

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943): Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18 (1901)

It's a truism that the path to success is often paved in failures, but Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 offers an especially dramatic example. The concerto was his first major work following a period of depression and anxiety that was triggered by the failure of his First Symphony. About all that could go wrong did go wrong at the symphony's premiere. One of Rachmaninoff's musical idols, the Russian composer Alexander Glazunov, conducted the work; however, what might have been a proud moment quickly became a liability. Glazunov was drunk on the podium, and he took liberties in editing and reorchestrating swaths of Rachmaninoff's score. Rachmaninoff was further humiliated when another great Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, heard the symphony in rehearsal and snarked, "Forgive me, but I do not find this music at all agreeable." Critics were not any kinder. One wrote, "If there were a conservatory in Hell, and if one of its talented students were to compose a symphony based on the story of the ten plagues of Egypt, and if he were to compose a symphony like Mr. Rachmaninoff's, then he would have fulfilled his task brilliantly and would delight the inhabitants of Hell." The artistic disaster of it all sent Rachmaninoff into a deep depression. He lost all confidence in his skills as a composer, and this kept him from writing anything at all for three years. Somehow he was able to continue touring as a pianist, usually in performance of his own works. Dazzled by his continued virtuosity, friends and fans begged him to write another piano concerto. To overcome his writer's block, Rachmaninoff sought the help of a neurologist, Nikolai Dahl, who practiced hypnotism. Under hypnosis, Dahl had the composer recite the following mantra: "You will begin to write your concerto...You will work with great facility...The concerto will be of an excellent quality." Eventually the mantra paid off—spectacularly so—with the result being the Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor. Critics weren't crazy about it, but audiences and pianists have loved it since its premiere. As testimony to its enduring popularity, the concerto's themes have been repurposed for film scores, for Olympic figure skaters, and even found their way into a couple of pop tunes: the Sinatra standard, "I Think of You," and an epic 1970s pop ballad, "All by Myself," sung by Eric Carmen and later covered by Celine Dion.

I: Moderato

The dramatic beginning evokes the low tolling of church bells, an important cultural marker of the Russian Orthodox Church. Following the introduction we hear a low chant-like melody alongside the continued tolling of the bells. The second theme, romantic and lyrical, is the kind of melody for which Rachmaninoff is particularly famous, full of longing without ever quite resolving.

II. Adagio sostenuto – Più animato

The second movement is exceedingly beautiful. Beginning with soft muted strings, Rachmaninoff creates the most sublime and ethereal introduction. He also creates a subtle rhythmic tension between the orchestra and soloist. The orchestra begins in a slow pattern of four pulses per measure, but when the piano enters it ignores this pattern to pursue its own pulse of three. The ambiguity of these parts floating alongside one another—connected but disconnected—is magic.

III. Allegro scherzando

It's a lot of emotional fireworks for the finale. Off with a gallop at the beginning, the piano seems to race past itself with the orchestra struggling to keep up. But it's not long before this race is halted by another luxurious melody, this one especially Russian in sound.