How would music history have been different if certain composers had lived longer? What if Mozart had survived his illness in December of 1791? What if Beethoven had not gone deaf? What if Mahler had been blessed with both a healthy heart and a happy marriage? Short of inventing time travel and smuggling antibiotics (and perhaps a marriage counselor who speaks German) back into the past, we will never know the answers to these questions. Yet some composers miraculously escaped having their promising careers cut short, and because they survived we can see how their lives and music were changed forever.

Dmitri Shostakovich’s First Symphony was composed as a graduation exercise from the Moscow Conservatory at the age of 19 and was soon performed by major orchestras around the world. He was the musical poster boy of the post-Revolution Soviet Union, but he ran afoul of Joseph Stalin, who had attended a performance of Shosakovich’s Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk in January of 1936 and found both the modernism of the music and the salaciousness of the plot equally repulsive. After a scathing review appeared in Pravda two days later, the composer found himself to be persona non grata. With this incident occurring in the midst of Stalin’s purges, Shostakovich feared for his life, and disappeared from Soviet stages for nearly a year. He was rehabilitated only by the premiere of his Symphony No. 5, which was received with great acclaim by both the audience and the critics.

After the Lady Macbeth debacle, Shostakovich became two composers. One is the public cheerleader for Socialist Realism, writing government-approved but eminently forgettable works like Novoroissiisk Chimes, the Flame of Eternal Glory, The Oath to the People’s Commissar, and Poem of the Motherland. The other Shostakovich is the disguised critic of the Soviet regime, withdrawing into the intimate world of the string quartet or creating symphonic works that failed to fulfill the political requirements of Socialist Realism. His Ninth Symphony was his shortest and most lightly scored symphony, symbolically thumbing his nose at those who expected his Ninth to be a Soviet version of Beethoven’s Ninth. He often used the words of poets to voice his protests – one of the poems in his Fourteenth Symphony includes the line “What good is talent among villains and fools?”

Shostakovich’s Festive Overture, Op. 96 was written in 1954 for a concert commemorating the 1917 Russian Revolution. The request for the work came at the last minute, with the conductor requesting a new work only days before the concert. Shostakovich wrote and orchestrated the entire piece in only three days. The work bears a strong resemblance to one of the most famous Russian overtures, Glinka’s overture to his opera Ruslan and Ludmila, especially in the busy writing for strings and woodwinds.

The overture opens with a majestic brass fanfare, leading directly into a lively presto, where the bustling opening melody passes back and forth between woodwinds and strings, answered by weighty
proclamations in the brass. Cellos and horns follow with a lyrical but very wide-ranging melody, which is then passed to the violins. The rest of the overture explores a rapid-fire development of these two ideas, both individually and in tandem, passing throughout the orchestra. The opening fanfares return at the end, adding a note of grandiloquence before the *presto* returns for the headlong rush to the final cadence.

**Sergei Rachmaninoff: Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43**

The consistency of musical inspiration is nearly impossible to predict or codify. Some composers, like Mozart and Schubert, poured forth endless streams of melody and harmony on a daily basis. Others began slowly and experienced an Indian summer of composition late in life. The British composer Havergal Brian (1876 – 1972) completed six symphonies by the time he was 65, but completed a whopping 26 further symphonies until the time he stopped composing at the age of 92. Composers like Elgar and Sibelius wrote a great deal of music early in life and then the creative flow slowed to a trickle. Elgar, devastated by both the carnage of the First World War and the death of his beloved wife Alice, wrote almost nothing between his Cello Concerto of 1918 and his death in 1934. The great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius also found his creative muse silenced (perhaps by depression and alcoholism) after finishing his tone poem *Tapiola* in 1926; he completed nothing in the 32 years that followed. For years rumors circulated of an uncompleted Eighth Symphony, but Sibelius supposedly burned all traces of it before his death in 1958.

