



Rachmaninoff: Beyond the Popular
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The Criticism

Rachmaninoff is perhaps the most popular composer of the 20th century among audiences and pianists, but this popularity also made him the target of snobbish criticism (a selection is presented below). The assumption of his opponents is that popularity is evidence of a lack of seriousness, and Rachmaninoff was well aware of this as the following exchange in an interview amusingly demonstrates:

Olin Downes: “Do you believe that a composer can have real genius, sincerity, profundity of feeling, and at the same time be popular?”

SR: “Yes, I believe it is possible to be very serious, to have something to say, and at the same time to be popular. *I* believe that. Others do not. They think ... what *you* think”

Until the past few decades, the majority of critics have identified themselves as the highbrow arbiters of taste and their disdain for more democratic tendencies often shows through. Rachmaninoff himself loved the popular music of his time and was influenced by genres such as Russian Gypsy songs or American jazz. He also had no objection to his own music being absorbed into the repertoire of popular entertainers. We can indeed categorise some of his pieces as “middlebrow” (I do not intend this to carry negative connotations), but there are other works, such the Piano Sonatas, that his contemporaries found quite forbidding.

There was a second source of this hostility. Rachmaninoff developed his original and often complex style as a member of the last generation of the Romantic era, but his career extended into the decades dominated by modernism. While modernist influences surface here and there in Rachmaninoff’s music from the mid-1910s onwards, his general aesthetic outlook was sharply at odds with modernism. Marietta Shaginian, an Armenian/Russian poet, wrote a long analysis of Rachmaninoff’s art in 1912, in which she already describes modern music as being anti-human (she was talking in particular of Scriabin, who had mystical supra-human and cosmic ambitions). By 1925, Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset had written his famous essay on modernist art, extolling its “dehumanising” tendencies: across all the arts, modernism, he said, distanced the artwork from the human subject, purging art of emotional content. This offers us a clear context for the comments of the critic Karatygin below, who greets the emotional sincerity of Rachmaninoff’s music with disbelief and mockery. Rachmaninoff left the foundations of his style unchanged, and by the time of his death in 1943, he was seen as a relic of a distant past. As Shaginyan put it:

“No, I am not with you, I want to be human. I don’t want to lose the human element” – this is what Rachmaninoff’s music stubbornly tells us, again and again, resisting the chaotic world that rages around it.

Today, the fact that Rachmaninoff’s music once seemed outmoded is of no more than academic interest for us, since we no longer espouse the dogged belief in musical “progress” that prevailed

among composers and critics of sixty or seventy years ago. In this sense, we are now closer to Rachmaninoff and more remote from the avant-gardists of the mid-20th century and their advocates. At any rate, much of the more dissonant and “dehumanised” music of that period has not stood the test of time, whereas Rachmaninoff’s music certainly has. We can also appreciate the complexity and exquisite craft that lies behind that sometimes populist surface, now that we are removed from the polemics and debates of the past century.

Critical comments

*As a composer he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all. His music is well constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of **artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios**. 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. (Eric Blom, Grove’s Music Dictionary, 1954)*

*The piano repertoire is vast, and Rachmaninoff to me seems **a waste of time**. (Alfred Brendel)*

*The public worships Rachmaninoff because **he has hit the very centre of average Philistine musical taste**. One need to be neither joyous nor distressed to hear this fact. What is distressing is that the unusual musical gifts of Rachmaninoff always take **a line tangent to art, brushing its sphere, never penetrating it...** Elegance of externals and insignificance of content are found together in most of Rachmaninoff’s piano works. They are terribly “sincere”. In them one hears an “experience” of some highly emotional feelings. But these experiences are coarse, petty, affected. What a strange psychological riddle: Scriabin is very much inclined to affectation – it often seems that he not so much experiences certain musically artistic emotions as, with a terrific effort of will, exciting self to an illusory experience of them – And yet this affectation gives an impression of tremendous sincerity and power; whereas Rachmaninoff’s music, saturated with “soul”, lofty emotion, and the most sincere “experiences” in spite of them appears so full of pretension and affectation that one must put its “**sincerity**” **in quotation marks**. (Vyacheslav Karatygin, Russian critic, 1913)*

*In all the music of M. Rachmaninoff there is **something strangely twice-told**. From it there flows a sadness distilled by all things that are **a little useless**. (Paul Rosenfeld, American critic)*

