

Listening part.

Task I

You will listen to the extract from a videoblog of a piano teacher, musician and overall music enthusiast as she calls herself, Allysia. She tells about the early days and the beginning of the career of the Russian magnificent pianist and composer Sergey Rachmaninoff. Listen to her story and choose True or False according to the information you hear. You will hear the recording twice.

You have 20 seconds to read the task.

Now we are ready to start.

Hi and welcome to today's episode of Piano TV. I am Alisha, your host, and today we are going to take a look at the life and times of Sergei Rachmaninoff. And I did have to look up how to pronounce his name on Dictionary.com. Rachmaninoff is what it told me to say. I have been mispronouncing his name all this time, so hopefully those of you familiar with the Russian language will accept Rachmaninoff as my pronunciation.

This is a little bit of a tangent to start this video on. What we are going to talk about in today's video is Rachmaninoff's life story, the accomplishments that he achieved in his lifetime, his death, his personality, all that good stuff. So let's get started.

Let's start with the basics. Rachmaninoff was born in 1873 in Russia during the late Romantic period of music. He did write a lot of late Romantic style pieces, but he also wrote a lot of early 20th century modern style pieces as well. He was a virtuoso pianist, and he did plenty of touring and conducting in his lifetime, which lasted 70 years. He was also greatly influenced by other significant Russian composers, such as Tchaikovsky, who was his idol. His piano and orchestral compositions are generally considered to be very expressive and very melodic because he was highly influenced by vocal works.

Rachmaninoff was born into a wealthy and musical family in Russia, and he had five siblings. And like pretty much any other significant composer, he was a virtuoso and showed a lot of great musical promise at the early age of four. By the time Rachmaninoff was 12, two of his sisters had died. One was an older sister who was the one who introduced him to the music of Tchaikovsky. So this early teen Rachmaninoff started slacking off at school, and he was actually about to flunk out. But his mom ended up saving him by transferring him to the Moscow Conservatory instead in the year 1885.

During his time in Moscow, Rachmaninoff befriended Skryabin, another well-known composer. He started doing better in school. He was awarded a scholarship, although one of his teachers was strongly against him getting into composing. Apparently composing wasn't for serious musicians, but Rachmaninoff, little rebel that he was, composed anyway.

In 1892, during Rachmaninoff's last year of school, he began his performing and composing career in earnest, which earned him praise from Tchaikovsky himself for an opera called Alekko. Rachmaninoff wasn't expecting this to go well at all. It was basically like a sign of self-doubt that would persist throughout his life, and Rachmaninoff was very surprised with its massive success and Tchaikovsky's approval. It also earned the highest mark for a final composition at the Moscow Conservatory.

His public debut as a pianist happened in 1892 when he was 19 years old. He performed his own piece, Prelude in C-sharp minor, which is one of his more well-known piano compositions. When Tchaikovsky died of cholera in 1893, Rachmaninoff was devastated. He wrote his trio Elegiac No. 2 for piano, violin, and cello as a tribute and basically fell into a deep depression afterwards. He was teaching piano, and he went on a tour that made him completely miserable, and he didn't even earn very much money while he was at it.

He completed his first symphony, and it debuted in 1897, and it was a complete flop. One music critic said that it would be admired by inmates of a music conservatory in hell. That's a very harsh criticism. The symphony performers didn't do well either, in part because the conductor was probably drunk. Rachmaninoff said that he wasn't so much upset at the outward criticism, but he was deeply distressed and heavily depressed by the fact that my symphony did not please me at all after its first rehearsal. This symphony was not performed again in his lifetime.

This event sent him into a creative and depressive funk that lasted for years. Eventually, he got into conducting, which did help alleviate some of his depression, but the fact that he was so depressed really kept his compositional output to a minimum. He wasn't really writing a whole lot. His auntie even arranged a visit with the very famous writer Leo Tolstoy, hoping that a meeting of the two minds would re-inspire him and get him productive again, but even though it was a pleasant enough encounter, it didn't spark any productivity in Rachmaninoff.

