

# More than Notes

## Student Study Guide

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Words in bold type are defined in the Glossary

## Sergei Rachmaninoff

### A Life in Exile



Sergei Rachmaninoff

The Russian composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries made great contributions to vocal music literature. One of those Russian musical giants was Sergei Rachmaninoff (pronounced Sehr-GAY Rock-MAH-nih-noff), a man who considered himself the most Russian of Russians, but a man who became a US citizen 24 years after being forced out of his beloved country by political **turmoil**.

Rachmaninoff, a composer, concert pianist, and conductor, was born in 1873, when Russia was still ruled by Tsars (pronounced, zars, and sometimes spelled "czars"), who were emperors with tremendous power. At that time Russia was, for the most part, divided into classes: the ruling classes, and the very poor. The ruling classes included royalty and also people who were what we might term "upper middle class," not royalty, but still rich enough to live well, like military officers, and those who could afford to own land. The very poor were treated much like slaves, with few civil or personal rights. Those in the royal courts were so disconnected from the majority of the Russian people that they did not even speak Russian. French was the language spoken in the royal courts of Russia. This was the world into which Rachmaninoff was born.

### Exile from Family

Rachmaninoff's mother and father were part of the aristocracy (air-ris-TOCK-rasy), the ruling class. His father, however, who was an army officer, brought the family to near financial ruin by poor investments, drinking, and gambling. None of those problems kept young Sergei from his music. He wrote, "My memory goes

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"I reflect the philosophy of old Russia...with its **overtones** of suffering and unrest, its **pastoral** but tragic beauty, its ancient and enduring glory."  
--Sergei Rachmaninoff

## Glossary

- **A capella** - vocal music without instrumental accompaniment
- **Anarchist** - a person who does not believe that government is necessary: an anarchist society is usually chaotic, disorganized and violent
- **Communists** - those who believe in a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person is paid and works according to his or her needs and abilities
- **Concerto (con-CHAIR-toh)** - a composition for a solo instrument accompanied by an orchestra
- **Conservatory** - a special school for the arts, specifically a school for the study of music
- **Facility** - ease, lack of difficulty
- **Mucus** - a slimy substance secreted by a membrane inside your mouth, nose and sinuses (mucus membrane is what you feel on the insides of your cheeks)
- **Overtones** - a subtle or hard to define quality
- **Pastoral** - associated with farmland or pastures, shepherds and flocks of sheep, usually implying something peaceful and calm, not urban

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*Exile from Family* - Continued from page 1

back to my fourth year, and it is strange how all my memories of childhood, the good and the bad, the sad as well as the happy ones, are somehow connected with music. My mother began to give me piano lessons when I was four. I must have made pretty good progress for I was made to play for people."

Because of his father's financial problems, the family had to sell their country estate and move to a small apartment in the Russian city of St. Petersburg. Because of his obvious talents, his first professional piano teacher advised Sergei's mother to enroll the boy in the St. Petersburg **Conservatory**, a **prestigious** music school. Since money was scarce, the family applied for a scholarship for the tuition. The scholarship made it possible for Sergei to enroll in the Conservatory at the age of nine. After moving to St. Petersburg, all five of the Rachmaninoff children immediately became ill with a disease called diphtheria. Diphtheria is a terrible infection that usually attacks the **mucus** of the throat, causing great difficulty in breathing and swallowing. Before modern science developed medicines to fight infections, many thousands of people died from diphtheria. Sergei's older sister died during their first few months in St. Petersburg.

Rachmaninoff's mother, already angry with her husband for losing their fortune (which had been her family's money before their marriage) now blamed him for the death of their daughter. Humiliated and unable to cope with the situation, Sergei's father left his wife and remaining four children, and never returned. Sergei's grandmother stepped in to support the family, allowing Sergei to go to the Conservatory. Visiting the churches of St. Petersburg, Sergei heard the choral music and church bells that would influence some of his later compositions.

