

Piano Elevation: A Review of Performer's Guide to Rachmaninoff's Transcendent Solo Transcriptions

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Abstract

The present work examines the piano concertos of Rachmaninoff providing valuable insights into its efficacy in traversing Rachmaninoff's compositions' complex technical and emotional aspects. Based on a thorough understanding of the extensive musical history, we examine how the guide effectively conveys the fundamental characteristics of Rachmaninoff's distinctive style. Rachmaninoff, one of the prominent composers of the Romantic era, is often overlooked for his significant contributions to the Romantic musical structure. Rachmaninoff's works are known for their technical challenges and musical depth, and having a guide that provides insights into interpreting them can greatly aid in musical education. His compositions and transcriptions hold significant importance in the classical music repertoire. Analysing his works provides insights into his compositional techniques and helps preserve and understand his musical legacy. The methodology used in this study involves conducting a thorough review and critical analysis of a selected guide on Rachmaninoff's solo piano transcriptions, assessing its structure, accuracy, and effectiveness in enhancing performers' understanding and interpretation of the compositions. This paper addresses a gap in the existing research literature by investigating the process of transferring music across different cultures using the piano concerto tradition. Examining the orchestral and pianistic compositions of Rachmaninoff aids researchers and music theorists in comprehending the progression of musical exchange in the early 20th century. The study provides comprehensive and insightful guidance, particularly in addressing technical challenges and capturing the emotional depth of Rachmaninoff's solo piano transcriptions, thereby significantly enhancing performers' interpretation and execution of these pieces. It provides vital information on enhancing interpretative abilities and fully appreciating the transformational beauty of Rachmaninoff's solo transcriptions. It is recommended to further conduct an empirical study to evaluate the practical application and effectiveness of the recommendations provided in the performer's guide through surveys or performance assessments and explore additional interpretative approaches to Rachmaninoff's solo piano transcriptions.

Keywords: Sergei Rachmaninoff, Performance Practice, Piano Concerto, Tempo.

Introduction

“Music is enough for a whole lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music” – this is a quote from Sergei Rachmaninoff (Ruoxu, 2015). Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a classical music composer, pianist, and conductor in the 20th century (Jiao, 2023). Sergei Rachmaninoff was known for his piano transcriptions and arrangements, which were unique in sound, brilliance, and expressiveness. His transcriptions often involved complex harmonic language and counterpoint, and he was generally faithful to the original music while adding his touch to make them more pianistic. Rachmaninoff decided to devote his attention to pursuing a career as a composer. His appearances as a pianist were confined to the performance of his compositions and the participation in mixed recitals with other musicians on rare occasions (He et al., 2022).

Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini is considered one of his most important works. If the world were to forget all of Rachmaninoff's music, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini would be the only piece that would always be remembered (Jiao, 2023). For his solo piano works, he is regarded as one of the masters of the piano miniature. The majority of his piano compositions are sets of smaller pieces, including the following major collections: two sets of Études-Tableaux (17 total, two of which are published posthumously), two books of Preludes (24 total preludes, one of which is in the *Morceaux de Fantaisie*), *Morceaux de Fantaisie* (5 total), *Morceaux de Salon* (7 total), and *Six Moments Musicaux* (Dawn, 2016).

Rachmaninoff was well known for being one of the most prolific concert pianists, and we have multiple recordings of him performing. According to (An, 2020), he possessed a natural advantage: very large hands, which allowed him to reach the span of a twelfth while most others could only reach an eighth or ninth. Igor Stravinsky described him as "a six-and-a-half-foot scowl." His playing was very natural, without extra showy gestures. His sound was crystal clear and precise and was never over-pedaled. His transcriptions aimed to create engaging and expressive piano pieces, often drawing upon the influence of other composers. As stated by David Butler Cannata in the keynote speech at the University of Maryland on a retrospective of Rachmaninoff (Gabrielian, 2018)

In the spectrum of Music History, there is little problem in evaluating the importance of many of Rachmaninoff's contemporaries. However, this is not the case with Rachmaninoff: in many ways, he remains an enigma, at best, a semi-present figure on the larger musical scene. Pianists still cannot live without his music, and audiences still adore it. The music has a remarkable appeal, even on first hearing, which explains why it became part of the standard repertoire overnight. As for his reputation in intellectual circles, some things do not change again. Rachmaninoff's music proves too popular to be taken seriously by most professional musicologists.

