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SERGEI RACHMANINOFF'S *PIANO CONCERTO NO. 4, OP. 40:* IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARC SHAPE IN THE FORMAL STRUCTURE AND IN RACHMANINOFF'S INTERPRETATIVE CONCEPTION

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SUMMARY. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the relation between the elaboration of form within the compositional process and its implications in the interpretative act. I have chosen to discuss Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Concerto No. 4 in G minor Op. 40* for piano and orchestra, one of his most significant late works, given the evolution of his musical language. For the performance analysis I relied on Rachmaninoff's own recording of this work. I have particularly focused on the importance of the arc shape (prominent feature and major Tchaikovskian heritage in Rachmaninoff's work), an organising principle which impresses not only the dynamic and metric physiognomy of the work, but also the musical thought of the performer.

Keywords: Sergei Rachmaninoff, performance practice, arch shape, tempo, formal structure.

"Rachmaninoff brought as much art to the performance of his own works…as was brought to their creation"[2]

Introduction

Rachmaninoff remains up to the present day a controversial musical figure. He has his detractors and his defenders and fortunately the present tendency is towards the acknowledgement of the subtlety, refinement and complexity of his musical language. In characterising Rachmaninoff, Barrie Martyn describes him as standing "Janus-like between the old Russia and the new, looking back to the flowering of Russian nineteenth century 'classical'

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[2] Abram Chasins, *Speaking of Pianists,* Alfred A, Knopf Inc., New York, 1957, 45.

music as also ahead to the first generation of Soviet Composers".[3] But Rachmaninoff was not only a composer; he was also one of the most important pianists of the twentieth century. In this article I wish to show how his well-structured musical thinking governs both his compositional technique and his performance style.

The arc shape is a prominent feature of Rachmaninoff's musical language. It manifests itself in several dimensions such as harmonic organisation, melodic contour or form. It is also a key principle of his interpretative style. Despite the substantial evolution of his compositional technique and the adventurous spirit of his mature works, Rachmaninoff the performer remained deeply attached to this concept, which represents his Tchaikovskian heritage. In the present article, I shall describe how his performance of *Concerto No. 4 Op. 40* is very eloquent in this respect.

Concerto No. 4 is the first work Rachmaninoff composed in America, in 1926. His flourishing career as a concert pianist on the New Continent had kept him away from composition for nine years, which is a huge lapse of time for someone like Rachmaninoff, who had been very prolific during his Russian years. The original version, dated "January-25 August [1926] New York – Dresden", was finally found unsatisfying by the composer, primarily because of its length. It was only in 1941 that he completed his second and final revision of the work, the only version he ever recorded. This concerto was very badly received during the composer's lifetime, and for this reason Rachmaninoff only performed it nineteen times, which is very little compared to the ca. 150 performances of *Concerto No. 2*.

However, the value of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 4* can't be dismissed on account of its bad reviews. One mustn't forget that other great composers of the 20th century have encountered difficulties regarding the reception of their work. In this particular case, there was an obvious clash between the nature of this piece and the public's expectations. One might say that Rachmaninoff suffered from his own success. The lyrical hero of *Concertos No. 2* and *No. 3* had suddenly transformed into a more modern and abstract character, who simply didn't fit the bill. His musical language had changed in various respects. While still attached to the Romantic aesthetic of the arc shape, Rachmaninoff managed to forge himself an entirely original style, which is more visionary and daring than it is generally recognized. His piano writing shows a new perception of the instrument, which, along with its lyrical attributes, gains in modernity through new percussive effects, greater dynamic contrast and greater rhythmic complexity. His

[3] Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff. Composer, Pianist, Conductor*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, England, 1990, 3.

increasing interest in orchestral colours and timbre becomes evident and it is worth noting that several passages of the very successful *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini Op. 43* are anticipated in *Concerto No. 4.* The composer's harmonic syntax also undergoes important changes, becoming an original fusion between functional tonal organisation and musical "Impressionism" (modal structures and equal interval structures), occasionally tinted by elements of jazz influence.[4]

Rachmaninoff recorded *Concerto No. 4* for Victor RCA on the 20th of December 1941, in company of the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy.[5] Although Rachmaninoff was a partisan of the gramophone record as means of perpetration of an artistic model, he was very uncomfortable and nervous in the studio and adjustments were always made for him, so he would feel more at ease. A true perfectionist, he was extremely demanding and he didn't hesitate to impose numerous takes before being entirely satisfied with the performance. However, he was less severe when it came to orchestral recordings, as he was perfectly aware of the costs and the time limitations that such enterprises implied. We can only assume that in the case of *Concerto No. 4* his exigencies were met at closest, as he had already performed this work with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Ormandy five times prior to the recording.

Recently there has been an increasing interest in this concerto amongst the acknowledged virtuosos. The purpose of this study is to provide insight that may encourage more performers to approach this fascinating work. Rachmaninoff's own interpretation shouldn't be regarded as an ideal to be copied, but as one of the keys to a better understanding of his musical logic. In the first part of the article I shall take into consideration the existing literature on Rachmaninoff's interpretative style. Part 2 is dedicated to a brief description of the arc shape and its manifestation on several levels in the formal design of *Concerto No. 4*. In part 3 I shall analyse tempo, dynamics and phrasing in Rachmaninoff's performance, with punctual references to Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli's recording of *Concerto No. 4* for comparison.[6]

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[4] For extended information about Rachmaninoff's compositional development and on his American or "exile" period please consult Yasser 1951–52, Cunningham 1999, Carruthers 2006, Fisk 2008, and Johnston 2009.

[5] For the performance analysis in this article I used the 1994 remastering. Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 4*. Sergei Rachmaninoff. Philadelphia Orchestra. Eugene Ormandy. Recorded in 1941. RCA Victor Gold Seal 09026-61658-2, 1994.

[6] I have chosen this particular performance not only because it has become a valuable reference, but also because it is relatively close in time to Rachmaninoff's recording, and therefore reflects a perception not yet affected by a significant change in general musical taste or fashion. Michelangeli recorded *Concerto No. 4* in 1957.

1. Literature review

Since the 1980s, the studies on Rachmaninoff's piano music have become numerous, especially amongst pianist scholars. However, readings of his interpretative style still lack, although such an enterprise could lead to valuable results for performers. Apart from the brief, general considerations which appear in the major biographical works (Barrie Martyn, Max Harrison, Geoffrey Norris…), there are few in-depth analyses of Rachmaninoff's recordings. Needless to say, that *Concerto No. 4* has been completely left in the shadow. The few studies that concentrate on Rachmaninoff's performances are thesis dissertations, but only one of them takes this work into consideration. It is Jay Hershberger's research,[7] which is dedicated to the integrality of the piano/orchestra recordings. Hershberger establishes the central feature of Rachmaninoff's interpretative style as being "clear and consistent communication of the overall melodic and formal structures".[8] In the opening he talks about Rachmaninoff's musical education and his training as a pianist, and about the existing Rachmaninoff archives. When treating *Concerto No. 4,* he firstly lists its reviews and critics and he evokes Rachmaninoff's attachment to the notion of culminating point. He chooses to identify brief relevant examples for tempo relationships, agogics, phrasing, voicing, articulations and dynamics. All these examples remain rather succinct and unrelated and in general he only touches on various topics without treating them in-depth. He nevertheless underlines the importance of both the notion of culminating point and the tempo relationships in Rachmaninoff's performance of *Concerto No. 4*, the two ideas that I shall develop in this article.

