Interpreting Rachmaninoff's piano works - advice and insights from the composer

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to inform the understanding and interpretation of Rachmaninoff's piano music, particularly his smaller solo pieces. It does this by drawing together his own words from numerous interviews over decades of his career, and observations from acquaintances. The paper is in three parts. It starts by considering his obsessive secrecy concerning the inspiration, meaning and emotional content of many of his pieces. Rachmaninoff's deep reason for this is identified - with significant implications for interpretation. Next, the paper collates the composer's advice for interpreting his piano compositions - a summary of how to interpret his famous Prelude in C-sharp minor (Op. 3 No. 2) is also provided. Finally, the paper revisits the question of the composer's secrecy and discusses the extent to which it is a liberating factor or an impediment for a prospective interpreter.

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1. Introduction

Any pianist who approaches Rachmaninoff's smaller piano works is presented with a challenge from the outset. He veiled many of them in secrecy - so we don't know what inspired them, what they might represent, and in many cases, whether they were based on programmatic material at all. So, how should a pianist go about interpreting them in a way that remains true to his vision for them? It transpires that Rachmaninoff provided words of advice over many decades. An aim of this paper has been to collate these - from interviews he gave and accounts of acquaintances. By necessity, I have been selective - as a classical pianist, I have focused on his pronouncements that I hope will be of most interest to other musicians.

This paper also considers Rachmaninoff's obsessive secrecy concerning many of his pieces. We know that he often drew upon rich programmatic material and deep feelings when composing (evidence for both is presented later in this paper). So why was secrecy so important to him? Certainly, part of the answer was his desire for people to form their own interpretations of his compositions. However, when his pronouncements are compared over time, we shall see that a deeper explanation emerges - one which raises particular challenges and choices for an interpreter. In fact, Rachmaninoff himself struggled to explain all of this. In an interview in 1934, he remarked that when other pianists studied his works with him, he found it: "*very difficult to convey to the interpreter his own feelings about a work, and the way in which it should … be played*."[1] An aim of this paper is to cut through this difficulty.

The paper concludes by considering whether Rachmaninoff's secrecy is a liberating factor, or an impediment for prospective interpreters at the piano. Here I should declare an interest. Over the past year, I have been researching various Etudes Tableaux.[2] The aim has been to track down their inspiration and subjects from clues in the literature and elsewhere. So far, this has shone a light on five, and has uncovered an overarching programme for his Op. 33. However, the research has increasingly exposed a tension - between his secrecy, and the potential benefits to an interpreter from knowing the hidden information. Resolving this has been a key motivating factor for this paper.

2. Rachmaninoff's smaller piano works and the secrecy surrounding them

We start by considering what he was hiding in his compositions. I will single out three things:

2.1 Three key ingredients

The composer himself

In 1941, just two years before his death, Rachmaninoff made the following comment, presumably looking back at his life and career:

> "*A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books which have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the product of the sum total of a composer's experiences*." [3]

The implication here is that he places himself and his life in his own music. To know the man is to know his music, and vice versa. This desire to put himself in his compositions provided a key motivating factor for him to use so much programmatic material drawn from his personal life.

The primacy of emotion

For Rachmaninoff, the expression of emotion in his compositions was paramount:

> "*I am not an intellectual composer, rather an emotionalist.*"[4]
>
> "*My constant desire to compose music is actually the urge within me to give tonal expression to my feelings…*"[5]
>
> "*What I try to do, in writing down my music, is to make it say simply and directly that which is in my heart… If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become part of my music…*"[6]

He also remarked that the reason Russian music was so great was because it:

> "*… speaks directly to the heart. That is what gives it its vital beauty… .*"[7]

The author's research into his Etudes Tableaux shows that Rachmaninoff did not embed hypothetical emotions into the pieces, but rather his own, very deep feelings. Looking across the original set of six Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux, these relate to his profound love of his homeland (Nos. 2, 6, 7 - using his original numbering), but also his grief and fear for the death and destruction that a deepening civil war would bring (Nos. 8 and 9).[8]

The above quotations suggest that understanding and expressing the emotional dimension in his music should be a key consideration for an interpreter of his music. However, we will see below that this is far from straightforward.

Programme material

This was something which really helped him to compose. In 1909 he said:

> "*A poem, a picture, something of a concrete nature at any rate, helps me immensely*. *There must be something before my mind to convey definite impressions, or the ideas refuse to appear*."[9]

But more than that, the programme material served another purpose. In an interview for Musical America in 1918 he said that a composer *ought* to have a programme in mind:

> "*… a thread of interest on which to string the emotions which he [the composer] seeks to express in the work.*"[10]

However, there was a caveat:

> *"… to put the program ahead of the emotions to be expressed … the results are bound to have a primarily unmusical interest*."

To summarise: Rachmaninoff valued programme material as an aid to stimulate his creativity.[11] For some pieces, his use was extensive - Annex A provides two examples from the Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux. However, the above quotations show that he regarded programmatic material as secondary to the expression of emotions. In the case of his Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux, the visual images depicted certainly evoke vibrant scenes - e.g. the endless Russian *steppe*[12], a spring thunderstorm[13], or the chaos of war[14] - but it is the deep emotions the pieces inspire that were most important to him.

2.2 'Absolute' versus 'programme' music

Having prepared the ground, the reason for Rachmaninoff's obsessive secrecy will now become clear as we consider his very different attitude to two different types of music: so-called 'absolute music' and 'programme music'.

