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Rachmaninoff the Harmonist: The "Rachmaninoff Sixth" and its Analysis in His Music

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Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Daniel Crozier**

Fig. 1: Sergei Rachmaninoff, circa 1900. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

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Dr. Gloria Cook

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Dr. Rachel Walton

The Rollins College Honor Code: On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.

TRANSLITERATION OF RUSSIAN NAMES

As many Russian names are transliterated differently across different times, languages, and authors, this paper will use a standardized transliteration for the sake of consistency and accuracy. Three Cyrillic letters merit particular consideration in this regard:

LETTER	TRANSLITERATION	EXAMPLE
В, в	"v," not "ff" or "w" EXCEPT in the name "Rachmanino**ff**"	"Prokofie**v**"
Й, й	"y", not "i"	"Tchaikovsk**y**"
Х, х	"kh" EXCEPT in the name "Ra**ch**maninoff"	"Mi**kh**ail"

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> "Neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew that 'great Shakespeare' whom we know now… [Shakespeare] has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their own epoch."[1]
>
> - Mikhail Bakhtin, 1970

> "[Rachmaninoff's music consists of] artificial and gushing tunes, accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios."[2]
>
> - Eric Blom, 1954 (11 years after Rachmaninoff's death)

ABSTRACT

The music of Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), Russia's great pianist, conductor, and composer, 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.[3] Although the composer's works are beloved by audiences worldwide, they have often faced complex critical reception for the composer's supposed conservatism and relative lack of expressive

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[1] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Noviy* Editorial Staff," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Quoted in Taruskin, "Defining Russia Musically," Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

[2] Rosa Newmarch, additions by Eric Blom: "Sergey Vassilevich Rakhmaninov," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* New York, 1954.

[3] Terry Teachout, "What was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?" Commentary (June 2002), https://www.commentary.org/articles/terry-teachout/what-was-the-matter-with-rachmaninoff/

palette. Francis Maes, author of *A History of Russian Music*, 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. Sergei Rachmaninoff, far from a thoughtless imitator, saw the tradition of Russian nationalist art music that came before him, and he used what he found therein to create a style that was entirely personal, and, as will be seen in the analysis of the "Rachmaninoff sixth" chord, occasionally innovative.

THE RUSSIAN TRADITION BEFORE RACHMANINOFF

Musical nationalism in the nineteenth century

The history of Rachmaninoff's music must be understood in the context of classical music in Russia, and this in itself cannot be understood outside of the context of musical nationalism in general. This key ideology, coincident with the rise of political nationalism in general, aimed to move away from the idea of the "international style" of the Classical era. Musical nationalism not only encouraged nations to develop their own distinctive musical identities, but also posited that the nation to which a person belongs is a large, inextricable part of the fabric of who they are as an individual.[5] Three areas where this movement flourished, and where the resulting musical innovations influenced the approaches of Russian composers including Rachmaninoff, were Germany, Czechia, and Poland.

[4] Max Harrison, "Rachmaninoff: Life Works, Recordings," London: Continuum, 205: 204
[5] Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

It is important to understand musical nationalism as framework which composers did not always use in the same exact fashion throughout time and place. While it is a useful tool for scholarship, discussions of musical nationalism often fall into the trap of assuming that every composer from an "exotic" nation must write inherently nationalist music with certain predetermined traits. There can be many gray areas involved in considering questions about whether a particular composer or work is nationalist in nature. However, since this paper deals not with all of Russian music but with Sergei Rachmaninoff in particular, further discussion on this topic will (perhaps simplistically) consider musical nationalism a real and direct influence on Rachmaninoff and those who influenced him, and leave the subtler details for the reader to ponder.

In Germany: Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms

For nationalistically thinking Germans throughout the Romantic period, Beethoven (1770-1827) was the quintessential artist, who brought the nation "to the fore as the protagonist of musical evolution."[6] Franz Brendel, editor of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* ("New Journal of Music", the journal founded by Schumann), saw Beethoven as the point of departure for composers writing with the so-called "German spirit" that would lead the world's historical development.[7] Richard Wagner (1813-1883), picking up on these ideas for his music dramas, perhaps exemplified this idea best when he spoke through a character in

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Meistersinger: "ehrt eure deustchen Meister! […] uns bliebe gleich die heil'ge deutsche Kunst!" ("Honor your German Masters … [and we will be left with] holy German art!")[8]

Not every German nationalist composition in this era, however, was written in Wagner's style. Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), an avid early music enthusiast and scholar, composed a cantata (the *Triumphlied*, Op. 55) along the line of Bach and Mendelssohn to celebrate the formation of the newly unified German Empire in 1871.[9] Brahms's decision to feature a double chorus (as did the *St. Matthew Passion,* BWV 244) and three trumpets (reminiscent of the *Magnificat*, BWV 243) places this piece squarely in the anti-Wagnerian camp of composition. However, the admiration and mythification of earlier German composers (e.g., Bach and Beethoven) and their craft is precisely another feature of German nationalism, which is why some Russian composers like the Five, a group of Russian nationalists who will be discussed in greater detail below, would later explicitly reject Western compositional technique.

In Czechia: Bedřich Smetana

The Czech people, historically called Bohemians in the German language, are another Slavic culture alongside Russia that cultivated its sense of musical identity in the nineteenth century. The first distinctively Czech composer is widely recognized to be Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884). Much like Beethoven to the Germans, Smetana became as much of a symbol to the Czechs as he was a man. He started as a career as a follower of the style of Liszt, studying composition with a German teacher (Adolf Bernhard Marx) and writing pieces in established Western European genres (e.g., bagatelles, impromptus, and

[8] Richard Wagner, "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg," *B. Schott's Sohne*, 1868.
[9] Taruskin, "Nationalism."

morceaux). However, from the 1860s onward, Smetana developed a style that would later be identified as nationally Czech, through his operas and his multi-work cycle of symphonic poems *Má vlast*, among other works.[10]

In Poland: Frederic Chopin

Not every occurrence of exuberant national identity in music has been so chauvinistic as that of the German variety. Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (1810-1849) needs no introduction as composer, pianist, and possibly the most widely recognized Polish composer to this day. Chopin's works form an integral part of the piano repertoire and have made a lasting impression on the way composers wrote for the instrument throughout the Romantic period and beyond.[11] Beginning his life in Poland, Chopin pursued and then abandoned a concert career around Europe, choosing to work fully as a composer until his death at the age of thirty-nine. Despite never returning to his native Poland, he published many pieces modeled on a characteristic Polish dance, the mazurka. With these publications he "established a new model for the stylization of [Polish] folk idioms, marrying elements of peasant music with the most 'advanced' techniques of contemporary art music."[12] This undertaking then "set the tone" for nationalists in the Slavic world (including Russia) later in the Romantic period.

Rachmaninoff, like many piano composers after Chopin, wrote in many of same genres: nocturnes, preludes, etudes, and even one mazurka, despite not being Polish.[13] Rachmaninoff's love of Chopin is also seen in his more direct homage to the composer, the

[10] Marta Ottlová, et. al, "Smetana, Bedřich," *Grove Music Online*, 2020.
[11] Jim Samson, "Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Rachmaninoff, Sergei, "Morceaux de Salon, Op. 10," *Gutheil*, 1894.

famous set of variations for solo piano on Chopin's Prelude in C minor Op. 28 No. 20.[14] This notably mirrors Chopin's own decision to compose a set of variations on an aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Chopin himself, despite his temporal positioning in the Romantic period, admired Mozart greatly, citing the fact that he never departed from the "eternal principles" that composers like Beethoven routinely "turn[ed] their back" on.[15] Just as Chopin honored Mozart as his predecessor by composing a set of variations on his work, Rachmaninoff, perhaps with not a small amount of historical awareness, did the same with his idol Chopin.

Besides genre, Rachmaninoff also took a deeper stylistic influence from Chopin in his approach to piano writing. In her doctoral thesis, pianist Dr. Sanghie Lee identifies several striking similarities between certain works of Chopin and Rachmaninoff from the latter composer's earlier compositions for the piano, namely the *Morceaux de Fantasie* (Op. 3) and the *Moments Musicaux* (Op. 16). One particularly cogent example is the comparison between Chopin's posthumously published Nocturne in E minor and the "Elegie" from Rachmaninoff's *Morceaux de salon*.

[14] Rachmaninoff, Sergei, "Variations on a Theme of Chopin," *Gutheil*, 1903.
[15] Samson, "Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin," *Grove*, 2001.

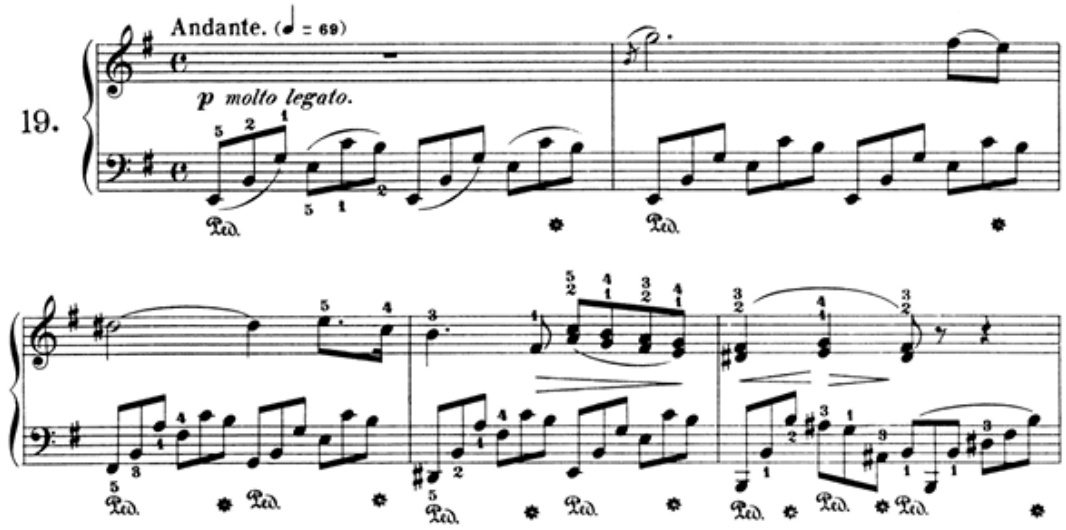

Fig. 2: Frederic Chopin, Nocturne in E minor Op. 72, No. 1: m. 1-5.

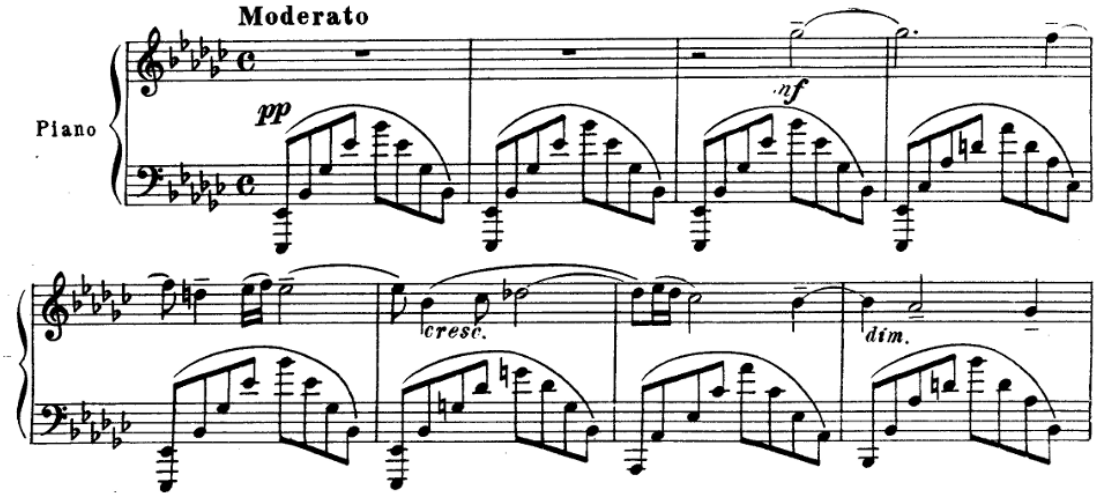

Fig. 3: Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Morceaux de Fantasie*, Op. 3, No. 1: m. 1-8.

