

Riccardo Chailly conducts early Rachmaninoff, with Alexander Malofeev

Thursday, May 13, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Riccardo Chailly, conductor · Alexander Malofeev, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Scherzo in D minor</i>	5'
2	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1</i>	27'
3	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>The Rock, Op. 7</i>	16'
4	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Cinq Études-tableaux (orchestration Respighi)</i>	
TOTAL MUSIC		48'

Sergei Rachmaninoff

5 minutes

1873–1943
Scherzo in D minor

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

This is where Sergei Rachmaninoff's orchestral music begins. The Scherzo in D minor is his earliest surviving piece for orchestra, written while he was a pupil at the Moscow Conservatory. The manuscript is dated February 1888, when he was fourteen, though another hand later altered the year to 1887. He dedicated it to his cousin, the pianist Alexander Siloti, to whom he would also dedicate his First Piano Concerto.

The manuscript carries the heading 'third movement', so the scherzo was evidently meant as part of something larger, most likely a symphony, of which nothing else is known to survive. The Mariinsky Theatre's note on the piece adds a human detail: on the title page the boy misspelt the word 'scherzo', though he had no trouble with the orchestration.

His model is easy to hear. The piece takes after the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's music for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', the pattern for every light, quick, fairy-tale scherzo of the nineteenth century. The key is worth noting too. D minor seems to have meant something to the young Rachmaninoff, who went on to use it for the 'Trio élégiaque', Op. 9, and for his First Symphony.

Rachmaninoff never heard the piece played, as far as is known. The first performance was given in Moscow on 2 November 1945, two years after his death, and the score was printed soon afterwards. In this programme it opens an evening that Riccardo Chailly has built entirely from early Rachmaninoff, and it is the earliest thing in it by several years.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Scherzo lasts between four and five minutes and uses a small orchestra: woodwind in pairs, a single horn and trumpet, timpani and strings. Listen for the steady, pulsing rhythm that drives it, for the clear, uncluttered scoring, and for the fluttering flute writing that comes straight from Mendelssohn. There is very little here of the broad melody and dark colouring that people think of as Rachmaninoff. What it shows is a fourteen-year-old who already knew how an orchestra works, and that is the point of beginning the concert with it.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

The First Piano Concerto is Rachmaninoff's Opus 1, the first piece he thought worth a number. He wrote it in 1890 and 1891, still a student at the Moscow Conservatory. In March 1891 he told a friend that two movements were written and the third composed in his head; he finished the score on 6 July, a few months after his eighteenth birthday. It was his second attempt at a concerto, after one in C minor that he had begun and abandoned in 1889, and he dedicated it to his cousin and teacher Alexander Siloti.

Students were encouraged to work from a model, and his was the Piano Concerto by Grieg, which Siloti had been practising in the Rachmaninoff household the summer before. The debt is plain in the way the piece starts. Rachmaninoff played the first movement with the Conservatory orchestra under Vasily Safonov on 17 March 1892, and that may have been the only time he performed the concerto in its original form.

He soon came to think it was not good enough. In 1908 he wrote to a friend that three of his pieces frightened him, the First Concerto among them, and that he would like to see them in a corrected, decent form. He finally did the work in the revolutionary year of 1917, shortly before he left Russia for good. By then he had written his Second and Third Concertos, and the revision was thorough: he thinned the textures of both piano and orchestra, cut material that

had made the original diffuse, rewrote long stretches and gave the finale a new opening. Nearly all the themes are those of 1891. The craftsmanship is that of 1917.

The listings for these concerts do not say which version is played. The 1917 revision is Rachmaninoff's last word on the piece, and it is the text described here. Rachmaninoff was proud of it and puzzled that audiences were not more interested. 'I have rewritten my First Concerto; it is really good now', he told Alfred Swan. 'All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily. And nobody pays any attention.'

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Vivace. A brass fanfare, then the piano crashes in with a cascade of double octaves and chords, a gesture taken from the openings of the Grieg and Schumann concertos. The flourish returns later in the movement and helps to hold it together. The main theme that follows is short by Rachmaninoff's later standards, but it already rises and falls in the long arch that became his signature.

II. Andante. A nocturne, and a brief one, only 74 bars long. The piano muses over quiet support from the orchestra, and the harmony is coloured here and there by the chromatic touches he added in the revision.

III. Allegro vivace. The finale begins loudly, with the bar lengths shifting back and forth, one of the few places where this conservative composer plays with metre; this opening dates from 1917. A long central episode in E-flat major, far from the home key, gives the soloist room to sing before the quick music returns and drives to the end.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

The Rock, Op. 7

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Pa-

16 minutes

ganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

Rachmaninoff wrote 'The Rock' in the summer of 1893, when he was twenty. He called it a fantasy for orchestra; its Russian title, 'Utyos', is also translated as 'The Crag'. Jurgenson published the score in Moscow in 1894, and he dedicated it to Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, whose brilliant way with the orchestra it plainly admires.

At the head of the score stand two lines from a poem by Mikhail Lermontov: a little golden cloud spent the night on the breast of a giant crag. In the poem the cloud is gone by morning, and the old rock is left alone with a trace of moisture in its wrinkles, weeping quietly in the wilderness.

Rachmaninoff later let it be known that he had a second source in mind, a short story by Anton Chekhov, 'Along the Way', which carries the same two lines as its epigraph. Two travellers are held overnight at a roadside inn on Christmas Eve while a blizzard blows: a middle-aged man, worn down by his own enthusiasms and failures, and a young woman. He tells her the story of his life. In the morning she is moved by him, but she has to travel on, and he is left standing in the snow. The man is the crag and the girl is the cloud.