'Absolute music'

For Rachmaninoff, this was music in its purest sense: existing on its own, devoid of anything external - no programme, no overt emotion, no descriptive title - nothing. An example he gave was his famous C# minor Prelude, Op. 3 No. 2.[15] He said that his main impetus for composing the piece was solely to create something "*beautiful and artistic*" - and the need to earn 40 roubles, as an impoverished young musician.

In an interview in 1910, Rachmaninoff gave his views on 'absolute music':

> "*… its primal function is to give intellectual pleasure by the beauty and variety of its form*."[16]

This, he said, was the motivation for Bach in composing his "*wonderful Preludes*". He then commented that these were:

> *"… a source of unending delight to the educated musical listener."*

The reference to Bach is important, since it associates 'absolute music' in Rachmaninoff's mind with music of the highest quality. He remarked in an interview in 1932, that in the hands of a great master, such music could be '*heavenly*'. (The occasion he referred to was when Anton Rubinstein played from Bach's '*Well Tempered Clavier*' in two lectures on Bach - presumably at the Conservatory in St Petersburg).[17]

The expression of beauty in music was particularly important to Rachmaninoff. In the early twentieth century, this was increasingly at odds with contemporary developments. His friend and confidante, Margaret Shaginyan, remarked that at the time, the modernist movement was seeking to eschew beauty and strive for "*other musical effects and outcomes*".[18] This increasingly exposed him to criticism as being somewhat backward-looking.

The absence of a programme and descriptive title for absolute music needs further comment. In the case of the C# minor Prelude, Rachmaninoff avoided giving it a title, although he noted that many editions had invented their own. He commented in 1925:

> "*Had I have given it a descriptive title, …, the imagination would be more or less fettered and the fancy therefore confined to whatever name I chose".*[19]

In 1910, he also noted Chopin's anger when told that the title 'Raindrop Prelude' had been fancifully attached to one of his Preludes.[20] The point Rachmaninoff is making, is that 'absolute music' should be experienced or interpreted in a way that is not constrained - either by an explicit programme or a suggestive title. The audience should be free to imagine any meaning they wished. But equally, a pianist should be free to imagine - and reimagine - any programme to aid his/her interpretation. For example, the celebrated Russian concert pianist Nikolai Lugansky has formed his own mental image of the subject of each of the Etudes Tableaux, and revises these from time to time.[21]

However, there is a substantial caveat for interpreters. Rachmaninoff expressed caution concerning the inherent emotional content of 'absolute music', and how an interpreter should handle this:

> "*The salient beauty will be missed if we try to discover in them the mood of the composer*."

He then grudgingly accepted that if a pianist was intent on expressing the 'psychology' of some 'absolute music', then the:

> "… *function of the piece is not to express a mood but to induce it."*[22]

This seems eminently reasonable - at least when applied to the music of Bach…

'Programme music'

Rachmaninoff wrote many compositions that were overt programme music - his songs, his symphonic poem '*The Isle of the Dead*', his choral symphony '*The Bells*', and so on. However, our focus here is on his smaller piano works that were not given titles and were shrouded in secrecy.

In 1941, less than two years before he died, he made a series of remarks in an interview that provide the information we need.[23] The following starts by restating the importance of programme material to his creative process:

> "… *musical ideas come more easily if I have a definite non-musical subject to describe*."

He said that this was especially true in writing shorter pieces for the piano. Also:

> "*Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration."*

But, he then says something that would seem to be absurd:

> *"By that I do not mean that I write program music.*"

Rachmaninoff explained this statement as follows:

> "*Since the sources of my inspiration are never revealed, the public must listen to the music absolutely*" - meaning as 'absolute music'.

What Rachmaninoff was saying, is that the programme material was just a means to an end - to help him compose the piece, embed the important emotions, and paint the necessary colours. Once used, it was discarded. This was like a sculptor casting a work, and then breaking the mould to unveil a statue unadorned and naked - pure and unadulterated. The programmatic significance of the music would still be known to him, of course, but only him.

When we compare the above quotations with the previous section on 'absolute music', we can see what was in his mind. 'Absolute music' was pure, adamant. It was what the great J. S. Bach (sometimes) composed. Emulating this was Rachmaninoff's goal - at least for many of his smaller piano works, which he regarded as especially difficult to compose.[24] However, his use of programme material to stimulate and inform his creative process presented him with a problem. One simply could not have 'absolute music' with any trace of programme material (or emotions) hanging on its tail. The programme material had to be made to disappear. It was only through his secrecy that a composition could be transformed to be (or regarded as) 'absolute'. However, this was much more than a matter of semantics. As we have already seen, 'absolute music' makes specific demands on an interpreter, notably relating to the expression of emotion. Also, the secrecy obscures the composer's true vision for the work.

There are two further observations to make. First, it seems strange that Rachmaninoff poured so much into the music, only to erase all trace of it - himself and his turbulent life, his deepest emotions, and rich material drawn from art and poetry. But on reflection, it was all still there, but just hidden in plain sight in the music. The second point is specific to Op. 33. The author's paper on the overarching programme has shown that there were additional reasons to maintain secrecy for that particular opus. This is because Rachmaninoff's programme would have been extremely controversial (if not toxic) for audiences both before and after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The interested reader is referred to the relevant research paper for more details.[25]

The status of Rachmaninoff's Preludes and Etudes Tableaux - 'absolute' or 'programme' music?

Both should be viewed as 'absolute music'. Here is the justification.