Rachmaninoff, as an active concert pianist in his day, was already inundated with the style and music of Chopin. The similarities between these two compositions in accompaniment pattern, melodic contour, and even starting pitch (G in E minor vs G-flat in

E-flat minor), make it clear that this Nocturne was a definite influence, if not outright model, for Rachmaninoff when composing the "Elegie."[16]

Musical nationalism in nineteenth century Russia

By the Romantic period, Western Europeans had already harbored stereotyped musical ideas about their neighbors to the east for centuries. Baroque-era German composer Georg Phillip Telemann (1681-1767), for example, included a movement in his orchestral suite *Les Nations* entitled *Les Moscovites* (that is, the Muscovites, a term then popularly used to refer to the people of Russian-speaking lands as a whole) consisting of repetitive, interlocking bell-like ostinati in all four contrapuntal voices.[17] Telemann's decision to include Russia alongside the Turks (the pinnacle of "otherness" at the time) hints that Baroque Europe did not yet accept Russia as a musical equal, and that this road would indeed have to wait to be paved until the nineteenth century.

Mikhail Glinka

Mikhail Ivanovitch Glinka (1804-1857), living in the early Romantic period, was the first Russian composer to experience acclaim for his mastery of the existing musical language of his day while combining it with distinctively Russian elements. Glinka's opera *Zhizn' za tsarya* ("A Life for the Tsar"), a mostly political propaganda piece for the Romanov family, was the first true opera in Russian, in the sense that it was sung through without resorting to spoken lines.[18]

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[16] Sanghie Lee, "Rachmaninoff's Early Piano Works and the Traces of Chopin's Influence: The Morceaux de Fantasie, Op. 3 and the Moments Musicaux, Op. 16," DMA diss., (University of Cincinnati, 2018): 7.
[17] Georg Phillip Telemann ed. Nils Jönsson, "Ouverture-Suite in B-flat major TWV 55:B5," *IMSLP*, 2016.
[18] Stuart Campbell, "Glinka, Mikhail Ivanovich," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

Although Glinka's own music was still full of the conventionalized elegance and restraint of the late Classical and early Romantic periods, his music anticipated what would come to be associated with the Russian style in many ways. In other words, Glinka "drew on the musical mainstreams of his day" (such as French and Italian opera) "and acclimatized them in Russia."[19] Despite this, Glinka's use of folkloric and historical subject matter firmly positioned him as a Russian composer, and the model for later composers such as the Five.

The Five (*Moguchaya kuchka*)

After Glinka, the dream of a nationally Russian school of music did not fade. The Five (sometimes called The Mighty Five or The Mighty Handful in English; *Moguchaya kuchka* or "mighty little bunch" in Russian) were a group of self-educated Russian composers led by Mily Balakirev. Glinka met Balakirev, and though he did not teach him, he approved of him as a musician, and Balakirev went on to see his views as bearing the seal of approval of the foremost Russian composer of his time.[20] The *kuchka* opposed traditional "routine" techniques as taught in Western-influenced conservatories, and, until 1871, (the year when member Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was accepted as a professor there), also opposed the very existence of the St. Petersburg Conservatory for these same reasons.[21] Notably, no member of the Five was originally a composer by profession. However, all of them contributed significantly to the popularization of Russian nationalism in music.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Taruskin, "Defining Russia Musically," 115.
[21] Edward Garden, "Five, the [Moguchaya kuchka]," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

Fig. X: The Five, collectively depicted (mostly) posthumously by Félix Vallotton in 1907

César Cui (1835-1918) was the longest-lived member of the five, having survived to 1918. In addition to his career as a composer, Cui was also a music reviewer who wrote zealously in favor of his own ideals and that of the Five. This role is what led him to review Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 1 as a "program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt" written by a student in a conservatory in Hell.[22] The resulting failure of the First Symphony led Rachmaninoff into a long period of depression and lack of creative output.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) was a naval officer and composer born in Tikhvin near St. Petersburg in 1841. As a member of The Five, he is responsible for cultivating the "fantastic style" in his fairy tale operas. In his opera *Kashchey*, in order to show the contrast between the mundane world and that of folkloric magic and fantastical creatures, Rimsky-Korsakov used ordinary harmony for the former, and structures based

[22] Geoffrey Norris, "Cui, César [Kyui, Tsezar' Antonovich]," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

upon the diminished seventh chord (such as the octatonic scale) for the latter.[23] Among his colleagues, Rimsky-Korsakov was the one who popularized the octatonic scale, sometimes affectionately called the *Korsakovskaya gamma* (Korsakov scale). This scale was adopted by many Russian composers as a badge of (often all too explicitly telegraphed) musical nationalism.[24]

Finally, Alexander Borodin was a medical doctor and chemist. As the illegitimate son of a nobleman of Georgian descent, Borodin had the ability to obtain formal schooling and an arranged marriage despite his legal status as a serf. Of all the members of the Five, Borodin left behind the smallest number of completed compositions. However, as an avid performer of chamber music, he cherished its composition more than any of them.[25]

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), contemporary with but not part of The Five, took a different direction as a composer, not wanting to be influenced by the "dogmatic" thinking of Balakirev.[26] Introduced to music at a young age, Tchaikovsky was initially sent to jurisprudence school, but never forgot about composition. When he eventually received formal musical training in piano and other instruments, as well as in composition, at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories, he maintained "a respectful distance from both nationalists" and Westernized composers.[27]

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[23] Marina Frolova-Walker and Mark Humphreys, "Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolay Andreyevich," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
[24] Taruskin, "Defining Russia Musically," 84.
[25] Robert W. Oldani, "Borodin, Aleksandr Porfir'yevich." *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
[26] Edward Garden, "Five, the [Moguchaya kuchka]," *Grove Music Online,* 2001.
[27] Roland John Wiley, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

In his symphonies, Tchaikovsky's use of form and large-scale structure is unabashedly Western, borrowing from Schumann, Brahms, and Beethoven in different capacities.[28] This caused the members of the Five to come to disdain him, and particularly Cesar Cui, who wrote that Tchaikovsky was "a musician of extraordinary talent, except that he abuses his technical facility" by being "devoid of Russian character that pleases and attracts." He further wrote that Tchaikovsky's style is "bloated and faceless" and an "antagonist" to the nationalist style.[29]

In addition to the other Russian composers, even French audiences exposed to the works of Tchaikovsky despised them because they were not "Russian" enough; French audiences had a longstanding taste for Russian music and culture due to the mutual influence between the two countres. Even though Tchaikovsky's general style and technique were readily understandable to such audiences, his works did not align with the stereotyped "Russian" style they had come to associate with the works of the Five.[30] However, Tchaikovsky was not by any means a fully Westernized composer. His use of folksong in Symphony No. 2 and other works is much more in line with the mode of thinking espoused by The Five.[31]

It is also important to consider Tchaikovsky's social standing. While the members of The Five lived and worked in Moscow and its environs, Tchaikovsky was a member of the St. Petersburg social elite, and he wrote music that aimed to please aristocratic audiences.[32] To use a metaphor from the classical era, Tchaikovsky was more akin to Mozart than to

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Taruskin, "Defining Russia Musically," 49.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Roland John Wiley, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
[32] Taruskin, 294.

Beethoven. According to the scholar Wye Jamison Allenbrook, the music of Mozart was deeply rooted in the ritualized social dance forms of his era, and Mozart saw in these the most expressive and "fully realized" representations of humanity, which he aimed to use to move audiences emotionally.[33] While Mozart used the courtly minuet and the rural contredanse to represent different classes of people, Tchaikovsky used the imperial polonaise and the peasant (and bourgeois) waltz to achieve this purpose.[34] Having picked up this trick, consciously or no, from Mozart, Tchaikovsky saw himself as a fully Russian composer, not because he resorted to harmonic tricks and references, but because he represented Russian people in a way he considered realist.[35] In the apt words of *Grove* author Roland John Wiley, Tchaikovsky "individualized the classical pattern with striking materials" that were, if not his own original creations, were nevertheless entirely his own with regards to the creative thought processes involved in their selection and deployment in compositions.

Francis Maes, author of *A History of Russian Music,* considered Rachmaninoff to be Tchaikovsky's spiritual successor. They both divided their time "between long stays abroad and sojourns in the Russian countryside."[36] The two composers knew each other, and shortly after Tchaikovsky died in 1893, Rachmaninoff dedicated a piano trio "to the memory of a great artist" ("A la mémoire d'un grand Artiste," also printed in Russian.)[37]

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[33] Ibid, 292.
[34] Ibid, 294.
[35] Ibid, 295.
[36] Francis Maes, "A History of Russian Music," Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996: 203.
[37] Sergei Rachmaninoff, "Trio élégiaque No.2 in D minor, Op.9," *Gutheil*, 1907.

Trends of Russian musical nationalism

Although Tchaikovsky successfully defied the trends of Russian musical nationalism, those trends did exist and exerted a lasting influence on the music of that country. Three main strains of Russian musical nationalism are Russian folk music, orientalism, and Orthodox chant. Rachmaninoff drew upon all of these in his works, throughout his career.

Russian folk music

When early Russian composers, such as Alexei Lvov and Glinka, utilized folk material in their works, they did necessarily not do so to make any sort of nationalistic statement.[38] Indeed, when Glinka sought to retire from his practice of writing arrangements of Russian folk tunes for voice and keyboard, he said that he had "decided to shut down the Russian song factory."[39] However, when Lvov published the first such printed collection of Russian folk tunes in 1790, he used the term *narodnaya* (of the nation) instead of *prostaya* (simple) or *sel'skaya* (rustic) to describe the tunes.[40] This shows a growing awareness of a Russian "nation" with specific, unique musical qualities worth showcasing.

Mily Balakirev of the Mighty Five was the first to consciously take Russian folk material and use it in sophisticated motivic ways.[41] As was standard and expected in the *kuchka*, this technique made itself common property among the members to add to their own technique, and it quickly became part of the stereotyped "Russian style" that Tchaikovsky was berated by the critics for not following closely enough.

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[38] Taruskin, 9.
[39] Ibid, 113.
[40] Ibid, 17.
[41] Ibid, 141.

Orientalism and *nega*

In the nineteenth century, Russia was a highly socially stratified, imperial power led by the absolute authority of the Tsar. Aside from the territory of Russia proper and much of Eastern Europe, the Russian Empire also held lands in Central Asia, Western Asia (also known as the Middle East), and the Caucasus. The influence of orientalism in Russian musical culture did not come from nowhere, but roughly corresponds to the movements of the Russian army in its imperial ventures in these regions.[42]

As nineteenth-century Russian composers were mostly aristocrats (or, at the very least, heavily associated with aristocratic circles) living in wealthy areas like St. Petersburg or Moscow, they too were beholden to the stereotyped ideas about faraway lands that tend to develop in imperial societies. One concept in Russian, called *nega*, associates the East (a somewhat inept term, as the regions under discussion are actually to the geographic south of the Russian heartland in Eastern Europe) with a supposed penchant for sensuality, temptation, and femininity.[43]

Features of the "orientalist" style include "undulating" melismatic melodies, chromaticism in harmony, and droning accompaniments.[44] The flattened sixth, and, correspondingly, the raised fifth were also a feature of this style.[45] This mode of writing became a shorthand for many composers for all seductive atmospheres and situations, even those not explicitly occurring in the East.

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[42] Taruskin, 156.
[43] Ibid, 176.
[44] Ibid, 165.
[45] Ibid, 166.

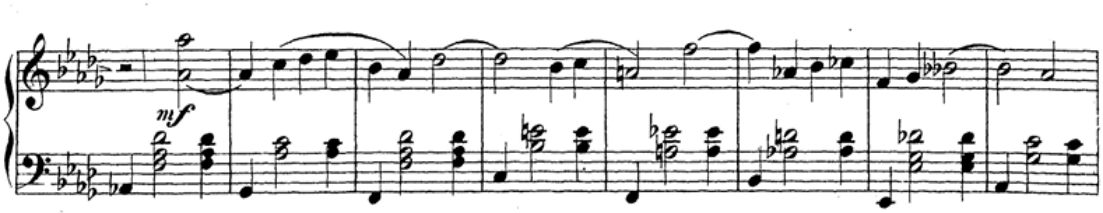

Fig. 4: The famous "love theme" from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, composed in 1869. This universally beloved melody actually has an orientalist tint, as can be seen in its heavy use of chromaticism (note the flattened sixth in m. 7) and melismatic feel. Piano reduction by Carl Bial (Berlin: Bote and Bock, 1871).