The literature review aims to provide a historical context for Rachmaninoff's compositions, placing his work within the broader framework of Russian classical music during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Also to explore the influences and events that shaped Rachmaninoff's musical style, including his early education, Russian folk music, and the socio-political climate of his time, and to analyze the impact of critical reviews on Rachmaninoff's career and artistic development. This research aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by investigating the intricate process of transferring music across different cultures, specifically through the lens of the piano concerto tradition. The study recognizes the piano concerto as

a unique genre that has been adapted and embraced by various cultures, and it seeks to unravel the complexities and nuances involved in this cross-cultural musical exchange.

Historical Context

The background of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was summarized by (Gabrielian, 2018): Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was born in 1873, the fourth of six children, into a musical family in the Novgorod Oblast. His paternal grandfather was a musician and had taken lessons with John Field, and his father was an amateur pianist. Rachmaninoff's mother was his first music teacher when he began the piano at the age of four, and she was immediately impressed with his natural ability and ease of memorization. When news of his talent spread through the family, his paternal grandfather suggested that they hire Anna Ornatskaya as his next teacher. Ornatskaya moved into the family home and began teaching Rachmaninoff formal lessons.

Before the Revolution, Rachmaninov actively conducted and performed abroad. In 1909, he toured the USA and Canada. Rachmaninov's last concert in Russia occurred on February 21, 1917, in the concert hall of the Tennishevsky School in Petrograd. Shortly after the 1917 revolution, the composer was invited to perform at a concert in Stockholm. Going on tour to Sweden, Rachmaninov and his wife decide not to return to Russia, leaving all their property there (Muminjon, 2023). It was also reported Ruoxu (2015) that the Bolshevik Revolution never returned. Rachmaninoff, at the age of forty-four, transformed himself by necessity into a concert pianist and toured America for a quarter of a century from 1918 until he died in 1943, becoming one of the greatest pianists of the day.

In his early formative years, Rachmaninoff was remarkably influenced by three preeminent Russian composers—Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Mussorgsky. Starting with referencing his predecessors' compositional models, Rachmaninoff eventually shaped a personal musical idiom that involved a heart-touching lyricism, striking melodic ingenuity, a colorful harmonic palette, and a breadth of expressiveness (Ruoxu, 2015).

Morceaux de Fantaisie is a set of five pieces that was Rachmaninoff's first publication for solo piano. Rachmaninoff composed the work shortly after he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory (Glover, 2003). This very difficult time of his life found him in bad health, experiencing depression and financial hardship.

Rachmaninoff's Transcendent Solo Transcriptions

Sergei Rachmaninoff is considered one of the greatest pianist-composers of the Late Romantic Era. Specifically, his twenty-four piano preludes stand as hallmarks of the Russian solo repertoire, inspired by the prelude cycles of Johann Sebastian Bach and Frédéric Chopin (Young, 2019). For a long time the genre of vocalize existed only in the sphere of instructive compositions for the development of vocal technique, like etudes in the field of piano music. However, beginning at the end of 19-20th centuries, in Russian music, solo vocalization, a new interpretation, replaces a purely educational and methodical component - vocalization becomes a conceptual parameter of the composition (Krasov, 2019). Where the word is powerlessly silenced, a universal means of artistic expression—vocalize comes into force.

Rachmaninov was admired for his talent in composition and piano performance throughout his life. His piano works include five concerti, two piano sonatas, two sets of Préludes and Études-Tableaux each, variations on themes by Chopin and Corelli, and numerous transcriptions (Maria, 2021). He had very large hands, reaching a twelfth on the keyboard, an overwhelming range of color, and a brilliant technique. The economy of the movement

helped him eliminate tension from the hands and the body. Above all, Rachmaninov was admired for his sound. His lifelong friend, singer Fedor Shaliapin, once said,

"When he plays for me, I can truly say, not that 'I'm singing, but 'we are singing.'"

