

Listening part.

Task I

You will listen to the extract from a videoblog by 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 Rakhmaninoff. 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.

Now listen again check your answers.

Task 2.

ABC Arts is an independent source of Australian stories and conversations about art and culture. You will listen to a short conversation between a journalist of ABC Arts Alice Keath with the pianist Sonya Lifschitz about the beginnings of Russian classical music. Listen to her story and choose A, B, C or D according to the information you hear. You will hear the recording ONLY ONCE.

You have 15 seconds to read the task.

Now we are ready to start.

AK: He's, you know, the so-called father of Russian music. What drew you to his music early on?

SL: Well, like you said, you know, he's the place where all Russian, authentic, so-called indigenous Russian music really begins, you know. And interestingly, Glinka was actually a citizen of the world, you know, he traveled the world, he went to Italy, he started European music, you know, then he came back, he became associated with what's now known as the Mighty Five or the Mighty Handful, you know, a bunch of five composers who were devoted and dedicated to developing an authentic Russian style of music.

AK: Which is also, it has to be said, very broad-ranging, and the music of Russia has continued to be as diverse as the country itself. Can you speak to that, I guess, in terms of the broad-ranging influences that Russian composers have always drawn on and have continued to draw on?

SL: Yes, of course, you know, given the vast dimensions of Russia's geography, especially if we are talking pre-1917, you know, Russia spans an enormous amount of land, you know, and because of that, there's an extraordinary diversity of ethnicities and cultures and racial diversity, cultural diversity, and the composers were very inspired, particularly if you're talking about the Mighty Five, they were inspired by the Oriental influences, you know, and then there were all these invasions from the East, you know, the Turks and the Mongols, and also there's a lot of Eastern exoticism in Russian music, you know, and then there's the folk elements of Russian music, so it's on one hand incredibly eclectic, and on the other hand, I guess, that thread, you know, to find the Russian, the essence of Russian expressions from music.

The listening part is over.