Rachmaninoff said in 1910 (in the context of a discussion about his C# minor Prelude - Op. 3 No. 2) that:

> "*A Prelude, in its very nature, is absolute music, and can not with propriety be twisted into a tone poem or a piece of musical impressionism.*"[26]

This makes it clear that he regarded his Preludes as 'absolute music'. The secrecy surrounding many of them fits with this: we know that the odd one at least, was conceived using programmatic material (I suspect most were). In a discussion with the celebrated concert pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch, Rachmaninoff was astounded to discover that the latter had divined the subject (and even the painting) which had inspired the composer's favourite Prelude (Op. 32 No. 10 in B minor). The artwork was Arnold Böcklin's '*The Return*': it depicts a traveller's return home, and resonates with Rachmaninoff's anguish of self-imposed exile.[27]

The Etudes Tableaux (Op. 33 and Op. 39) were obviously classified differently, being termed 'study-pictures'. Rachmaninoff's friend and biographer Oskar von Riesemann clearly inferred that these were '*absolute music'*.[28]

We can reasonably assume that all of the Etudes Tableaux were composed using programme material - Rachmaninoff tried to keep the relevant information secret and avoided giving them descriptive titles. Riesemann confirmed that 'many' were inspired by paintings by Arnold Böcklin. Also, the composer exceptionally divulged the subjects of five to Ottorini Respighi, who had been asked to orchestrate them (e.g. an oriental march, the sea and seagulls, etc.).[29] The author's research has uncovered the subjects of another five - and for each, a veritable web of connections to paintings, poetry and events in the composer's life.[30] The research also shows that

Rachmaninoff infuses the Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux with deep and powerful personal emotions.[31] (Annex A outlines two examples - Op. 33 Nos. 6 and 8).

So, for the Etudes Tableaux: the secrecy in which he shrouded their inspirations and subjects, his decision not to attach any titles or descriptive suggestions, and Riesemann's observations, all suggest that Rachmaninoff regarded them as 'absolute music'.

3. Key considerations for interpreting his pieces - advice from the master

Throughout the decades of his career, Rachmaninoff gave advice on how to interpret his piano compositions in interviews, as well as to students and friends. The following provides a selection which is relevant to all of his works - including those he shrouded in secrecy. The references provide further detail. Aspects of technique are not covered. The reader who is interested in Rachmaninoff's views on that may wish to consult the following references.[32,33,34]

3.1 The importance of knowing the historical context

In an interview Rachmaninoff gave in America, he was asked what to listen for in his music - his response is of equal interest to an interpreter. He responded by saying that the greatest benefit would be obtained if the person listening to it: "*… is historically aware of its message and content.*" He/she should also know:

> *"… the political, economic and social scene of the composer's life in order to evaluate him."*

Rachmaninoff then summed himself up as a composer:

> " *…. I reflect the philosophy of old Russia - White Russia - with its overtones of suffering and unrest, its pastoral but tragic beauty."*[35]

In another article in America, his advice to a student entering a Conservatory was direct and relevant to his own music:

> *"… to interpret properly the works of … every great composer, he must know the histories of these men. The American student should absorb such books and thus really come to know the ideals of the masters - yes, and the struggles they went through - in order to preserve them. Music is a spiritual art; it portrays the emotions, the passions of humanity; the student who does not understand the inspiration back [sic] of the compositions he studies will not be able to interpret them in the properly sympathetic spirit.*"[36]

Rachmaninoff's life was more than eventful - for example, his depression following the disastrous premiere of his first symphony; his love affair with his country; his desperate flight to safety with his family in 1917; and his unbearable exile after that.

3.2 'Real musical understanding' essential

Rachmaninoff said that the knowledge of a composition (i.e. its subject and what inspired it) is no substitute for the real essentials leading to good pianoforte playing. There is a vital need for the student:

> "*to understand what it is that gives the work unity, cohesion, force, or grace, and must know how to bring out those elements*."[37]

He said that this is partly about understanding the structure of his compositions. Here a helpful description arose in an interview in America (the exact date is unclear). It is Rachmaninoff's own description of the structure of many of his pieces. He says that the listener should concentrate on:

> " *… themes, the solo voices. These are interspersed with bridges of harmonic material leading to the next individual melody."*

He went on to say that he alternated the theme and bridges with frequent modulations to keep aural interest. Also:

"Each theme, solo or melody, unfolds from the foregoing one, like petals from the same flower, only the petals are different colours and shapes in this case."[38]

And here is a further quotation for an interpreter to reflect upon. It is about how his music is intended to unfold:

"*I don't dramatise. I invite the listener to dramatise in his mind with unfolding colour. This is particularly true of my Etudes-Tableaux, my songs, my Second Concerto*."[39]

The importance of colour is considered further, below.

3.3 The critical way in which a climax needs to be managed

Once, in the intermission of a piano concert, Marietta Shaginyan found Rachmaninoff furious at himself and his own 'unforgivable incompetence'.[40] She was puzzled since the audience was in a storm of "*frenzied delight.*" So what was the disaster?

He explained that for him, an absolutely critical point in a piece is 'the' climax. This can be at the end or middle of a piece, loud or quiet, but the performer must be able to approach it with "*absolute calculation, absolute accuracy*." Without that, the whole edifice falls, loses its point, and becomes loose and limp. It will fail miserably in expressing what the listener must hear. Such a failure had just occurred moments before.