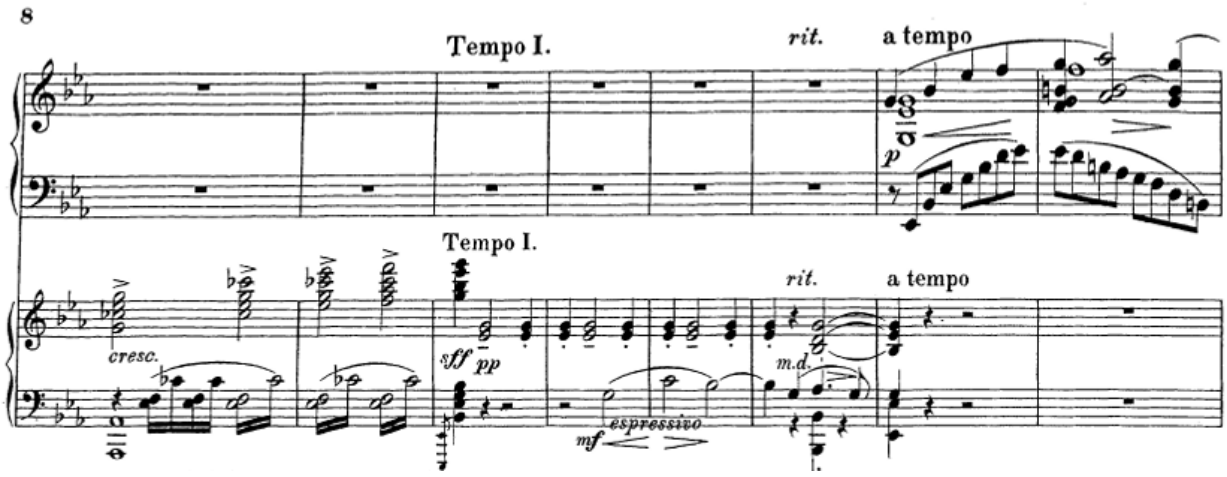

Fig. 5: The second theme from the Second Piano Concerto by Rachmaninoff (1901). This example contains both a raised fifth (m. 8) and lowered sixth (m. 10, 12). Even when chromaticism is relatively light, the feeling of *nega* pervades the entire theme.

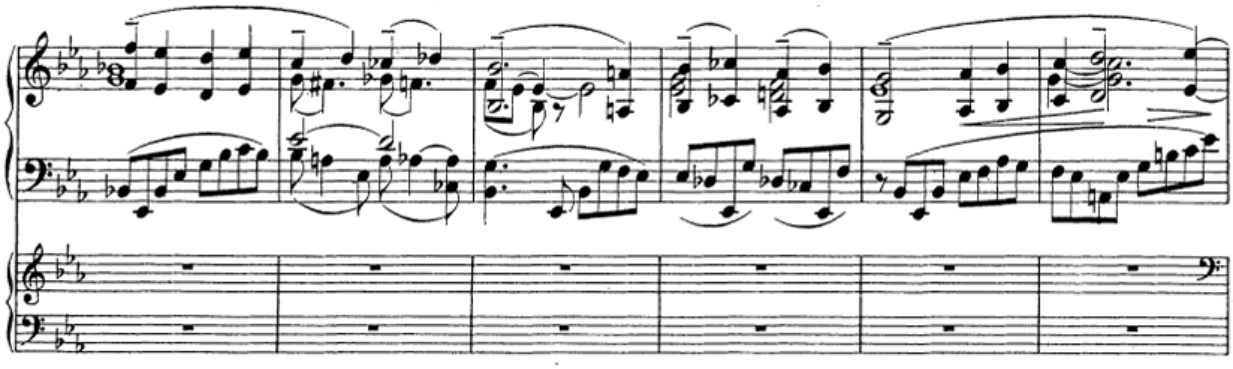

Fig. 5 (cont'd)

Despite its complex political origins, the "orientalist" style of Russian music is responsible for many of its sweetest melodies. While they may sometimes feel reminiscent of (to use Richard Taruskin's words) a "long, wet noodle," some of Sergei Rachmaninoff's most moving moments come from the orientalist influence, and some of his choices of chromatic harmony stem from this as well.[46]

The *Znamen* chant of the Orthodox Church

Another feature of Russian music, specifically beloved by Rachmaninoff, is the use of and reference to the *Znamen* chant of the Russian Orthodox Church. Just as Western composers have historically used the Gregorian chant of the Catholic Church and its overall spirit in musical compositions, the chants of the Orthodox Church have been influential in Russia.[47] One such composition where Rachmaninoff's devotion to chant comes through by explicit quotation is in his "All-Night Vigil," or *Vsenoshchnoye bdeniye.*[48] Throughout his oeuvre, however, the composer consistently draws from chant or chant-inspired melodies. For example, the very first theme of the Piano Concerto No. 3:

[46] Taruskin, 185.
[47] Maes, 206.
[48] Ibid.

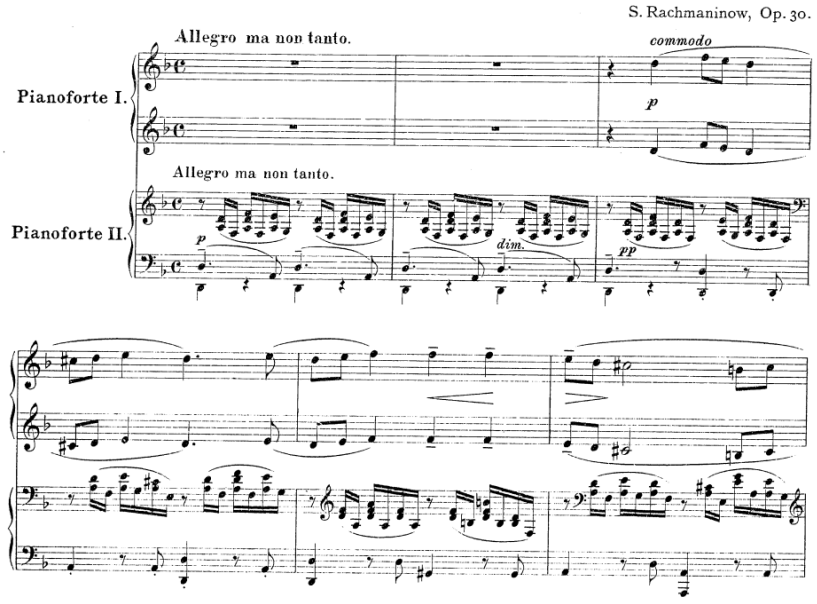

Fig. 6: Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 3, Edition Gutheil

The Second Concerto, too, commences with a chant-like theme, this time carried by the orchestra rather than the piano soloist.

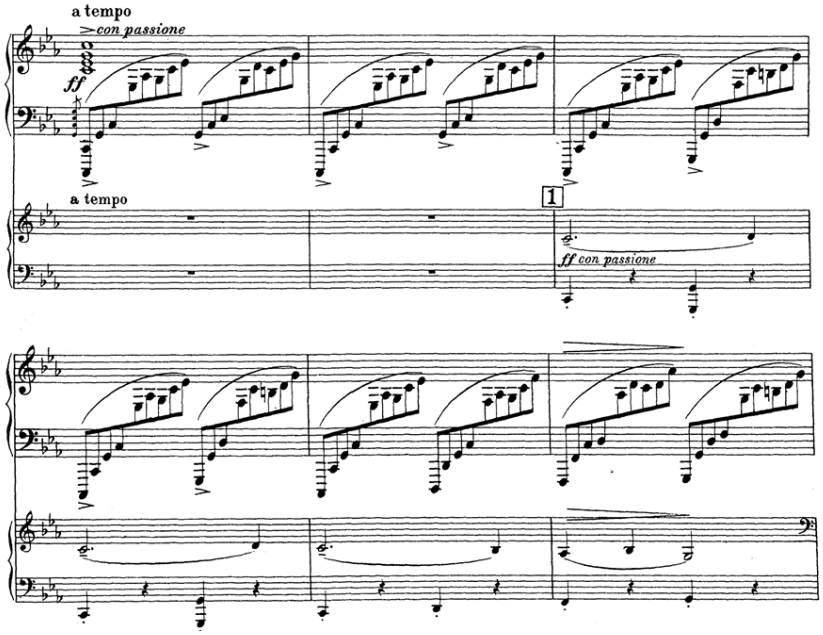

Fig. 7: Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 2, Edition Gutheil

Finally, one of the themes from the *Symphonic Dances* is also reminiscent of *Znamen* chant:

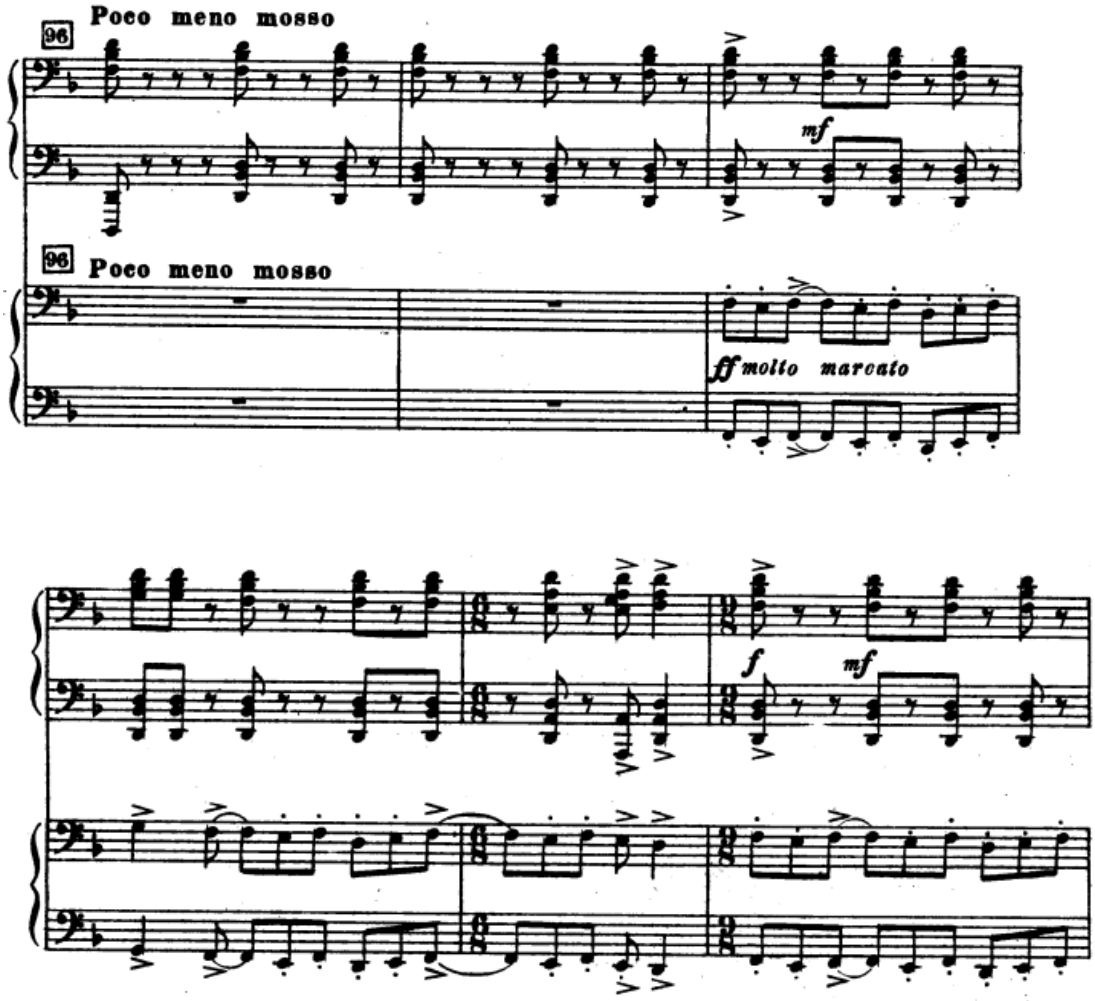

Fig. 8: Rachmaninoff, *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45 (mov. 3)

Rachmaninoff's "lyrical and elegiac" quality would doubtlessly not have been possible had he not been exposed to Orthodox chant early and often.[49] The composer is at his best when he combines the impulse of *Znamen* chant and other musical trends of his home country, his influences from composers of other nations and the musical canon before

[49] Maes, 203.

him, and his own musical touch. All these factors and many others, when they converged together at just the right moment in history, were just the right combination to produce the composer we know as Sergei Rachmaninoff.