For his first three years in the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Sergei was not particularly successful. He was so gifted that he could pass his classes without really applying himself. He was undisciplined and lax in his studies. His mother, worried about his slow progress, arranged for him to study with Nicholas Zverev, a brilliant musician and one of the finest piano teachers in Russia. However, Zverev taught at the Moscow Conservatory rather than the one in St. Petersburg. Since Sergei was only 12, it was arranged that Sergei's 17-year old sister, Elana, would move

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Moscow Conservatory

to Moscow with him so she could begin her singing career with the Bolshoi (BOHL-shoy) Opera, which was also in Moscow. Tragically, Elana became ill and died in the summer before she was to move to Moscow with the young Sergei. In the fall, Sergei boarded the train to Moscow by himself to begin his

new life in music. His mother sewed money into the lining of his coat so it would not get lost or stolen. As Rachmaninoff later wrote, "I had my fair share of sorrows, sufferings, and **privations.**" Zverev, Sergei's new teacher, was a strict disciplinarian. He allowed Sergei and a few of his other young pupils to live in his Moscow house with him and his sister. There the boys shared one room and one piano, wore uniforms, and got up at six o'clock each morning for supervised lessons and music practice. They studied languages, history, and literature as well as music, and regularly attended the theater to expand their cultural life. By the time he was 15, Sergei had grown tired of this restrictive life, and he left Zverev's house after an argument, moving in with his aunt so he could remain in Moscow.

## Exile from Composing

At 19, Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory with high honors. By that time he was a highly skilled pianist and conductor, but he intended to make his living as a professional composer. He had discovered his talent for composing by the age of 12. While in school, he studied with some of the finest composition teachers in the Moscow Conservatory, and came to the attention of the already famous Russian composer Pytro Tchaikovsky (chai-KAHV-sky), who became a musical mentor.

For the first five years after graduation his career went well, and his compositions were highly praised. He became overconfident and a little arrogant. When a famous and much older composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, suggested a change in one of his compositions he blew him off, a very foolish thing to do. He had already begun work on what was to be his first Symphony, a very large work for orchestra. Two years later, in 1897, the First

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## Glossary (cont.)

- **Prestigious** - having achievements or power that bring the respect of others
- **Privations** - hardships, lack of comforts or necessities
- **Proletarian** - the lowest class of people; those who work for others for low wages
- **Socialist** - a political theory which advocates that the community as a whole should own and control the means of production, distribution, and exchange of goods
- **Transliteration** - the systematic conversion of text from one writing system or alphabet to another
- **Turmoil** - violent confusion
- **Virtuoso** - a person highly skilled in the technique of a fine art, especially music

### Continue learning online by searching for these topics:

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- The Russian Revolution
- World War I
- The Nazi Party and World War II
- The Cyrillic Alphabet and the Russian Language
- Russia in the 21st century
- Bolshoi Opera

# Rachmaninoff's Vespers

## Movement VI: Ave Maria

If you are Catholic, you might recognize the text below - the complete lyrics for the sixth movement of *Vespers: Ave Maria*.

### Russian Transliteration

Bogoroditse Devo,  
raduysya, blagodatnaya Mariye,  
Gospod's toboyu:  
Blagoslovenna Ty v zhenakh,  
i blagosloven plod chreva Tvoyego,

Yako Spasa rodila yesi dush  
nashikh.

### English

Virgin mother of God,  
hail, Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee:  
Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy  
womb,  
For thou hast brought forth the  
Saviour who redeemed our souls

Read the complete *Vespers*  
text and transliteration on  
Choral Arts' website at:  
[www.choralarts.org](http://www.choralarts.org)

One of Rachmaninoff's most beloved choral works is his *Vesper Mass for Chorus a cappella*, which was written in 1915, when he was still in Moscow, before the final Russian Revolution. A Vesper Mass is a religious service performed in the early evening, at the sixth of the canonical hours—times that are pre-set for prayers or religious services in the Catholic church. The word Vespers has an interesting history: it refers to the planet Venus, which was named after the Roman goddess of love. The planet Venus is often the first and brightest star visible in the night sky, and the evening service in the early Christian churches came to be known as Vespers, referring to that star.

This work is numbered "Opus 37." The word "opus" means "work," which is a way to identify WHEN a piece of music was written. In this case, *Vespers* was the 37th piece of music Rachmaninoff had published. The words "**a cappella**" mean that there is no instrumental accompaniment for the chorus. The phrase literally translates as "from the chapel," referring to a smaller worship space where there was no organ or other instrument available to accompany a choir.