He went on to explain. In such a climax, it was essential to:

"… *measure the whole mass of sounds in such a way, to give the depth and strength of the sound, in such a gradualness, that this top point, which the music must enter with the greatest naturalness*…".

Also, despite the artistic intensity of the moment, this needed to be done in such a controlled way that:

"… *the moment of climax sounds and flashes is if the ribbon fell at the finish of a race, or a glass bursts from an impact*."

Beyond managing a climax in a piece, this suggests an intensity of thought and calibration of expression which he regarded as essential in interpreting his own music (and the music of others).

3.4 The 'vital spark' in interpretation

Here are two quotations from Rachmaninoff on how to raise the level of a performance to a higher level: [41]

"… t*he vital spark is the soul. The soul is the source of that higher expression in music which cannot be represented in dynamic marks. If a player depends on mechanical rules [meaning dynamic markings, length of pauses, etc.] the music's playing will be soulless."*

"*Fine playing requires much deep thought away from the keyboard. The student should not feel that when the notes have been played his task is done. It is, in fact, only begun. He must make the piece a part of himself. Every note must awaken in him a kind of musical consciousness of his real artistic mission.*"

An example to reflect upon arose while researching Rachmaninoff's Op. 33 No. 2 Etude Tableau. This piece is inspired by the endless Russian *steppe* suffused by sublime light rain.[42] This is countryside he came to love deeply.[43] It surrounded the family Ivanovka estate, which he bought in 1910 (the year before composing the piece).[44] Through an account of Marietta Shaginyan, the soul of the music is suggested. The piece does not merely depict the scene as one might present a photograph or painting. Rather, through the music, Rachmaninoff becomes part of the scene, standing and surveying the sweep of the countryside - and we are experiencing it through his eyes and his own deep feelings. For an interpreter, the difference is between painting the picture and being inside it.

3.5 Two gifts possessed by composers: heightened imagination and colour-sense

Rachmaninoff viewed composers as a race apart with innate abilities not generally found in a musician who is merely an 'executant'. I will set out his pronouncements on the matter, and then draw conclusions for those of us who were not so lucky to have been born as naturally gifted composers.

First, he believed that composers generally have superior imaginations - demonstrated by their ability to imagine and create their own pieces.[45] This apparently gave a composer-pianist an edge in interpreting the pieces of other composers. He states that "*interpretation demands something of the creative instinct*" - and only the piece's composer knows what it is really about. This meant that everyone else "*must imagine an entirely new picture for himself*", and composers were generally better equipped for doing that.

The second gift that composers have relates to their "*intensely refined sensitiveness for musical colouring."* He maintained that a composer has an affinity with other composers, and can tap into their "problems and their ideals": "*You can give their works colour*." He then said:

> "*… the most important thing for me in my pianoforte interpretations, is colour. So you can make music live. Without colour, it is dead*."[46]

He then concluded with the ultimate put-down for any pianist who is not a composer:

> "*… I think he can never acquire the talent for sensing and reproducing the full range of musical colour that is the composer's birthright.*"

(At least Rachmaninoff is not building up any false expectations here.)

For those of us languishing below Rachmaninoff's exalted class of composer-interpreters, the above comments suggest a need to focus particularly on the expression of colours. And to compensate for our relatively dull imaginations, it would seem logical to learn as much as one can about the pieces and what was in his mind when composing them - i.e. try to get inside his mind and inside the music.

3.6 Learning from great pianists

Rachmaninoff had clear views on how he would play his own pieces. But in an interview in 1921, he was asked for his views on how others interpret his works.[47] Here, he divided pianists into two categories.

In the case of a 'great pianist': he believed that such a musician was justified in finding his own interpretation, and putting his own personality into the composition. Rachmaninoff remarked that some play his pieces with "*many differences of detail, with nuances and shadings"* that he himself would not use. However, such interpretations commanded his respect - he believed that the overall conception of the piece "*will never be wrong, because of the master's own good taste and musical instinct*…" Indeed, Rachmaninoff found it '*most interesting*' to see how:

> "*… other [great] pianists will give a piece … an entirely different musical colour, or present it from quite another angle of interpretation than your own*."

However, Rachmaninoff seems to take a different - if not indifferent - attitude to lesser pianists. The following quote needs no comment:

> "*… when it comes to the average pianist, I am perfectly willing to let him play my pieces just as he chooses - especially if I am not there to hear him*!"

Once again, his comments put most of us in our place. However, his pronouncements do suggest a genuine desire for all pianists to have freedom to interpret his works - and with licence to do so in ways he would not himself.

Rachmaninoff advised prospective interpreters to seek guidance on playing his pieces by listening to 'great' pianists who were acknowledged as excellent interpreters of his works. First and foremost is Rachmaninoff himself, of course - a list of his recorded piano works is provided in

Annex C. Other pianists that he specifically lauded include Vladimir Horowitz[48], Benno Moiseiwitsch[49], Leopold Godowsky, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Josef Lhévinne and Josef Hofmann.[50]

3.7 Interpreting 'absolute music' - a detailed example

All of the foregoing general advice can be applied to interpreting Rachmaninoff's 'absolute music'. Also, we have already learned how he wanted beauty and emotion handled. But did he provide any detailed guidance on how to play any 'absolute music'? The answer is yes. In two interviews (in 1910 and 1925), he explained the interpretation of his famous Prelude in C-sharp minor - Op. 3 No. 2. I have summarised the main points in Annex B. Apart from noting the occasional lapse when he resorted to using terms of emotion, I will leave it to the reader to draw his/her own conclusions from his advice.

