

**“A Ghost Wandering in a World Grown Alien”:  
Rachmaninoff and the “Contemporary Problem”**

By Keenan Reesor

Presented at the Symposium “Prokofiev and the Russian Tradition”

February 27, 2016

Louisiana State University

Baton Rouge

Rachmaninoff composed only six original works between his emigration from Russia in late 1917 and his death in 1943. **[SHOW SLIDE 2]** In these works, Rachmaninoff continued to retreat from the idealism of his earlier music, embracing a more sarcastic, taut, and dissonant idiom—a process of subtle but significant stylistic evolution that had begun during his last years in Russia. The emigration works were received enthusiastically in Russia but poorly in the West, with the exception of the Paganini Rhapsody. To Western ears, which were still very much preoccupied by his earlier works, the emigration works strayed just enough to lose their broad appeal but not enough to excite modernists. The latter felt that Rachmaninoff’s music represented, to quote Virgil Thomson, “an avoidance of the contemporary problem.”<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Gilman’s review of the premiere of Rachmaninoff’s Fourth Concerto in 1927 exemplifies these attitudes:

Rachmaninoff the composer represents a curious and touching survival of a vanishing age. . . .

For all its somewhat naïve camouflage of whole-tone scales and occasionally dissonant harmony, Mr. Rachmaninoff’s new concerto . . . remains as essentially nineteenth century as if Tchaikovsky had signed it. . . .

The new work is nether so expressive nor so effective as its famous companion in C minor [i.e., the Second Concerto]. Nor is it as resourceful in development.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Virgil Thomson, foreword to *Rachmaninoff*, by Victor Seroff (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Gilman, “An All-Russian Program by the Philadelphia Orchestra,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 23, 1927.

The emigration works have since survived and garnered aesthetic appreciation, but their historical authenticity remains in question. In this presentation, I will summarize the prevailing scholarly approaches to these works—in the West, for in Russia the situation is very different—and suggest a hermeneutical interpretation by which they might reasonably be regarded both as authentic and as contemporaneous. Although many examples could be summoned to support my thesis, I have selected two works that are amenable to the medium of the lecture-recital: the revised *Mélodie*, op. 3 no. 3, and *Humoresque*, op. 10 no. 5.

Commentators seeking to authenticate the emigration works have generally done so in one of two contradictory ways: by arguing that (1) the works do in fact belong to their time—that they are more stylistically contemporary than has generally been supposed and are by implication authentic reflections of twentieth-century life; or (2), that they in fact belong to an earlier time—that they are authentic but delayed reflections of pre-Revolutionary Russia, and that their stylistic conservatism is thus justifiable.

The first of these lines of reasoning appeared less than a decade after the composer's death, beginning with two articles in a special Rachmaninoff issue of *Tempo* in winter 1951–52. In one of these, “Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Twentieth-Century Composer,” William Flanagan described the Fourth Concerto as “a pivotal work” in which there were, “for Rachmaninoff, *new* tendencies at work: the refinement of the musical texture toward simplicity—in the scoring . . . but even more strikingly in the economy of the piano writing. The result of these inclinations,” continued Flanagan, “. . . is an unquestionably more *contemporary sound*.”<sup>3</sup> The other article, “Progressive Tendencies in Rachmaninoff's Music,” was written by Joseph Yasser, who argued that Rachmaninoff employed a “many-sided use of altered chords, progressions, and bold

---

<sup>3</sup> William Flanagan, “Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Twentieth-Century Composer,” *Tempo*, no. 22 (Winter 1951–52): 6–7.

digressions *within* the limits of a single or, at any rate, long exploited key”—what Yasser termed *intra-tonal chromaticism*. In Rachmaninoff’s emigration works, Yasser continued, “one may observe still greater ingenuity in the use of harmonic means along the line of intra-tonal chromaticism.” These features are apt to be missed, however, because “Rachmaninoff’s chromatic patterns are ideally made here to conform with the laws of natural voice-leading, and by the same method are logically interwoven with the diatonic context.”<sup>4</sup>

Like Yasser, other commentators have invented terminology to describe harmonic features in Rachmaninoff’s music that seem to straddle the divide between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Stephen Walsh described them in 1973 as a *side-step* or *sideslip* technique, which he noted also in the music of Richard Strauss.<sup>5</sup> The most concerted theoretical effort of this type was devised by Blair Johnston in his 2009 dissertation, “Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff.” Johnston invented the term *hyperdissonance* to describe tension resulting from dissonance not between two or more pitches but between two or more “layers of a stratified compound harmonic environment.”<sup>6</sup> Johnston further posited hyperdissonance as a feature of postromanticism evident in works by Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Prokofiev, and in Rachmaninoff’s later works.<sup>7</sup>

Just what all these writers have in mind can be shown rather easily [**SHOW SLIDE 3**]. The eight introductory bars of the Paganini Rhapsody, for example, prolong an implied dominant

---

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Yasser, “Progressive Tendencies in Rachmaninoff’s Music,” *Tempo*, no. 22 (Winter 1951–52): 21.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Walsh, “Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873–1973,” *Tempo* 105 (June, 1973): 18–19.

