

Lullaby

The transcription of Tchaikovsky's "Lullaby" for piano, Op. 16 No. 1, which Rachmaninoff made in August 1941, is his last work. It is a remarkable coincidence that one of the very first pieces that he wrote as a 13-year-old boy in 1886 was the arrangement of another composition by Tchaikovsky for piano duet, the "Manfred" Symphony. Thus his creative life came full circle. He lived only one more year. He premiered the "Lullaby" in Siracuse, NY on 14th October 1941 and recorded it on 26th February 1942. RCA did not release this beautiful recording until 1973.

Sonata No. 2 op. 36

If the 1st Sonata is characterised by the great thematic diversity due to its programmatic nature, the 2nd Sonata, while also written in sonata form, is created out of a single thematic seed. It is an astounding feat of ingenuity. The awareness of the thematic uniformity when performing it is of paramount importance to the structural coherence of this composition – without it the Sonata simply sounds disjointed.

This thematic seed or "idée fixe" is a chromatic descending motif in the opening of the Sonata.

Example 1 (Track 5, 0:05):

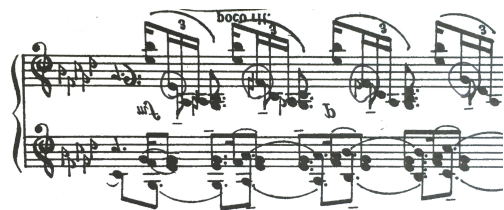


Not only are all the main themes based on it, but most of the transitional material and inner voices are also derived from it.

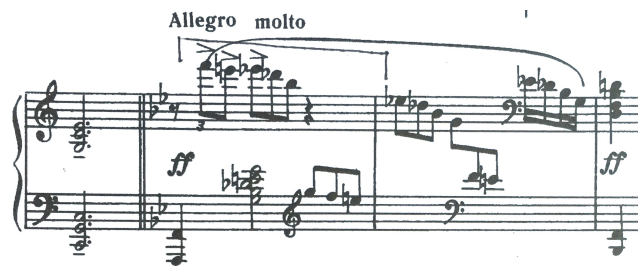
Example 2.1 (Track 5, 1:55):



Example 2.2 (Track 5, 2:40):



Example 2.3 (Track 7, 0:34):



Example 2.4 (Track 7, 0:56):



The 2nd and 3rd movements are linked by a short theme repeating the opening of the 2nd movement with some rhythmic variation. Another interesting feature of this Sonata is a recurrent imitation of Russian bell chimes. The symbolism of church bells has always had a very special significance in Russian culture: they were tolled to announce important events such as the imminent invasion by the enemy, a wedding or a death of a member of the royal family, a national celebration, etc. The bells are considered to be the "voice of God" and are even believed to have the power to bring sinners to repentance. That is what happens, for example, to Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment".

The sound of the Russian chimes is distinctly different from its western counterpart: the bells are deliberately cast not to be tuned to any particular pitch, but rather they consist of an overlay of many different frequencies at once. There is a huge range of various sizes of bells and professional bell ringers toll them simultaneously in particular rhythmic patterns. In Russia such tolling is considered an art form and is called "malinovy zvon" – literally, crimson chime.

Other composers had used bells in their music before Rachmaninoff: Glinka in his opera "Ivan Susanin", Mussorgsky in his opera "Boris Godunov" and in the Pictures at an Exhibition, Rimsky-Korsakov in his opera "Tale of the Tsar Saltan", Tchaikovsky in his 1812 Overture, etc. Rachmaninoff used them in his Prelude op. 3 No. 2, in the opening bars of his Concerto No. 2, and later in the Etudes-tableaux op. 39 Nos 7 and 9, but most significantly, in his choral symphony "The Bells", which he was working on simultaneously with this Sonata.

He masterfully recreates the sonority of the "crimson chimes" with their many frequency layers at the climax of the 2nd movement while fashioning it out of the original "idée fixe". And here too such a grandiose sonority has a spiritually

“cleansing” effect. Subsequently, the coda that follows sounds like a devout prayer.

