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# Prelude



## MASTERWORKS #7:

**RACHMANINOFF AND TCHAIKOVSKY** APRIL 17 – 19, 2020

**Two Russian composers, teacher and pupil, both legends in the world of classical music and revered by their countrymen, shared something else in common: periods of severe and crippling depression.**

Dr. Richard Kogan, a Juilliard-trained pianist, graduate of Harvard College and Medical School, and a Clinical Professor of Psychology on the faculty of the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City, has concluded that a disproportionate number of the great composers of classical music suffered from mental illness.<sup>i</sup> In his years as a student, Dr. Kogan pursued both music and pre-medical studies. His roommate at Harvard was famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and, with violinist Lynn Chang, they performed as a trio.<sup>ii</sup> With a choice between music and medicine, Dr. Kogan chose medicine, but, in so doing, noted the close relationship between the two fields.<sup>iii</sup> In interviews, he observed that Apollo was the Greek god of music **and** medicine and that shamans have long moved between the worlds of healing and music.<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Kogan regularly performs as a musician and in interpreting the great works of the composers as both musician and physician, his priority is destigmatizing mental disorders.<sup>v</sup> After all, he notes, "If geniuses can have mental illness, then maybe mental illness is not shameful."<sup>vi</sup>

Since ancient times, the link between creative genius and mental illness has been observed, and modern research suggests that, when compared with the general population, the incidence of psychiatric illness is greater among writers, artists and musicians.<sup>vii</sup> Sergei Rachmaninoff and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, both subjects of extensive study by Dr. Kogan, battled a lifelong struggle with depression.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky, born May 7, 1840 into a family of relative privilege, formed his earliest musical impressions from the family's orchestra, which played excerpts from Mozart, Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti.<sup>viii</sup> He began to study piano at age five, but, despite his early interest in music, the family had him enroll as a boarding student in the Imperial School of Jurisprudence, a path to a solid career as a civil servant.<sup>ix</sup> In 1854, in the midst of his schooling, his mother's sudden death from cholera plunged the

lonely 14-year old into despair.<sup>x</sup> He mourned the loss of his mother for the rest of his life and called it the most "crucial event" he'd ever experienced.<sup>xi</sup> With his mother's death, a young Tchaikovsky became the parent figure for his younger twin brothers, Anatoly and Modest.<sup>xii</sup> Despite the family's wish that Tchaikovsky have a career in the Ministry of Justice, the young man was drawn to music. When the St. Petersburg Conservatory opened its doors in 1862, Tchaikovsky was among its first students.<sup>xiii</sup> From that point forward, his musical path was clear, and his work as a composer earned him a teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory.

Although the topic of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was suppressed in Soviet Russia, his sexual orientation is indisputable, according to the autobiographical account of his brother, Modest, who was also gay.<sup>xiv</sup> Through letters between Tchaikovsky and his two younger brothers, we now know of the heart-wrenching stress the composer endured as a closeted homosexual, in persistent fear of a public scandal. After a series of affairs that included Valdimir Shilovsky (the stepson of Valdimir Behichev, the director of repertoire for the Moscow theaters),<sup>xv</sup> Tchaikovsky fell deeply in love with Joseph Kotek, a violinist and former student at the Moscow Conservatory.<sup>xvi</sup> When Kotek proved to be unfaithful, Tchaikovsky, then 37 and under social pressure to marry, hurled himself into a hasty marriage with a former female student, Antonina Ivanova.<sup>xvii</sup> The marriage was a disaster that ended after just two months.<sup>xviii</sup> In despair, Tchaikovsky walked into the freezing waters of the Neva River and attempted to commit suicide by freezing himself to death.<sup>xix</sup> He was luckily rescued by passersby who witnessed the event.<sup>xx</sup>



Tchaikovsky and Ivanova

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Though he and Antonina never again lived together, they did remain legally married until the composer's death, and her occasional letters to him plunged him into an even deeper state of despair, marked by periods of loss of sleep, loss of appetite, an inability to work, and a fixation on imminent death.<sup>xxi</sup> His failed marriage caused Tchaikovsky extreme anxiety, and, in correspondence with his brothers, he expressed his constant state of deep depression, exacerbated by the terror that his wife might expose his sexual orientation.<sup>xxii</sup> Tchaikovsky suffered from severe untreated depression for the remainder of his life.<sup>xxiii</sup> Meeting strangers caused him intolerable agony, and he was so convinced that his head would fall off while conducting that, when he stood on the podium, he held his head with one hand and conducted the orchestra with the other.<sup>xxiv</sup>



Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff, born in 1873, was the son of a wealthy landowner who squandered nearly his entire fortune through gambling.<sup>xxv</sup> The family was forced to move to a cramped apartment in St. Petersburg in the midst of a diphtheria epidemic, and 9-year old Sergei fell ill, as did his sister.<sup>xxvi</sup> His sister's death from the disease left Sergei with a fear of death that lasted throughout his lifetime.<sup>xxvii</sup> As an undisciplined but talented young pianist, he was sent to study in Moscow and, as a composition student at the Moscow Conservatory, he studied with Tchaikovsky, his musical idol.<sup>xxviii</sup> In recognition of Sergei's gift for composing emotionally charged music, Tchaikovsky effectively anointed Rachmaninoff as his successor.<sup>xxix</sup> After Tchaikovsky's unexpected death in 1893, Rachmaninoff was determined to honor his mentor and began to compose a symphony, believing it would live up to Tchaikovsky's legacy.<sup>xxx</sup> But the world premiere of his Symphony No. 1 was an utter disaster. The orchestra failed to sufficiently rehearse and the conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was reportedly drunk during the concert.<sup>xxxi</sup> According to Dr. Kogan, Rachmaninoff "always" had a "gloomy disposition," and the disastrous performance of his first symphony precipitated an emotional crisis that plunged the composer into a depressive episode that nearly ended his career as a composer.<sup>xxxii</sup> Rachmaninoff developed insomnia, lost his appetite and was completely unable to compose.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

When the London Philharmonic Society commissioned Rachmaninoff to compose a new piano concerto, he accepted the assignment because he needed the money, but, at the time, he was still in despair and suffering from complete writer's block.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In desperation, he consulted with Dr. Nikolai Dahl, who used hypnosis for the treatment of psychiatric problems. Rachmaninoff saw Dr. Dahl on a daily basis beginning in January of 1900 and by April of

that year, there was considerable improvement in Rachmaninoff's appetite and mood.<sup>xxxv</sup> The composer was sufficiently recovered to start work on his second piano concerto, and the piece was dedicated to Dr. Nikolai Dahl. The successful psychiatric treatment helped Rachmaninoff flourish as a composer, and Igor Stravinsky remarked that it was "as if he had transitioned from using watercolors to oil paintings."<sup>xxxvi</sup>



Rachmaninoff and Dahl

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Rachmaninoff fled Russia and eventually settled in New York City where he developed a successful career as a brilliant concert pianist.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Despite his success, which included a devoted wife and family, along with wealth and worldwide fame, Rachmaninoff continued to suffer with depression, and, as he grew older, he developed a multitude of phobias about strangers, darkness and small animals.<sup>xxxviii</sup> He openly acknowledged that he suffered from mental illness, but never again sought psychiatric treatment.<sup>xxxix</sup> Dr. Kogan theorizes that Rachmaninoff was not motivated to seek treatment because he believed that he sought Dr. Dahl's treatment to cure writer's block, not depression.<sup>xl</sup> Rachmaninoff continued to concertize throughout his life, even when diagnosed with malignant melanoma. He died just 4 days short of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, on March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California.

The magnificent music of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff defies the pain they endured during their lives and remains as an enduring tribute to the remarkable human ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Join us!

**Please join** the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for ***Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky***, April 17 - 19, 2020, to hear soloist Henry Kramer perform Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, in concert with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5.



## WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO'S Listening Guide, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Yefim Bronfman performs Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Valery Gergiev:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFkAwFDZGHk>

Leonard Bernstein conducts the Boston Symphony in a performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2JBTOHC98I>

### Interested in hearing more samples?

Listen as Rachmaninoff performs his own Piano Concerto No. 3:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA0kXDMKiLg>

See Dr. Kogan perform Rachmaninoff:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=6&v=Z8hRBUzAeJs&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=Z8hRBUzAeJs&feature=emb_logo)

Another composer who famously suffered from mental illness is Robert Schumann, and Martha Argerich's performance of Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor is filled with the magic of his music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynky7qoPnUU>



*Rachmaninoff's Hands*



*Tchaikovsky Monument in Moscow*



*Rachmaninoff in Concert*

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**Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.**

Rachmaninoff's most challenging piano concerto, the No. 3 in D Minor, has tested the skills of the greatest pianists, but none has surmounted its difficulties with more apparent ease than Martha Argerich, accompanied by Riccardo Chailly and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (DECCA).

Every great and not great conductor has recorded Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5, but two recordings stand out as personal favorites: Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, a reading where the orchestra is so super-charged by the conductor it seems on the edge of escaping the bounds of the score (DG), and the direct opposite of that approach, a tightly controlled, compelling and brilliantly executed version by George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra (SONY).



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