4. Rachmaninoff's secrecy - an impediment or freedom for an interpreter?

When interpreting Rachmaninoff's music, is it better to know his sources of inspiration, programme material, and the emotions he infused into the works - or to work with his secrecy and embrace the freedom which comes with that? Here are some counterarguments for the latter - some of which are drawn from his own words and actions.

We have learned that he attached great importance to the expression of colour in interpretations of his works. So, when Respighi had been asked to orchestrate five of the Etudes Tableaux in 1930, Rachmaninoff immediately wrote to him to offer the 'secret explanations' of the works, saying that these would: "*make the character of these pieces more comprehensible and help to find the necessary colors [sic] for their orchestration*."[51] The subtext here is that Rachmaninoff is placing value on keeping true to the original intent of the piece, and expressing that through the colours of the orchestration. However, pianists also seek to make the character of a piece comprehensible, and pianos paint colours as well as orchestras. It is not clear why the information was needed for an orchestrator, but would not be useful for a pianist.

In the event, Rachmaninoff did not like Respighi's orchestration at all. Respighi's fussy use of percussion climaxes seemed mismatched for two of the pieces (one depicting a languid seascape of sea and seagulls, and another the story of Little Red Riding Hood), and it all but destroyed the one depicting a funeral.[52] So, despite Rachmaninoff's apparent *laissez-faire* attitude to interpretation, staying faithful to his original vision seems to have really mattered to him, at least sometimes.

We have also seen that Rachmaninoff believed that the quality of interpretation of a piece was likely to be constrained for pianists who are not also composers - he maintained that they were generally handicapped by inferior imaginations and reduced sensitivity to musical colours. While many might rightly dispute his views, the secrecy in which he shrouded many of his works must surely exacerbate any such possible disadvantages, while a knowledge of the composer's vision for the work would mitigate them.

In our discussion about 'absolute music', we found that Rachmaninoff did not want an interpreter to inject emotions into an interpretation. Yet research shows that his own feelings that infuse the Etudes Tableaux (at least in Op. 33) are so deep and strong that it seems strange not to be able to use that information. The same could be said of the programme material, which is so rich and intimately linked to the meaning and essence of the pieces. Annex A provides specific examples of how such knowledge can inform interpretation.

While we should respect Rachmaninoff's desire for his music to be regarded as 'absolute', the reader will be forgiven for thinking that I am struggling to see the practical advantages of his secrecy, at least from the perspective of an interpreter.

5. Summary and conclusions

This paper has focused on Rachmaninoff's smaller piano works. It has set out the composer's advice on their interpretation - drawn from interviews he gave over several decades, and also from remarks from his acquaintances. This has highlighted aspects that were particularly important to him, such as the expression of colour, the critical way to manage a climax in a piece, and more besides. A summary of his guidance for interpreting his Prelude in C-sharp minor (Op. 3 No. 2) has also been provided.

Rachmaninoff shrouded many of his piano pieces in secrecy, refusing to disclose their meaning, programme, or inspiration. A deep reason for that has been explored. His goal was to create what he called 'absolute' or 'pure' music. This is music at the pinnacle of composition: beautiful in itself, and unsullied by the baggage of meaning, emotion, or descriptive title. However, a contradiction lay in his use of rich programmatic material and deep emotions as an aid to composing. Secrecy was therefore a necessity - it enabled what was essentially programme music to be regarded as (or transformed into) 'absolute music'.

Rachmaninoff's view of 'absolute music' imposed specific requirements on interpreters. For example, he said that the aim should be to let the music speak for itself and let its inherent beauty shine through. More problematically, he said that: "… '*absolute music' should not express emotion, but rather induce it in the audience."* This would seem reasonable enough for the music of J. S. Bach, but a challenge for anyone interpreting Rachmaninoff's deeply Romantic and emotionally laden works.

This paper has also considered whether Rachmaninoff's secrecy is an impediment or a liberating factor for a prospective interpreter. Several arguments were made against it - some of these arose from inconsistencies in Rachmaninoff's own words and deeds. The reader needs to weigh such arguments for him/herself. However, I will hazard a personal view.

Interpreting deeply Romantic pieces in a vacuum of emotion and meaning would seem to sacrifice a great deal on the altar of idealism. The greatness of the music should not depend on whether we label it as 'absolute' or not. Also, knowledge about the meaning and deep significance of his works would surely inform (rather than constrain) their interpretation. But, as the goal of much of my own research has been to lift his veil of secrecy, my view on this matter is perhaps unsurprising.

I hope the reader has found this paper useful, either by highlighting new perspectives or by provoking further thought and debate. Rachmaninoff poured his life, his intellect, and his soul into his music. As such, it demands equally deep consideration by any pianist setting out to interpret it at the keyboard.

Annex A: Rachmaninoff's use of programmatic material - two examples

These examples draw on the author's research. They expose some of the richness of his programme material and raise issues for an interpreter to consider.

Example 1: Etude Tableau in G minor - Op. 33 No. 8 [53] (*In some editions, this is No. 5 or No. 7*).

Exceptionally, Rachmaninoff confided to a friend that this piece was based on a painting by Arnold Böcklin entitled 'Morning'. However, no such painting exists - the information had become corrupted. Figure 1 therefore shows what Rachmaninoff told us about the piece. Figure 2 details what the research tells us.

It is clear that the absence of information (Figure 1) leaves the pianist completely free to imagine whatever he or she thinks the piece should express. However, the contrast with Figure 2 could not be more marked. Here is a brief explanation (see the research paper for the full details).