In the case of Sergei Rachmaninoff, the sudden drop off in creativity and productivity could be traced to two factors: life changes after leaving Russia in the wake of the 1917 revolution, and his need to make a living through appearances as pianist and conductor. When Rachmaninoff left Russia in December 1917, he and his family had sold the family estate and Rachmaninoff’s own dacha had been seized by the Leninist government. He ended up losing the royalties on his music published in Russia, since those rights were not covered by international copyright.

After a brief sojourn in Copenhagen, Rachmaninoff and his family immigrated to the United States. Both the Boston and Cincinnati Symphonies offered him the position of Music Director, but he refused them both, preferring to pursue his career as a freelance piano soloist and conductor. With his need to make a living through performance, Rachmaninoff found far less time to compose. From 1917 until his death in 1943, he produced only a handful of piano pieces and only three orchestral works: his Symphony No. 3, the Symphonic Dances (his last orchestral work) and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* for piano and orchestra, written in 1934.

It’s not known exactly what attracted Rachmaninoff to the theme from the great Italian violin virtuoso’s final caprice for solo violin, but Paganini’s melody has fascinated composers from Brahms and Liszt to Witold Lutoslawski and Andrew Lloyd Webber (who wrote his own set of variations on the tune for cello and rock band as a consequence of losing a bet to his brother Julian, a cellist). Rachmaninoff takes more than just the theme from Paganini’s 24th caprice – like the Italian violin virtuoso, he structures the work as a series of variations, creating 24 to Paganini’s original 11. There are other homages as well: after a
brief introduction, the first “variation” occurs before the entire theme is heard, presenting only the bare bones of the melody, heard *staccato* in the full orchestra, much like the opening variation in the finale of Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony. While the *Dies Irae* (the plainsong from the medieval Mass for the Dead) occurs frequently in Rachmaninoff’s output, here it seems to be a sly reference to the rumor that Paganini had sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his extraordinary facility on the violin. In fact, in 1937 Rachmaninoff suggested just such a scenario to the choreographer Mikhail Fokine, who created the ballet *Paganini* in 1939, using Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody* as the music.

Throughout the work, Rachmaninoff explores myriad facets of Paganini’s theme. We hear it as a waltz, a grim march, a minuet, and in two of the variations, the theme is treated as a piano cadenza. The *Dies Irae* first appears in Variation 7 and that melody is altered and transformed in Variations 8, 9, and 10. The virtuoso pianism of the middle variations eventually subsides into the Romantic calm of the famous Variation 18. While this soaring melodic line sounds worlds away from Paganini’s demonic tune, it is in fact an inversion of the melody, beginning serenely in the piano but increasing in ardor throughout the variation. From frenetic *scherzo* of the 19th Variation to the end of the work, the tempo, energy, and virtuosity gradually increase to a white-hot frenzy, with the *Dies Irae* making a malevolent and seemingly triumphant return in Variation 24, but it is the piano that has the final say, in an ending that is as unexpected as it is effective.

**Camille Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78, “Organ Symphony”**

He was born in the same year as Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie; he died in the same year as Enrico Caruso. He knew Hector Berlioz, John Philip Sousa and Igor Stravinsky. He was a child prodigy, playing concertos by Mozart and Beethoven in the Salle Pleyel in Paris at the age of ten. He was a virtuoso pianist as well as a prominent conductor and organist – Franz Liszt called him “the best organist in the world.” He traveled widely, performing in Britain, Russia, North Africa, South America, and the United States. He wrote the first original film score in 1908. He was an avid student of mathematics, philosophy, archaeology and astronomy. He was fluent in both Latin and Greek and wrote books of poetry, philosophy, and astronomy as well as several plays.

Despite his many accomplishments, most music history texts give Camille Saint-Saëns little mention if any. His popularity with the general public tends to rest on *The Carnival of the Animals* (subtilted “Grand Fantasie Zoologique”), an occasional piece that he never intended to be heard beyond its first performance. Amongst music critics, he tends to be damned with faint praise – “elegant,” “well-balanced,” “a classical sense of proportion,” “based on Classical models.” Late in his life he was considered something of a reactionary, a reputation that still dogs him almost a century after his death.