*His work would fittingly be described as **super-salon music**. Mme. Cécile Chaminade might safely have perpetrated it on her third glass of vodka. (American critic on the Fourth Piano concerto)*

*The Rhapsody isn’t philosophical, significant, or even artistic. It’s **something for audiences**. (The New Yorker on the Paganini Rhapsody)*

The Hands

Rachmaninoff’s unusual physique drew much attention. He was 6’4”, with very large hands, even for his height, as the memoirists all noted. His fingers were long, and the joints of his hand seemed unusually flexible, to the extent that more recent researchers have detected a condition known as “Marfan’s syndrome”. As a composer who was also a virtuoso performer, Rachmaninoff was able to create his own style of piano writing, which capitalized on his physical advantages. In various

passages through his solo and concerto writing for piano, there are chords that very few pianists can actually play as written. Piano keys were once narrower, but this cannot explain away Rachmaninoff's writing, since he was using piano keyboards that conformed to the modern standard that prevailed after 1870. The exception that proves the rule is Josef Hofmann, a celebrated rival virtuoso of the same period, who had to commission a narrow-key grand piano from Steinway so that his smaller hands could cope with Rachmaninoff and other contemporary composers with a similar approach to piano writing.

Here is Rachmaninoff's own description of his piano writing:

I believe in what might be called indigenous music for the piano; that is, music which the Germans would describe as klaviermässig. So much has been written for the instrument that is really alien. Brahms is a notable example. Rimsky-Korsakov is possibly the greatest of Russian composers; yet no one ever plays his concerto in these days, because it is not klaviermässig. On the other hand the concertos of Tchaikovsky are frequently heard because they lie well under the fingers! Even with my own concertos I much prefer the third, because my second is uncomfortable to play, and therefore not susceptible of so successful effects. Grieg, although he could not be classed as a great master pianist, had the gift of writing beautifully for the piano and in pure klaviermässig style. (Article from 1923)

The Bells

The "Russianness" of Rachmaninoff's music has always been noted, and on the most concrete level this quality is manifest in the use of idioms from the Russian Orthodox musical tradition, whether from liturgical chant, harmonised liturgical music, or bell-ringing. For the bell writing, Musorgsky is the main precursor (we talked about his bells last time). For the sung music, there is one piece in particular by Rimsky-Korsakov, namely his Easter Overture, which made a lasting impression on Rachmaninoff. But while he was indebted to such music, he went much further by assimilating these idioms thoroughly, so that they become part of his general vocabulary. His melodies, for example, are not only dominated by stepwise movement, but often pass over the same narrow span of notes again and again, in the manner of liturgical chant. His piano textures absorbed the patterns of Russian bell-ringing in various ways, so that pieces that are superficially very different share the same influence. Early in his career, before the assimilation was complete, there are blatant bell passages. The piece "Tears", from the first Suite for Two Pianos was inspired by the bells of a monastery in Novgorod, as Rachmaninoff tells us. There is also the early C#-Minor Prelude, where bell sounds are obvious in the slow outer sections, and in early foreign editions, the piece was even published under the unauthorised title "The Bells of Moscow".

The Prelude in C-sharp Minor

Rachmaninoff's most famous work comes from the very beginning of his career, from a set of piano pieces, published as his Opus 3. The piece propelled the composer to fame and allowed him to launch his international career, but it also became an albatross hanging from his neck, since a large proportion of the audience, throughout his career, attended his concerts mainly in the hope of hearing that one early piece. When Rachmaninoff finished his concert programme, and the time had come for encores, these listeners were not satisfied until he had played his famous Prelude. Here is the background to this:

*This autumn [of 1898], Siloti made a tour of Europe, England, and America that was to have a profound effect on Rachmaninoff's career. For one thing he played his cousin's **Prélude in C-sharp minor** and was astonished by the growth of its popularity, particularly in England and in the United States; it overshadowed everything else, new and old, on his programs.*

English and American publishers issued several editions of it at once, and as no copyright on it had been taken out in these countries, nothing prevented these publishers from making handsome profit from its popularity, while its composer was in real need of money and unaware of the irony of his situation. (Bertensson and Leyda, Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music)

