



Sergei Rachmaninoff—whose last name is also spelled Rachmaninov—was born on his family's estate near Novgorod, Russia. He studied piano at an early age, but his passion for music really took hold when he became a student at the Moscow Conservatory.

Composition was one of his subjects, and the young student discovered he had a gift.

Living in the home of his teacher, Nikolai Zverev (Zveref)—with other young musicians \* who would also become famous —Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was able to play for noted Russian musicians of the time (including Tchaikovsky, his idol).

The developing pianist had another *major* gift ... his hand span. His fingers could stretch so far that he was able to reach notes only dreamed-of by other pianists.

To experience Rachmaninoff's amazing hand span for yourself, find a piano keyboard and, with both hands, try to reach these notes:

*C; E-flat; G; C; G* [with the left] *and C (second finger)-E-G-C-E (thumb under)* [with the right]

If you can reach all those notes, with both hands, you are one of the rare people with a hand span like Rachmaninoff's.

But you have to do more than just reach the notes to play Sergei Vasilievich's most-difficult compositions. Take his Third Piano Concerto, for example.

Concert pianists—like Olga Kern, the extraordinarily talented Russian who won the 2001 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition with her rendition of the Rach 3 (Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30)—are able to mesmerize an audience with their renditions of Rachmaninoff's masterful compositions for piano and orchestra.

Rachmaninoff didn't just compose for the piano, however. He also put literature to music when he created *The Bells*, Op. 35, in 1913.

Based on the poem of Edgar Allan Poe, the words of the choral symphony were liberally translated into Russian by Konstantin Balmont, a symbolic poet. It is performed, in this embedded video by the Scottish National Orchestra and Chorus, directed by Neeme Järvi, and has four movements:

- I. *Allegro ma non tanto*: Sleigh Bells
- II. *Lento*: Wedding Bells
- III. *Presto*: Alarm Bells
- IV. *Lento*: Funeral Bells

Because of the Bolshevik Revolution, Sergei Vasilievich was forced to leave Russia in 1918. A devastating development in his life, he was never-again able to return to his beloved homeland. His ideas about music and culture clashed with those of Russia's Communist government.

One example of the clash between the composer and the Bolsheviks is what happened to his summer home, known as Ivanovka, a place of peace for him. Not only did Rachmaninoff love spending summers there—southeast of Moscow in the Tambov Oblast—he found the inspiration he needed to compose his music. The Bolsheviks, however, burned it to the ground:

*He would spend most summers there, usually arriving as spring was advancing rapidly to see the latter part of that spring taking hold of the land. And he stayed until the harvest was gathered in before returning to the professional demands of Moscow and elsewhere.*

*Over the years Rachmaninoff became increasingly involved in the running of the establishment up until his final visit in April 1917. Later that year, following the Bolshevik coup d'etat, the whole place was burnt down by revolutionary enthusiasts. (Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings by Max Harrison, at pages 26-27.)*

We know about the negative impact caused by his leaving Russia from statements Rachmaninoff made during his lifetime. They are quoted, or paraphrased, in the narration of "[Harvest of Sorrow](#)," a documentary about his life (in which Sir John Gielgud, then in his 90s, voices Rachmaninoff):

- "I was forced to leave my homeland ... One place and one place only remains closed to me and that is my own country, the land where I was born."
- [Ivanovka](#). "Twenty years of my life spent there. Every Russian feels strong ties to the soil. Perhaps it comes from an instinctive need for solitude. The endless fields of wheat stretching as far as the eye could see. The smell of the Earth, mowed rows and blossoms. I felt so good there. I could work - and work hard. Most of my music was written there, and even when I left Russia, my music was inspired by there. There, at last, I found blessed happiness."
- "Wherever I live, it is Russian music [I create]."
- "I am like a ghost, wandering forever in the world."
- "I am burned with a harvest of sorrow."
- "I have no country. "

Sergei Vasilievich lived in America, in Paris, in Switzerland, then back to America where he died on the 28th of March, 1943. A few days later, on the 1st of April, he would have turned 70.

When Rachmaninoff fell ill, his doctors determined that he had advanced melanoma ... and ... nothing could be done to save him. His family was given the grim news, but not the maestro himself.

He continued to perform, giving his last concert at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville during February of 1943. Following that event, he was so ill he had to return to his Beverly Hills home.

Although he wished to be buried at his [Senar estate in Switzerland](#), where he'd recreated the environment of his Russian family home, the world was still at war when he died.

Three-and-a-half years after his 2nd piano concerto was interrupted, as German bombs knocked-out the power of Warsaw Radio, Sergei Rachmaninov was [laid to rest](#) at Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York. Decades after his death, we can still experience the joy of his music and marvel at the extent of his talent (as depicted in this 2016 BBC documentary "The Joy of Rachmaninoff").

Click on the top image for a better view.

**See, also:**

**[Rachmaninov - Concerto No. 2 in C Minor and Its Creation](#)**

**[Rachmaninov - Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Part 2](#)**

**[Rachmaninov - Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Part 3](#)**

\* Nikolai Zverev and his students, from left to right: Samuelson, Scriabin, Maximov, Rachmaninoff, Chernyaev, Keneman and Pressman. The photo was taken sometime in the mid-to-late 1880s. Rachmaninoff left his studies with Zverev in 1890.

Credits:

This image depicts Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff as he appeared, circa 1901. Online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Sergei-Rachmaninoff-and-His-Amazing-Hand-Span>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Sergei-Rachmaninoff-and-His-Amazing-Hand-Span>

## Media Stream



### Sergei Rachmaninoff and His Amazing Hand Span

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Sergei-Rachmaninoff-and-His-Amazing-Hand-Span0>