

THE REAL RACH 4

Why did Rachmaninov spend decades revising his Piano Concerto No 4 when, writes **Scott Davie**, there was nothing wrong with the original?

“As in the old Russian saying, I have followed three hares (composing, conducting and playing the piano). Can I be certain I have captured one?” Rachmaninov, so often doubtful, wrote these words toward the end of his life. After the emotional abandonment of his homeland in 1917, he pursued the third of his “hares” – becoming one of the most successful pianists of the 20th century – while composition was forced to the back seat. Had he stayed in Russia, it seems certain that at least one important piece would have come to fruition sooner.

Given the enduring popularity of Rachmaninov’s Second and Third Piano Concertos, not to mention that other jewel in his crown of concertante works, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, one might wonder why the Fourth Piano Concerto has received such a bad wrap. Even his First Concerto – penned in student days but later considerably revised – seems to have been more appreciated. The perennial Second Concerto, completed in 1901, is unquestionably written in a late-19th century idiom, while the Third – from 1909, and a substantially different work – is often erroneously perceived as such. Did Rachmaninov seek to create something more modern with his Fourth Concerto? Could this be why audiences have been reluctant to embrace it?

Little is written about the history of the Fourth Concerto, other than the fact that the version usually played dates from 1941. Some may be aware of an earlier version, published in 1928 – yet unknown for many years was the existence of the original version

from 1926, the meticulous, hand-written full-score of which was stored in the archives of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Until recently, this version of the concerto was unplayed since Rachmaninov premiered the piece in 1927 with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. There were only five performances of the concerto, all on the east coast of America and all critically unsuccessful. The question begs: was there something wrong with this first version?

Rachmaninov’s success as a composer had built steadily from 1893, when his first works began appearing in print. Although there was bitter disappointment with the reception of his First Symphony in 1897, the compositions that followed are characterised by their abundance of melody, and were instantly popular with audiences. Even then, however, it seems the composer was aware their popularity was, at least in part, due to conservative elements in his music.

The turn of the century brought challenges for many composers as they sought to define the “new”. Works by Richard Strauss and Mahler pushed at the boundaries of dissonance, while in Russia, Scriabin and Stravinsky were forging their own frontiers. The compositions by Rachmaninov that date from shortly before the revolution of 1917 – including the Second Piano Sonata, the final set of songs, Op 38, and his second collection of *Études-tableaux*, Op 39 – are perhaps his most modern, featuring fractured approaches to both harmony and pulse. This striving for modernity occupied much of the 20th century, and certainly contributed to Rachmaninov

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later questioning his validity as a composer.

The events of 1917 had a cataclysmic effect on his life. In the wake of the Revolution, the composer fled Russia with his wife and two young daughters, leaving property and possessions behind. Needing to support his family, he had to find a more effective and immediate way of earning money than composition. Having gained exit papers through offers of conducting work – that career having been the second of his “hares” – he soon realised he would be better employed as a concert pianist and duly set about learning repertoire for recitals in Scandinavia. Fortuitously, his arrival in New York in 1919 coincided with a vogue for Russian culture, and he began the series of lengthy tours that would continue throughout the rest of his life. (His willingness to play works by other composers helped – Prokofiev and Medtner both found difficulty sustaining audiences through long programs of their own works.)

But what of his career as a composer? It is well known that he was affected by his sudden departure from Russia, and that the country’s landscape had been a primary source of inspiration for his music. Reflecting on the absence of his muse, he responded sadly to a friend “how can I compose without melody?” In more detail in 1923, he stated that “either from over-fatigue or from loss of the composing habit (it’s been five

years since I worked on composition), I am not drawn to this matter, or rarely drawn. This does take place when I think about my two major compositions that I started not long before leaving Russia. When I think of these, I long to finish them.”

So as not to arouse the suspicion of the guards at the Russian border, Rachmaninov had carried only a small suitcase when he left. Through the study of the archive of his donated materials in Washington, it has been determined that, along with some small piano pieces (two of which he later published), he had brought a completed act of a new opera (*Monna Vanna*, to a libretto by Maeterlinck) and advanced sketches for his Fourth Piano Concerto. According to comments in the Russian press, Rachmaninov had been working on the new concerto as early as 1911 – making it a much closer relation to the Third than many would imagine. Certainly, by 1914 references to the new work were widespread. But it was not until 1926 that, confident he had established both a new career and financial security in the West, he felt able to take a sabbatical year to bring those sketches he “longed to finish” to completion.