Alexandr Scriabin said,

"In his sound, there is so much materialism, so much meat almost some kind of boiled ham." These two descriptions – the singing tone and the "meatiness" of the sound – are two features of Rachmaninov's piano music and two of the most serious challenges for the (Alexandru, 2012; Maria, 2021).

The three Rachmaninoff transcriptions, the Minuet, the Hopak, and the Polka de W.R., preserve the spirit of the Golden Era's musical salon. These pieces were written to delight and dazzle audiences with their bold character, musical taste, virtuosic tricks, and technical finesse (Alexandru, 2012).

Analysis of unique technical and expressive challenges

Vocalists penetrate almost all genres of musical art. Choral vocalists begin to play a special role in musical theatre, as it is in them that attention is focused on the timbre of human voices due to the exclusion of the poetic word. Perhaps the appearance of a choral vocalist in Rachmaninoff's operas was primarily associated with the development of the opera genre, where polyphonic vocalists were one of the means to create an artistic image, often for the personification of choral sound (Krasov, 2019).

So in the opera "Francesca da Rimini," the choir sounds the moans of souls driven by a hellish whirlwind. Choral sound with no words (text only instructed the chorus in the phrase that closes the whole opera: "There is no greater sorrow in the world as to recall the happy time in misery") is woven into the orchestral web, as the tone paint that brings the opera close to the orchestral poem, and the cantata. The pictures of hell (prologue and epilogue) are dominated by fatalism and hopelessness. Initially in the Orchestra and then in the choir, a descending second intonation is heard, developed further throughout the prologue in a spirit close to the medieval Catholic hymn *Dies ira*. This intonation will appear in other S. Rachmaninoff works: in the symphonic poem "Island of the Dead" (1909), in "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" for piano and Orchestra (1934), in "Symphonic Dances" (1940) (Krasov, 2019).

The music of Sergei Rachmaninoff has often been maligned by critics and musicologists alike for its reluctance to follow the avant-garde of the music world into that great adventure of experiments in atonality and non-common-practice technique of the early twentieth century (Forsythe and Forsythe, 2023). Although the composer's works are beloved by audiences worldwide, they have often faced complex critical reception for their supposed conservatism and relative lack of expressive palette.

Francis Maes, author of *A History of Russian Music*, as stated by (Forsythe and Forsythe, 2023), lamented that "he lacked the exuberant imagination and subtle aestheticism of Tchaikovsky" and wrote that Rachmaninoff's music was only an expression of "the musical values of the lower strata of the aristocracy."⁴ Despite these remarks, Rachmaninoff's music is not so easily stereotyped to the late Romantic "last holdout" idea. Despite Rachmaninoff's immense talents, musicologists have largely dismissed him as a touring virtuoso and conservative, part-time composer (Gehl, 2008). Further, it is reported that not too many show an interest in Rachmaninoff's pianistic expertise, even though he was one of the finest pianists of his generation and his pianistic skills used to be highly venerated in his day (Ruoxu, 2015).

In his words, Sergei was one of the greatest pianists who ever lived; his compositions consist of numerous pieces in late romantic style and more modern twentieth-century pieces (An, 2020). According to Barbara Hanning, the author further stated, "Rachmaninoff, like Tchaikovsky, cultivated a passionate, melodious idiom. Some have dismissed his music as old-fashioned, but, like other composers in the first modern generation, he sought a way to appeal to listeners enamored of the classics by offering something new and individual yet steeped in tradition. He focused on other elements of the Romantic tradition, creating melodies and textures that sound both fresh and familiar.

According to the author (Reesor, 2016), the British critic and lexicographer Eric Blom, also the edition's general editor, asserted that, as a composer, Rachmaninoff was old-fashioned, lacked distinctive national and individual features and was technically "highly gifted, but also severely limited." Blom described the composer's music as "well-constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by various figures derived from arpeggios." He added a negative prognosis to these pronouncements: "The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favour.

