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Hey Busy Kids! Welcome to episode 96 of Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music loving families. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm delighted to have you joining me today as we make musical discoveries together.

Today is our first episode in a 2 part series about Russian composer, virtuoso pianist and conductor, Sergei Rachmaninoff. In today's episode we'll learn about his life and style of composing and some of his musical contributions, and in the next episode we'll learn about and listen to some of his famous piano preludes.

Rachmoninoff was born on April 1st, 1873 to a family of the Russian aristocracy. His family was a musical one, and his mother made sure that she had piano and music lined up for her son Sergei when he was just 4-years-old. She had noticed that her son could memorize passages of music and play them perfectly, and so she hired a teacher to live with them in their home and give him lessons.

Rachmaninoff's father hoped that his son would join the military, but because he lost their entire family fortune, he could no longer afford an expensive military career for his son. Instead, Rachmaninoff's beloved music teacher arranged for him to study at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory at the age of 10. When his father left them, his maternal grandmother came to live with them and help raise Sergei and his siblings. She regularly took them to Russian Orthodox Church services, where Rachmaninoff would first hear church bells and chanting – two features you'll hear in his compositions.

Rachmaninoff eventually transferred to a different conservatory in Moscow, where he graduated from at the age of 19. He had won a gold medal for a one-act opera that he composed and was gaining popularity as a composer and a concert pianist.

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Though you've heard just a bit of Rachmaninoff's work in this episode so far, you might be surprised to learn that he suffered from self-doubt and uncertainty over his abilities which would cause him long periods of deep depression. After a failed launch of his first symphony, which was performed poorly, he received some pretty strong negative criticism. One critic said that the piece would only be admired by the inmates of a conservatory in Hell – ouch! Rachmaninoff fell into a deep depression that lasted for three years, during which he composed almost nothing. He continued to give piano lessons during this time, but described himself “like the man who had suffered a stroke and for a long time had lost the use of his head and hands.” By 1900, composing had become nearly impossible for him. His aunt encouraged him to seek out professional help, and he connected with a family friend and psychiatrist Nikolay Dahl, who provided him with daily therapy sessions. Dahl is usually credited for restoring Rachmaninoff's self-confidence and desire to compose, enabling him to write the Piano Concerto No. 2, which you're listening to now. He dedicated this piece to Dahl.

Amids this return to professional success, Rachmaninoff married Natalia Satina in 1902 after a 3-year engagement. Because they were first cousins and because Rachmaninoff was not a regular church attendee and had avoided confession, the marriage was forbidden by the Russian Orthodox Church. Instead, the couple went around the church rules and had a small ceremony at a military chapel in Moscow.

At the time of the Russian Revolution of 1905, Rachmaninoff was working as conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre. The revolution was affecting the performers and staff who staged protests and demands for improved wages and working conditions, so Rachmaninoff turned in his resignation and took his family on a tour around Italy, hoping to inspire and complete new compositions. After illness struck his wife and daughter, they returned to Russia in 1910.

On the day the 1917 Russian Revolution began in St. Petersburg, Rachmaninoff was performing a piano recital in Moscow in aid of

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wounded Russian soldiers. Members of the Social Revolutionary Party seized his home, and he found himself completing revisions to his Piano Concerto No. 1 amidst the sounds of gunshots and rallies outside. When he received an offer to perform 10 piano recitals in Scandinavia, he immediately took it, using it as a chance to obtain permits for him and his family to leave the country.

Rachmaninoff spent the next 25 years dividing his time between residences in Switzerland in the United States. He had difficulty learning English and acclimating to the culture of these new countries, and lived a rather isolated life, longing for Russia and Russian people. This affected his creative ability, and composed little, mostly just rewriting some of his earlier compositions and performing as a concert pianist. In 1943, he died in Beverly Hills, California.

During a time when many Russian composers were trying to develop new musical styles, Rachmaninoff embraced and was inspired by composers of 19th century Romantic music, such as Tchaikovsky. You can hear this in the beautiful melodies and dramatic expression of his compositions, and the fact that he often featured the piano in his work. If you head to this episode's show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/96](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/96), you'll find a link to a curated playlist on YouTube of some of Rachmaninoff's best-known works that I've put together for you. You'll also find there a transcript of this episode as well as links to the music featured in today's episode. Again, you can find that at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/96](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/96). I hope you'll take a chance to listen to some of Rachmaninoff's beautiful music until our next episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs in 2 weeks. In that episode, we'll take a closer look at some of Rachmaninoff's preludes for the piano. I look forward to connecting with you then – bye for now!

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