The manuscript of the original version of the Fourth Piano Concerto – a copy of which I was fortunate to have access to when undertaking post-graduate study in 1999 – is dated *January – August 25 / New York – Dresden*.

Once in America, Rachmaninov’s concert tours became his chief source of income



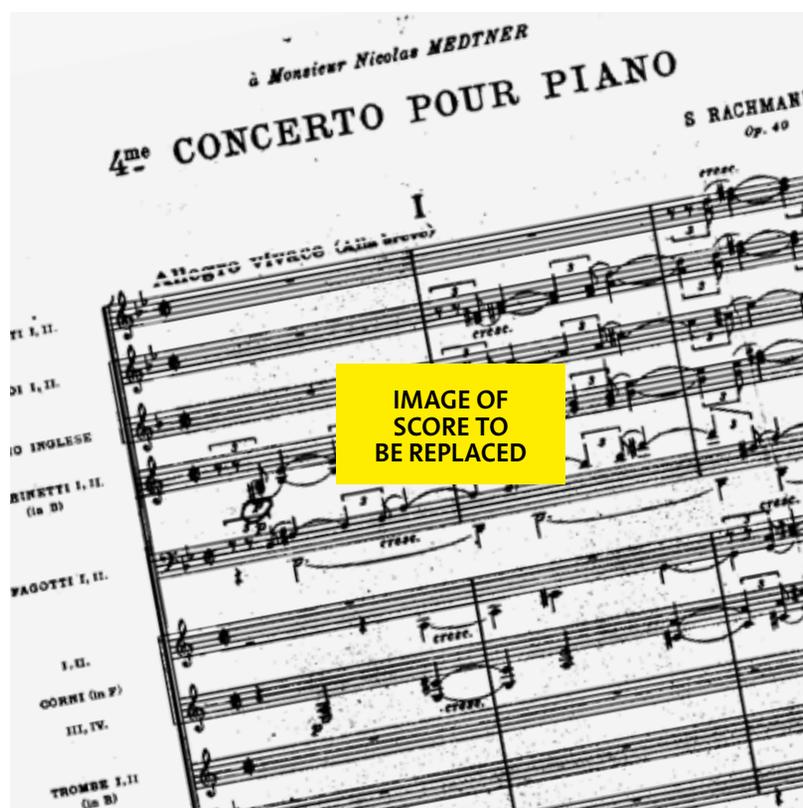
The score exudes confidence; nowhere is there a trace of the self-doubt for which Rachmaninov became well-known, and for which this concerto would pay such a high price. One can see that self-doubt in many compositions where he sanctioned often disfiguring cuts – such as the Second Symphony, the Third Concerto, the *Isle of the Dead* – and in the period of silence that followed the premiere of his First Symphony. One also recalls comments about his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, where in performance he was guided by the coughing of the audience. “Whenever the coughing increased, I would skip the next variation. Whenever there was no coughing, I would play them in proper order. In one concert... the coughing was so violent I played only ten variations (out of 20).”

When combined, his sensitivity to audiences’ approval

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and the preoccupation with stylistic “newness” likely created trepidation about composing. Additionally, it might be presumed that premiering a work in the role of both author and performer would be doubly hard. In any event, the critics weren’t kind. Writing in the *Herald Tribune*, Lawrence Gilman noted of the new concerto that that despite its “somewhat naïve camouflage of whole-tone scales [sic] and occasionally dissonant harmony... it remains as essentially 19th century as if Tchaikovsky had signed it”. Samuel Chotzinoff wrote in his review for *The World* that “one was left with the impression that a lot was said, but not of any particular importance”. Pitts Sanborn, writing in the *Evening Telegram* in New York, was perhaps blending criticism with sexism when he noted the work was “long-winded, tiresome, unimportant, in places tawdry... Mme. Cécile Chaminade might safely have perpetrated its on her third glass of vodka”.

Regardless of what style of work he wrote, it is doubtful that critics would have been sympathetic.



By 1927, Rachmaninov had achieved enormous (perhaps enviable) success as a pianist, and the romantically-styled compositions with which he was most closely associated – such as the Second Piano Concerto, by then a quarter of a century old – were still foremost in people’s minds. The damage was done, though, and he immediately set about fixing what he perceived as deficiencies, using a highly effective method: revision by excision.