## Lets Look at the Music

The music illustration to the right is from the third movement (section) of Rachmaninoff's *Vespers, Opus 37*. There are a total of 15 movements in this work, written in Russian, that when translated, have familiar religious texts.

The Russian language uses a different alphabet, called Cyrillic (sih-rill-ic). Here is Rachmaninoff's name written in the Cyrillic alphabet: РАХМАНИНОВ. Here are a few other letters in the Cyrillic alphabet: Д Ж Ц Ы Й Ю Ф Э. As you can see, it would be difficult for American singers to be able to pronounce the words without a great deal of training, so Choral Arts has created what is called a "**transliteration**" of the Russian text—a version which has been written out phonetically. This phonetic spelling gives the singers a clearer idea of how to pronounce the Russian by writing out how to say the words using familiar letters.

To the right you will see the last line of the third movement, which begins "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." You can see the transliteration of some words of praise: "Slava Tebye, Bozhe. Alliluya..." ("Glory to Thee, O Lord. Alleluia...").

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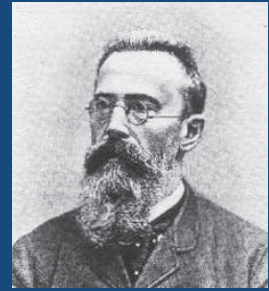
The word "Alleluia" is recognizable to the eye, but there are still differences in the way the word sounds. For instance, Russians have several different ways to pronounce the letter "L," and to sound like you are speaking Russian you must be able to identify those sounds and move your tongue in various ways to pronounce them.

As you can see, this page shows a key signature that contains one flat. Do you think the piece is in the key of F Major or D minor? Look at the last chord in the last measure. Those notes are D, F, A, which is a D minor chord, which tells us that the key of this piece is probably D minor. Notice that there is no time signature—the notes seem to simply move along without being divided into regular beats in measures. That means the singer can't think in terms of 1, 2, 3, 4 / 1, 2, 3, 4, but must think in terms of how each note relates to the next one. If you think of the "pulse" of the music in quarter notes, you simply keep that pulse going, moving twice as fast for eighth notes and holding two pulses for half notes. The top line is for soprano voices. Notice they are the only voice that does not divide.

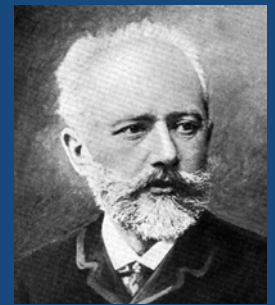
Is this section soft or loud? Notice the dynamic markings *p* and *pp*, soft and very soft. Notice that there is a great deal of "rubato" (give and take) of tempo. The first measure says "Rall." (rallentando), slowing down, then the tempo goes back to the "Previous tempo," then slows again, with a fermata (hold) on the last chord. The bottom two lines of music are for piano, but they are used only in the learning process, not in the performance, since *Vespers* is "a cappella."

The image shows a musical score for a section of a piece. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system has three staves: a soprano line with lyrics, a vocal line, and a piano accompaniment line. The bottom system has two staves: a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are in Russian: "Сла-ва Те-бѣ Бо-зхе. Ал-ли-луй-и-а, ал-ли-луй-и-а, ал-ли-луй-и-а. Сла-ва Те-бѣ Бо-зхе." and "Сла-ва Те-бѣ Бо-зхе. Ал-ли-луй-и-а, ал-ли-луй-и-а, ал-ли-луй-и-а. Сла-ва Те-бѣ Бо-зхе." The tempo markings are "Rall.", "Previous Tempo", and "Rall." in both English and Russian. Dynamic markings include *pp* and *ppp*. The score is numbered "Р.М.Н. 277" at the bottom.