A very valuable, complete and pertinent research is Yuanpu Chiao's Ph.D. dissertation[9] on the changing style of playing Rachmaninoff's piano music. Although this extensive work analyses the interpretation of several great pianist of the 20th century, Chapter 3 is dedicated to an analysis of Rachmaninoff's own performing style. Chiao points out a very important fact. Rachmaninoff "displayed slightly different interpretative attitudes to his own works compared to works by other composers".[10] He approached other composer's works very subjectively, while as a composer-pianist, "Rachmaninoff was comparatively faithful to his own scores, and his interpretations were

[7] Jay Alan Hershberger, *Rachmaninoff on Rachmaninoff: An Interpretative Analysis of his Piano/Orchestra Recordings*, D.M.A diss., Arizona State University, 1995.
[8] Ibid., iii.
[9] Yuanpu Chiao, *The Changing Style of Playing Rachmaninoff's Piano Music*, Ph.D. diss., King's College London, 2012.
[10] Ibid., 139.

more objective".[11] This aspect is important as I shall further demonstrate his faithfulness to his own text in his performance of *Concerto No.4*. Chiao renders a concise yet complete characterisation of Rachmaninoff's performance style, clearly identifying elements of Russian school tradition and elements of personal identity, with precious specifications on his unique rubato and his "big singing and phrasing style".[12]

Natalya Lundvedt's[13] doctoral dissertation focuses on Rachmaninoff's *Concerto No. 2*, and comprises a second part that is dedicated to Rachmaninoff's own performance of the work. Although Lundvedt identifies certain key aspects in Rachmaninoff's performance, her explanations often lack theoretical insight. It is worth noting that she stresses the importance of tempo as a structuring tool, and the role of that which she calls the "sensuous arc"[14] in Rachmaninoff's phrasing.

Finally, Ruby Cheng[15] analyses Rachmaninoff's recording of *Concerto No. 3*. Cheng characterises this interpretation as an oscillation between two "polar opposite aesthetic approaches: strict versus free"[16]. In fact, in this case the term is not properly chosen, as what she describes as an aesthetic approach is rather an attitude, determined by the intrinsic logic of the musical content. The listing of several miscellaneous interpretative choices lacks a unifying stroke which would lead to a better understanding of Rachmaninoff's conception. Regardless of these observations, Cheng's dissertation is a pioneering work and it "offers prospective performers of this great work more concrete guidance than mere accolades"[17].

2. The arc shape and its manifestations in the formal design of *Concerto No. 4*

In introducing the arc shape, I would like to refer to Leonard Ratner's *Classic Music*. *Expression, Form and Style.* In this work, he invokes the two possible divisions of the sonata form. Firstly, a two-part division which "arises

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 141.

[13] Natalya Lundvedt, *Rachmaninoff and Russian Pianism: Performance issues in the Piano Concerto in C minor, Op. 18*, D.M.A. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2009.

[14] Ibid., 54.

[15] Ruby Cheng, *Rachmaninoff the Composer-Pianist: Aspects of Pianism in His Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor*, D.M.A. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2009.

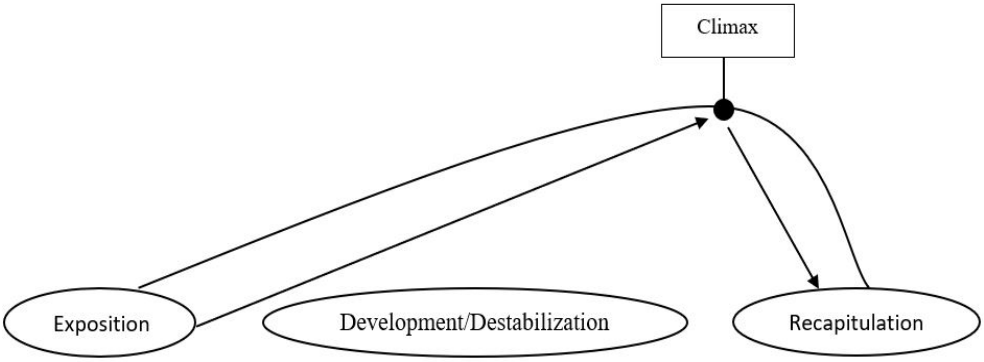
[16] Ibid., 51.

[17] Ibid., 74.

from its harmonic contour"[18] and which is characterised by motion (motion away from the tonic, attainment of the "point of furthest remove", and then motion towards the tonic). In his view, when considering motion, "the principal object of the development…is to *regain* the tonic."[19] Secondly, a static three-part division which "rests upon thematic layout"[20]. In figure 1, I present a generalised arc shape derived from Ratner's ideas on the sonata form, which may be applied in many other musical contexts.

The arc shape is intimately linked to the notion of climax. Climax is generated by the convergence of the multiple layers that have an effect on the musical material. These layers are at the same time linked to the harmonic complex and to the thematic design. In this study, I shall focus on the thematic aspect and show how the arc shape emerges from the appearance and the transformation of the thematic material, and how Rachmaninoff's performance reveals this arc shape.

