

DLA Theses

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## SEQUENTIA FREQUENTISSIMA

THEMATIC AND MOTIVIC USE OF A MELODY FRAGMENT

IN RACHMANINOFF'S OEUVRE

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### I. Antecedents of the research

In the course of multiple listening, analysis, and performance of Rachmaninov's works from his different creative eras, I had the intention to try to find and explain the connections in the layers of the composer's works in a more breathtaking writing. In recent decades, many and in many ways have researched, analyzed and interpreted Rachmaninoff's deeply fatalism – passionately lived between depression, failure, and doubt – and the presence of related sound combinations. A significant number of dissertations on Rachmaninoff mentions and analyzes in shorter or longer chapters the composer's intense and intimate relationship to suffering and destiny, studying these has played an extremely important role in my research.

My dissertation differs from the fact that it highlights on a spiritual and creative process by creating and introducing the concept of *sequentia frequentissima*, focusing on the thematic and motivic features of one of Rachmaninov's early and recent works. This eternally recurring *sequentia* transcends its primary function from the instinctive, mood-painting authorial application, gradually moving away from its original features and character, transforming into a metaphor for the composer's death image, becomes one of his most important musical attributes and compositional tools.

## II. Sources

As the dissertation covers on three topics that are far apart in space and time - orthodoxy, the Western Christian liturgy, and Rachmaninov's works discussed in the dissertation - the sources are also extremely numerous and extensive.

In the first part, which presents orthodoxy as a social, cultural and spiritual background, the writings and scientific dissertations of Anatole Leikin and Richard Taruskin served as significant scientific sources. In the second part of my dissertation, which examines *Dies irae* from the Western Christian liturgy, the following books and dissertations: *The sequentia* by László Dobszay, the *Dies irae and the dance of death* by Erin Brooks', and *The history of the death mass until the 17th century - Tomás Luis de Victoria: Officium Defunctorium* by Andrea Kovács provided extremely useful information.

In the third part of my study, which presents Rachmaninoff's deep connection to the previous two chapters, the books *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* by Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* by Barrie Martyn and over and above, in the concluding of my dissertation, *Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff*, an

extremely exhaustive PhD dissertation in discussing the subject by Blair Allen Johnston helped me in the analysis.

## III. Research Methods

My research method basically rests on three main pillars: the first and most important is to focus on the thematic delimitation of the study, by listening the works several times with the help of a score intended to be presented and analyzed. This was followed by the preparation of detailed analyzes, defining the method of analysis and the formula described in later chapters, devised specifically for this study. Reading and processing analyzes, essays, studies, recollections, and critiques related to the topic also played a prominent role in my research. In addition to the mentioned sources mainly related to music theory and musicology, I also examined a range of phenomena and layers (including liturgical, psychological, religious psychological aspects and references) that are not directly related to the topic, but are essential for understanding and justifying.

## V. Research Results

In my study I present how Rachmaninov forges the thematic and motivational layers of the *sequentia frequentissima*, and how this note combination becomes one of the leitmotifs of the oeuvre. In the analyzes, I also examine how the composer exploits the variations inherent in the formula I have created to illustrate this. The main conclusion of my dissertation is that *sequentia frequentissima* has a “dual identity”: it is simultaneously assimilated and the composer’s own, one of the main reasons for this is to be found in the structure of the formula, which carries many compositional possibilities.

The dissertation consists of six chapters. The first chapter called *Orthodoxy as a Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Background*. As I examine the constant presence of a single liturgical melody fragment in two selected works of the oeuvre, I examine the social, cultural, and religious background that served as Rachmaninov’s compositional gestures and musical theme choices. Family tragedies, professional failures, Orthodox traditions and personal relationships with them, as well as the dogmas of the Orthodox religion, strongly influenced the author’s deeply lived fatalism, his image of death from his early creative era. The musical imprints of all this are also analyzed in the dissertation.

In the second chapter, a model called *sequentia frequentissima* (perpetually recurring sequence), the *Dies irae* motif, comes into focus. First, abstracting from specific works, I present the origin, liturgical aspects, musical and structural features of this *sequentia*. I then examine the compositional tools of *Dies irae*’s artistic application that are particularly important to this dissertation, and then I list all the works from other composers containing *Dies irae* quotes that Rachmaninov must have encountered in his lifetime.

In the third chapter, I talk about the spiritual background of Rachmaninov's fatalism, which I claim can be related to the descending motives he uses extremely often, and through this to the melody of *Dies irae*. Then I examine Rachmaninov’s individual compositional technique, which served as the main resource of *sequentia frequentissima* based on a chain of descending thirds, gradually becoming a basic formula. The composer created a monotematic way of composing, the central theme of which initially became a specific compositional sound formula and later the first line of the *Dies irae*. Monotematic composition on its own is not specific, but the conscious connection of this compositional technique with this particular song, the *Dies irae*, is already a peculiar compositional tool of Rachmaninov.

In the fourth chapter, I present an early work of Rachmaninov, the Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op. 3, in which the very first application of this *sequentia frequentissima* formula can be heard.

In the fifth chapter, I present the relentless rise of *Dies irae* sequentia, now consciously and repeatedly symbolizing fatalism in Rachmaninov's last work, the Symphonic Dances, examining the applications of the melody, its attitudes and transformations to other themes, and justifying the right to exist of *sequentia frequentissima* indited in the title of the study. The appendix contains the score of the complete third movement of the Symphonic Dances, all the typical appearances and references of the topic analyzed in the dissertation marked with special characters in it for easier understanding of the main text. The third symphonic dance presented in the last chapter is a scene of a specific interlacement of a voice, a faith, a feeling, a fragment of melody, and a genre. One of the key words in the chapters of my dissertation can be added to each of these concepts, such as the sound of bells, the belief in fatalism, the feeling of nostalgia, the melodic fragment of *Dies irae*, and the genre of danse macabre. Rachmaninov fuses these elements with the recollection of his earlier works, and thus with the memories of his life, through the large-scale and complex exploitation of *sequentia frequentissima* and monothematic composition, creating the synthesis of his art.

## **V. Publications and papers related to the topic of the dissertation**

As one of the main motivating factors for writing this dissertation was my intense interest in Rachmaninov's life and work, besides delve into his symphonic and vocal works, as a pianist, I regularly perform his piano and chamber works, which make up an extremely large part of his oeuvre.

In November 2017, at a concert held at the FUGA Cultural Center in Budapest, among othes I performed the complete series of the Etudes-Tableaux op. 33.

At the first Russian Music Festival, which has been held in Hungary annually since 2018, focused on Rachmaninov's art, my chamber music group played a concert for the presentation of Rachmaninov's early chamber works.