Referring to Figure 2:

- The piece was inspired by a painting of the deposition of Christ from the cross by the Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin: '*Mourning under the Cross*'. However, the real focus of the artwork (both visually and in its title) is the depiction of two contrasting expressions of grief/ mourning - distraught versus quiet and introspective. It is these that are depicted in different sections of the piece.
- The music references his Op. 5 No. 3 - also in G minor. This piece is explicitly associated with Tyutchev's poem 'Tears', which similarly contrasts two forms of grief. The material that is drawn upon is a motif representing the bells of St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod, which in turn links to Rachmaninoff's idyllic stays with his grandmother in his youth.
- The Op. 5 No. 3 piece was associated with a personal tragedy. The young Rachmaninoff had dedicated the work to Tchaikovsky, who was his close friend and mentor. The latter had planned to attend the premiere but died just weeks before. This gives the piece (and its interpretation) added poignancy.
- The set of six Etudes Tableaux in Op. 33 (in the first edition) embodies Rachmaninoff's deep and profound love for his homeland, and his fears for the civil war that threatened to engulf it at the time of its composition in 1911. The G minor Etude Tableau is the penultimate piece and fits into this scheme by representing Rachmaninoff's lamentation and grief for the coming catastrophe (depicted in the last piece).

In the light of the above information, the author's research paper suggests what may have been Rachmaninoff's programme for the G minor Etude Tableau - detailing the emotions which are portrayed as the music unfolds section by section.

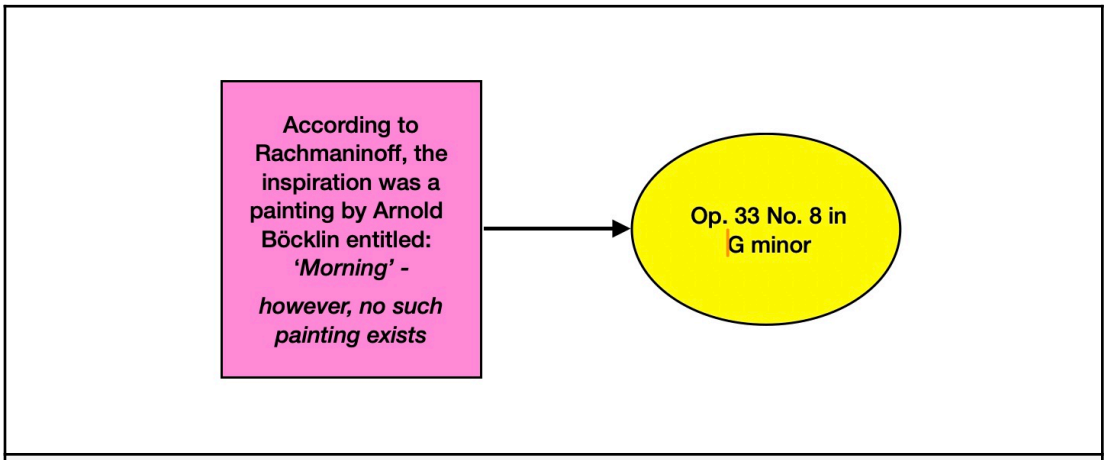

Figure 1. What Rachmaninoff told his friend Oskar von Riesemann about the Etude Tableau in G minor (Op. 33 No. 8)