E.g. 1



Generalised arc shape

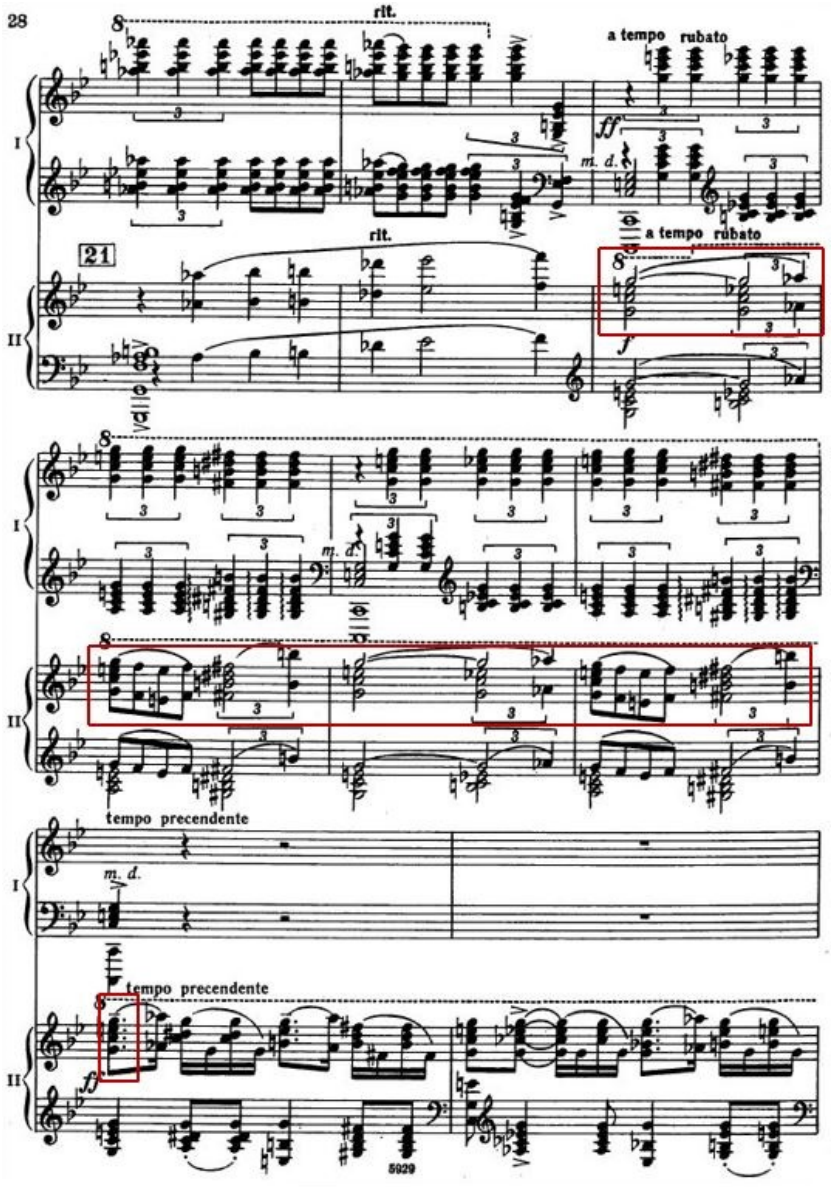
[18] Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music. Expression, Form and Style*, Schirmer Books, New York, 1980, 220.
[19] Ibid, 225.
[20] Ibid.

Recent research led by Blair Allen Johnston demonstrates that "Rachmaninoff's works are climax-centric. Form is organized around climax events to a degree matched perhaps only in the works of Mahler".[21] Johnston points out the subtle difference between climax and point of culmination: climax is "a series of stages of gradually increasing intensity"[22], while the "point" is the "expressive focus in a work"[23], whether it be the loudest or the softest moment. However, the two notions may overlap, and the Oxford English Dictionary defines "climax" in its general sense as "the most intense, exciting, or important point of something; the culmination".

Despite the "progressive tendencies"[24] in *Concerto No. 4*, the formal designs of the two rapid movements follow arc patterns. Furthermore, Rachmaninoff seeks to unify the whole work, firstly through the tempo scheme – *Allegro vivace-Largo-Allegro vivace* – and secondly by quoting passages from the first movement in the third movement. The most important quotation is of course the culminating point, which in this case coincides with the climax, in the rhetoric sense described by Johnston. In the following excerpts, I have outlined the orchestral thematic material, which only appears in these two precise moments.

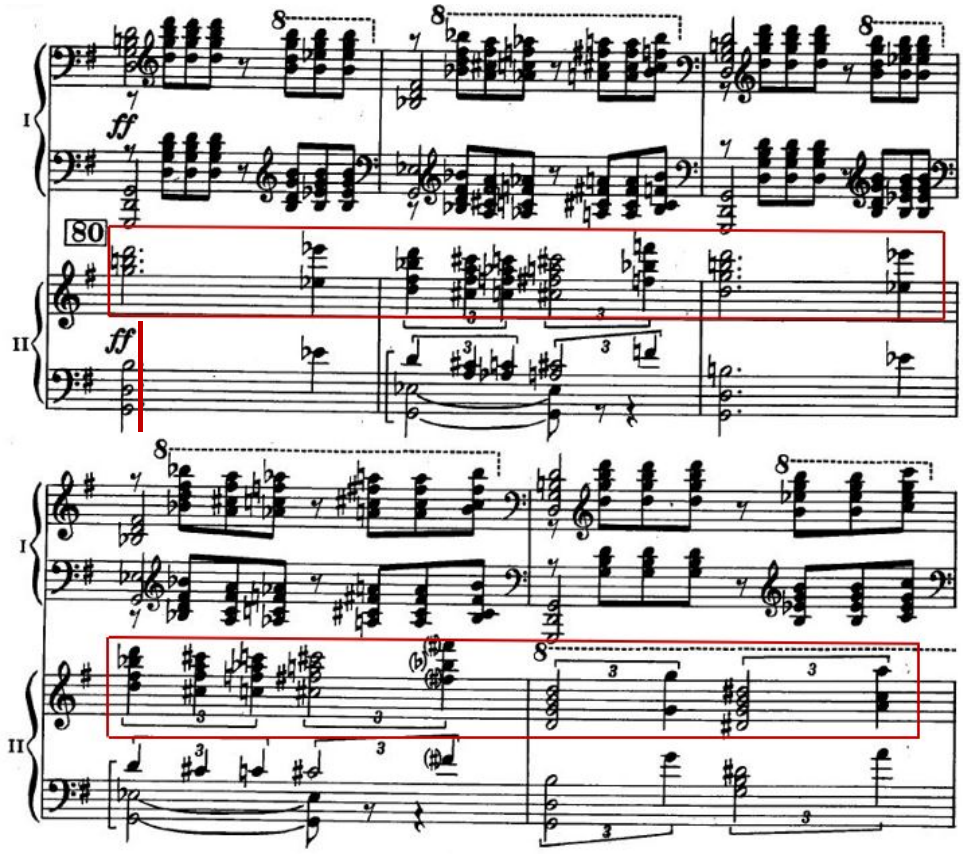
[21] Blair Allen Johnston, *Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff*, Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2009, 22.
[22] Ibid., 24.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Joseph Yasser, "Progressive Tendencies in Rachmaninoff's Music", *Tempo*, New Series, No. 22, Rachmaninoff Number (Winter, 1951-1952).

