

A performance of the Fourth Piano Concerto, restored to its original version, invites listeners to re-examine a composer beloved by audiences and castigated by critics.

REINVENTING

Rachmaninoff

THERE ARE CERTAIN PLEASURES THAT come only with aging. It takes a number of years to see how the panorama of reputation is continually changing. There was a time when the idea of a Rachmaninoff retrospective at New York's Lincoln Center would have seemed incredible. Always loved by the public, he simply was not taken seriously by the music critics, scholars, theorists, and historians. Yet, here we are: Great Performers at Lincoln Center has scheduled thirteen events this fall that focus on his music and his place in history. As a subject of serious consideration, Rachmaninoff seems at last to have arrived.

Rachmaninoff's neglect by the intelligentsia could be attributed to simple snobbery. But let's consider it another way: specialists like to enlighten the public. Since the public already understands and loves the music of Rachmaninoff, he is not an especially attrac-

tive subject to write about. Conversely, the current espousal of Rachmaninoff could be attributed merely to fashionable anti-intellectualism, like the controversial motorcycle exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum.

Yet there is good reason why we should now be prepared to take Rachmaninoff seriously. The history of music is dotted with figures whose music made a big splash with the public only to fade from the active repertoire. Rachmaninoff, however, has been around for some time and he shows no signs of going away. Many (including myself) believe that such staying power is itself an indication of worth.

Rachmaninoff's five concerti are often performed individually, but the Rachmaninoff Retrospective offers music lovers a rare chance to hear the last three concerti live on successive evenings, and thus to examine his

Continued on page 48

BY JOSEPH SMITH

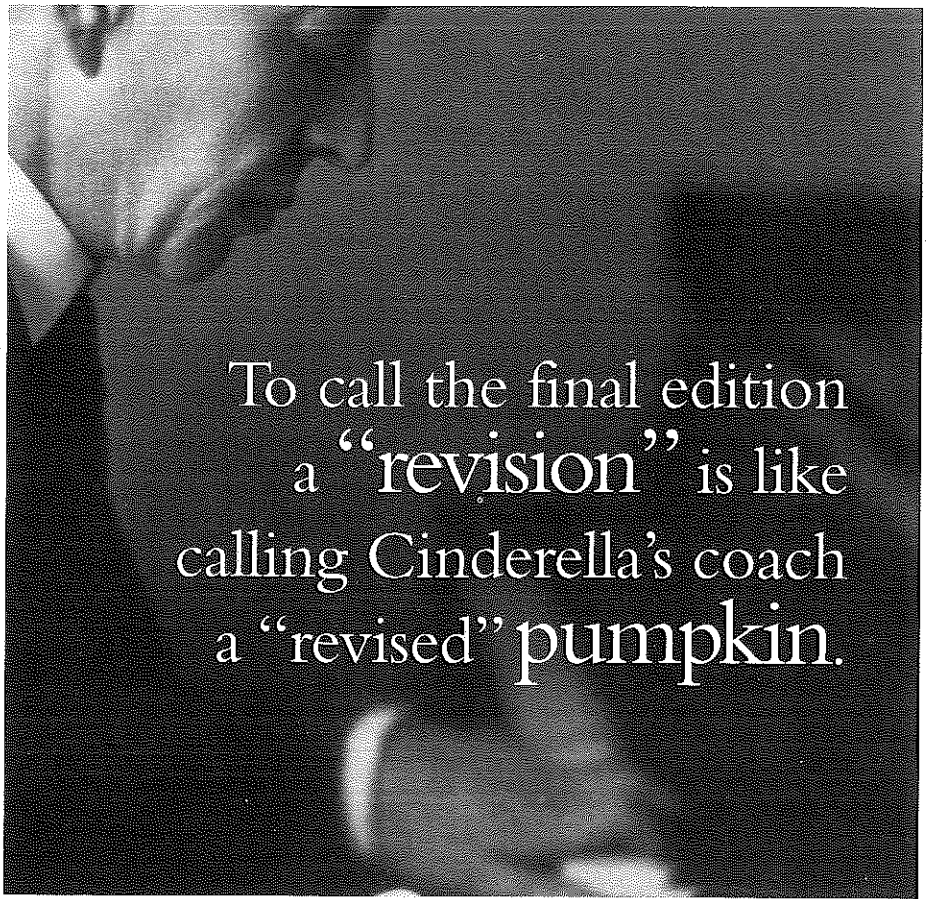
Rachmaninoff *continued*

changing response to the form. Of particular interest is the New York première of the seldom-heard fourth concerto in its even-more-seldom-heard original form (the soloist is Russian pianist Alexander Ghindin, who recently recorded it, and the conductor is Vladimir Ashkenazy). This restored version differs significantly from the one we usually hear, and it invites us to re-examine the work.