THE "RACHMANINOFF SIXTH"

Rachmaninoff's life and music: an overview

> "I have chased three hares [composing, conducting, and playing the piano.] Can it be certain that I have captured one?"[50]
>
> - Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff began life as a member of the "lower reaches" of the Russian aristocracy.[51] He took to music early on in his life, with his sister Helena introducing him to the works of Tchaikovsky on the piano.[52] Eventually, when Rachmaninoff's family decided that he needed formal musical instruction, they called upon a teacher from St. Petersburg and eventually sent the boy to live as a pupil at the house of Nikolai Zverev.[53] In addition to taking lessons, Rachmaninoff lived as a boarder at Zverev's house, and it was there that he met his lifelong associate Alexander Scriabin.

Rachmaninoff began studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory at age 10 and later moved to the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied piano performance and composition

[50] John Culshaw, "Rachmaninov: The Man and His Music," New York: Oxford University Press: 11.
[51] Harrison, 5.
[52] Culshaw, 18
[53] Geoffrey Norris, "The Master Musicians: Rachmaninoff," New York: Schirmer, 1976: 3, 5.

with Anton Arensky and Sergei Taneyev.[54] After he convinced the faculty to allow him to become a full-time composition student, he continued at the Moscow Conservatory until he graduated in 1892 with the opera *Aleko* and the Symphony No. 1.[55] According to Terry Teachout, "the essential elements of Rachmaninoff's style were already firmly in place by the time he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory."[56] Rachmaninoff received a rigorous compositional education at the Conservatory, and there he absorbed all of the compositional styles and techniques that were available to him.

Only a few years after graduation, the failure of his Symphony No. 1 in 1897 caused a deep personal crisis for the composer.[57] This failure was, in large part, due to the conducting of Alexander Glazunov, who apparently did not understand the work and "felt nothing" when he conducted.[58] Rachmaninoff, deeply ashamed of this failure, aimed to ensure that no one would ever hear the symphony, and he considered destroying the manuscript.[59] This dark psychological time in Rachmaninoff's life was followed immediately by his decision to flee from St. Petersburg back to Moscow.[60]

In Moscow, Rachmaninoff took a post as a conductor of opera.[61] He also underwent psychological treatment, under a Dr. Nikolai Dahl, in an attempt to restore the compositional self-confidence he had had before the incident with the Symphony.[62] Although this treatment ostensibly involved hypnosis, the main aspect of it that helped

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[54] Culshaw, 23.
[55] Ibid, 28.
[56] Terry Teachout, "What was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?" Commentary (June 2002), https://www.commentary.org/articles/terry-teachout/what-was-the-matter-with-rachmaninoff/
[57] Culshaw, 30.
[58] Norris, 23.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Culshaw, 32.
[62] Ibid, 33.

Rachmaninoff through this period of his life were his long conversations with Dahl. In these conversations, Dahl forced Rachmaninoff to repeat words of affirmation and self-confidence until he sincerely believed them.[63]

Rachmaninoff performed an American tour as a pianist and conductor in 1908, then returned to Russia shortly after.[64] He preferred to remain in his home country and declined offers for further musical tours in the United States.[65] However, when the Bolshevik Revolution began in 1917, the Rachmaninoff family was forced to leave the country, and Sergei grasped at a recital tour in Scandinavia as a way out.[66] Much to the family's grief and anguish, their property was seized by the Communists, and the large wooden house at the family estate of Ivanovka was burned down.[67] Although they travelled much in this period, the family eventually settled in the United States.

In this period, composition had to take a place on the proverbial backburner, as Rachmaninoff could no longer make a reliable living composing music, and he had to rely on the other two "hares" that he had chased throughout his life: piano performance and conducting.[68] Still, he never forgot about Russia. However, to add insult to injury on this matter, both the St. Peterburg and Moscow Conservatories in Russia "forbade the study and performance" of Rachmaninoff due to his aristocratic heritage and dissent to Soviet rule.[69] It was for this reason that the composer wrote, "Only one place is closed to me, and that is my

[63] Norris, 30.
[64] Culshaw, 37.
[65] Noris, 44.
[66] Culshaw, 40.
[67] Noris, 53.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Noris, 64.

own country – Russia."[70] Despite the fact that he travelled widely throughout the United States and Europe performing and conducting, he would never return to his homeland.

In the United States, Rachmaninoff did not write very much, but he managed to complete the Third Symphony, *Isle of the Dead*, and the *Symphonic Dances*, as well as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, all of which remain beloved works to this day.[71] In 1943, Rachmaninoff peacefully died of cancer, as a fully naturalized American citizen.

Reception in the twenty-first century

In the twenty-first century, it cannot be said that the music of Sergei Rachmaninoff is under-appreciated. Using the Internet alone, one can easily see the mass appeal of Rachmaninoff's music. To name a few examples, the Ukrainian pianist Anna Fedorova's performance of the Second Piano Concerto has garnered over 37 million views on YouTube.[72] Popular performances of the famous Prelude Op. 3 No. 2 in C# Minor, such as the freely available one by Evgeny Kissin, are able to achieve view counts in the millions as well.[73] On the music streaming service Spotify, Sergei Rachmaninoff is listed as having 2.7 million monthly listeners as of February 2023. Among other selections listed on the service, the *Andante cantabile* variation of his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* has been listened to over 30 million times by users of Spotify.[74]

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[70] Norris, 65.
[71] Culshaw, 43.
[72] AVROTROS Klassiek, "Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto no. 2 op. 18 – Anna Fedorova – Complete Live Concert – HD," YouTube Video, 37:48, September 2, 2013, https://youtu.be/rEGOihjqO9w.
[73] Newjebenthan2, "Evgeny Kissin Rachmaninoff Prelude Op 3 No 2 in C Sharp minor," YouTube Video, 4:54, October 4, 2014, https://youtu.be/SCm9O2KNEX4.
[74] "Sergei Rachmaninoff", Spotify, *Spotify*, accessed 19 February 2023, https://open.spotify.com/artist/0Kekt6CKSo0m5mivKcoH51.

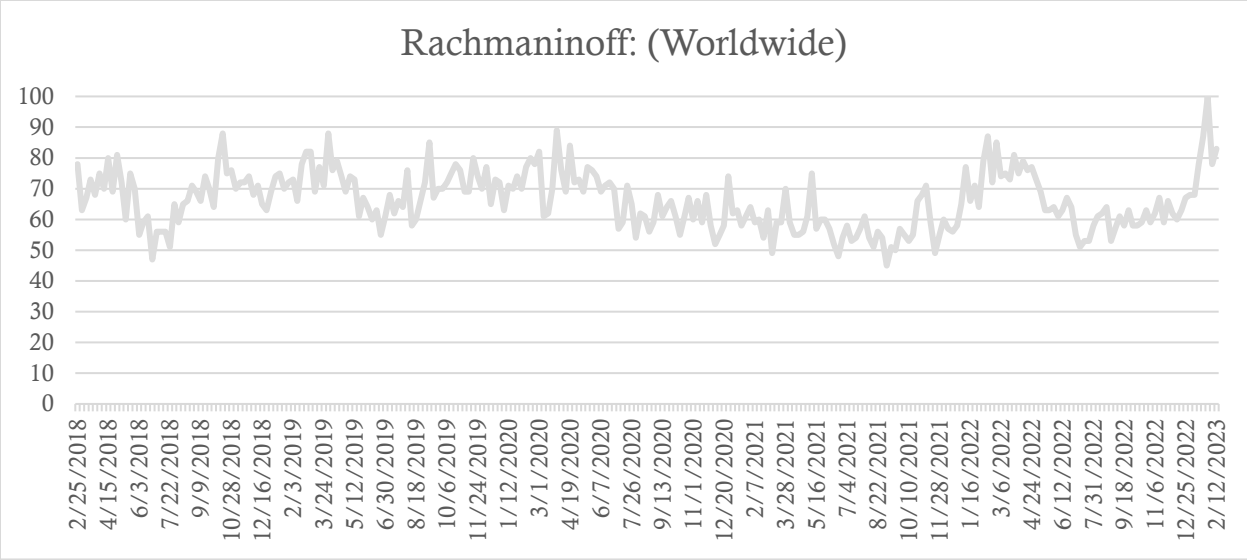

Fig. 9: Google Trends results for "Rachmaninoff" worldwide, collected on 2/19/2023. In this chart, each number does not represent an absolute number of searches, but rather a relative increase or decline in interest, with 100 being the all-time peak.

Furthermore, according to the analytics service Google Trends, Rachmaninoff experienced a peak of interest worldwide in January 2023 by users searching for his music on YouTube and Google-related services.[75] It is trivial to say that in the twenty-first century, Rachmaninoff's music does not need promotion. In fact, he has captured and held the attention of the modern classical music-listening public.

Apart from popular acclaim, Rachmaninoff has also seen a resurgence in positive opinion from critics in the twenty-first century. Classical music critic James R. Oestreich writes that "[in the 1980s,] upholding Rachmaninoff as worthy not only of popularity but also of respect seemed a lonely business […] Few then would have bet much on his chances of thriving in a new century."[76] Even from his vantage point in 2001, Oestreich foresaw that

[75] "Rachmaninoff," Google Trends, *Google*, accessed 19 February 2023, https://trends.google.com/trends/
[76] James R. Oestreich, "Suddenly Seeing More in Rachmaninoff," *New York Times*, September 2, 2001.

the tide of opinion was already turning in Rachmaninoff's favor. Charles McBurney, an English composer, had called Rachmaninoff a "great clockmaker of music," citing his compositional craftsmanship in shaping the tonal scheme of the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.[77] The second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published in 2001, was the first to soften Eric Blom's comments expressed almost fifty years earlier (previously quoted in the abstract of this thesis).[78]

A conservative composer?

Even the most ardent members of the avant-garde admit that "a consistently popular composer, good or bad, is automatically an important one."[79] However, this does not mean that Rachmaninoff has been secure from critique from critics in the twentieth century. American composer William Flanagan accused Rachmaninoff of spending most of his life purposefully avoiding of "the pressing issues of [the twentieth] century's modern musical thought"— not by critically engaging with them, but rather by flat-out ignoring them while remaining wrapped up in his neo-Romantic habits of composition.[80] Flanagan, writing in the early 1950s, finds some merit in the music after Rachmaninoff returned to composition in 1926. In these works, there is supposedly a newfound "eschewal of the arbitrary:" more precision, lucidity, and economy, and less intense reliance on the composers of the nineteenth century.[81] In other words, Flanagan was only able to recognize the value in Rachmaninov's works in which he took on traits associated with the neo-classical school of

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] William Flanagan, "Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Twentieth-Century Composer," *Tempo* 22 (Winter 1951-1952): 5
[80] Ibid, 5.
[81] Ibid, 7.

composition: those of Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and other composers that would remain influential throughout the twentieth century.

Other critics were not so nuanced in their appraisal of Rachmaninov's music. Jonathan Frank "melody is either non-existent or of almost comic vulgarity" in Rachmaninoff's music, and calls the central section of one piece (op. 3 no. 4, the *Polichinelle*) "appallingly banal."[82] American composer Walter Piston, author of several influential books on harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration, once asked a colleague, "How can you play such junk?" after hearing his performance of the Piano Concerto No. 2.[83] Philip Hale, another musician who felt that Rachmaninoff's forms were derivative and hashed out, opined that the first movement of the same concerto "might have been written by any German […] who was acquainted with the music of Tchaikovsky."[84]

Even as recently as 1997 critics have harshly, almost as though it were a rite of passage for any forward-thinking music critic, bashed Rachmaninoff's works. Bernard Holland, in his review of the music used in the Australian dramatic film *Shine*, a movie about a concert pianist's struggle with mental illness, wrote thusly: "The idea of losing one's mind over the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto is simply too offensive… [H]ow can you get excited about a cozy piece of schlock like this?"[85] As if this were not enough, he continued further: "Treating [this concerto] with awe, *Shine* lowers musical values to fast-

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[82] Jonathan Frank, "Rachmaninov and Medtner: A Comparison," *Musical Opinion* (March 1958): 387, quoted in Glen Carruthers, "The (Re)Appraisal of Rachmaninov's Music: Contradictions and Fallacies," *The Musical Times* 147 (Autumn 2006): 46

[83] Terry Teachout, "What was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?" *Commentary* (June 2002), https://www.commentary.org/articles/terry-teachout/what-was-the-matter-with-rachmaninoff/

[84] Ibid.

[85] Bernard Holland, "Basking in the Glow of the Golden Arches," *New York Times*, December 22, 1996.

food levels."[86] Such opinions were never in short supply during the twentieth century, and, despite a revival of interest in Rachmaninoff, the composer's supposed legacy as a conservative nostalgic, shying away from musical modernism, still haunts his memory.