E.g. 2.1



Culminating point in first movement (two piano transcription)

E.g. 2.2



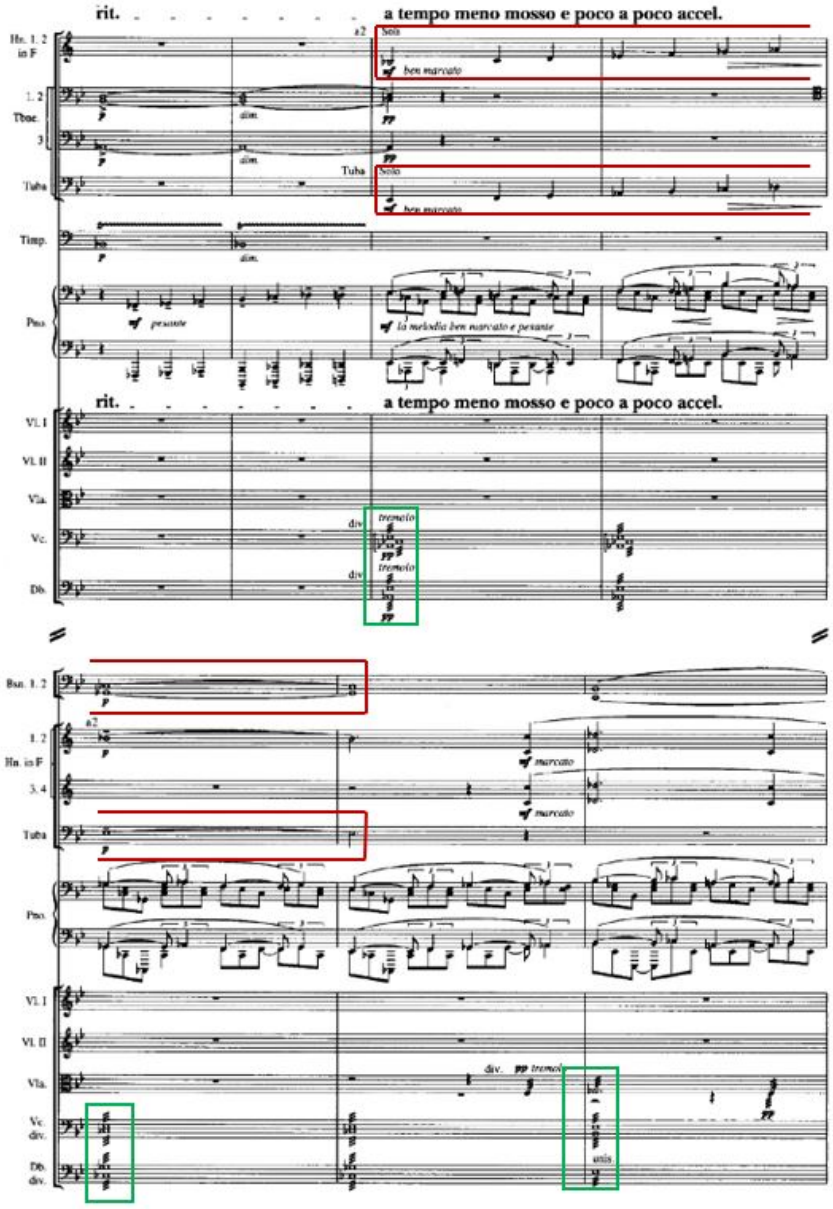
Quotation in third movement (two piano transcription)

I shall continue by pointing out some of the most important formal characteristic of the first *Allegro vivace*, as it is one of the clearest illustrations of a large-scale arc shape within this work. Before resuming this idea, I wish to clarify the terms "arc shape" and "arch form", in order to prevent any possible confusion. I have used the term "arc shape" to define a generalised design based on the departure-return principle, where the tension build-up towards the climax spans over a longer space of time than the release. The arch form on the other hand is a ternary form, which, according to the Oxford Companion to Music, may be extended "to create a larger 'arch'…ABCBA, where the first two sections are repeated in reverse order after the contrasting middle section, thereby creating mirror symmetry".

In *Concerto No. 4*, the form of the first movement is a "sonata arch" - a fusion between a sonata form with reverse recapitulation[25] and an arch form. Its particularity is that in the development section none of the two themes from the exposition are recognisable, apart from one very brief primary theme incipit played by the piano in mm.186-9. This is due to the way in which thematic material is transformed harmonically, melodically, rhythmically, and through orchestration and instrumental writing. Figure 3 illustrates such an example. The ascending melodic trait derived from the primary theme, played by the horns and tuba at the beginning of the development, is now based on a tertian root movement and is overshadowed by the piano's counterpoint. The development appears therefore as a section based on new material, hence justifying the association with the extended arch form. The climax is located at the end of the development section and in terms of proportions it not only fits the arc shape, but it corresponds to the golden section of the movement. In the light of this we come to realise the importance of this type of structure for Rachmaninoff, and his own performance renders it even clearer. Figure 4.1 shows the movement's formal structure and its proportions calculated according to the number of measures corresponding to each section. In figure 4.2 the same sections are described according to their duration in Rachmaninoff's performance. The comparison between the two graphs is very relevant. Bearing in mind that in the exposition the secondary theme lasts longer because its tempo marking is slower than that of the primary theme, we can still conclude that Rachmaninoff's choices of tempo enhance the aural perception of the arc shape. I shall come back to this essential idea, which I shall develop in part 4.

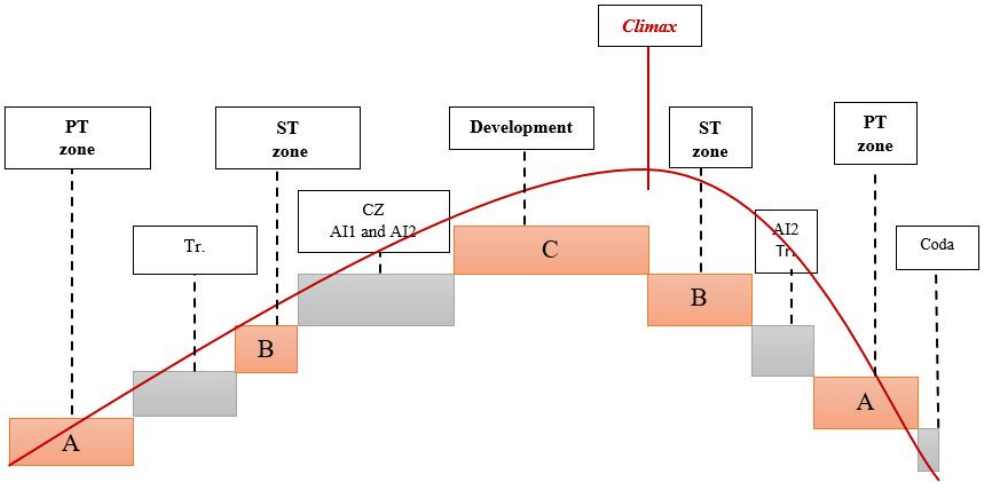
[25] James A. Hepokoski - Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.

