

DLA doctoral thesis

Kovács Gergely Tamás

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF'S PERFORMING STYLE,
PIANISTIC CAREER

Supervisor: Orsolya Szabó, DLA, Prof. Emerita

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I. Background of the research

Sergei Rachmaninoff's composer life is a frequently researched topic in international musical science, although the detailed analysis of his performing style and life does not get too much attention. It is especially significant that he was one of the last composer-performer, whose actual piano playing has remained in a large number of audio recordings. These sources make it possible for us to analyze his piano playing style and skills in a wide scale of aspects.

In order to reconstruct the historical and biographical background I have studied the works of Sergei Bertensson & Jay Leyda, Geoffrey Norris, Barrie Martyn and Oskar von Rieseemann primarily. These sources contain very important data about Rachmaninoff's life, his career as a concert pianist and personal relationships but rarely handle his recordings as individual, thorough interpretation analysis.

The decision of the topic of my doctoral dissertation was also decided by personal experiences. In the process of learning and practicing the second piano concerto for the first performance in my life, I came across his own recordings of the piece and realized that they have significant differences compared to the performing practice of nowadays artists. Therefore the main question of my research was: what are the permanent, recognizable specialties of Rachmaninoff's piano playing and what is the historical and pedagogical background behind it. Furthermore, how these realizations make him different than his contemporaries and the future generations of performing pianists.

A significant part of professional literature only negotiate Rachmaninoff as a composer, most of these works mention his performing career from a biographical or historical aspect. Less emphasis is placed on a detailed examination of the consistently recurring interpretative characteristics that define his piano playing – based on his remained recordings – and on tracing these back to the pedagogical and interpretational traditions. Also, how much can these realizations be considered as hallmarks of an individual piano performing style. My dissertation attempts to find the answers for these questions.

II. Sources

The primal source of my research was the remaining gramophone recordings of Rachmaninoff. I have placed the acoustic (1924) and the electronical (1929) recordings of the 2nd piano concerto in the center of the analysis. These recordings were both conducted by Leopold Stokowski and accompanied by the Philadelphia Orchestra. This fact makes it especially suitable to focus on the performing differences and constants. I have considered the technological differences in the process of the analysis.

In the progress I have examined many other of Rachmaninoff's recordings, that have been placed in the original version of the dissertation. These have been remained later in order to highlight the essence of my work and ensure its structured nature. In the final version these recordings are only mentioned if they show a significant feature of his performing style.

The data of his concerts and repertoire were also very important sources of the research. In the reconstruction of his concert career I relied on the collecting works of Zarui Apetian and Sofia Satina. These two very significant sources were organized by the Australian pianist Scott Davie. For the period after Rachmaninoff's emigration I have used the documents of the American Congress Library, through the dissertation of Robin Sue Gehl.

In the revealing of the historical background I have used letters, contracts, contemporary recollections, critical papers and press materials. For the analysis of the musical scores I have used the edition of A. Gutheil from 1901, and all the graphical illustrations of the 2nd piano concerto are derived from the same edition. My personal markings are also very structural: the red colors reflect the tempo and timing features, the blue colors show the articulation, accentuation, voicing and character specialties, and the yellow lines are the differences in the recordings of 1924.

III. Method

My research is connected three different approach: historical and contextual examination, practiced reconstruction based on performing experienced reconstruction, and audio recording analysis.

The first phase was focused on the reconstruction of Rachmaninoff's musical raising and pedagogical heritage. Through his teachers and masters I have tried to find the Russian, Middle-European and Lisztian traditions that could build inside his performing thinking. Based on the pedagogical family-tree, the lyrical thinking and the sound creation on the piano is coming from Field and Clementi, the technical discipline is from Zverev, the orchestral, large-scale piano playing is from Ziloti and – indirectly – from Franz Liszt.

The second phase is the examination of Rachmaninoff's career as a pianist via the his data of concerts and repertoire. Based on the remaining programs I have analyzed chronologically and statistically his life as a pianist, a conductor and chamber music player. I have divided it to two stages, the differences before and after his immigration, and also the logic of his concert repertoires.

The third and most important phase is the historical recording analysis that I have attempted with the musical scores. I have examined the choices of his tempo, the inside movements, the differences in his timings, phrasing, the dynamic developments, articulation, accents, his voicing and technical precision. My aim was not categorizing isolated effects, but to uncover how these details connect to the structure, the characters and the dramaturgical progress.