Sadly, it seems not to have occurred to him that content can dictate form. Similarly to the revision of his Second Piano Sonata in 1931 (where, in an effort to match the duration of Chopin’s own Second Sonata, he cut out some of the best bits), he believed the primary problem with the new concerto was its length. He had written to Medtner prior to the premiere, humorously

RACHMANINOV THE CONCERT PIANIST

Rachmaninov’s career as a concert pianist in the West ranks as one of the most highly regarded of the 20th century. Having given only around 100 recitals in his 44 years before the Revolution – usually in performances of his own works – he went on to give over 17,00 concert performances before his death in 1943. He gave an astonishing 343 performances as a concerto soloist, 147 of which were of his own Second Piano Concerto. His tours would last for months at a time, covering vast stretches of

North America and, eventually, large sections of Europe. They were so arduous that briefly in his new-found career he acquired his own railway carriage, so as to be able to rest more comfortably of a night between concerts. He was one of the highest paid performers of the age, and the wealth he was forced to leave behind in Russia he soon made back again. Details of every single concert he gave can be found in his Performance Diary, hosted online by the Rachmaninoff Society at www.rachmaninoff.org



recalling: "I glanced at its size... and was terrified! Out of sheer cowardice I haven't yet checked its time. It will probably be performed like *The Ring* on several evenings in succession. And I recalled my conversation with you on the theme of length and the need to cut down, compress, and not to be long-winded, and I was ashamed." However, the concerto was already shorter than his previous work in the genre, and certainly not as long as others (such as Busoni's, which can run to 70 minutes). By 1928, the Fourth Concerto was reduced from 1016 bars to 902; by 1941, it was further reduced to 824, losing roughly a fifth of its length.

And what a pity that is. A common criticism of the final version is that it lacks an organic quality,

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and a comparison with the original version quickly indicates why. The confident opening melody – its setting reminiscent of the closing moments of the Third Concerto – settles into a distillation of ideas before the serene second subject emerges. And these bars of rumination are necessary, the narrative perhaps analogous to the composer's journey through the intervening years. But the passage was cut, and the second subject can seem upon us before we've registered that the opening has concluded. And so the trend continues. A similar point of consolidation once marked the recapitulation of the movement: being one of the concerto's strongest sections, this, too, was removed.

In the second movement – already cut from more modern cloth than his earlier concertos – the omissions were fewer but no less telling. Believing that "four square" phrase structures evinced poor quality, he set about erasing single bars and, sometimes, just occasional beats. However, it was not so "four square" to begin with. Of greater impact in the slow movement were the changes to piano textures. For example, the midpoint outburst of brass was originally accompanied by violent cascades of chords in the solo part. And the final melody (famously borrowed from the C major *Étude-tableau*) was once underscored by the most graceful of arabesques. Here I believe that his reasons were, sadly, more pragmatic: professional orchestras are vastly more capable in our times, and I suspect the changes were due to ensemble problems in his early performances.

By far, the biggest changes lay in the final movement. In his letter to Medtner, Rachmaninov continued: "What I must have piled up there! In my mind I have already started to look for cuts." What started as a "sonata form" movement – two subjects, the second in typically lyrical vein, followed by a development and recapitulation of both ideas (rounded out with a stunningly quick-witted coda) – eventually became purely episodic. By the final version, the development section misses

its recapitulation, and instead moves straight to a new ending, this time based on the climax of the first movement. Almost inexplicably, the second subject is reduced to a glimmer of its initial lyricism.

One can see how the popularity of his earlier compositions could lead to an expectation for more of the same. With his Fourth Concerto, though, Rachmaninov clearly wanted to present audiences with a new style, one perhaps aimed at dispelling the notion that his music was of a bygone age. But the debates over "newness" have waned; should we not now also release the composer from some of our preconceptions? Do we similarly judge this balance of modernity and expectation in other concertos of the time?

When the Fourth Concerto was completed in 1926, Rachmaninov had already been contemplating it for over a decade. By the time of its final version, just two years before his death in 1943, he had been working on it for close to 30 years – over half of his working life! If it is extraordinary that it occupied him for so long, it is more perplexing to question why. After all, in works where he found actual weakness he quickly took action, such as with certain Op 10 piano pieces, dropping them from a second publication. Was there something elementally important that Rachmaninov had recognised in the Fourth Piano Concerto? Something that compelled him to keep returning to it? My belief is that he sensed he had produced a great work, but that an unfortunate combination of self-doubt, history, and shifting tastes kept the truth of it from him.

Having found fault with his First Symphony many years earlier, he told friends that he would destroy the manuscript. I believe we might one day be grateful he never did the same with the original version of his Fourth Piano Concerto. ●

Scott Davie plays the original version of Rach 4 with the Sydney Symphony on November 21-24

Rachmaninov revised the Fourth Piano Concerto over a period of nearly 30 years