In England Rachmaninoff was already known as the man who wrote the Prélude and all the newspaper notice and critical appraisal of him was built around that fact. Siloti may have warned him of this, but Rachmaninoff was quite unprepared to encounter his piano piece under the guises that are later adopted such titles as “The burning of Moscow”, “The day of judgement”, and even “The Moscow waltz”. (Bertensson and Leyda)

*Indeed, the fact of the last two pages being laid out for four staves naturally **gives the performer a certain standing in Clapham drawing-rooms**, which a piece laid out in the usual manner in two staves might fail to do. The result of this excessive adoration of this piece appears to be the almost total neglect of the other twenty-three preludes of Rachmaninoff, most of which are far fine, if less sensational, than this particular example. (Eric Thiman, 1926)*

The Prelude soon entered popular culture through a number of arrangements. One of the early contenders was George L. Cobb’s “Russian Rag” (1918), whose virtuoso demands pay tribute to Rachmaninoff. There were several arrangements for jazz orchestra, and according to the memoirs, Rachmaninoff was not in the least ruffled when they were played in his presence. One of the more striking of these artefacts is the 1927 silent film “Prelude”, which connects Rachmaninoff’s piece to the Edgar Allan Poe story “The Premature Burial”.

The “Point”

One of the defining features of Rachmaninoff’s music is the use of great climactic peaks in the dramatic structure. There is an interesting memoir that reveals the connection between the climactic point and the larger structure in performance:

*...the reception of Rachmaninoff was so tempestuous that it was difficult for us to push our way through the crowd. We finally reached the artists’ room, where we saw at once from the expression on Rachmaninoff’s face that he was in an awful state: he was biting his lip furiously, his complexion was yellow. As we opened our mouths to congratulate him he exploded in complaint – he must be losing his mind, he’s growing decrepit, better discard him altogether, prepare his obituary; once there was a musician, but that’s all over now, he could never forgive himself, and so on. “Didn’t you notice that I missed the point? Don’t you understand – I let the point slip!” On a later occasion he explained that each piece he plays is shaped around its culminating point: the whole mass of sounds must be so measured, the depth and power of each sound must be given with such purity and gradation that this peak point is achieved with an appearance of the greatest naturalness, though actually its accomplishment is the highest art. **This moment must arrive with the sound and sparkle of a ribbon snapped at the end of a race** – it must seem a liberation from the last material obstacle, the last barrier between truth and expression. The composition itself determines this culmination; **the point may come at its end or in the middle, it may be loud or soft, yet the musician must always be able to approach it with sure calculation, absolute exactitude, for it if slips by the whole structure crumbles**, the work goes soft and fuzzy, and cannot convey to the listener what must be conveyed. Rachmaninoff added, “I am not the only one who experiences this – Chaliapin, too. At one of his concerts while the audience*

was wild with enthusiasm, he was backstage tearing his hair because the point had slipped”.
(Memoir by Marietta Shaginyan)

One of Rachmaninoff's models in this regard was Tchaikovsky, who is well known to have been a major influence, but less obviously, Wagner also played an important role here. In 1901, an English critic wrote thus on the Elegie from Rachmaninoff's op.3:

...rising to a climax, in which Rachmaninoff joins hands with those who take as their ground-work in passionate music the love themes in “Tristan”. This climax is a Tristanesque outburst – but it is a Rachmaninoff interpretation of Tristanism, and while parallel with the Wagner statement of that phase of passion, it does not take root there, rejoicing in a chromatic descending passage peculiarly its own. (Vivian Carter, 1901)

The eroticism of Rachmaninoff's music is very much a sign of its times. When Rachmaninoff emerged as an artist in the 1890s, Russia was in the grip of an ardent debate about sexuality that was provoked by Tolstoy's famous novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* – a novella in which music and musical performance possess a powerful erotic charge, with catastrophic consequences for the characters. In the same decade, female poets began to make their mark in Russia, and articulated their story for the first time. And after 1906, when pre-publication censorship was abolished in Russia, mass readership embraced the more explicit explorations of desire, such as the scandalous novel *Sanin* by Artsybashev.