<sup>6</sup> Blair Johnston, “Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

harmony by means of a linear chromatic progression that occurs simultaneously in several voices, in this case featuring parallel motion, including motion by parallel fifths and sevenths. It is the accumulation and ultimate discharge of chromatic tension that give this phrase its trajectory; the various triadic and non-triadic harmonies produced by the prolongation are incidental and non-functional. The effect of this linear chromatic prolongation is to heighten the harmonic tension of the phrase beyond the capabilities of functional harmonic syntax, a phenomenon that Johnston calls *hyperdissonance of exaggeration*. Of course, Prokofiev, too—the honored subject of this symposium—used parallel dissonant intervals for jarring effect, as for example in the early “Diabolical Suggestions” [SHOW SLIDE 4], but he also used hyperdissonance to create tension arcs like Rachmaninoff, an example of which Johnston draws from the Third Piano Concerto [SHOW SLIDE 5].

To summarize, these writings succeed in illustrating Rachmaninoff’s stylistic kinship with members of his own generation who are considered more modern. Nevertheless, the obvious limitation of these analyses to the emigration works in their historical context is that the works still sound much more like romantic music than interwar neoclassicism, which is of course what Gilman meant with his denigrating comment about the Fourth Concerto’s “somewhat naïve camouflage of whole-tone scales and occasionally dissonant harmony.” According to his own proponents, then, Rachmaninoff’s style must still be considered old-fashioned during his emigration period.

If any kind of contemporaneous authenticity for the emigration works is to be sought, it must be sought somewhere other than in style as usually conceived. The need to adopt more nuanced criteria in evaluating Rachmaninoff’s musical legacy was suggested already in the year of his death, in Olin Downes’s obituary for the composer in the *New York Times*. “We are

becoming,” he wrote, “temporarily if no longer, aware that it is not idiom or style that makes a composition important, but things which are harder to establish or analyze, things having in the first place to do with inner probity and invention, and secondly with the artist’s determination to become a past master of the tools of his trade.”<sup>8</sup>

The second of the aforementioned approaches to Rachmaninoff’s emigration works exemplifies this perspective by portraying the emigration works variously as delayed realizations of ideas conceived in Russia or as “reminiscences,” “memories,”<sup>9</sup> or “backward glances at a vanished world.”<sup>10</sup> Barrie Martyn, for example, in his well-known 1990 biography of the composer, described the emigration period in a rather apologetic tone. “His final period as a composer is marked by only six major works,” wrote Martyn. “The first two, the Fourth Concerto and the Three Russian Songs, seem to be realizations of ideas already conceived, if not actually sketched out, in Russia; and although the Corelli Variations and *Paganini Rhapsody* were entirely new creations, the two final compositions, the Third Symphony and the *Symphonic Dances*, in the nature of their musical material again look back across the years to a homeland out of reach, to a Russia that had already ceased to exist even before Rachmaninoff’s departure.”<sup>11</sup> This is also the basic premise of Dorothea Redepenning’s 1995 article on the emigration works, which in turn influenced Christoph Flamm’s article on Rachmaninoff in the

---

<sup>8</sup> Olin Downes, “A Romantic Passes,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothea Redepenning, “‘. . . das undurchdringliche Schweigen erstarrter Erinnerungen . . . ? Anmerkungen zu Sergej Rachmaninovs Werken der Emigration’ [ . . . the unbreakable silence of his memories . . . ? : Notes on Rachmaninoff’s emigration works], *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 13 (1995): 253–69.

<sup>10</sup> Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, 291.

second edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, which appeared in 2005: “This music has come into being about a quarter century too late,” wrote Flamm, “but it is aware of this fact; it justifies itself as a synthesis, as a sum of trodden and untrodden paths.”<sup>12</sup>

This perspective is a perfect complement to the first. It has the documentary advantage of Rachmaninoff’s well-known nostalgia for Russia in his emigration, but it does not adequately consider the implications of the changes to Rachmaninoff’s style in the emigration works. If the idiom exhibited no change, then Rachmaninoff’s emigration period could simply be regarded like Balakirev’s last period of activity, occupied primarily with the completion of works begun decades earlier. But they do exhibit change, and that change demands explanation.