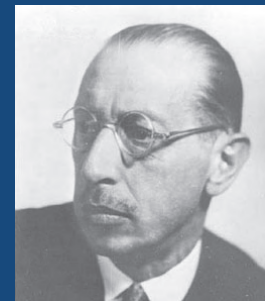
## Check Out These Russian Composers who lived during Rachmaninoff's lifetime



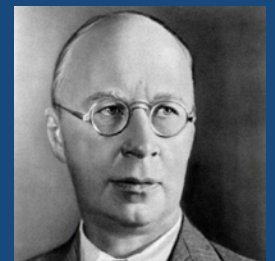
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1909)



Pyro Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)



Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)



Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

## A Timeline of A Life

1873

- Sergei Rachmaninoff is born in Russia.

1882

- The Rachmaninoff family moves to St. Petersburg after having to sell their country estate.
- The first electric fan, electric iron, and electric Christmas lights are available, if you are lucky enough to have electricity in your home.

1885

- Rachmaninoff begins study at the Moscow Conservatory.
- George Parker invents a game called *Banking* and is selling it nationwide. In 1935 the game will be renamed *Monopoly*.
- English scientist Frances Galton proves that fingerprints are never identical and can be used to identify people.

1909

- Rachmaninoff makes his first trip to the United States on a concert tour.
- The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) is organized in New York.
- Nucleic acids RNA and DNA are discovered by scientists who call them "the building blocks of life."

1917

- The Bolshevik Revolution drives Rachmaninoff out of Russia.
- The United States joins World War I after German submarines begin attacking all ships in open waters. The war started in Europe in 1914.
- After years of pressure from suffragettes, the state of New York adopts a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote.

1927

- Rachmaninoff continues concert tours, playing and conducting, in Europe and North America.

*Exile from Composing* - Continued from page 3

Symphony was premiered, and the performance was a disaster. It was so unpopular and unsuccessful that Rachmaninoff fell into a depression that lasted for three years. He said, "I did nothing at all and found not pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent lying on a couch (and drinking) and sighing over my ruined life...I felt like a man who had suffered a stroke and for a long time had lost the use of his head and hands."

During those three years of misery Rachmaninoff played the piano and conducted, but did not write a note of music. Finally, he sought help from a hypnotist who had him repeat over and over, "I will begin to write my **Concerto**...I will work with great **facility**...the Concerto will be of excellent quality...." He said, "Although it may sound incredible, this

cure really helped me...I began to compose again." That Concerto became his most famous work, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, a very difficult piece of music written for performance by a **virtuoso** pianist with orchestral accompaniment. Some musicians call this music the "Rach2" or "Rocky2," and it is still popular as a concert piece for extremely advanced pianists. (The "Rach2" was featured in the Oscar-winning movie *Shine* several years ago—rent it!)

### *Exile from Tradition*

In 1902, two years after his recovery from depression, Rachmaninoff married Natalya Satina, his first cousin. Marrying your first cousin was illegal in Russia, and he had to receive special permission from the Tsar for the marriage. He and Natalya were happily married for forty years and had two daughters, Irina and Tatiana.

Rachmaninoff's career as a composer began to blossom as musical organizations all over the western world started programming his music. He was composing all the time and playing solo piano recitals as well. However, historic events were about to change everything for him, for his family, and for the world.



Natalya

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By 1905, Russia was in the midst of a revolution. For the next 12 years, internal strife would rock the country again and again, finally resulting in the 1917 takeover of the government by the Bolsheviks, a group of Communists who seized the land and property of well-to-do people and drove out or killed everyone previously in power. Rachmaninoff was not interested in politics or social issues, only in music. In 1906, he decided to take his family to Dresden, Germany, where for three years he enjoyed the peace and quiet he needed for composition. He also found himself in demand as a pianist and conductor, and his fame increased in Europe.

He and his family travelled to the United States in 1909 on a concert tour, but he wasn't happy here at that time, writing to a friend that Americans are "forever doing, clutching at you from all sides and driving you on. Everyone treats me nicely and kindly, but I am horribly bored with it all." He had returned to Russia and was with his family on their country farm when he heard that a war had begun. This was the first of the two "world wars" of the 20th century. Russia was now part of the largest and most awful war the world had ever known.