E.g. 3



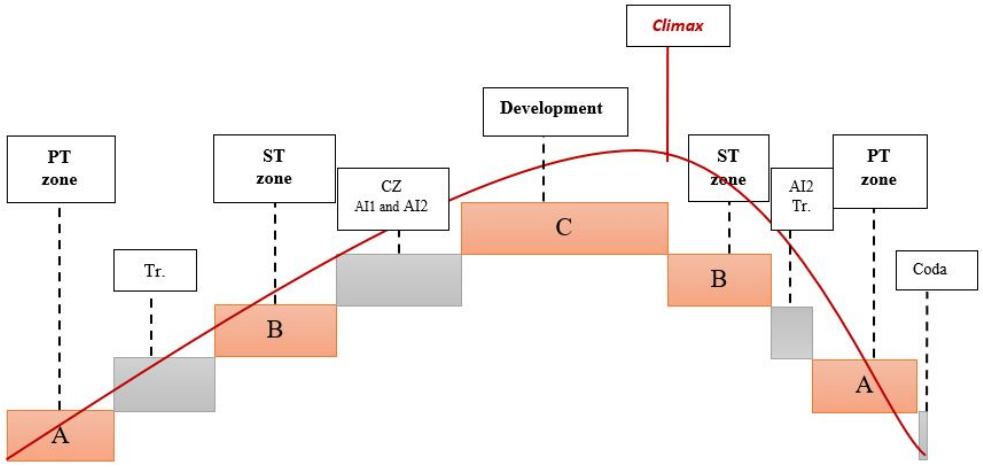
Material from the primary theme in the beginning of the development section, mm. 145-151.

E.g. 4.1



Arc shaped formal structure of the first movement
PT = primary theme; ST = secondary theme; Tr. = transition
CZ = closing zone; AI = accessory ideas

E.g. 4.2



Arc shape and formal sections calculated in terms of duration in Rachmaninoff's performance

3. A selection of stylistic elements in Rachmaninoff's performance

3.1 Tempo and the arc shape in the first movement

I shall begin my brief performance analysis by referring to Rachmaninoff's choice of tempi in the first movement of *Concerto No. 4*, in relation to what I have pointed out earlier. His entire strategy confirms and even reinforces the arc shape of the formal design. First thing to note is that there are no less than 23 tempo changes in the musical text. In the table below, I have listed the most important indications of tempo and their location within the formal structure.

E.g. 5

Tempo marking	Measure number	Section	
Allegro vivace (Alla breve)	1	Primary theme zone; transition	Exposition
Moderato (4/4)	77	Secondary theme zone	
Allegro assai	94	Accessory idea 1	
Allegro	104	Accessory idea 1	
Tempo come prima (Alla breve)	113	Accessory idea 2	
Tempo meno mosso e poco a poco accel	145	Development	
Agitato sempre accelerando	163	Development	
Allegro vivace	186	Development	Reverse recapitulation
Poco meno mosso	210	Secondary theme zone; Accessory idea 2/ transition	
Tranquillo	284	Primary theme zone	
Allegro vivace	308	Coda	

Main indications of tempo in the first movement

Rachmaninoff's performance accurately reflects the score. However, there are two exceptions, justified by strategic choices. The first one is the interpretation of the secondary theme in the exposition, where for purposes of phrasing and expression he introduces considerable agogics which are not marked in the score. For example, he plays the intensely chromatic triplet motif at mm. 79-81 and mm. 84-6 very *rubato*, and at mm. 91-2 he slows down quite dramatically, to enhance the *pp dolce*. The second exception is the development, where he overlooks the *sempre accelerando* and the *allegro vivace*, keeping a steady tempo up to the culminating point, mm. 163-95. This could be explained by his preoccupation with structural unity and the means of rendering it clear to the listener. Figure 6 depicts tempo and its fluctuations throughout Rachmaninoff's performance of the first movement.

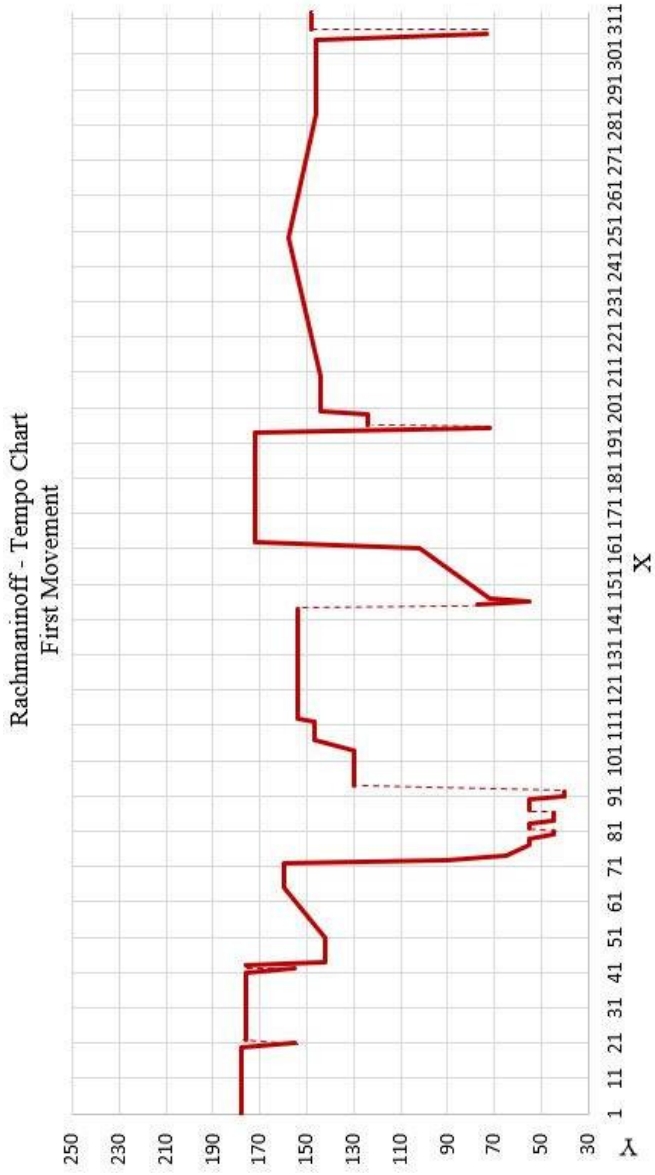
As the chart indicates, in the exposition Rachmaninoff creates a very large contrast between the primary theme and the secondary theme, to such an extent that they become in fact the two extremes of this movement. As I already mentioned, in the development section, instead of gradually accelerating towards the climax, he maintains a constant tempo, at 172 bpm/quarter note. This means that in the actual performance he dissociates the tension build-up from the temporal acceleration.