The piece had a distinguished first listener. In September 1893 Rachmaninoff played it at the piano at the home of his former teacher Sergei Taneyev, on an evening when Tchaikovsky was present to hear a run-through of his own new Sixth Symphony. The composer Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, who was there, recalled that the piece pleased everyone, and Tchaikovsky most of all, for its colour. Tchaikovsky asked to include it in a concert tour of Europe he was planning. He died a few weeks later. The first performance was given in Moscow on 20 March 1894, by the old Russian calendar, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society conducted by Vasily Safonov.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening sets out the characters. A weary phrase low in the cellos and double basses stands for the man, or the rock. A flute answers with a graceful, lively figure, the cloud or the young woman. A third idea, passed between solo woodwinds, has been read as the strivings and disappointments of his life.

From these the piece grows as a single span of between fifteen and eighteen minutes. The orchestra is a large one, with harp and a good deal of percussion, and Rachmaninoff uses it for atmosphere: listen for the anger of the storm, and for bell sounds that seem to come through the driving snow. The music works up to an impassioned climax and then falls away into a despairing coda, with the rock left alone.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

Cinq Études-tableaux (orchestration Respighi)

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

The last piece in this programme of early Rachmaninoff is not early at all, and its orchestral dress is not by Rachmaninoff. He wrote two sets of piano pieces under the title 'Études-tableaux', study-pictures: Op. 33 at his country estate, Ivanovka, in 1911, and Op. 39 in 1916 and 1917, among the last music he composed before leaving Russia. Each is a study in some aspect of piano technique and, at the same time, the picture of something. What the pictures were he kept to himself. 'I do not believe in the artist that discloses too much of his images', he said, and he preferred to let listeners paint for themselves what the music most suggested.

He made one exception. Around 1930 the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who led the Boston Symphony Orchestra and also ran a publishing house, proposed that a group of the études be orchestrated, and that the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi should do it. Respighi was an obvious choice: the composer of 'Pines of Rome' was one of the great orchestrators of the day, and he had been a pupil of

Rimsky-Korsakov. Rachmaninoff chose five pieces, one from Op. 33 and four from Op. 39, and in a letter he told Respighi what lay behind them, to help him find the right colours.

The result was published as 'Cinq Études-tableaux', with a title for each picture taken from Rachmaninoff's hints: 'La mer et les mouettes' (The Sea and the Seagulls), 'La foire' (The Fair), 'Marche funèbre' (Funeral March), 'Le chaperon rouge et le loup' (Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf) and 'Marche'. Respighi changed the order of the pieces but otherwise kept close to what Rachmaninoff wrote. The orchestra's note quotes a telegram in which Rachmaninoff told him he could never have done it like that himself. The orchestra bills these performances as the Dutch premiere of Respighi's version.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are five movements, each a separate scene. They are described here in the order in which the set is usually given.

The Sea and the Seagulls (Op. 39 No. 2) is a picture of gulls hovering over a heaving sea, and the bleakest of the five.

The Fair (Op. 33) is the one piece from the earlier set, bright, loud and festive, a market scene in full swing.

Funeral March (Op. 39 No. 7) is the most elaborate picture. It opens with the march itself; then comes music that suggests a choir singing, over a fine, persistent accompaniment that stands for rain. At the climax church bells ring out, and then the march returns.

Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf (Op. 39 No. 6) sets growling figures low in the orchestra, the wolf, against the hurrying steps of the girl.

March (Op. 39 No. 9) closes the set in D major, with a colouring that one programme note calls exotic and Eastern.

Throughout, it is worth noticing how much Respighi adds in drama and atmosphere while the music remains recognisably Rachmaninoff's, which is what reviewers of the orchestral version have tended to admire in it.

Tonight's artists

Alexander Malofeev *piano*

Alexander Malofeev makes his debut with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in these three concerts, on 13, 14 and 15 May 2027, each at 20:15 in the Main Hall of the Concertgebouw. The concerto suits the occasion: it is the work of a pianist of seventeen and eighteen, and the orchestra's note points to the heroic part it gives the soloist. Riccardo Chailly conducts. He was the orchestra's chief conductor from 1988 to 2004 and has been its conductor emeritus since, and he has chosen a programme that keeps almost entirely to what Rachmaninoff wrote before he was twenty-one, closing with five later piano pieces as Respighi orchestrated them.

Alexander Malofeev was born in Moscow in 2001 and began playing the piano at five. He studied at the Gnessin music school and at the Moscow Conservatory, and came to international attention in 2014 when, at the age of thirteen, he won first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians. He has since appeared as a soloist with orchestras including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, working with conductors such as Riccardo Chailly and Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and is especially admired in Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky. An outspoken critic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he left Russia in 2022 and has lived in Berlin since. He records exclusively for Sony Classical, which released his first solo album, *Forgotten Melodies*, in February 2026.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings**

Max Harrison, Continuum 2006

Max Harrison goes through Rachmaninoff's music piece by piece alongside the life, and he covers the student works as well, the Scherzo in D minor among them.

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff**

Geoffrey Norris, Oxford University Press 2000

A compact life of Rachmaninoff with a guide to his music, and a quick way into the early Moscow years from which most of this programme comes.

DEEPER **Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor**

Barrie Martyn, Routledge 2016

Barrie Martyn's large study treats Rachmaninoff as composer, pianist and conductor and discusses the music in detail, the fullest account in English for anyone who wants more on the early works heard here.

SOURCES

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Sergei Rachmaninoff · Cinq Études-tableaux (orchestration Respighi)

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-05-13-chailly>

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