Review of Roman numeral analysis and tonal function

Before analysis of Rachmaninoff's harmonic language may proceed, a brief review of tonal analysis will follow. For the purposes of clarity, and because different papers use different notation to analyze the same chords, a series of examples will illustrate the way this thesis uses Roman numerals to analyze diatonic and chromatic chords. All examples to follow will be in the key of C major.

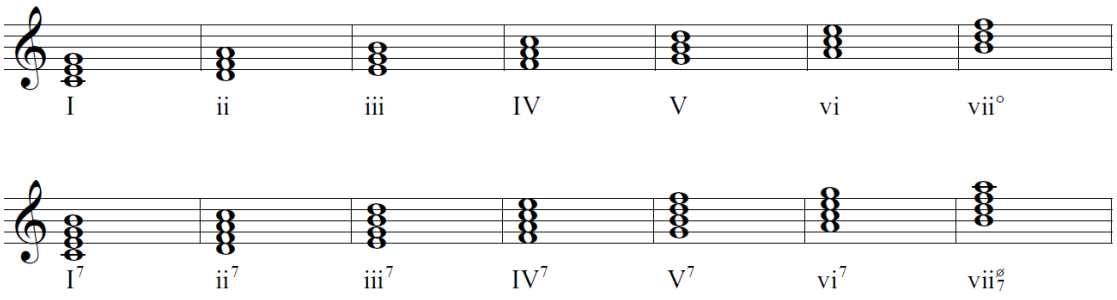

Fig. 10: Analysis of basic diatonic chords in C major.

The basic chords in a key are analyzed in this way, with uppercase letters for major sonorities, and lowercase for minor sonorities. Fully diminished seventh chords are notated with a small circle, and half diminished sevenths are the same but with a small diagonal "tick" through the circle.

[86] Ibid.

Within functional harmony, chords related to I and vi are considered to fall under the "tonic" function. Likewise, chords related to IV and ii are "predominant," and chords in the family of V and vii° are said to have "dominant" function.

Modal borrowing

Chords that contain accidentals "borrowed" from the parallel minor (in major) or major (in minor) key are notated thusly:

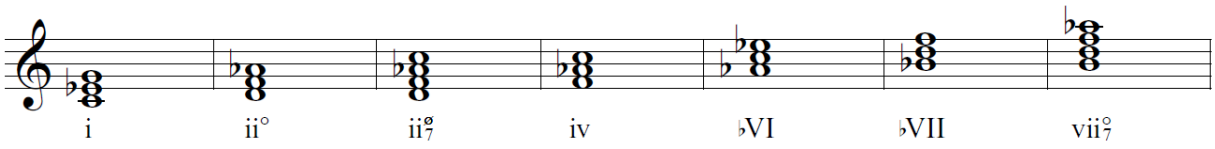

Fig. 11: Modally borrowed chords in C major.

The Neapolitan chord and Augmented Sixths

The chord of the Neapolitan and the three conventionally recognized augmented sixths are written with the usual abbreviations:

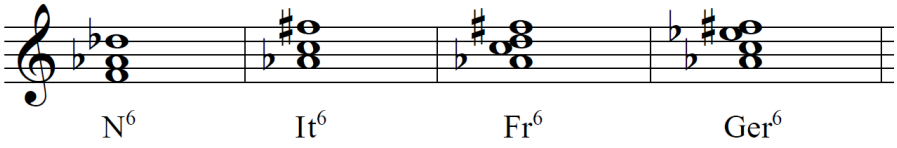

Fig. 12: The Neapolitan and the "International" chords in C major.

Secondary dominant and predominant chords

Finally, secondary dominant and predominant chords occur when a passage is harmonized with foreign accidentals, as though it is touching upon but not fully modulating

to a new key. These chords are favored by Rachmaninoff for their color and emotional effect, and therefore clarity in their notation will prove worthwhile:

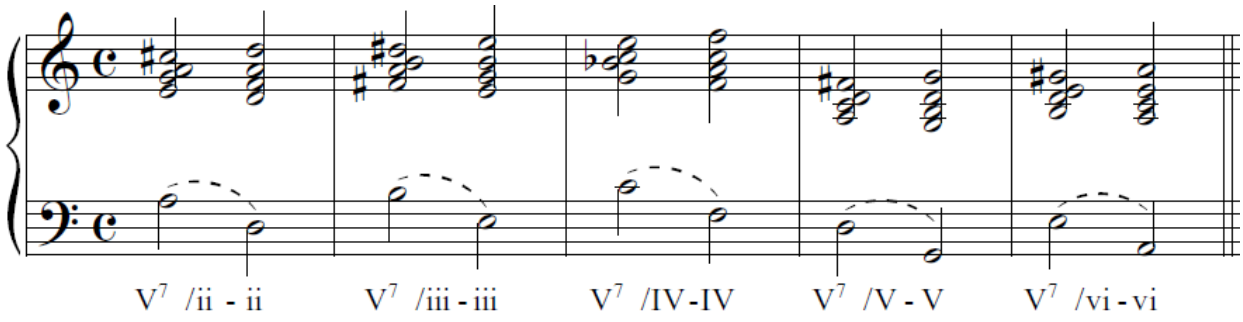

Fig. 13: Common secondary dominants in C major.

While predominant chords are possible in many keys, they are only shown here in the key of V for brevity's sake. While in an isolated context it will appear that these progressions are merely in G major, further analysis will demonstrate how these harmonies are used effectively in the context of larger passages.

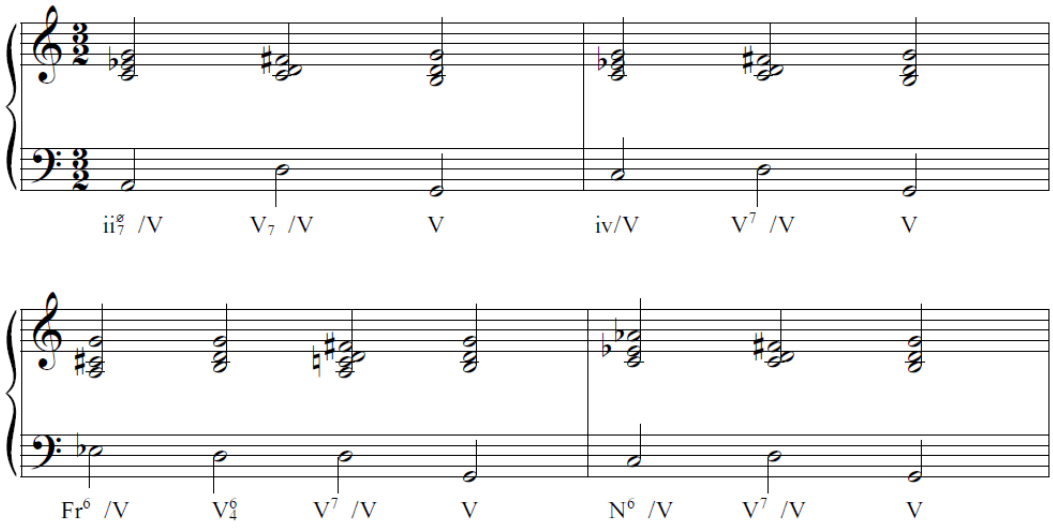

Fig. 14: Some examples of secondary predominants in C major. Note the secondary augmented sixth chord in m. 3, and the secondary Neapolitan in m.4.

Unlikely friends: Rachmaninoff and Scriabin

Harmonic proliferation in the nineteenth century

> At an early rehearsal of [Prometheus], Rachmaninoff, stunned at the sound of it, asked Scriabin 'What [chord] are you using here?' Scriabin answered, "The chord of the pleroma."[87]

Although the notation of functional harmony has been treated at length, it is helpful at times to remember the basic nature and purpose of harmonic function. With such a foundation of knowledge, the different methods composers extend and elaborate upon it begin to appear like a unified whole, no longer so disparate as they once might have seemed. Rachmaninoff and Alexander Scriabin are two composers with extremely contrasting harmonic languages, with the latter even approaching blatant atonality.

Since the advent of formalized, written music, two main techniques have played into all composers', including Rachmaninoff's and Scriabin's, ability to create and release tension in polyphonic textures. The contrapuntal method, which finds its most basic expression in the preparation and resolution of a dissonant suspension, creates tension through dissonant chords and resolves it when one or more voices return the chord to consonance.

[87] Taruskin, 251.

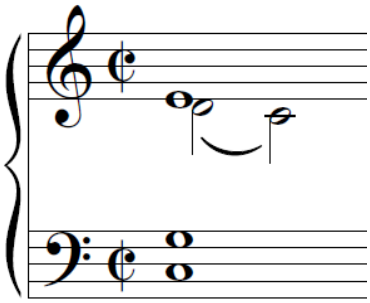

Fig. 15: A small amount of tension built up and released in a basic suspension.

While the contrapuntal component of tension and release is as old as polyphony itself, the second factor, namely that of function, only took shape during the coalescence of functional harmony in the Renaissance. Its essential motivating idea is that phrases move from a stable harmonic area (known as the tonic), through the predominant area (where there is heightened tension) into the dominant (the area of highest tension) before returning to rest in the tonic.

The most effective use of tension and release comes from when composers combine contrapuntal and functional motion. Through delaying, elaborating upon, and embellishing the movement from tonic to predominant to dominant, composers can achieve a wide range of subtle effects through the resulting near-infinite palette of combinations of tones.

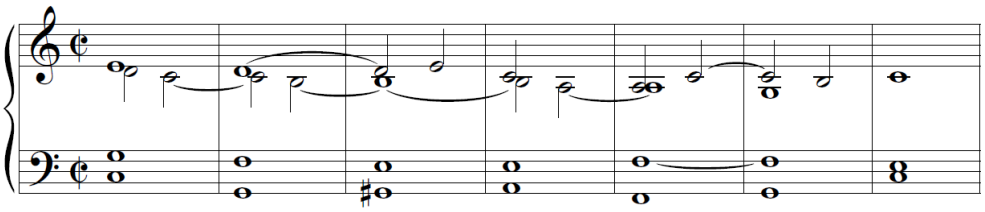

Fig. 16: A simple phrase illustrating some possible elaborations on the functional motion from tonic to predominant to dominant.

The combination of the contrapuntal and the functional components of harmonic tension and release experienced a flourishing under the hand of Richard Wagner, who introduced the world to certain chords that cannot quite be analyzed under conventional Roman numeral analysis. These chords do not push the boundaries of tonality for the mere sake of it, but for the sake of achieving additional and subtler tone combinations to express emotional affect, thus securing Wagner's legacy in the field of harmony despite his many personal controversies. Every music student is familiar with the so-called "Tristan chord," almost to the point where it need not be printed here.

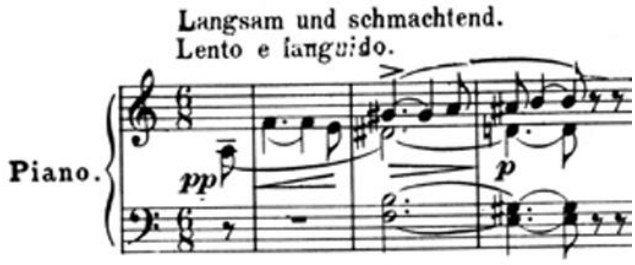

Fig. 17: Prelude from *Tristan and Isolde*, piano reduction by Kleinmichel (New York: Schirmer, 1906)

For a deeper analysis of the *Tristan* prelude than can be included here, the reader is invited to seek out Richard Taruskin's book *Defining Russia Musically,* already cited at length here.

Scriabin and the tritone link

The innovations spurred by Wagner in harmonic ambiguity prompted composers to seek out and employ chords that can be analyzed in many ways depending on their context in the phrase. Scriabin went farther than most in this regard, inventing an entire harmonic language around the latent possibilities he saw in the interval of the tritone. He devised a

system of "linking" tritones, wherein the two notes of any such tritone can be used as enharmonic common tones while the bass note moves around (in intervals, appropriately of a tritone) to form different chords.