What happens after the climax is particularly relevant for this demonstration. *Poco meno mosso* and *tranquillo*, the two indications in the recapitulation, are relative terms and therefore it is the performer's role to choose the most suitable tempo. Rachmaninoff unifies all the thematic elements of the reverse recapitulation by playing the whole section at the same speed. He chooses a pulse that shifts between 144 and 158 bpm/quarter note – close to the tempo of the primary theme in the exposition but very far from the pulse of the first occurrence of the secondary theme, which in the exposition was situated at 55 bpm/quarter note. Therefore, he not only blurs the contrast between the two themes but he also creates an effect of time compression in this final section, in which the thematic material has already been condensed in the score. This conception is evidently marked by the arc shape and its climax-related proportions.

I shall now compare Rachmaninoff's version with that of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, whose interpretation of *Concerto No. 4* has become reference.[26] Figure 7 reveals a different approach in terms of tempo.

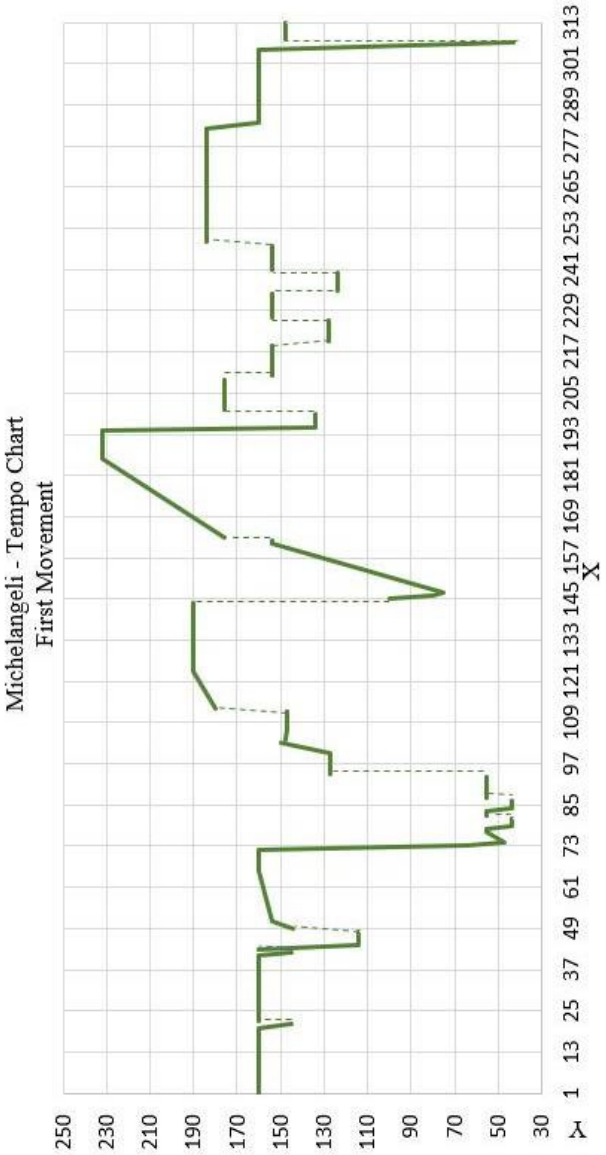
[26] Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40*. Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. Philharmonia Orchestra. Ettore Gracis. Recorded in 1957. Warner Classics 0724356723825, 2015.

E.g. 6



Tempo chart of Rachmaninoff's performance – First movement
X= Measure numbers; Y= Metronome markings

E.g. 7



Tempo chart of Michelangeli's performance – First movement
X= Measure numbers; Y= Metronome markings

Rachmaninoff achieves global unity through tempo as there is little difference in his performance between *Allegro vivace, Allegro assai* and *Allegro*. He places all three markings in a range between 148 to 178 bpm/quarter note. On the other hand, Michelangeli's *allegro*s span from 148 to 232 bpm/quarter note, amplitude justified by a different understanding of the formal design. Following the composer's *accelerando* indication in the development, Michelangeli produces an important speed progression throughout the tension build-up towards the climax, and he reaches the highest velocity point just before the culmination.

Furthermore, Michelangeli favours sudden transitions from one tempo to another, whereas Rachmaninoff more often introduces new tempos gradually, trough *accelerando* or *rallentando.* Such an example is the transition between the two themes in the exposition. Rachmaninoff increases the tempo gradually from 130 to 154 bpm/quarter note, whereas Michelangeli abruptly leaps from 114 to 144 bpm/quarter note at measure 49.

The following remark is very important as it shows, by contrast, to what extent the arc shape is inherent to Rachmaninoff's performing style. In the recapitulation, Rachmaninoff dismisses the initial contrast between the two themes, whereas Michelangeli seeks to preserve it. At each occurrence of the secondary theme, first played by solo flute and then by solo oboe (mm. 220-7 and mm. 235-41), even though the score doesn't show any indication, the tempo suddenly decreases in Michelangeli's version, thereby reinstating the dreamy character of this theme.

We can conclude by saying that the two interpretative approaches seek to outline different formal characteristics. For Rachmaninoff, there are three essential elements. Firstly, there is the essence of the sonata form – the two contrasting themes. He uses tempo to enhance the contrast between them in the exposition – the majestic primary theme holds the highest tempo of the movement, while the dreamy secondary theme has the slowest tempo. Secondly, there is the arc shape with its long tension increase, powerful climax and rapid tension release. He chooses to emphasize this shape not by exaggerating the climax but by accelerating the tension release, which in this case is the reverse recapitulation, as I have explained above. Thirdly, there is the tendency towards global unity of the surface level. As figure 6 clearly illustrates, he uses a certain evenness of the high tempi as a main tool to obtain this unity.

Michelangeli's performance reflects a different perspective. Michelangeli is attached to the importance of each constituent element of the sonata form. Firstly, he balances the tempos of the two occurrences of the primary theme, in the exposition and in the recapitulation (at 160 bpm/quarter

note). This balance is inexistent in Rachmaninoff's performance. Secondly, in the exposition, Michelangeli clearly marks the contrast between the two themes but less dramatically than Rachmaninoff does. Thirdly, in the recapitulation, he wishes to retrieve the initial and essential contrast between the two themes by slowing down the tempo of the secondary theme, even if the score does not indicate such a thing. Finally, in the development he follows Rachmaninoff's indication to accelerate (which funnily enough the latter ignores in his own performance) and reaches the tempo peak of the movement just before the culminating point. The climax therefore comes to stand out as veritably the highest point of this musical form.