Example 3 (Track 6, 4:36):

The Bells

poco a poco cresc.

m.s.

mf

“Idée fixe” 19

The image shows a musical score for 'The Bells' by Rachmaninoff. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes a piano part with a treble and bass clef, and a vocal line. The piano part has markings for 'poco a poco cresc.' and 'm.s.'. The vocal line starts with a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The second system continues the piano part with a treble and bass clef, and the vocal line. There are handwritten annotations in the score, including 'Idée fixe' and the number '19'.

The first version of the Sonata was composed in 1913 and, unlike the Sonata No. 1, it was well received at its premiere in Moscow in December of the same year. However, as with several of Rachmaninoff’s works, he soon felt dissatisfied with it and eventually revised it, significantly shortening it as well as thinning out the texture. The revised edition was published in 1931.

When Horowitz expressed his reservation regarding the second edition of the Sonata to Rachmaninoff, the composer agreed with him and gave him the permission to make his own version. The question is why would Horowitz - or any pianist for that matter - not be content to perform the revised edition – after all, isn’t it the composer’s “final say”, his ultimate artistic statement? Perhaps, in order to answer this question, we have to address another one first: why Rachmaninoff felt the need to revise the original edition in the first place.

He told his friend Alfred Swann: “I look at my early works and can see how much there is superfluous. Even in this Sonata there is so much unnecessary movement of the voices, and it is too long. Chopin’s Sonata lasts 19 minutes and everything is said”. Coincidentally, while the original edition of the Sonata lasts around 25 minutes, the revised version is trimmed down to around 19 minutes.

The dissatisfaction with his work was not unique to this Sonata. Due to his perfectionism, the conviction that his compositions are no good afflicted him throughout his life. In his 1930 interview with London’s “Musical Times” Rachmaninoff explains: “...The older we get, the more we lose that divine self-confidence which is the treasure of youth, and the fewer are those moments when we believe that what we have done is good. We get lucrative contracts – more, in fact, than we can accept – but we are still longing for that inner satisfaction which is independent of outside success, and which we felt at the beginning of our career at the time of our troubles when success seemed far away. Nowadays it’s very rarely happens to feel sincerely satisfied with myself, to feel that what I do is really a

success. Such occasions stick in the memory for a long time – for nearly the rest of my life...”

In addition, his music was often harshly criticised and dismissed as worthless. A typical example of that is an article in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which calls his music “...monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios.” It goes on to state that “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.”

Inevitably, the combination of his own extremely critical judgment and such condemning reception of his work led to him becoming increasingly insecure about the value of his music. As a result, he would censor his own compositions with utmost ruthlessness. To understand just how ruthless he could be, it is enough to remember the baffling cuts in his recording of the Concerto No. 3. He writes to Nikolai Medtner on 21 December 1931 regarding his performances of the newly composed Corelli Variations op. 42 : “I am sending you my new Variations. I have played them here about fifteen times, but of those fifteen times only one performance was good... I also haven't performed them in their entirety. I was guided by the coughing of the public: as coughing increased, I would skip the next variation, if there was no cough, I played it as written. In one concert – I don't remember where – in some small town, the coughing was so bad that I played only ten variations (out of twenty). My record was eighteen variations (in New York). I hope, however, that you will manage to play them all through without “coughing”.”

It is quite clear from the above examples that Rachmaninoff was capable of censoring his music quite mercilessly, even if it was obvious that it was detrimental to the form of a composition.

In the case of this Sonata, I feel quite strongly that in his quest for more conciseness and clarity, he sometimes went a little too far in the revised edition, so the structure of the work suffered. Where I felt that, as a result of the cuts, some of the logic of the continuity of ideas was compromised due to missing transitions, bridge passages or climaxes, I discreetly reinstated them from the original edition. I hope that the listener will not judge me as an insolent desecrator. I did this out of love for this extraordinary work and with the humble intention to restore its coherence.

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