A survey of Rachmaninoff's concertos reveals much about his development as a composer. In comparing them, one immediately notices a curious fact: all five are in minor keys. Indeed, one can make a larger and even stranger observation: *all* of Rachmaninoff's multi-movement instrumental works—whether symphonies, chamber music, or piano works—are in the minor, with the single exception of the second two-piano suite (and its finale is also in the minor)! Is there another major composer with as marked a predilection for the minor? The obvious explanation would be Rachmaninoff's brooding temperament. But there may be a purely musical explanation as well. Rachmaninoff favors strong contrasts between themes rather than continuity, and therefore, in sonata-allegro movements, relishes the shift from a minor first group to a major second group.

These works tell us a great deal. First, we have the first concerto. Or do we? Composers seem to have a fatal tendency to number their early piano concertos in a misleading way. Both Beethoven and Chopin chose to publish as their "first" concertos their actual chronological second concertos. While Rachmaninoff did compose a version of his first *first*, he "revised" it long after composing the third concerto. It was only after examining the original—that I will call the pre-first—that I comprehended the degree of "revision." The work we now know as the first concerto is virtually a new concerto based largely on the materials of the "pre-first."

The changes are fascinating. Even where the materials remain intact, there is a pervasive difference: the complex, widespread textures, the harmonic finesse, the contrapuntal web—the *glamour* of the piano



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part—are absent from the original. If you can imagine the first two movements of the "first" as if they were composed in the style of the Grieg concerto, you will have an idea of the pre-first. The finale of the pre-first differs the most—it lacks the changing meters and disorienting rhythmic quirks that give the skittish finale of the "new" first its mad energy. To call the final edition a "revision" is like calling Cinderella's coach a "revised" pumpkin.

The second concerto is a very different matter. It would be an exaggeration to describe it as a symphony with piano *obbligato*, but the piano part is certainly less independent than those of Rachmaninoff's other concerti. For instance, the stern, fateful opening theme of the first movement is stated by the orchestra, with the piano offering an accompaniment. (If heard alone, this accompaniment would convey little.) In the recapitulation, the orchestra again pours out this potent theme, the piano this time pounding out an exciting counterpoint. In other words, Rachmaninoff leads off with a principal theme the opening of

which is *never* given to the piano.

In the second movement, the soloist is again introduced with an accompaniment. There is no extended cadenza in any movement. (When I was a kid, I once turned on the radio in the midst of the second concerto. The soloist sounded good to me. When the announcement came, I was astonished to learn that it was a pianist I considered crude and unimaginative. This is when I first realized how comparatively few interpretive options the soloist is given in the second concerto.) But this *concertante* treatment of the solo does offer its own special excitement—the thrill of hearing the piano constantly braving a turbulent sea of orchestral sound.

Then we have the third. One listener might describe the third concerto as "richly luxuriant," another as "excessive and loose," but both would in fact be describing the same quality. The third gives the soloist ample opportunity not simply to display virtuosity, but to ruminate over themes at leisure. The price for this generosity is a reduction of formal tautness. There is, for instance, a

passage in the finale that used to be traditionally cut (two bars after rehearsal 52 to rehearsal 54.) This section begins with a meandering "modulating" passage that in fact ends in the key in which it began, followed by a restatement in the orchestra of the piano's preceding *scherzando* episode with a new piano *obbligato*. From the standpoint of form, the material is an excrescence, and therefore the cut is reasonable. But from the standpoint of the ear, the striking contrast between the crisp, impish *scherzando* and the rich, smooth, sprawling piano *obbligato* amply justifies the inclusion of the passage. The peculiar charm of the third, in fact, depends to a great degree on the originality, density, and difficulty of the piano textures, and their interaction with the orchestra. In this concerto, texture is not decorative, but essential. We cannot reasonably wish that the Rachmaninoff third was more continent and economical—if it were, it would simply not be the Rachmaninoff third!