In another unique report (Krasov 2019) of not trying to sound every word, S. Rachmaninoff creates a composition in which the sacrament of sacred meaning prevails, and the word only concretizes the thought. As A. Lyakhovich writes, "Rachmaninoff's art is a revelation given in silence, a mystical comprehension of the mystery of the symbol "music speaks for itself", and (to paraphrase an aphorism) "the musical thought extracted in the Declaration is a lie."

Reception and Critical Response

Young Rachmaninov quickly became a favorite of the Moscow public: he was known as a talented pianist, composer, and conductor. However, in 1897, the musician suffered a real failure. The young composer's first tour in the capital turned out to be a failure. The St. Petersburg public received Rachmaninov's First Symphony coldly, and negative reviews appeared in the press. The failure was due to the inexperience of the conductor, Alexander Glazunov, who, despite the desire to introduce the capital to the work of Rachmaninov, needed to understand the innovative essence of the young composer's music. Rachmaninov's innovative work was not accepted by either critics or the public.

According to (Muminjon, 2023), Rachmaninov was especially hurt by the devastating review of Sergei Rimsky-Korsakov, who was revered by Sergei, which caused deep depression. The composer fell into depression and, for almost four years, did not compose anything and practically did not leave the house, giving only private lessons.

As Reesor (2016) put it bluntly:

'How could Rachmaninoff's music enjoy the obvious veneration represented by enshrinement in the time-tested concert repertoire, in addition to widespread popularity, and at the same time be the subject of critical scorn? In reality, this question entails several others: Why didn't these critics like the music, and who were they? Was distaste for Rachmaninoff's music a hallmark of critical or scholarly professionalism, or was it the product of some independent ideology? Was it as widespread as it seemed, and if so, how did the music survive? Finally, how do the answers to these questions bear on Rachmaninoff's general standing in musical life?'

The first step in elucidating Rachmaninoff's international critical reception as a composer is thus to establish its documentary facts: Who said what about Rachmaninoff, when, where, and why? This approach, a straightforward mode of reception history, will offer quantifiable

data concerning the extent, both geographically and temporally, to which Rachmaninoff's music has been praised or disparaged and the historical basis for doing so. In *The Politics*, Aristotle described criticism as the pinnacle of musical experience, a practice ideally preceded by a long performance period by critics themselves.

Sergei Rachmaninoff was undoubtedly a pianist of the highest order. Because of his skill as a pianist, his piano works demonstrate his enormous technical prowess and an understanding of the full capabilities of the modern piano. Despite his command of pianistic writing, musicians and critics frequently need to pay more attention to the significance of his compositions. Even great pianists who have performed his works extensively have added to the criticism. Some have referred to his music as accessible, light, and trivial. Artur Rubenstein stated

According to (Maria, 2021), any pianist who has learned a piece by Rachmaninov would undoubtedly agree that his works are always exceptionally difficult, musically and technically. The composer's textures are incredibly dense and comprise spread-out chords that reach over an octave and involve all ten fingers simultaneously; brilliant passagework that requires steel-strong fingers and inventive fingering; and frequent sub-melodies that need careful voicing. Rachmaninoff was a pianist after my heart was a greater pianist than a composer. I fall, I have to admit, under the charm of his compositions when I hear them but return home with a slight distaste for their too brazenly expressed sweetness (Glover, 2003).

Aristotle regarded such a critic as a person of "quality" and a "gentleman," while professional performers were dismissed as "paid employee[s]" who were caught up with "common" listeners in a mutually detrimental, self-perpetuating cycle of indulgence in "vulgar pleasure" and "popular music such as appeals to enslaved people, children, and even some animals (Reesor, 2016).

Impact on the Broader Piano Repertoire

No matter how brilliant Sergei Rachmaninoff's compositional work for piano and Orchestra is, his legacy as a vocal composer has been largely underestimated. If only songs were to be considered, in 23 years between 1893 and 1916, he published 71 songs distributed in seven collections, resulting in the composition of approximately one song every four months throughout almost a quarter of a century. Suppose this might be enough to unveil Rachmaninoff as a fluent and assiduous vocal composer. In that case, it is important to remember that his operatic and choral productions were excluded from those figures (Ricardo, 2019).