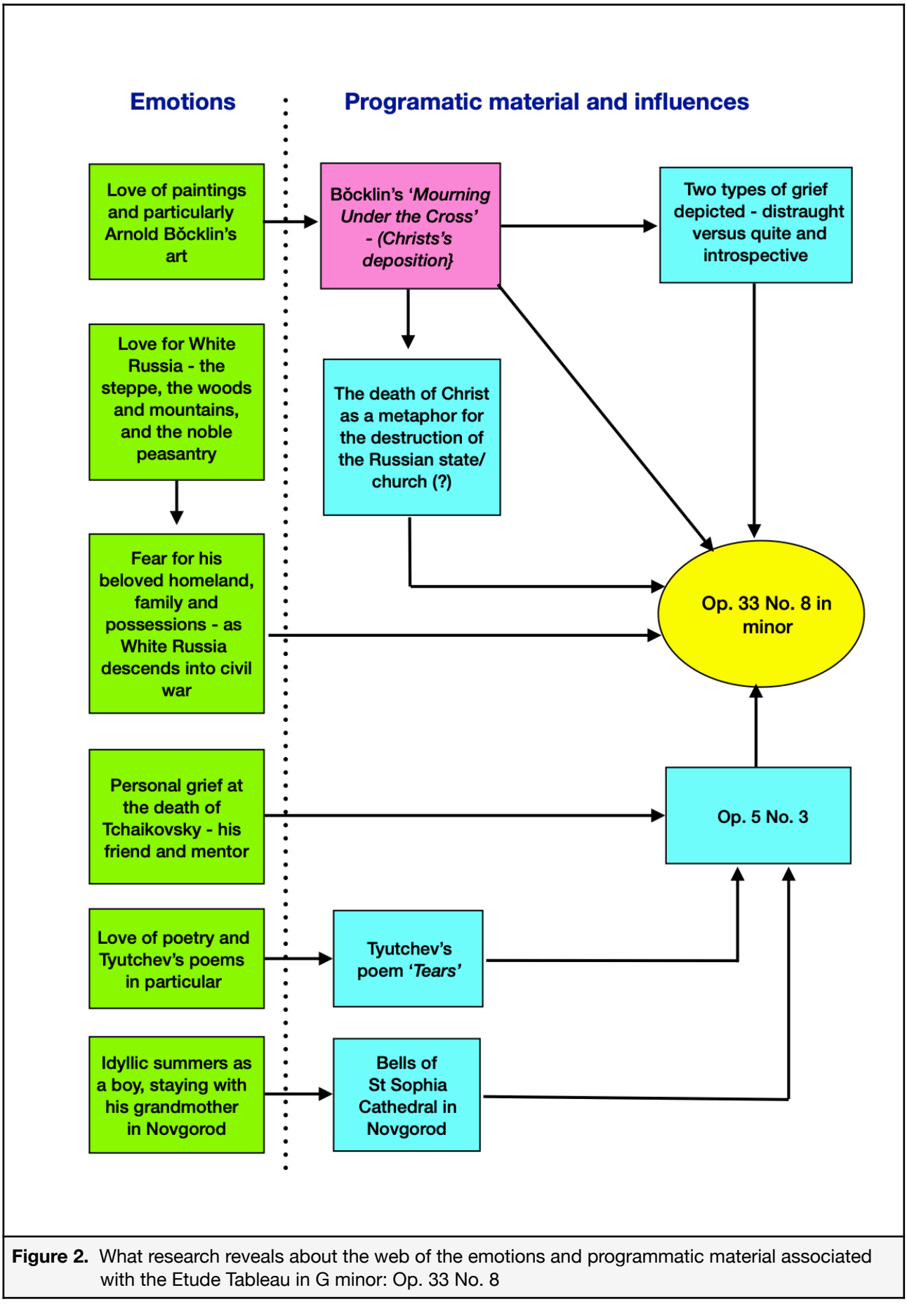

Figure 2. What research reveals about the web of the emotions and programmatic material associated with the Etude Tableau in G minor: Op. 33 No. 8

Example 2: Etude Tableau in E-flat minor - Op. 33 No. 6 [54] *(In some editions, this is No. 3).*

Rachmaninoff does not disclose what the piece is meant to represent. However, it has become known by the nickname '*The Snowstorm*', as the music feasibly suggests a swirling storm.

However, the author's research has proposed that the piece is actually based on a Tyutchev poem: "*Spring Storm*." (A new translation is provided in the reference). This depicts the joyous arrival of a spring thunderstorm which heralds the end of the long, hard Russian winter. Some implications for its interpretation are as follows:

- We can infer the likely emotions that were in Rachmaninoff's mind when he composed the piece. The poem reflects his deep love of the Russian countryside of woods, rivers and mountains. Added to this is the poem's subject - a spring thunderstorm which is greeted with joy by the Russian people.
- The poem - and the music - depicts claps of thunder playing and frolicking with each other. This imagery opens practical possibilities for an interpreter to consider. For example, using colours so that the relevant chords imitate the timbre of thunder, and making the different peals seem as though they are in dialogue.
- The poem and the music both include birds in a forest. The research identifies the relevant passages of birdsong, which again informs their interpretation.
- No. 6 ('*Spring Storm*') forms a contrasting pair with No. 2, and not just in terms of mood. They both depict Rachmaninoff's love of different types of Russian countryside and are associated with different episodes in his life. No. 6 also links to the next piece (Op. 33 No. 7), which depicts a joyous Russian fair - feasibly the Maslenitsa spring festival. Such relationships between different works in Op. 33 (there are others) can feasibly inform the choice of pieces when constructing a programme for a performance.

Annex B: Rachmaninoff's advice on how to play his Prelude in C-sharp minor - Op. 3 No. 2

Rachmaninoff provided at least two accounts of how to play this famous piece. The first was an interview published in *The Delineator* magazine in 1910, and the other in *The Musical Observer* in 1925.[55,56] I have extracted his key remarks, although the full articles are well worth reading (see the references). First, some background points.

Rachmaninoff made clear that the piece was 'absolute' or 'pure' - it was not based on any picture or programme material. He also remarked that it "*cannot be twisted into a tone-poem or a piece of musical impressionism."* And, the "… *function of the piece is not to express a mood but to induce it.*" Also, as a Prelude, he said that it should rightly be played before a more important piece.

He had avoided attaching any title, so that "… *the imagination would not be fettered …"* However, he noted that some editions in America and Europe had invented their own titles for it. The clear implication is that these should be ignored, as they have no basis or merit, and may act to falsely constrain an interpretation.

Here are the salient points:

- The opening theme.
    - The three opening chords should sound "*solemnly and portentously.*" The contrasting melody is intended to work against these to capture the attention. It should also serve to "*lighten up the gloom*" of the opening.

- The pianist needs to strike just the right pace in the opening, and then maintain that strictly throughout the first section.
- Avoid the common mistake of playing the opening too loudly - the climax comes later. However, the first three notes of the theme need enough force to carry through.
- The chords of the interleaving melody should be "*pressed out lightly and caressingly*" - and the top note should sing.
- It is important to strike the chords evenly and not to arpeggiate them.
- Pay special attention to ensuring evenness in the third and fourth beat in each bar.