It is worth taking a fresh look at Rachmaninoff in this context. These new trends were often overlooked or shunned by highbrow historians of literature, especially in the case of women's literature. But what did Rachmaninoff do? He actually chose to set women's poetry to music, and this only adds to the list of supposed faults that caused highbrow critics to despise him. The texts he chose often told of amatory encounters, and here is where the climactic points reveal Rachmaninoff's Tristanesque aspects better than anything else. I think it is this more modern, more explicit eroticism, together with the source in middlebrow literature, that made colleagues like Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov so uneasy about Rachmaninoff's music: euphemistically, they complain that his songs eschew all subtlety and refinement. In contrast, popular culture readily embraced this aspect of Rachmaninoff's music: in the film *Brief Encounter*, for example, the Second Piano Concerto is used as the film score, and the climactic point is timed to coincide with the pivotal moment in the story, the two lovers' passionate kiss.

The Prelude in D major

This prelude offers us a good example of how Rachmaninoff prepares for the “point”, achieves it, and then descends. In this 77-bar piece, the climax is located at bar 51. This happens to coincide with the Golden Ratio, but this feature can never be so strongly evident in any art form that unfolds in time, and Rachmaninoff sometimes places the “point” around the middle of a piece even earlier (as in the E-flat Major Prelude).

The rest of the structure is subordinated to the point: at first, the music oscillating between *p* and *pp*, and the ascent is very slow. But the feature of greatest interest is the descent after the point. Instead of a rapid return to a calmer plateau, Rachmaninoff characteristically allows us to savour the descent over a long time, using his harmonic ingenuity to prevent closure from occurring. If you listen carefully, you will notice that during the descent, there is even a secondary “point”, quieter, and moving in its effect, since it creates a musical counterpart to nostalgia.

But I must also talk about the polyphony in this piece. The simplicity of Rachmaninoff's music is deceptive, and the infamous writer of the Grove Dictionary article clearly failed to listen with any

care, since it is simply false to say that Rachmaninoff offers nothing more than standard melody-and-accompaniment textures. Like so much of Rachmaninoff's music, the texture of this piece is multi-layered: there is a principal melody, an often static bass, but also elaborate arpeggio figurations from which elusive voices are forever springing and then disappearing again, sometimes doubling the melody in thirds, or echoing the melody. Instead of a mere accompaniment, we have something like a living organism that reacts in complex and unpredictable ways to its environment. In the final, post-climactic section of the piece, there is an echo of the melody at the very top of the keyboard, and we can detect as many as six layers in the texture here, all perfectly calculated to lie under the control of two hands, although the intellectual effort is daunting.

The Gloom

As Liadov once said, Rachmaninoff's music is just as gloomy as the man himself. The gloom is certainly not unremitting across Rachmaninoff's work, but it is certainly common, and when he wants, it can be exceptionally dark. We know now that Rachmaninoff did indeed suffer from depression, and was one of the first to seek psychiatric treatment for it. The treatment he received was a combination of hypnosis and what we would now call cognitive behaviour therapy. The root of his depressive moods apparently lay in his lack of confidence as a composer – his “inferiority complex”, as Marietta Shaginyan called it. The criticism he received, and above all the wholesale dismissal of his First Symphony in 1895, had a devastating effect on his mental health.

But the illness hangs on to me tenaciously and with the passing years digs in ever more deeply, I fear. No wonder if I should, after a while, make up my mind to abandon composition altogether and become, instead, a professional pianist, or a conductor, or a farmer, or even, perhaps, an automobilist... (Rachmaninoff in a letter to Marietta Shaginyan)

Rachmaninoff's ruminations on death are also well known, and often come to the surface of his music: the most favoured musical symbol of death, the requiem-mass chant *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) regularly appears in music spanning his entire career. Shaginyan, who became one of his unofficial therapists, tells an amusing story on this subject. Rachmaninoff was complaining to her that he could not stop thinking about death, and had a terror not so much of death itself, but of what might lie beyond. As he spoke, he ate from a bowl of salted pistachios, absentmindedly but copiously. This snacking seemed to brighten him up gradually, leading him to drop the topic as he felt more content. He noticed this himself and cheekily asked his hosts to roast some more pistachios for him to take away. This they happily did.