From 1914-1917, Rachmaninoff stayed involved with music. He gave concerts and benefits for wounded soldiers, but he composed very little, falling into depression about the state of Russia. In February of 1917, another revolution rocked Russia, and this time the Tsar was overthrown and a moderate **Socialist** government in St. Petersburg was established. By October, yet another bloody overthrow took place, this time led by Vladimir Lenin and the **Communists**.

Rachmaninoff tried to ignore all this, saying "[I was] so engrossed with my work that I did not notice what went on around me. Consequently, life during the **anarchistic** upheaval, which turned the existence of a non-**proletarian** into hell on earth, was comparatively easy for me. I sat at a writing table or the piano all day without troubling about the rattle of machine guns and rifle shots." But Moscow was certainly not a safe place for his family.

## 1927 (cont.)

- The Stock Market goes wild, producing new millionaires every day. Two years later the Stock Market will crash, destroying the US economy for years, and plunging the world into the Great Depression.
- Pilot Charles Lindbergh, known as "Lucky Lindy," becomes the first person to fly alone across the Atlantic in his plane, "The Spirit of St. Louis."

## 1939

- Rachmaninoff returns permanently to America to escape the approaching war in Europe.
- World War II begins when Nazi Germany, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler, attacks neighboring Poland. Russia and Japan are already at war on the other side of the world.
- African-American classical singer Marion Anderson tries to rent Constitution Hall for a concert but is turned away because of her race. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt intervenes and arranges for Ms. Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday. 750,000 people attend the concert.
- Some call this the greatest movie year in history with the release of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Stagecoach*.

## 1943

- Rachmaninoff dies of cancer in Beverly Hills.
- World War II continues to rage in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, China, Russia, and Japan, as well as other places.
- The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma* opens on Broadway. It is the first of the great musicals that incorporate the songs into the story-line. It will run for 2,212 performances.
- The Jefferson Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.

## Exile from Russia

When Rachmaninoff was offered a concert tour of Scandinavia, he agreed to it immediately and managed to get passports for his family to travel as well. Since this was supposedly just a concert tour, the family had to leave their belongings, houses, and land as if they would soon return. They took clothes and 500 rubles (Russian money) for each of them, traveling in a snowstorm across the border to Finland. Rachmaninoff desperately missed his homeland, but he never was able to return. When asked about it in later years he said sadly, "There is no Russia."



Rachmaninoff spent the next 20 years successfully touring Europe and North America as a piano virtuoso and conductor, working with dozens of orchestras as sort of a "citizen of the world." He continued to compose piano, vocal, and orchestral music. He never lost his desire to return to Russia, saying, "even the air here [in the US] is not like in Russia—it smells differently." As he got older, he felt most comfortable in the company of fellow Russians who had also been driven from their homeland.

Unfortunately, by 1938, his world was again turned upside down by forces beyond his control. Following the rise of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany, Europe was once more on the brink of a world war. It was no longer safe for Rachmaninoff and his family to travel there. In 1939 he returned to America. His fellow Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, who had also fled from Russia, called Rachmaninoff "a six-foot-two scowl."

In 1942, Rachmaninoff moved to Beverly Hills, California, and in 1943 he became a US citizen. Sadly, he died of cancer just one month later. In his last few days he wrote, "Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is never enough for music." He was 70 years old.

### Just for Fun

*In the game below, the letters of Rachmaninoff's name stretch downward. Fill in the blank with the word that fits the definition given.*

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| R _____ | Country of Rachmaninoff's birth  |
| A _____ | A person of the upper class or nobility  |
| C _____ | A specialty school, especially one for music   |
| H _____ | Profession of the person who helped Rachmaninoff out of depression in 1900               |
| M _____ | Russian city where Rachmaninoff attended a Conservatory                                  |
| A _____ | A person who believes that all government should be abolished                            |
| N _____ | Ruling party of Germany, headed by Adolph Hitler from 1933 to 1945                       |
| I _____ | First name of another famous Russian composer, Stravinsky                                |
| N _____ | First name of Rachmaninoff's wife  |
| O _____ | Month of the 1917 Revolution that put the Communists in charge of Russia                 |
| F _____ | Month of the 1917 Revolution that put the Socialists in charge of Russia                 |
| F _____ | Number of the Symphony that failed, sending the young composer into a fit of depression. |