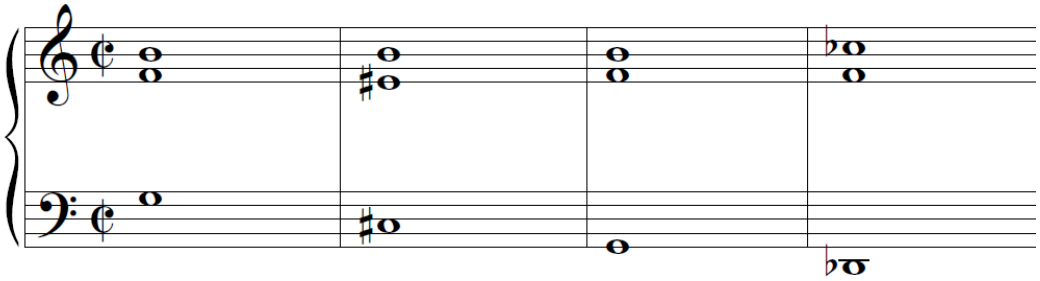

Fig. 18: Four iterations of Scriabin's "tritone link."

Rachmaninoff and Scriabin

Sergei Rachmaninoff and Alexander Scriabin, despite their aesthetic differences and divergences in life history, were unlikely friends. They studied together under the composition teacher Anton Arensky in the Moscow Conservatory, and according to Max Harrison, Rachmaninoff's use of free chromaticism in his piano music can be seen as an homage to his fellow composer.[88] The two sometimes butted heads, as when Rachmaninoff wrote that Scriabin's later music was a "musical no-man's-land" with no "true musical constructiveness" besides their eccentricity.[89] In return, Scriabin dismissed Rachmaninoff's music as "only an imitation of Tchaikovsky."[90] However, the two men maintained a healthy

[88] Harrison, 171.
[89] Ibid, 199.
[90] Ibid.

mutual respect until the end: after attending Scriabin's funeral in 1914, Rachmaninoff planned and performed a series of immensely successful recitals of only Scriabin's music.[91]

Harmonic tendencies in Rachmaninoff's works

Certain harmonic tendencies can be identified within Rachmaninoff's compositions, mainly centered on the predominant function. In particular, the composer has a particular penchant for the chord of the Neapolitan and for borrowed subdominant chords. Both of these aspects of his harmonic personality factor into his innovation of the "Rachmaninoff sixth."

Neapolitan

Rachmaninoff favors the Neapolitan, both as a chord for ordinary use in the middle of a phrase and on a deeper, structural level. For example, the third movement of the *Symphonic Dances* begins in the key of D major:

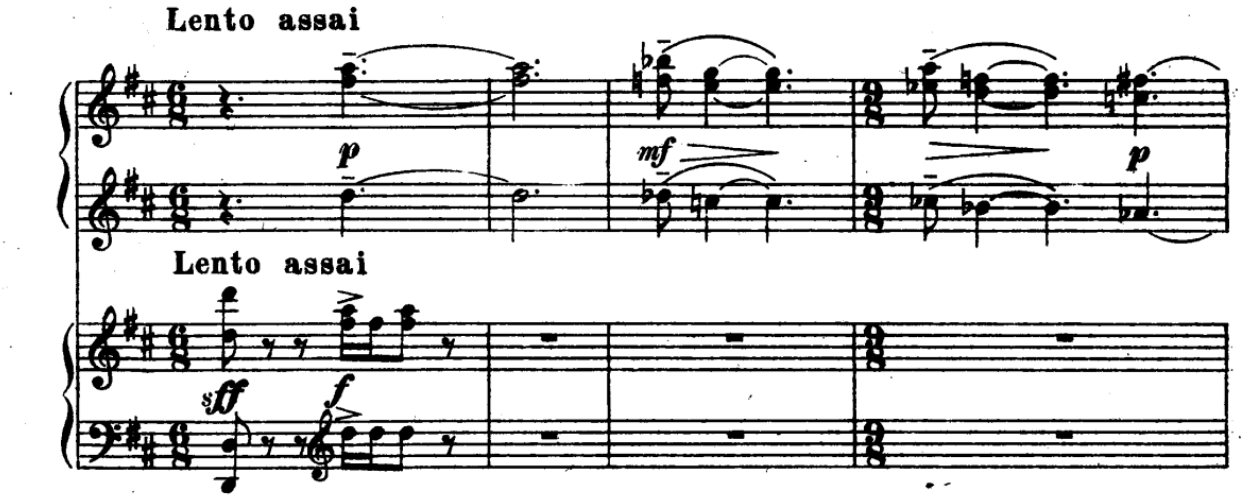

Fig. 19: Rachmaninoff, *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45 (third movement)

[91] Ibid.

Only a few pages later in the two-piano version of the score, a heavy Neapolitan chord is sounded. Although it lacks a third, the E-flat and B-flat make its quality unmistakable:

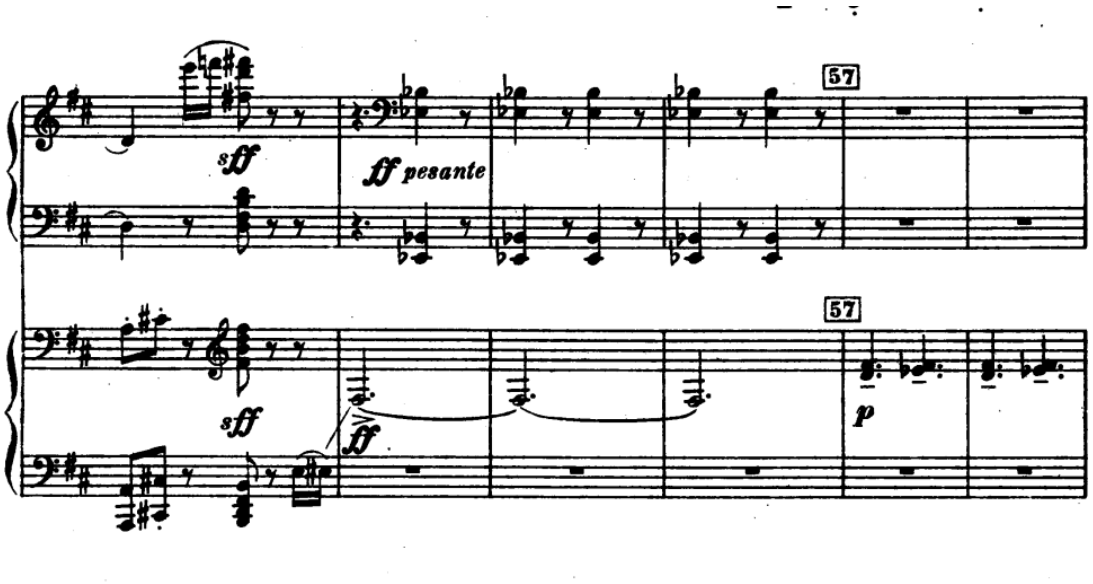

Fig. 20: Ibid. Note the Neapolitan chords beginning in m.2 of this excerpt.

Rachmaninoff's Neapolitan obsession extends to the level of movement-wide structure. This is readily apparent in the third movement of the Piano Concerto No. 3. Not only is the chord of the Neapolitan itself heavily used throughout this movement, but the tonal structure of the entire movement is based on a (no pun intended) Russian doll structure of Neapolitan relationships. The beginning of the piece, like the previously quoted first movement, begins in D minor. After the presentation of the first and second themes, the piece moves into the key of E-flat major, or the so-called "Neapolitan" note.

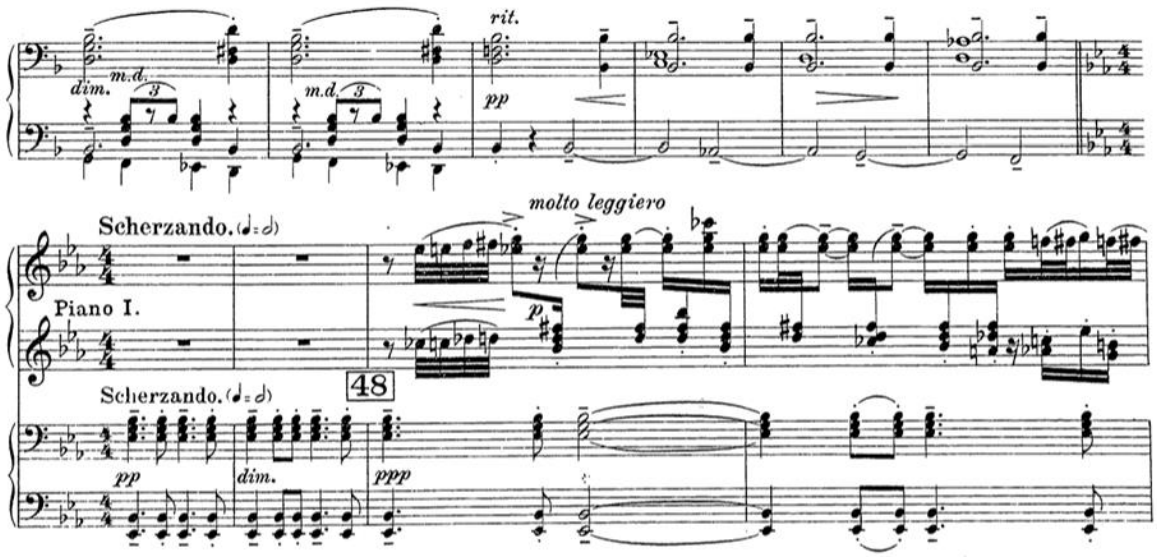

Fig. 21: Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 30 (third movement): Modulation into the Neapolitan key

Later in the movement, the music modulates to E major, which is, of course, enharmonic with F-flat, or the Neapolitan of the Neapolitan of D minor.

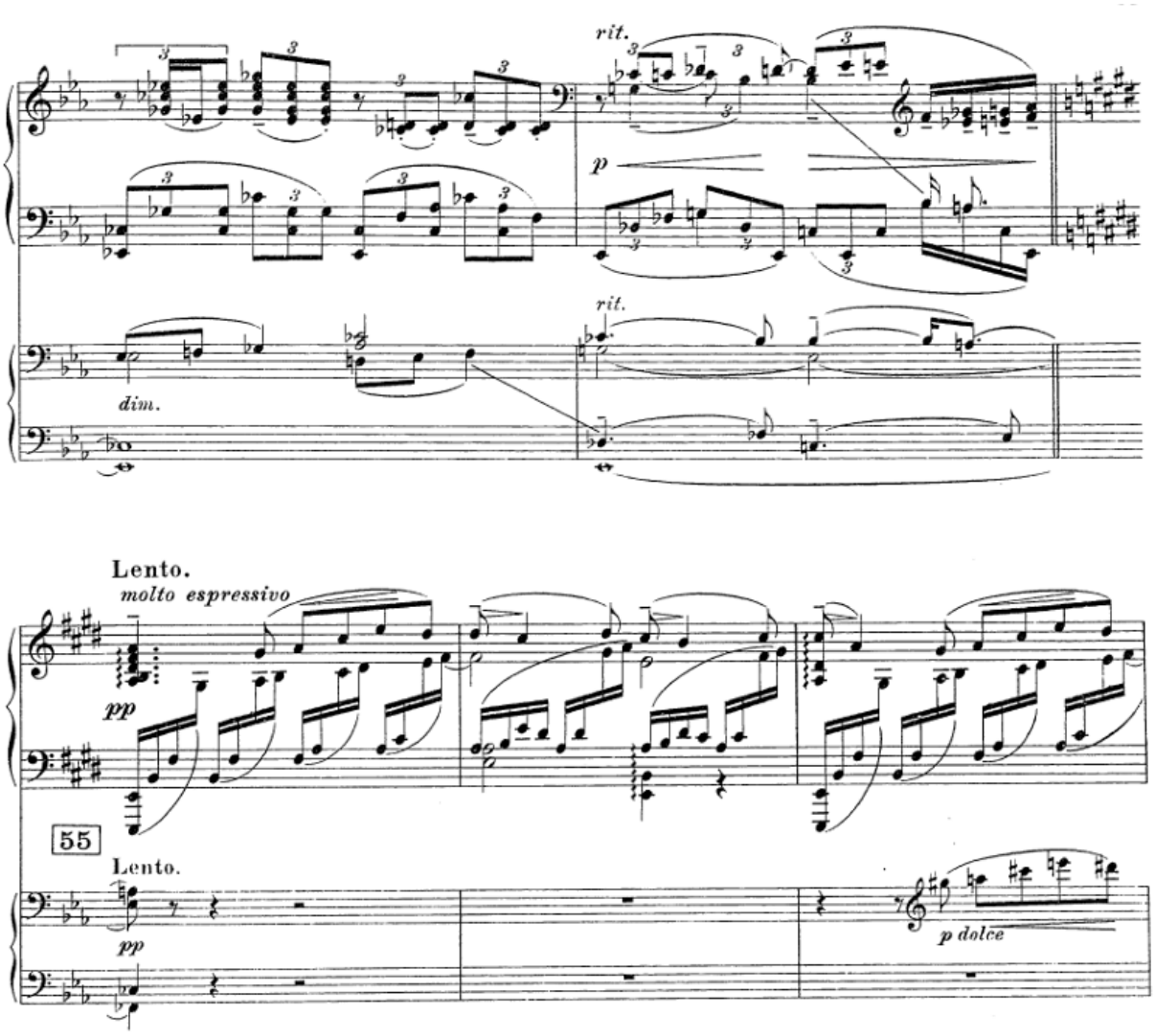

Fig. 22: Ibid: Modulation into the (enharmonic) Neapolitan of the Neapolitan

Secondary predominant

Heavy use of secondary predominant chords constitutes another harmonic habit of Rachmaninoff. He particularly appreciates half-diminished seventh chords borrowed from other keys. This tendency is found in many compositions, but showcased here in two popular pieces, the “Elegie” and the “Vocalise”:

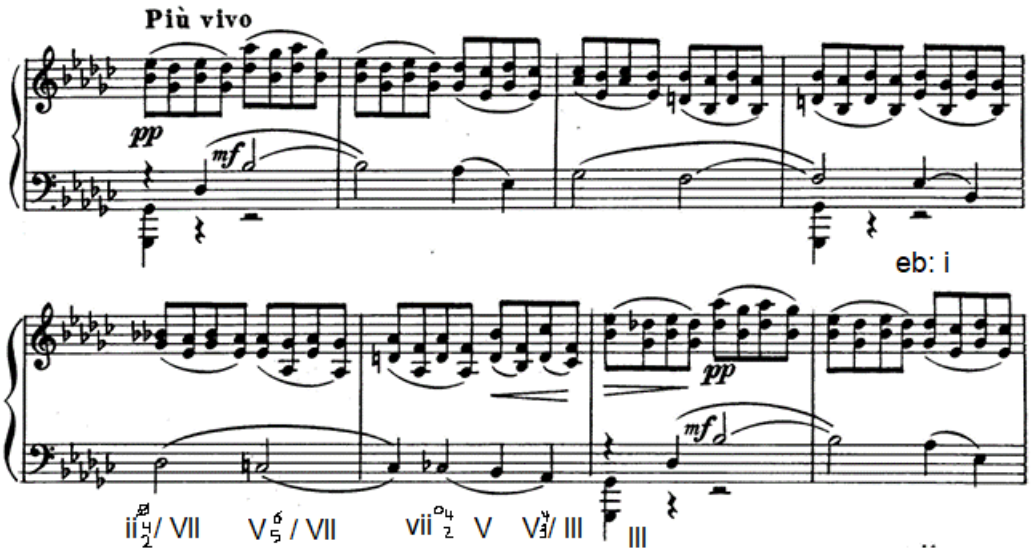

Fig. 23: Rachmaninoff, Elegie, Op. 3/1

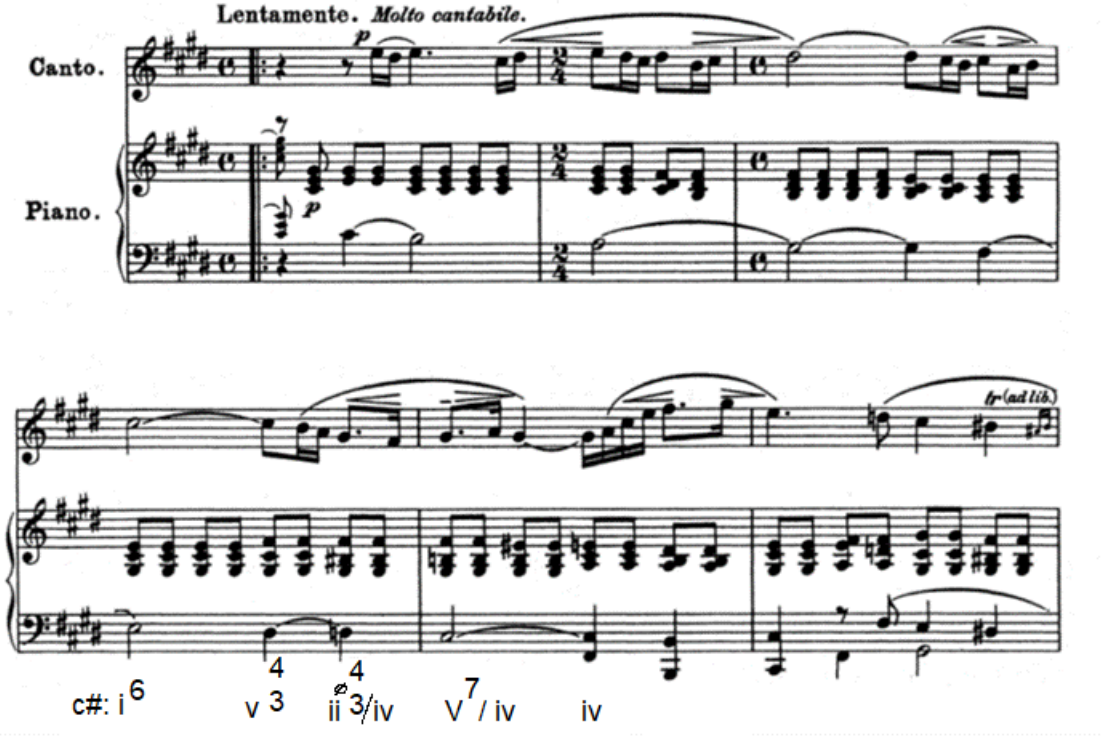

Fig. 24: Rachmaninoff, Vocalise, Op. 34/14

Ger6/iv or the "Rachmaninoff sixth"

The *raison d'etre* for this thesis is now presented. In certain works of Rachmaninoff, the composer uses a particular chord that can be conventionally analyzed as a borrowed German augmented sixth from the fourth scale degree:

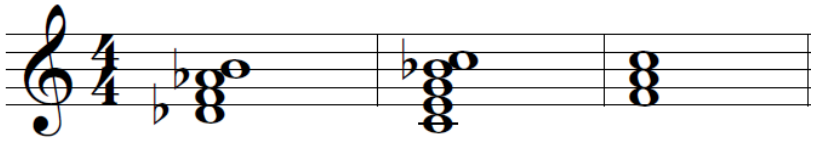

Fig. 25: The "Rachmaninoff sixth" as a borrowed German augmented sixth chord.

The affinities of this chord with the Neapolitan and borrowed predominant categories of chords are immediately clear. It is built upon a lowered second scale degree, and acts as a predominant in both this expected resolution and in Rachmaninoff's actual usage.

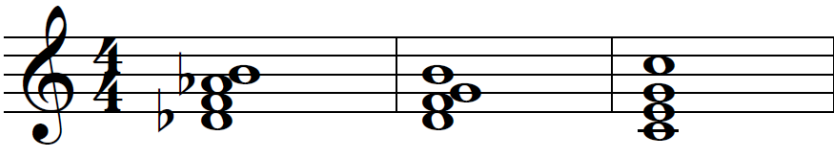

Fig. 26: The "Rachmaninoff sixth" in actual resolution.

Rachmaninoff and Scriabin both, therefore, took advantage of the tritone link that the latter formalized into his esoteric system of composition. The "Rachmaninoff sixth" as a predominant shares the same tritone with the dominant seventh immediately following it, and this use of common-tone part writing makes the chord progression convincing. Since

this chord (due to its spelling with the D-flat, B-natural interval) cannot be analyzed in any other way than as an augmented sixth, it would seem natural that it represents a type of augmented sixth chord innovated and pioneered by Rachmaninoff himself, much like the "Scriabin sixth" chord identified by Taruskin. Two places where the "Rachmaninoff sixth" are used are in the Second Piano Concerto and the Elegie, which have already been quoted in this paper. Another piece with the chord in abundance is in the second movement of the *Symphonic Dances*. An analysis of the sections in all three pieces featuring the chord is now given:

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 18

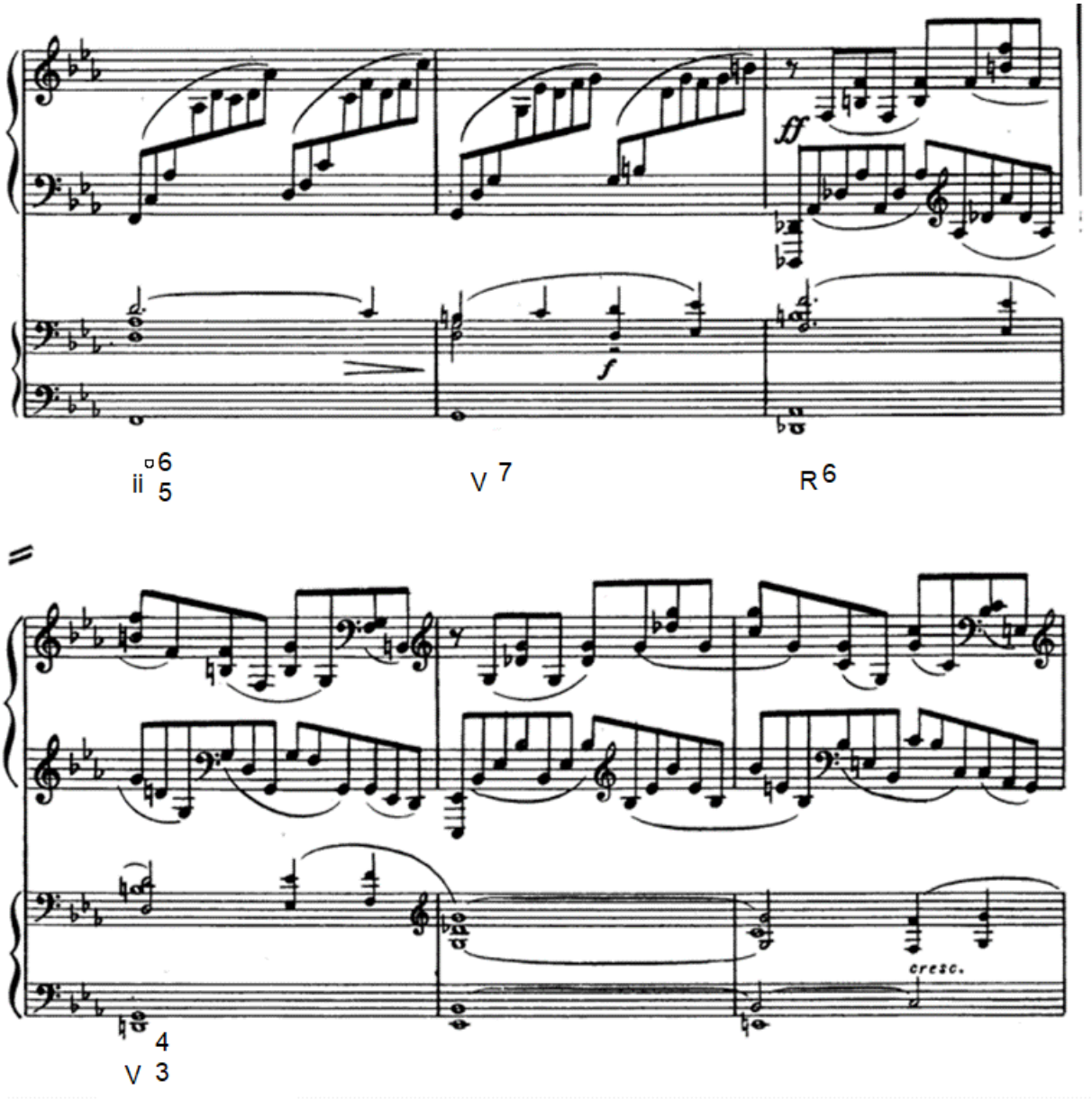

Fig. 27: Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 2, mov. 1, Op. 18, mm.33-38