The Prelude in B minor

Rachmaninoff said that he had a pictorial mind and that he often drew inspiration for his music from the visual arts (as well as literature):

There must be something definite before my mind to convey a definite impression, or the ideas refuse to appear [...] When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration... (Bertensson and Leyda)

In most cases, we do not know what images Rachmaninoff had in mind, but some surfaced by accident. The B-minor Prelude is one example: the pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch discovered that it was inspired by one of Arnold Böcklin's paintings, “The Return”. Moiseiwitsch anachronistically connects the idea of a “return” with Rachmaninoff living in exile from Russia, but the Prelude was written in 1910, when the composer could hardly have imagined such an outcome.

Let us take a look at this painting. From behind, we see a man in a rich 16th-century costume. He sits on the edge of a fountain and seems to gesture excitedly towards a brightly lit window of a house in the middleground, among some trees. No-one else appears in the picture, so this must be the returnee, but what prevents him from entering the house?

The German viewer, on seeing that the title is *Die Heimkehr* (The Homecoming), is more likely to discern the artist's intention. The title was borrowed from a famous cycle of poems by Heine, who was much admired by Böcklin. Heine's cycle is full of dark images of homecoming: for example, the protagonist returns after a long absence only to find that his beloved is married to someone else. The memories weigh heavily upon him, and his perceptions are thoroughly embittered. The most famous poem from *Die Heimkehr* had been set by Schubert as *Der Doppelgänger* (The Double), a devastating song portraying the man watching his own suffering as if from the outside.

The idea of a double does indeed seem to be relevant here, because most of the painting is occupied by the reflection of the figure (and the sky) in a pool of water, to eerie effect. The other Böcklin's painting Rachmaninoff took as his inspiration was *The Isle of the Dead*, which he immortalised in a long symphonic poem, and the Prelude shares the same morbid colours.

Rachmaninoff's prelude gathers together many musical features associated with profound grief, beginning with the rare choice of B minor as the key, which it shares with the Schubert song, but also with Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. There is also the melancholy lilt of the siciliano rhythm, the "weeping" of chromatic descending motifs, and a vague sense of something missing, arising from harmony that avoids the dominant, which is the chord that serves to clarify and give definition to the key. There might be something else here connected more immediately with the painting, and that is the idea of reflection, or doubling: almost throughout, both hands play the same material, and in the middle section, the chords are spaced in a symmetrical way. The symbol of death, the *Dies irae*, is not actually quoted on this occasion, but the restricted, constrained motifs sometimes come very close to it.

I would also like to point out that the whole Prelude makes a special feature of the interval of a second, both in melody and harmony. Rachmaninoff often gives a privileged position to a particular interval within individual preludes (for example, the 5^{ths} of the G-flat major, or the 3rds of the A minor). On close inspection, Rachmaninoff's music is organised with great rigour, and there is a Germanic, Beethovenian or Wagnerian aspect to his treatment of motifs across a whole work (not only a longish prelude like the B Minor, but even over very long works, as in the Second Piano Concerto).

This belies another common misconception: that Rachmaninoff wrote music with little thought, that it was born easily under his virtuosic hands:

*Rachmaninoff's compositions are the work of a man who, as an exceptionally brilliant public performer, has travelled and mixed much with many minds and imbibed a cosmopolitan view of his art. All the exigencies of the executive side of it are met by **sure instinct which requires little or no conscious mental effort**. Technique in composing, as in playing, is a part of his nature; and consequently his work has that apparent facility which is constantly characteristic of the music of great executants, whether they are writing for their own instrument or not. (The London Times)*

The Prelude in B-flat Major

This piece brings together many of the features we have talked about. It allows us to feel the might and scale of Rachmaninoff's pianism, written like a mini-concerto, even including a challenging

“cadenza” section. It brings into play the whole range of the keyboard to create orchestral sonorities of a sort that is again “layered”, with several strands unfolding simultaneously. The exuberance of the piece places it at the opposite end of the scale to the gloomy B-minor prelude. There is no record of the image or idea that brought this joyful music to life, but it is often compared with the song “Spring Waters”, in which Rachmaninoff had used a similar left-hand figuration. The melodic line is highly unusual, containing two elements: there is a fanfare and also the pealing of bells once again. We can even find a prototype for this in the finale of Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Tale of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, which has a similar combination of a fanfare and a descending bell pattern. As we have seen in other pieces, this Prelude also attaches importance to a single interval, in this instance, the 4th, which we hear both as a wilful call in the melodic line, and as a continuous presence in the figuration.

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