By 1900, Rachmaninoff's family suggested that it might be time for some professional help to deal with the depression, and Rachmaninoff was like, yeah, for sure, I agree with this. He had a doctor named Nikolai Dahl, and the two of them made a lot of progress in a really short amount of time. Rachmaninoff was re-inspired, and he completed his second piano concerto, one of his most well-known works, and dedicated it to his therapist. Even at the time, this composition was really well-received, and it earned him the Glinka Award and a cash prize.

Rachmaninoff married his first cousin, Natalia Satina, in 1902 when he was 29 years old. The happy couple had two daughters in Moscow, and he continued his life as a music teacher and conductor. As a conductor, he was really strict, and he worked with soloists individually to perfect their performances, and that was kind of an unusual practice. He went gallivanting around Italy with his family after growing tired of conducting, and also because of the effects that Russian politics had on his job. When he returned to Russia with no job, his only real option for money at the time was composition, but due to the political situation of Russia and having a big social life, Rachmaninoff couldn't find the time to compose when he was there, so the family ended up packing up and moving to Dresden, Germany, and they lived there between 1906 to 1909.

Now listen again check your answers.

Task 2.

You will hear a short part of a conversation between Dr Dominik Rahmer and a world-famous Canadian pianist and composer Marc-André Hamelin. Listen to the conversation and choose A, B, C or D according to the text you hear. You will hear the recording ONLY ONCE.

You have 15 seconds to read the task.

Now we are ready to start.

M-AH: ... I think there is a case to be made that there will be never enough Rachmaninoff recordings, because he's such a vital presence and continues to be. And I think his presence in our lives is really growing, and it's especially amusing to consider past critical opinions of his music.

If you look at the 1954 Grove, there was an article, the entry on Rachmaninoff written by Eric Blum, who was the editor, said that on the whole the music doesn't have much future, if you can imagine that. But at the time, Rachmaninoff really wasn't to us what he is now. He's become a necessity.

Dr DR: So do you think there are differences perhaps between America, Europe and Asia with respect to Rachmaninoff's reputation or to the popularity of his works?

M-AH: I think Rachmaninoff's reputation is growing everywhere. I think he's really essential for all of us. The immediacy, the wonderful melodiousness of the music and the way he just plunges directly into our

hearts, all of that, we finally realized what a great musician he was. And as I said, what an essential ingredient he is to our lives.

Dr DR: You've also played in Russia, in Moscow. Do you think there's a special feeling about it to play maybe in the same venues as Rachmaninoff did, in front of a Russian public?

M-AH: Oh, I think definitely. And I have. I remember one of the last concerts I gave there, I did the second sonata, the 1931 version, also with a couple of preludes before. And I have to say that for one reason or another, there was a special warm feeling and perhaps an added sense of occasion when playing these for an audience who just lives, breathes and talks Rachmaninoff and eats Rachmaninoff.

Dr DR: Apart from Rachmaninoff, you have recorded many pieces from the Russian repertoire. You have recorded the complete Scriabin sonatas, the sonatas by Nikolai Meitner. You've recorded an album with music by Nikolai Roslavets. Is there something special that is appealing to you in Russian music that you wouldn't find in a different repertoire, even if you have recorded many other pieces from French or American composers?

M-AH: Well, I think I've always been attracted to the richness of it. I mean, that's the word that really comes to my mind the most, is that there is an incredible richness and there's an unbelievable melding of craft and true inspiration. Of course, you could say that about Bach and Beethoven, but there is something special in Russian music that I find that separates it from the rest, but I'm still really trying to identify exactly what it is. Of course, even Russian music varies in interest, of course, but the best is among the very greatest that I think there is, and sometimes in very many different ways...

You have 15 seconds to fill in the answer sheet.

The listening part is over.