He possessed an uncanny memory and flawless pianistic technique and made a career as a pianist and composer; he displayed virtuosic piano skills at a young age and was awarded the 'Rubinstein scholarship' at age fifteen (An, 2020). After settling and marrying his cousin, Rachmaninoff's personal life appeared stable (Garcia, 2004). He is rumored to have had an extramarital affair or two, but if he did, he was extraordinarily discreet.

Table 1

Selected piano by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Selected piano works	Year
Moments musicaux, Op. 16 Nos. 1 & 2	1896
Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22	1902–1903
Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 30	1909
Études-Tableaux, Op. 33 Nos. 5, 7, & 8	1911
Études-Tableaux, Op. 39 Nos. 3, 4, 5, 8, & 9	1916–1917
Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 1 (revised version)	1917

When, with the help of hypnotherapist Nikolai Dahl, Rachmaninoff resumed composition, it was with his Second Piano Concerto, a decidedly Tchaikovsky work. His subsequent compositions would show only glimpses of the powerful originality of his First Symphony, which Rachmaninoff removed from public view altogether. Thus, a potentially influential work was withdrawn from the field at a time of tremendous creative ferment, an act of artistic self-immolation. Rachmaninoff then applied his talents to conducting, and later developed himself into a pianist of magnificent artistry, though apparently limited repertoire (Garcia, 2004).

Sergei Rachmaninoff was undoubtedly a pianist of the highest order. Because of his skill as a pianist, his piano works demonstrate his enormous technical prowess and an understanding of the full capabilities of the modern piano. Despite his command of pianistic writing, musicians, and critics frequently underestimate the significance of his compositions (Glover, 2003); the author reported further that, fortunately, others had taken the opposite view. In his book *The Art of the Piano*, David Dubal writes that Rachmaninoff's works are often dense in number of notes per measure, forming a tapestry of unusual effects and counterpoints.

In a famous 1941 interview with the journalist David Ewen, Rachmaninoff, two years before his death, would leave a most interesting testimonial about his personal views on the relations between a composer's work and the general outlines of his personal life.

In the final analysis, music should express a composer's complex personality. A composer's music should express the country of his birth, love affairs, religion, books that have influenced him, and pictures he loves. It should be the product of the total of a composer's experiences. Study the masterpieces of every great composer, and you will find every aspect of the composer's personality and background in his music ('Music should speak from the heart', interview to David Ewen published in *The Etude*, No. 59, December 1941) (Martin 1990). To a certain extent, such a statement represents an invitation and a warning to a musical analyst. An invitation towards considering the social, historical, and cultural environment of the author whose artistic and intellectual legacy one analyses – besides his psychological and even medical conditions throughout the whole sequence of significant events that can be collected from his biography.

Expressive Elements

The fundamental emotions expressed in music and speech have expressive properties in acoustical dimensions, including timbre, pitch, contour, and intensity, similar to those expressed in music. Music listeners can internalize the feelings stated in the song (Jiao, 2023). Even though *Morceaux de Fantaisie* was written during Rachmaninoff's teenage years, its compositional style is characteristic of his later works. Rachmaninoff premiered the work in Kharkov on December 27, 1892. Eventually, Rachmaninoff revised all of the pieces in this set (Norris 39).

Elégie in E-flat Minor op. 3, no. 1

Date of composition: 1892

Number of measures: 106

Approximate performance time: 6:00

Figure 1. Elégie in E-flat Minor op. 3, no. 1

"Elégie" is an expressive work that exhibits the young Rachmaninoff's gift for romantic melody and pianistic writing (Glover, 2003).