To my knowledge, only one writer, Charles Fisk, has suggested a solution to this conceptual impasse concerning the emigration works. In his article “Nineteenth-century Music? The Case of Rachmaninov,” Fisk pursues the objective of the first group by pointing to progressive features of Rachmaninoff’s music, and he is content to conclude that Rachmaninoff belongs in the twentieth century. We have already observed the limitations of this approach for the emigration works. But one of Fisk’s subsidiary points suggests in passing an unexpected link between the two approaches. According to Fisk, it is the *juxtaposition* of progressive features in the emigration works with lyrical elements retained from Rachmaninoff’s earlier style that suggests loss. “It is as if Rachmaninov is revisiting in them not only a lost time and place, or a lost love,” writes Fisk of the Paganini Rhapsody and Symphonic Dances, “but—more

---

<sup>12</sup> “Diese Musik ist etwa ein Vierteljahrhundert zu spät entstanden, weiß aber um diesen Umstand; sie begründet sich als Synthese, als Summe beschrifteter und unbeschrifteter Wege.” *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd ed., ed. Ludwig Finscher, 27 vols. (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter, 1994–2007), s.v. “Rachmaninov.”

concretely—a lost musical style: the style of his early published songs and of the enormously popular Second Piano Concerto and Second Symphony.”<sup>13</sup>

I would simply like to suggest here that the historical authenticity and contemporaneity of Rachmaninoff’s emigration works lies in the reorientation and extension of Fisk’s thesis. First, the significance of the progressive features of Rachmaninoff’s emigration works is not that they make him stylistically modern (which they don’t) but that they are the means by which these works suggest Rachmaninoff’s loss. Second, while I consider their suggestion of loss to supply the basis for their authenticity, their contemporaneity lies not in this loss per se but *in its effect* on Rachmaninoff and his music. That effect is alienation, a quintessential aspect of modernity. “I feel,” Rachmaninoff wrote in 1939, “like a ghost wandering in a world grown *alien* [emphasis mine].”<sup>14</sup> That Rachmaninoff should partake of modern disenchantment in this manner should hardly be surprising: two world wars and the Bolshevik Revolution had brought the defining turmoil of the twentieth century to his doorstep.

Rachmaninoff’s revised *Mélodie* and *Humoresque*, which I will now play for you, exemplify the subtle but deeply significant change in Rachmaninoff’s style during emigration and its alienating effect. He wrote them at the very beginning of his career and revised them at its very end—in 1940, during World War II, after he had lost his home to conflict for the second time. The *Mélodie* features but one brief instance of mild hyperdissonance, as always suavely integrated into its contrapuntal context [**SHOW SLIDES 6–7**]. The *Humoresque* features more alteration, as previously lucid triadic harmonies become interlaced with linear chromatic

---

<sup>13</sup> Charles Fisk, “Nineteenth-century Music? The Case of Rachmaninov,” *19th-Century Music* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 251–52.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Leonard Liebling, “Variations,” *Musical Courier* 127, no. 7 (April 5, 1943): 17.

progressions that obscure their harmonic function and once again produce angular parallel intervals [**SHOW SLIDES 8–12**]. These changes may seem nothing more than a “somewhat naïve camouflage”—but, in my view, their alienating effect constitutes Rachmaninoff’s genuine engagement with what Thomson termed “the contemporary problem.” Thank you [**SHOW SLIDE 13**].

# “A Ghost Wandering in a World Grown Alien”: Rachmaninoff and the “Contemporary Problem”

A Lecture-Recital  
By Keenan Reesor

Symposium “Prokofiev and the Russian Tradition”  
Saturday, February 27, 2016  
Louisiana State University

1

## Rachmaninoff’s Emigration Works

- Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Minor, op. 40 (1927, rev. 1941)
- Three Russian Songs, op. 41 (1927)
- Variations for piano, op. 42 (*Corelli*; 1931)
- Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, op. 43 (1934)
- Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, op. 44 (1936)
- Symphonic Dances, op. 45 (1940)

2

INTRODUCTION  
Allegro vivace

S. RACHMANINOFF  
Op. 43

Piano I

Piano II

*gsta bassa*

VAR. I (Precedente)

Rachmaninoff, Paganini Rhapsody, Introduction

3

Prokofiev, "Diabolical Suggestions"

4

This musical score is for the second movement of Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto. It features a piano part on the left and string parts on the right. The piano part includes a section marked '8' and another section marked 'Fiati' with dynamics *f* and *p*. The string parts are labeled 'Violini' and 'Ottone'.

Prokofiev, Third Piano Concerto, II

This musical score is for Rachmaninoff's 'Mélodie' (1892). It is a single piano part. The score includes several sections with triplets and a section marked 'cresc.'.

Rachmaninoff, Mélodie (1892)

*Più mosso*

*Animato*

Rachmaninoff, Mélodie (1940)

*pp leggiero*

*pp leggiero*

Rachmaninoff, Humoresque, Opening

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the 'Transition' section of Rachmaninoff's Humoresque. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic marking. The second system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. A red vertical box highlights the first measure of both systems, which contains a complex chordal texture with multiple notes in both hands.

Rachmaninoff, Humoresque, Transition

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the 'Main Theme' of Rachmaninoff's Humoresque. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic marking. The second system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. Two red vertical boxes highlight specific measures in both systems, showing the melodic and harmonic development of the theme.

Rachmaninoff, Humoresque, Main Theme

*fff con fuoco*

8

Rachmaninoff, Humoresque, Climax (1894)

8

*ff*

8

Rachmaninoff, Humoresque, Climax (1940)

**Thank you!**

**Keenan Reesor**

**reesor@usc.edu**