SERGEY RACHMANINOV
Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18
Born: April 1, 1873, in Novgorod, Russia
Died: March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California
Work composed: 1901
World premiere: November 9, 1901, in Moscow. The composer was the soloist, and Alexander Siloti conducted the Moscow Philharmonic Society Orchestra.

Sergei Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto has long been a favorite of concert audiences everywhere — not only among this composer’s works but within the entire body of music for piano and orchestra. It is easy to see why. The concerto is supremely melodious, so much so that several of its themes have been used for popular songs. And the concerto as a whole has served as the soundtrack to several motion pictures.

Remarkably, Rachmaninov created this work at the low point of his career. A child prodigy, the future composer had entered the Saint Petersburg Conservatory at age nine and wrote his first orchestral piece when he was fourteen. The years that followed saw him progress quickly and steadily in his creative endeavors. By the time he was twenty, Rachmaninov had completed a piano concerto; an opera, Aleko, which was triumphantly produced at the Bolshoi Theater; several tone poems and chamber pieces; and a number of keyboard works, including the famous Prelude in C-sharp minor. The stage seemed set for a lifetime of rich musical accomplishment.

Perhaps the brilliance of Rachmaninov’s early career made the effect of his initial public failure the devastating event it proved to be. In 1897 his First Symphony, with which the composer hoped to cement his standing as a major artist, was performed in St. Petersburg. The reception of this work was disastrous. César Cui, a respected composer and critic, likened it to the product of “a conservatory in Hell.” Other commentators were not much kinder.

Rachmaninov was crushed. He retreated from the Russian capital, staying with friends and relatives in the countryside, but was unable to overcome his depression or resume composing. Eventually he managed to secure a conducting post and performed some piano recitals. But despite his promise to produce a new piano concerto for a concert tour to England, Rachmaninov composed nothing during the next three years and became so despondent that his friends worried for his health.

Finally, in 1900, Rachmaninov was persuaded to visit Nicolai Dahl, a doctor specializing in treatment by hypnosis. In his memoirs, the composer recalled the treatment this way: “Day after day I heard the same hypnotic formula while I lay half asleep in Dahl’s armchair: ‘You will begin to write your concerto. You will work with great ease. The music will be excellent.’ Incredible as it may sound, this cure really helped me.”

Dahl’s work must be counted the greatest psychiatric success in the history of music. In a short time Rachmaninov was again composing, completing his long-delayed Second Piano Concerto. This work was enthusiastically received when the composer gave its debut performance, in Moscow, in 1901, and he dedicated it gratefully to Dr. Dahl.
WHAT TO LISTEN FOR
The first of Rachmaninov’s captivating melodies is heard in the strings following a brief introduction of pensive chords in the piano. It is marked by a unmistakably Russian soulfulness that is both contrasted and complemented by the romantic tenderness of the second theme, presented by the soloist.

The second movement opens on a note of almost religious tranquility, after which the piano provides a delicate accompaniment to the dream-like melody of the flute and clarinet. Toward the end of the movement there is a flurry of keyboard activity, culminating in a brief cadenza, a rhapsodic solo, for the pianist.

A march-like introduction in the orchestra and glistening figuration in the piano precede the statement of the energetic first theme of the finale. But Rachmaninov has saved his trump card, a sensuous melody stated by the orchestra. This theme, which in the 1940s became familiar to millions as the hit song “Full Moon and Empty Arms,” returns after an extensive development of the first subject to bring the concerto to an ecstatic close.

*Scored for pairs of winds; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani and percussion; strings.*

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