Yet Saint-Saëns’ music has remained a firm part of the concert repertoire. For all the dismissal of his work as less than profound, many of Saint-Saëns concertos and works for solo instrument and orchestra remain perennial concert staples, beloved of both performers and audiences alike. It is true that he based many of his works on Classical models and was one of the earliest proponents in France of the
music of Johann Sebastian Bach, but he also wrote numerous symphonic poems employing the cyclical forms and transformational procedures pioneered and developed by Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt. While his works display a Classical sense of balance and order, that makes them no less expressive or Romantic. Saint-Saëns’ own words sum up his approach to musical composition:

_The artist who does not feel completely satisfied by elegant lines, by harmonious colors, and by a beautiful succession of chords does not understand the art of music._

His Symphony No. 3 in C minor represents his crowning achievement in symphonic writing and is demonstrably the fusion of both the Classical and progressive elements of his musical style. On the surface, it is a symphony in four movements with a recognizable opening _allegro_ (with a slow introduction), slow movement, scherzo and finale. Yet the first and second movements are performed without pause, as are the scherzo and finale, dividing the work into two large-scale musical structures. The entire symphony is unified by transformational motives, small melodic/rhythmic ideas that are altered and developed throughout the work, much like the _leitmotivs_ in Wagner’s operas. As a result, even while satisfying the tenets of Classical symphonic form, the “Organ” Symphony has a micro-level organization that contributes even deeper levels of unity and variety. The instrumentation is for a standard Romantic orchestra, with the addition of a piano as well as an organ, which is used as part of the overall texture (as in the second movement) or in opposition to the weight of the full orchestra (in the finale) rather than a solo instrument.

The symphony opens with luminous and beautifully-scored string chords, answered by plaintive solo woodwinds. These woodwind figures will initiate a great deal of the melodic material for the entire symphony, pervading all four movements. Ominously rustling _staccato_ strings launch the subsequent _Allegro_, with woodwinds answering with variants of their figures from the introduction. As with the music from the introduction, this nervous string figure will be transformed throughout the work. The music ebbs and flows through several climaxes before the tempo relaxes into the second movement _Adagio_. The organ’s first entrance provides the lush harmonic cushion for a beautifully serene and long-breathed string melody, whose opening intervals are drawn from the sighing wind figures of the introduction. This melody is occasionally punctuated by a lilting woodwind figure, yet another version of the rustling string melody from the first movement’s _Allegro_. The organ takes up the string melody, with counterpoint provided by the violin section. After a nostalgic glimpse of melodic fragments of this tune, the first half of the symphony subsides into calm silence.

Ferocious unison strings propel the scherzo, whose opening idea derives from the first movement. The pounding rhythms of this scherzo are reminiscent of similar movements by Saint-Saëns’ elder contemporary Anton Bruckner, but the lightly scurrying woodwind figures and capricious piano scales of the trio section add a gossamer touch that is a far cry from the Austrian master’s weighty proclamations. The grim energy of the scherzo returns, as does the sparkling trio, but solemn chords in brass and organ (commented upon by chirpy woodwinds) initiate the transition into the finale. The nervy figures of the trio disappear, and a glowing woodwind chord anticipates the music to follow.
The fortissimo blast from the organ that ushers in the finale sweeps away the darkness of the preceding movement. After the initial organ/orchestra dialogue, the piano murmurs another version of the central idea of the symphony, transformed from nervous C minor into calm C major, and answered reverently by the organ. The organ transforms the calm of the piano figure into an all-stops-out full-throated roar, rejoined with jubilant fanfares from the brass section. The low strings launch an extended fugato section, with the fugue subject derived from the central idea of the symphony. Most of the movement is occupied with these dramatic contrapuntal episodes. At the end of these fugal high spirits, the tempo accelerates into an exhilarating coda led by the brass section, holding back only briefly for a final momentous declaration from the organ before sprinting into the blazing trumpet fanfares and booming timpani strokes that end the symphony.