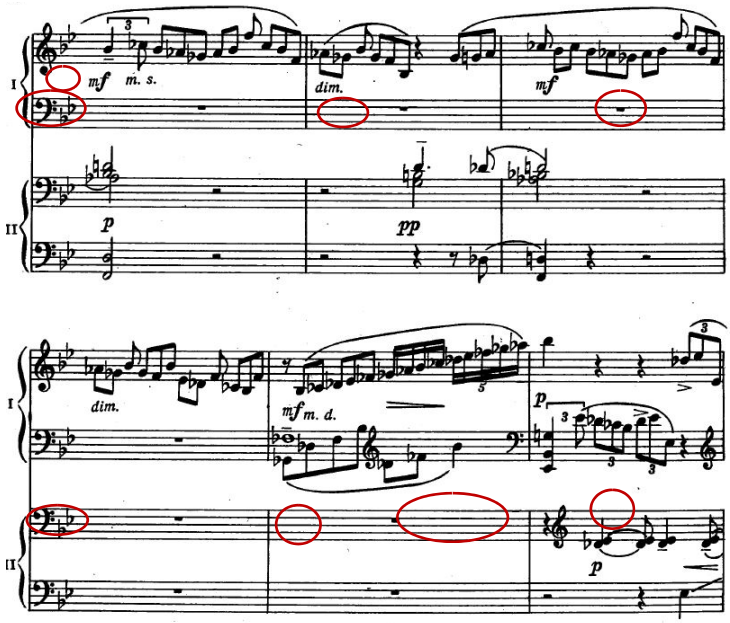
3.2 A few considerations on dynamics and phrasing

Rachmaninoff's compositional conception and his interpretative logic are interpretable. In the first movement of *Concerto No. 4*, Rachmaninoff's arc shape scheme is also emphasised by the general dynamic indication of the recapitulation. This entire section, which corresponds to the tension release of the arc, is to be played *piano*. This is very coherent with what we have noted earlier, the fact that Rachmaninoff finally subordinates this section of the sonata form to the global design of the arc shape. The dynamic indication is yet another tool that serves to erase the contrast between the primary and secondary theme, with the purpose of obtaining a rapid and clear tension release after the climax.

Dynamics and phrasing are strongly linked in Rachmaninoff's music. Rachmaninoff favours two distinct types of phrasing: the goal-directed long breadth phrasing, and the "diminuendo" phrasing – starting a phrase with a full sound (sometimes even an accent on the first note) and progressively fading away towards the end. Certain dynamic indications are intended as phrasing guidelines. For example, in the AI2[27] section of the first movement, Rachmaninoff plays the triplet motifs using his trademark "diminuendo" phrasing. In the score, he marks the phrases with slurs but also with dynamic indications and articulations that clearly point out his intention.

[27] See figure 4.1.

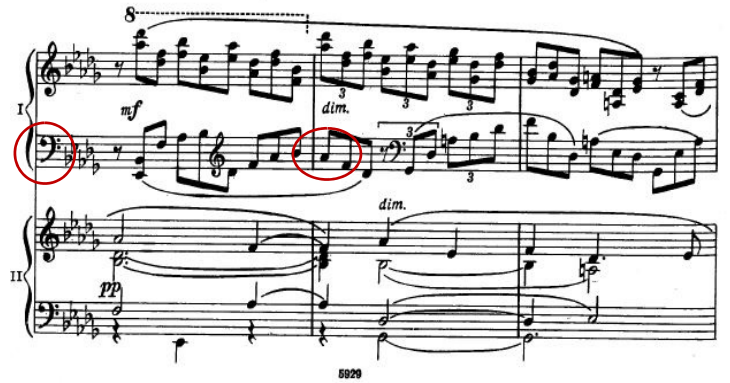
E.g. 8



Dynamic indications and articulations intended as phrasing guidelines
First movement, mm. 128-133.

We encounter the same type of example in the third movement:

E.g. 9

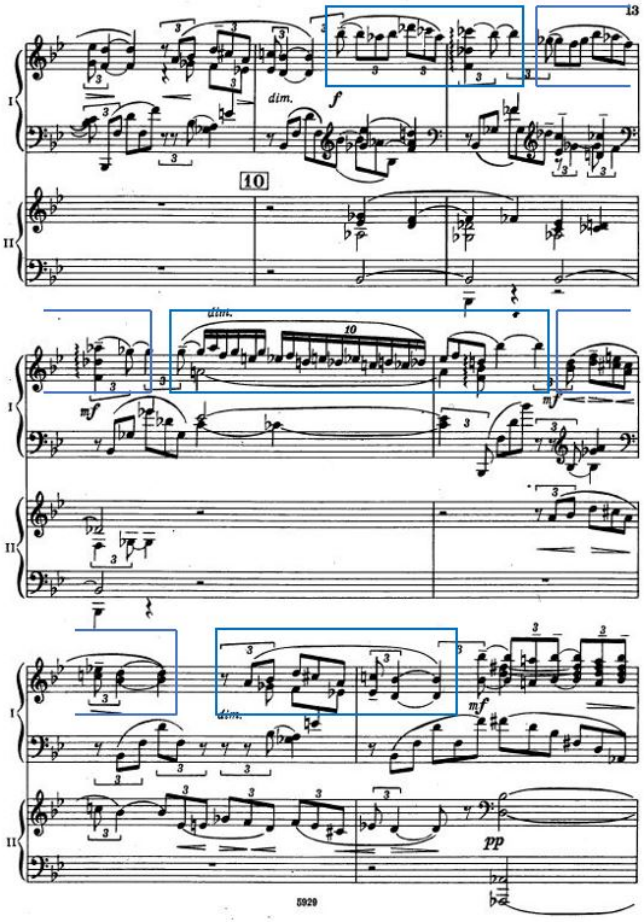


Dynamic indications intended as phrasing guidelines;
third movement mm. 119-121.

It is necessary to mention Rachmaninoff's outstanding long breadth phrasing. One of the qualities that distinguished him from other brilliant pianists was precisely this ability to sustain very long arched phrases, without sacrificing their flexibility. In the third movement for example, the lyrical *cantabile* theme at mm. 128-44 is remarkable in this respect. Between mm. 136 and 144 Rachmaninoff sustains one very long *rubato* phrase, while scrupulously preserving all the smaller arcs of motion within this large phrase, indicated by slurs in the score.

There are also cases when Rachmaninoff combines the two types of phrasing mentioned above. For this reason, the secondary theme, on its first occurrence in the first movement, deserves a close examination.

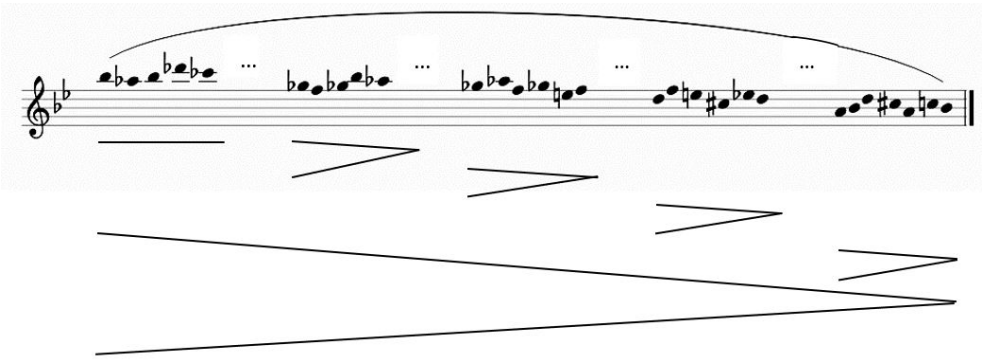
E.g. 10



Phrase in the secondary theme zone, first movement mm.81-6

In figure 10, I have marked with squares the five segments of the phrase that starts on the B*b* syncopation in measure 82. What is so extraordinary about this long melodic line is that although the contour of each one of the five segments is very well traced, this doesn't affect the larger "diminuendo" design of the phrase, to which the segments are subordinated.