"Elegie," op. 3 no. 1

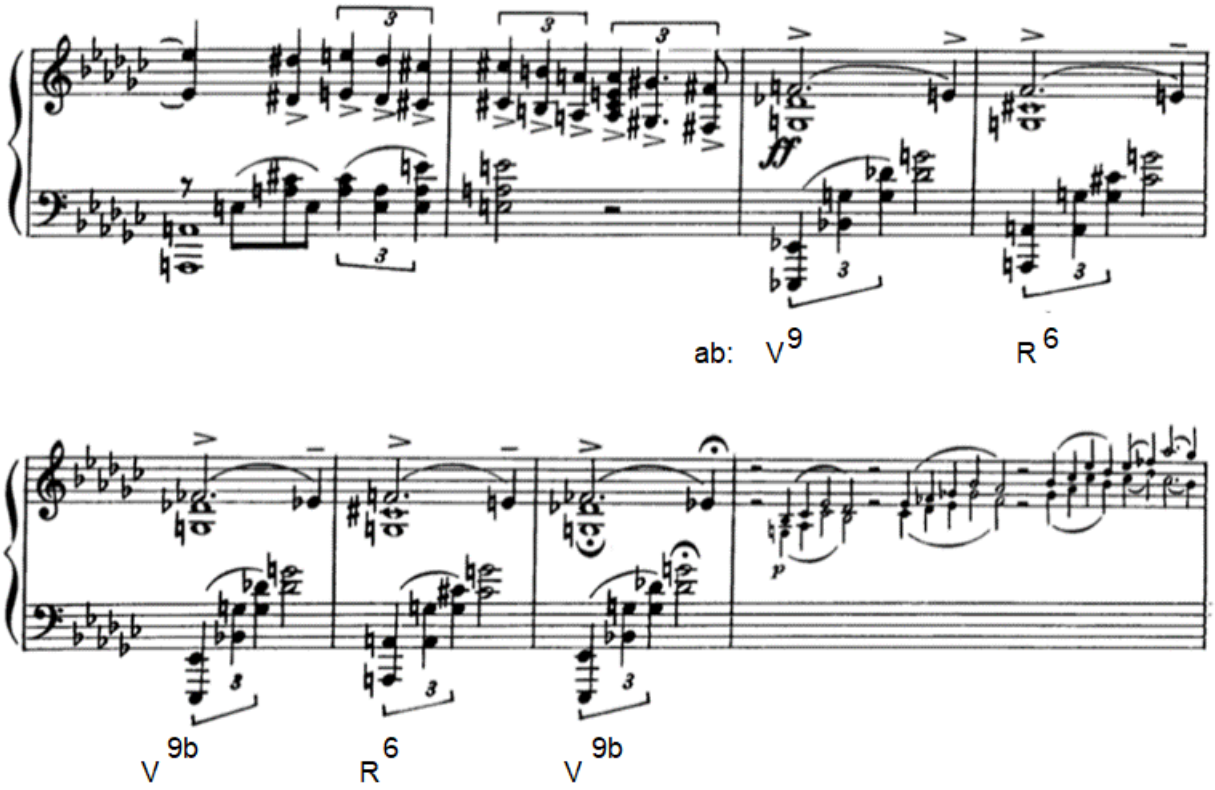

Fig. 28: Rachmaninoff, Elegie, mm.76-83

Finally, the Rachmaninoff sixth appears in the very beginning of the second movement of the *Symphonic Dances*, where it is even used multiple times before the first statement of the tonic triad:

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

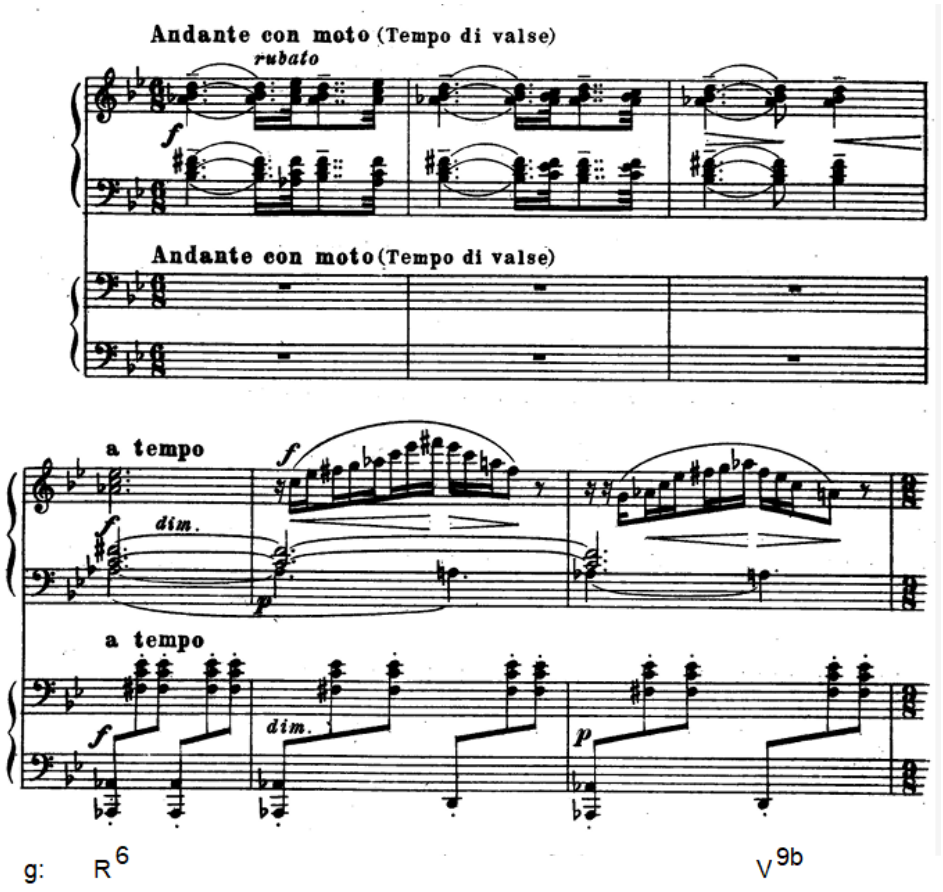

Fig. 29: Rachmaninoff, Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (second movement), mm.1-6

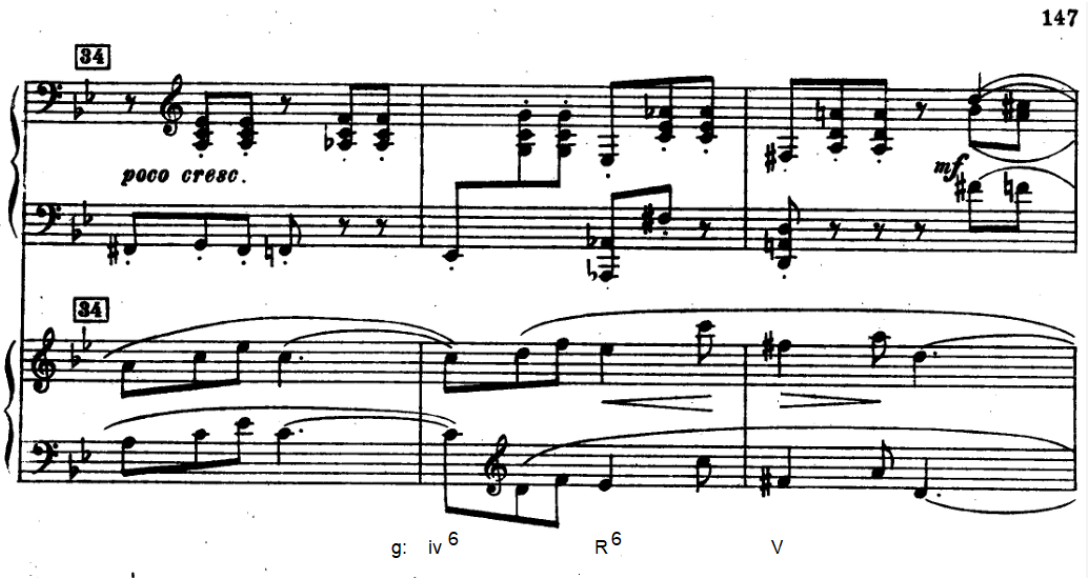

Fig. 30: Ibid

It is unknown whether the "Rachmaninoff sixth" represents a conscious invention by the composer, or whether it was a natural outcome of his habitual usage of Neapolitan and borrowed predominant chords. However, his usage of it enhanced both of the pieces quoted here, and the uniqueness of the chord merits recognition.

A conservative composer?: Revisited

> [Rachmaninoff's music consists of] artificial and gushing tunes, accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios.[92]
>
> - Eric Blom, 1954 (11 years after Rachmaninoff's death)

This excerpt from the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, quoted here again for ironic effect, may seem less apt to a reader now more fully aware of Rachmaninoff's

[92] Rosa Newmarch, additions by Eric Blom: "Sergey Vassilevich Rakhmaninov," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* New York, 1954.

creative harmonic capabilities. Although it may be said that much of Rachmaninoff's music bears the same tenor (or, as John Culshaw put it, "a self-centered mode of expression […] limited to a small emotional range"), his workings within that range qualify him as a serious composer worthy of continued study and celebration.[93]

Foreshadowing jazz: the tritone substitution

Finally, Rachmaninoff's use of the "Rachmaninoff sixth" chord foreshadows an important feature of jazz harmony. The tritone substitution, wherein the V^7 chord of a ii^7-V^7-I^7 progression is replaced with another dominant seventh built on the flattened second scale degree, is essentially the same procedure used by Rachmaninoff:

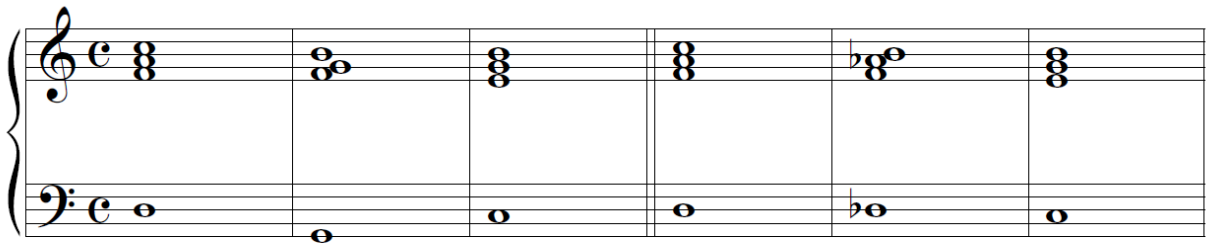

Fig. 31: The tritone substitution as found in jazz.

CONCLUSION

> All at once the public was the enemy. The worst thing an artist could now do, under the dispensation of [the German romantic doctrine of] *Kultur*, was the very thing Haydn and Mozart […] were so successful at doing: namely, "to please." […] "The poisoned

[93] Culshaw, 11.

> flowers" […] that tempted and threatened artists: "the applause of the vulgar crowd and the fixed gaze of sentimental women."[94]
>
> - Richard Taruskin

The German Romantic outlook identified by Taruskin as *Kultur* has long been a dominant perspective in musicology and the overall reception of composers.[95] One of these ways has been the dichotomy between "Classical" and "Romantic" composers, a distinction which today seems second nature but, like many concepts we take for granted, has a complex history, as artists like Haydn and Mozart were considered "Romantic" in their time.[96] Under *Kultur*, the "Romantic" artist was that exemplified by Beethoven and the perception of him espoused by the larger-than-life cult of personality that sprung up around him after his death. Beethoven, as the quintessential hero-artist, supposedly overcame the vulgar, the sentimental, and the feminine in the pursuit of his art, and the fact that people emotionally responded to said art was only incidental to this fact. This ideology ran from Beethoven through Wagner and finally inundated the roots of modern musicology in German academia. Thus, the spirit of Milton Babbitt's "Who Cares if You Listen?," though not explicitly adherent to *Kultur*, is nonetheless beholden to it in its implicit assumption that the composer and listener are in a firmly adversarial relationship.[97]

Rachmaninoff dismantles this relationship with an oft-overlooked aspect of composition: sincerity. Rachmaninoff "was a man burning with music, impelled to write music without

---

[94] Taruskin, 251.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?," *High Fidelity*, February 1958.

any outside considerations."[98] As he shared his musical gifts with humanity, he left behind a legacy not only of pianistic virtuosity but of a distinctive harmonic language as well.

Beyond understanding the legacy of one composer, it is important to integrate harmony, and each composer's individual use of harmony, into a complete music education. Far from only being relevant to those who wish to compose or arrange, a working understanding of this aspect of music is important to performers, educators, and students alike. As harmony has been one of the most important outlets of musical expression for all music written in the common practice period, no performer should be without an instinctual understanding of it and how it affects phrasing and interpretation, and if students are to become exemplary performers, then a cultivation of this understanding should be stressed as early and often as possible in pedagogy.

[98] Culshaw, 10.

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