The fourth is the least popular of Rachmaninoff's concerti. It gives the impression that Rachmaninoff is trying to distance himself from the emotionalism of the previous works—it is soberer, cooler. The problem is that its form resembles its predecessors too much for us to forget them—we keep expecting the fourth to rouse us with the same stimulants and lull us with the same narcotics as the first three.

Rachmaninoff composed this concerto in 1926 but revised it considerably in 1941. The original version differs from the later version most strongly in the finale: Rachmaninoff did not simply make cuts: he re-composed much of it. For instance, he took a lyric section in the original and turned it into a playful episode in the revision. The first version reprises this theme where the second version does not. The first version ends in a long, complicated, and acerbic coda, the second climaxes in a grandiose treatment of a passage from the first movement. This new climax tends to make us compare the fourth to the second and third—to its disadvantage. The greater length of the sections of the original finale helps impress its themes on the listener. I cannot imagine anyone preferring the pre-first to the first,

but I can easily imagine the original fourth replacing the revised one.

The popularity of Rachmaninoff's previous concerti rested to a great degree on his melodic invention. However, variations require the composer not to produce material, but to rethink material. Rachmaninoff's final concerto, the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, does not merely decorate its theme—it abstracts its various elements, probes and transforms them. The choice of Paganini's laconic theme pushed the work toward the biting, the hard-edged, and the sinister. Part of the reason that the famous eighteenth variation of this work is so striking is that it is the *only* moment that recalls the emotionalism of the previous concerti. On the whole, the *Rhapsody* is more concerned with orchestral color, with mercurial plays of harmony, and of course with transforming its theme, than with "melody." By casting his final concerto in the form

of variations, Rachmaninoff succeeded in casting off the conventions established by his previous concerti. (Likewise, in his final orchestral work, the *Symphonic Dances*, he succeeded in casting off the conventions of his numbered symphonies.) And this is the triumph of the *Rhapsody*—Rachmaninoff proved that he could create a work in a tougher, leaner, more intellectual style, and still gratify his public. That is, he not only transformed Paganini's theme, he transformed himself!

Thus, whether or not we cherish the fourth, we must be grateful to it. For it provided a path in the new direction that would lead to this *Rhapsody*. ■

For information on or tickets for the Great Performers at Lincoln Center Rachmaninoff series, call CenterCharge at 212-721-650, or visit the Lincoln Center web site at www.lincolncenter.org.

BACK IN 1973, the debate over Rachmaninoff's legacy elicited the following comments from several great pianists, quoted in a Carnegie Hall program booklet. Our thanks to pianist Ruth Laredo for calling them to our attention.

Eugene Istomin: "He left the listener with an impression of wonder and emotion.... There is an unmistakable originality in Rachmaninoff—despite his derivativeness. He is not a great master of composition (his larger works *are* flawed in form), but there is a kind of melancholic splendor that is completely peculiar to him. And if you're susceptible to that kind of emotion then he has his unique place."

Alexis Weissenberg: "The words sophisticated and refined, let alone dramatic, have been so misused that they sound almost pejorative and insulting when referred to an artistic achievement. And yet sophistication, refinement, an inner sense for the dramatic, plus nostalgia and an intense sensuality come to mind when one thinks of Rachmaninoff's music. These same elements are the ones that challenge a Rachmaninoff performer with the constant research in sound textures, harmonic moods, pianistic riches of unparalleled variety and a sensuous drive that is often difficult to control...."

Vladimir Ashkenazy: "Rachmaninoff's work has frequently been treated offhand, almost like semi-popular music, resulting in uncommitted performances. Certainly, if you don't see anything important in the music you play it will sound so. Add to this the tremendous technical difficulties that were next to nothing to Rachmaninoff himself with his transcendental pianism, and the picture is complete. It is indeed almost a vicious circle... No one would dream of placing Rachmaninoff alongside Beethoven or Mozart, nor would anyone strongly doubt the sincerity of his work. But as far as the depth and validity of his music goes—that has yet to be given its full value."