In the background of the method I have studied the approaches of Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Nicholas Cook, Neal Peres Da Costa, Kenneth Hamilton, László Stachó and László Somfai. It was another inspiration to examine the analytic-performative aspect of chasingthebutterfly.no project, made by two Norwegian pianists, Eirik Raude és Sigurd Slåttebrekk. My own instrumental work also made me realize that certain technical

solutions can be reproduced, but the personal musical ideas are not able to copy mechanically.

IV. Results

One of the main results of my research is that Rachmaninoff's very complex performing style is not the totality of independent interpretational gestures, but an easily detectable, consistently applied coherent system, based on performing fundamentals. These recordings of twenty-five years, reveal a consistency that points to a deeply rooted musical identity.

First of all we can highlight his large-scale way of thinking. In his performances the small details always work as parts of the bigger process. The local rubatos, accents, dynamic differences and articulated gestures do not cut the wholeness of the piece, but serve the bigger phases and directions. Even if his timings are extreme, they do not break the musical cohesion.

The second recognition is the importance of the melody. The leading voice is always very obviously detectable, which he always emphasizes which dynamic and timing tools. The long melodical lines do not exist as series of small motives but as a unified process.

It also shows his thinking in multiple voices. He always uses the piano as an orchestra: he leads parallel voices with different dynamics and tones, and if it is necessary he separates the notes of the same chord in order to show the individualness of the voices. This is not an occasional effect, but the significant element of his way of thinking as a music performer. For me it is coming from the Lisztian heritage, which connection receives a small proof by this observation.

Another fundamental element of Rachmaninoff's performing style is the musical meaning. The tempo, dynamics, articulation and sound quality always serves the structural and content-related interpretation of the piece. The execution of the climax points is never

made by only one tool: the development can be made by crescendo, decrescendo, accelerando or ritenuto, according to the meaning of the certain phrase.

The comparison of the two concerto recordings of 1924 and 1929 show that his interpretation changed in certain details. The first recording is generally faster and makes a more chased impression, however the 1929 recording has a larger scale of timings, richer sound and more detailed articulation. Some of the differences can happen obviously because of the different technological solutions. The importance of the melodical thinking, the hierarchy of the voices and the large-scale structural thinking stays the same.

His technical safety is also very significant. Under the recording conditions of the time – when afterwards edits were limited – his piano playing barely has any wrong notes. Even in the most virtuoso phrases he keeps the clarity of the voices, the precision of the scales and jumps, and still uses the technical tools for the service of the musical gestures and structural thinking.

The loyalty of the musical score is also a very important matter. When performing his own compositions Rachmaninoff follows his instructions almost every single time. He only makes some chords bigger or plays them in different registers. In the pieces of other composers he has much more interpretational freedom: he changes dynamics, articulation, tempos, and sometimes even notes and repetitions. These changes are never selfish, they serve his own musical interpretation.

Based on all this, Rachmaninoff's art of performance cannot be unequivocally categorized as belonging either to the Romantic freedom of the 19th century or to the 20th century ideal of strict fidelity to the score. In his playing there are two different ways of thinking: the understanding of the structure and musical meaning allies with the freedom of the artistic performer. This double-sided character makes his artistry as a connection between the 19th century traditions and the modern performing ways.

V. Activities Related to the Subject of the Dissertation

Rachmaninoff exists in my own performing life constantly for the last fifteen years. About seventy percent of my concerts include at least one piece from Rachmaninoff, which makes him third after Franz Liszt and Frédéric Chopin.

My Rachmaninoff repertoire contains all of his Preludes, the first version of the 2nd Piano Sonata, a few Etude-tableaux, both of the piano trios, songs, the 2nd piano concerto and the Rhapsody of a Paganini Theme.

My first performance of the 2nd piano concerto is very significant for my performing career and this dissertation as well. It happened in Miskolc, 16th of January 2023, with the Miskolc Symphony Orchestra led by conductor Levente Török. The performance of this piece was one of my most important goal for my entire life. In the process of preparing to this concert, I have started to examine Rachmaninoff's own piano recordings: this experience helped to realize the final topic of my doctoral dissertation.

My second solo label is also connected to Rachmaninoff. It includes five of his preludes, and titled: Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky: Preludes & Pictures. It was released by Hungaroton in 2026.