

A child prodigy of startling promise, Julius Katchen matured into a solo and chamber music pianist of broad interests and probing artistry. His death from cancer at age 42 denied a discerning public the presence of a pianist especially well-equipped to penetrate to the center-most meanings of those works he favored.

Born to a musical family, Katchen was instructed in the musical arts from his earliest years. His grandmother, formerly a faculty member at the Warsaw Conservatory, was his first piano instructor, while his grandfather taught him theory (his mother, a pianist, had trained at the Fontainebleau School of Music and had made concert appearances in both Europe and America). In 1937, Katchen presented himself to Eugene Ormandy and requested that he be permitted to play for him. Ormandy was sufficiently impressed to engage the lad for an appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The October 21, 1937, concert found Katchen performing Mozart's Concerto in D minor to high praise. Following this glowing reception, the 11-year-old pianist was invited to perform at a pension fund concert with the New York Philharmonic the following month. Critic Lawrence Gilman was moved to recall the debut of Josef Hofmann as a prodigy a half century before. "His fingers are fleet, his conceptions clear and intelligent," wrote Gilman of Katchen. "He has a musicianly feeling for the contour and flow and rhythm of a phrase and a sense of what is meant by Mozartean style." A New York recital a year later brought even more enthusiastic praise for the youth's musical understanding.

Before his career advanced, however, Katchen's parents chose to place a hold on further public appearances and enroll him instead at Haverford College, where he majored in philosophy and English literature. His break, Katchen often insisted, developed in him the intellectual curiosity that fed his interest in the more mentally challenging works in the repertory.

A fellowship extended by the French government permitted Katchen to travel to Paris in 1946; that cosmopolitan city became his home for the remainder of his life and he lost no time in making himself a formidable presence there and in the rest of Europe, respected for his commanding interpretive thoughtfulness and virtuoso technique. He undertook several highly successful tours of the Continent, winning acclaim in each center he visited. Decca Records signed him to an exclusive contract and he began recording a bracing cross-section of the repertory with Brahms always at the core. He presented concert performances of Brahms' complete solo piano works in New York, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Berlin and was heard with major orchestras in the two piano concertos. In addition to solo appearances, Katchen often took part in chamber music performances, again concentrating on Brahms, but certainly not neglecting other aspects of an extensive personal repertory. Ned Rorem and Benjamin Britten were just two contemporary composers to benefit from Katchen's advocacy. To say, as some have, that Katchen never achieved the success in America that was his in Europe fails to account for the far greater portion of his mature years that were spent on the Continent where other cultural stimulations prompted his most involved and productive work. Katchen was also acutely aware of the need to extend the exposure of classical music well beyond its existing ranks -- on December 11, 1968, he was one of a large group of musicians, all but one of them from the rock and blues fields, to perform as part of the Rolling Stones' Rock & Roll Circus, and a segment that was introduced by Brian Jones, no less; alas, due to production and post-production problems, no one got to see any part of Katchen's performance until over three decades later; the pianist himself, terminally ill with cancer, didn't live another six months after this extraordinary event. His tragic death was keenly felt on both sides of the Atlantic.



# RACHMANINOV

## PIANO CONCERTO

# No. 2

# KATCHEN

## LONDON SYMPHONY

# SOLTI



Rachmaninov composed this work in 1900, and played the first complete performance on November 9, 1901, with Alexandre Siloti conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Society.

He suffered a shattering career crisis in the 1897 massacre of his First Symphony in St. Petersburg, by its first conductor, Glazunov, who was reportedly disabblingly drunk -- a fiasco the critics en masse, led by César Cui, laid at the composer's feet like an animal carcass. The audience -- ever mindful that Rachmaninov had been expelled in 1885 from the local temple of musical instruction -- listened stonily, glad for the failure of a young lion schooled elsewhere (in Moscow, he completed the Conservatory course in 1891, and graduated a year later with highest possible grades). Because of the failure of the Symphony No. 1, Rachmaninov began to drink immoderately. Believing himself unfit to compose, he tried concentrating on parallel courses as a concert soloist and opera conductor, but embroiled himself in a love affair that ended very badly. By the end of 1899, he was an alcoholic whose hands shook, imperiling his keyboard career. Between January and April 1900, Sergey Vassilyevich saw Dr. Dahl, a Moscow specialist in "neuropsychotherapy," daily, and was urged under hypnosis to compose the new piano concerto that a London impresario was asking for. Trance therapy roused the composer from his lethargy; indeed, he worked with great facility on an excellent new concerto -- the Second, in C minor, Op. 18 -- dedicated to Dr. Dahl in gratitude. Never again in the remaining four decades of his life was Rachmaninov immobilized by depression, despite several convulsive changes of fortune.

The opening, C minor, movement in sonata form was composed last; structurally it is the most conventional. Ten bars of unaccompanied keyboard chords lead directly to a palpitant principal theme for violins, violas, and clarinets -- motivic rather than tuneful, despite a melismatic extension for cellos. An episode links this to the second theme, in E flat, one of Rachmaninov's most celebrated melodies, introduced by the piano. Following the development and a *maestoso alla marcia* reprise, there's a brilliant coda -- but no solo cadenza, yet.

In the E major, *Adagio sostenuto* movement, after four bars of Tchaikovskian string chords, piano arpeggios introduce a two-part principal theme, played first by the solo flute, then by the solo clarinet. Piano and orchestra develop both parts before a Tchaikovsky-like theme for bassoons nudges the tempo a bit. Further development goes even quicker, culminating in a solo cadenza that's been teasingly postponed, after which the original material returns, soulfully.

The finale is an *Allegro scherzando* in C major. The strings play a rhythmic figure that builds to a staccato climax. The piano enters with a flourish, setting up the principal subject -- again, as before in I, motivic rather than tuneful, but admirably constructed for developing. This is followed by another of Rachmaninov's signature melodies, lushly undulant, sung by the solo oboe and strings. (In the postwar 1940s, this was garnished with words and performed unrelentingly by big-band vandals as *Full Moon and Empty Arms*). A fugato brings back the principal subject, followed by a *Maestoso* statement of "The Tune." Accelerating fistfuls of piano chords set up a crowd-rousing conclusion.

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1. Moderato 9:40
  2. Adagio Sostenuto 11:51
  3. Allegro Scherzando 11:04
- Total Time: 32:35

*Transferred from a 15ips 2-track tape Date of Recording: June 1958 at Kingsway Hall, London.*

*Producer: John Culshaw Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson*



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