E.g. 11



Rachmaninoff's phrasing in mm. 81-6
First movement

The highest point of dynamic intensity and strength of expression is at the very beginning, in the first melodic segment. After this, intensity decreases with each new segment. Rachmaninoff plays the first segment in *forte*, without any dynamic changes. Then, for each of the segments 2 to 5 he applies his signature "diminuendo" phrasing. Figure 11 represents a schematic description of the way Rachmaninoff articulates this phrase. I have noted the incipit of each segment, with the corresponding dynamic scheme, and the outline of the entire large phrase.

3.3. Freedom in the second movement

I have mentioned earlier on that Rachmaninoff's compositional conception and his interpretative logic are interpretable. He has conceived the two rapid movements as elaborate formal designs and therefore his performance of these two movements is well-thought-out and rigorous, with some minor exceptions that I have already pointed out. In the third movement particularly, rhythmicity is one of the main attributes of his interpretation.

The central slow movement on the other hand, is characterised by freedom – of the formal construction and of the performance. It has an improvisational quality which is very contrasting with the two movements flanking it. Its form is fantasy-like, with a large A section based on one theme, a contrasting rhythmical B section, a lyrical C section, a brief reminder of the A theme, and finally the closing D section, with its passionate expressive climax. Rachmaninoff plays this *Largo* like a song which gradually unravels through its own expressivity. He doesn't give any indications of tempo changes or of *rubato*, and yet he plays freely, making extensive use of agogics, rhythmic distortions, *rubato*, *ritenuto* and *rallentando*. We may ask ourselves why didn't he note all this in the score, as he had so scrupulously done in the first movement? The difference is that in the first movement the indications of tempo were intimately linked to the formal construction, whereas here, all the oscillations are purely expressive. In the light of this, we understand the full meaning of his *espressivo* indication in measure 8.

The beginning of the *Largo* is a piano solo introduction which is strikingly influenced by jazz. Rachmaninoff's pianistic approach is reminiscent of the self-taught jazz pianists of his time. His playing seems improvised; he makes use of free rhythm, arpeggiated chords, specific voicing and a very natural, relaxed attack that is typical for jazz pianists. In the A section, the theme itself is not jazzy but it is remarkable through its conciseness. It is made of only three notes: E, D, C. Rachmaninoff the composer makes an impressive display of false simplicity, as each occurrence of the theme implies melodic and harmonic transformations.

E.g. 12

Melodic transformation of the base *x* cell, mm. 8-11

I shall only give a brief example of melodic transformation as the harmonic treatment would need a space that exceeds the present study. In figure 12, I have noted the first occurrence of the theme, measure 8. This first phrase is constituted of repeated transformations of the main melodic cell (E, D, C), which I have named *x.* The transformations are: varied *x* (x^{v}), inverted *x* (x^{i}) and varied *x* with one modification (x^{v1}).

In playing this theme, Rachmaninoff creates a well-contoured, multi-dimensional sound space. He leads the melodic line with a full, rich tone, carefully differentiating the timbre of the other subordinate voices. Voice leading is dictated by harmony, which also determines agogics and *ritenuto*. For the performer, the great difficulty of this simple theme is hidden in the harmonic progressions.

It is interesting to note that in this movement Rachmaninoff also feels free to change certain details of the musical text. In measure 31 he replaces the triplet in the melody of the right hand (D, C, D) with a dotted rhythm (D, C). In measures 44, 45, 46, and 48, on the first beat he plays a dotted rhythm instead of two equal sixteenth notes. In measure 51, in the melody of the right hand he plays D and E instead of D*b* and E*b*, like in the original version of the concerto (1926). Finally, in measure 76 he finishes the trill on the third beat while in the score the trill only ends on the first beat of the following measure. All these minor changes may be related to the general "improvised" mood of this middle movement.

I would like to draw attention upon the fact that the key of this movement is C major, the same key as the culminating point in the first movement. It is important to note that this key reflects Rachmaninoff's plagal-oriented harmonic style, which Anatole Leikin defines as "quintessential"[28]. Following the arc in figure 1, we can note the departure-return principle of the first movement as G-C-G (i-IV-i). There is a correspondence between microstructure and macrostructure, as the tonal scheme of the concerto is also G-C-G. When looking at the whole concerto we can retrace the arc through the large structure. The first movement could be seen as a large-scale, well-structured exposition. The second movement, with its liberty of form and incessant harmonic wonderings, could be the development and the third movement, which resumes several motifs and even extensive passages from the first movement, could be the large-scale recapitulation. Of course, this rests a supposition, but may Rachmaninoff not have conceived things this way, in his constant quest for unity?

[28] Anatole Leikin, "From Paganism to Orthodoxy to Theosophy: Reflections of Other Worlds in the Piano Music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin," in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience,* ed. Siglind Bruhn, Pendragon Press, Hilsdale, New York, 2002.

Conclusive Remarks

This study doesn't aim to formulate conclusions upon Rachmaninoff's performance style or compositional manner. Neither is it a complete analysis of *Concerto No. 4*, or of its performance by Rachmaninoff. Because of the limited scope and subject, I have intentionally chosen to concentrate on formal aspects and their relation to the interpretative design, and I haven't therefore considered harmony, which in his late works is a much more complex matter. I aimed to show how the arc shape was present in micro and macro structures and how it influenced Rachmaninoff's performance of the work. I hope I succeeded in clearly demonstrating that in Rachmaninoff's own interpretation, *Concerto No. 4* is a vivid expression of inward emotion and conception. I shall end by letting Rachmaninoff's own words define these two indispensable attributes.

"Fine playing requires much deep thought away from the keyboard."[29]

"Every individual note in a composition is important, but there is something quite as important as the notes, and that is the soul…The soul is the source of that higher expression in music which cannot be represented by dynamic marks".[30]

"What is this vital spark that brings life to mere notes? […] It is that astonishing thing known as inspiration".[31]

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[29] James Francis Cooke, *Great Pianists on Piano Playing. Study Talks with Foremost Virtuosos*, Theodore Presser Co., Philadelphia, 1913, 219.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 218.

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