There is a historical significance associated with Prelude in B minor, Op. 32 no.10 has deep nostalgic emotions and an actual source of inspiration that we currently know about. In a dissertation by Robert S. Buxton, as reported by (Matthew M., 2020), a conversation between pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch and Rachmaninoff discusses the prelude after a performance and the significance behind the piece. The end of the account goes as follows:

"So despondently, I sat down on the chair and said, 'Well, to me, it suggests a return,' after that, a long arm shot out, 'Stop!' So I said, 'Why, what have I done?' He said, 'That is what it is; it is the return.' It was an exile, and that is what Rachmaninoff was."

Buxton discusses the "sadness and nostalgia that both he and Rachmaninoff felt for the Russia of their youth" and how they fled Russia to escape the communist revolution. Buxton also mentions that despite the prelude depicting an exile, the piece was completed in 1910, roughly seven years before they left Russia. From this, his nostalgia had a much different meaning at that time. Those reminiscent feelings likely evolved into a deeper longing after they fled Russia.

A vivid description of Rachmaninoff's musical expression is reported by (Zheng, 2016)

Such works as the Romances, twenty-four Preludes, and Etudes-Tableaux constitute a collection of Russian culture, especially the Etudes-Tableaux. Rachmaninoff's Etudes are different from those of Czerny or Clementi. In addition to their tremendously difficult technique, Rachmaninoff's etudes are more musical and have deeper emotion. He described the characters of some pieces of Etudes-Tableaux in person. Op.39 No.4 is one representative of this tremendous series of works. This etude describes a lively atmosphere in a busy bazaar. It is a scherzo like etude in A-B-A' ternary form. The music begins with a short motive, "D-E-#F", and repeats the "B" five times to create a vivid atmosphere for the whole piece. The B section begins with a quiet and expressive melody and then increases the dynamic from p to mf by "Martellato" (hammered, strongly marked). The music calms down at measure 22, and the meter changes to 3/4. After a six-measure transition, the B section finishes similarly to section A's ending. The repeat "B" appears again in the A' section's opening. Several repeat notes build up the music to a high B. From that point, the melody descends by a group of intervals with the top notes of a B minor scale. The left hand brings out the theme from the very beginning and presents the theme with the right hand alternately, and the piece ends in a B minor chord.

In his work Grace (2023) reflects on the words of Rachmaninoff, who said, "rather than expressing a duty to "progress," "development," or "art for art's sake," it indicated that he was guided by the desire to express himself, construed as a combination of his life experiences, and to make music that is above all created and received with love.

Rachmaninoff's compositions' complex technical and emotional aspects

The ethereal music of Sergei Rachmaninoff has been a topic of fascination for many composers and musicians alike. From the seemingly lush melodies carried through by cascades of hill-like arpeggios, contrasted with galloping, triumphant chords (as well as many other elements), the music of Rachmaninoff has a familiar yet distinct color as his music shares elements of famous composers such as Frederic Chopin and Alexander Scriabin but evolves on those elements through a variety of techniques (Matthew, 2020). Also, Grace (2023) perceived Rakhmaninov as one of the finest artists of his time; as a composer, he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all, and he represented his country only in the sense that accomplished but conventional composers like Glazunov or Arensky did. He had neither the national characteristics of the Balakirev school nor the individuality of Taneyev or Medtner. Technically he was highly gifted, but also severely limited. His music is well constructed and effective but monotonous in texture, which consists, in essence, mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by various figures derived from arpeggios. The enormous popular success of some of Rakhmaninov's works in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor. The third pianoforte Concerto was liked by the public only because of its close resemblance to the second, while the fourth, which attempted something like a new departure, was a failure from the start.

Conclusion

As a pianist, conductor, and composer, Rachmaninoff has achieved an unrivaled mastery of art practice. His name is printed in music history, human history, and the world's civilization. As a pianist, Sergei Rachmaninov became a standard for many generations of musicians from different countries and schools. He made a significant contribution to the development of the Russian piano tradition on the international stage. Attention to the keyboards' intonation richness and the performance's deep content influenced the expressiveness and emotionality

of world piano music. The very commentators who have decried Rachmaninoff's allegedly poor critical treatment have often been authoritative musical commentators themselves, their appeals on his behalf often published in prominent periodicals.

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