- The middle agitated movement (29 bars) is intended to provide an abrupt change of mood - the music "*sweeps along like a rising storm*", intensifying as the melody rises in pitch.
  - The melody is carried by the first note of each group.
  - Ideally, this section should be played *allegro con fuoco.* But the passage should not be hurried beyond the capacity of the pianist to make this stand out.
- At the climax, the original chords reappear, but with everything doubled in the two hands - thereby intensifying the contrast with the previous single-note melody.
  - This calls for "*all the force the player is capable of*" - but don't mistake "*fury for breadth and majesty*." He says that it may be safer to take the passage slightly slower than the opening.
  - Maintain the evenness of the decrescendo as a priority - Rachmaninoff said that he began it after the sixth bar of this section.
- The music quietens, and a seven-bar coda closes the piece.
  - Accentuate the middle notes of the chords slightly to bring out the melody.
  - Do not be tempted to arpeggiate the final chords.
- Pedalling is important throughout.
  - The pedal is changed on the change of harmony throughout the piece.
  - He recommended that the pianist consider using a pedal technique to provide different effects in different registers - raising and lowering the dampers quickly can help to clear the upper notes while preserving the sonority of the lower notes (the latter need the dampers raised for longer to dampen them). An example he gives would be to use this technique to maintain the low G# in bar 7.
- Rachmaninoff considered it more important for a pianist to adjust the speed of different sections to his or her technical ability. An accurate musical rendition at a slower speed was preferable to struggling to play everything at an 'ideal' speed.

Finally, in *The Musical Observer* interview, the interviewer clearly listened to Rachmaninoff playing the piece, and noted various detailed aspects of his execution. For example, an accelerando here, a retard there, playing the odd measure particularly fast, playing certain chords not quite together, and so on. I have generally omitted those from the above. The reader should refer to the original article to assess the extent to which they are expressions of Rachmaninoff's personal style. Better still, I recommend listening to Rachmaninoff himself playing the piece.[57]

Annex C: Rachmaninoff's recordings of his solo piano works

Rachmaninoff's own recordings provide an invaluable reference for pianists at every level. The following provides a list of his solo piano disks. These were generally issued by RCA Victor, unless indicated otherwise. For a full list of the record labels, disk codes, etc., see Bertensson & Leyda.[58] This reference also provides information on recordings of his songs, and orchestral and chamber works.

Op. 3, Five Pieces for Piano
- No. 2, Prelude, C# minor
- No. 3, Mélodie, E major
- No. 4, Polichinelle, F# minor
- No. 5, Serenade, B♭ minor

Op. 10, Seven Pieces for Piano
- No. 3, Barcarole, G minor (issued by Edison)
- No. 5, Humoresque, G major

Op. 16, Moments Musicaux
- No. 2, E♭minor

Op. 21
- No. 5, Lilacs (transcribed by the composer)

Op. 23, Ten Preludes for Piano
- No. 5, G minor
- No. 10, G♭ major

Op. 32, Thirteen Preludes for Piano
- No. 3, E major
- No. 5, G major
- No. 6, F minor
- No. 7, F major
- No. 12, G# minor

Op. 33 Études Tableaux
- No. 2, C major
- No. 7, E♭ major
- No. 8, G minor

Op. 38
- No. 3, Daisies (transcribed by the composer)

Op. 39 Études Tableaux
- No. 6, A minor

No opus.
- Oriental Sketch
- Polka

References

Many of the following references relate to articles in magazines in which Rachmaninoff was interviewed. In each case, the details of the original article are provided. However, all of Rachmaninoff's articles have recently been collated into an excellent book: '*Sergei Rachmaninoff In His Own Words', e*dited by Geoffrey Norris; The Sergei Rachmaninoff Foundation, First Edition, October 2024. Wolke Verlag GmbH, Weggis and Hofheim. This book is the easiest way to access the articles. For that reason, I provide the page number in shorthand form: e.g. SRIHOW 207.

Some of the articles also appear in: '*Rachmaninoff and His World'.* Edited by Philip Ross Bullock. The University of Chicago Press. 2022. Here I provide the page number in shorthand form: e.g. RAHW 45.

[1] *Rachmaninoff, S., (November 1934). 'The Composer as Interpreter', The Monthly Musical Record. Volume 64, p 201. SRIHOW 205*

[2] All of the author's papers on the Etudes Tableaux may be found on the academia website:
https://independent.academia.edu/DerekFlynn2

A list of the individual papers to-date is as follows:

'Rachmaninoff's program for his Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux'.
https://www.academia.edu/145408196

'*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C major, Op. 33 No.2*'.
https://www.academia.edu/145355867

'The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in E-flat minor, Op. 33 No.6'.
https://www.academia.edu/145465988

'*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in G minor, Op. 33 No.8'.*
https://www.academia.edu/129128440

'The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C-sharp minor, Op. 33 No.9'.
https://www.academia.edu/144613634

'*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C minor, Op. 39 No.1'.*
https://www.academia.edu/143841682

[3] Ewen, D., (December 1941). 'Music Should Speak from the Heart'. *The Etude.* Vol 59, p 804 and p 848. SRIHOW 262, RAHW 210

[4] Quilty, G., (October 1959), 'Rachmaninoff - The Last Romantic Composer'. *HIFI Review*, 26 and 28. (As elsewhere, the words reproduced are Rachmaninoff's actual spoken words) SRIHOW 281, RAHW 214

[5] Ewen, D., (December 1941). 'Music Should Speak from the Heart: A Conference with Sergei Rachmaninoff, the World-Famous Composer-Pianist', *The Etude*, 59/12: 804 and 849. SRIHOW 261, RAHW 209-210

[6] Ewen, D., (December 1941). 'Music Should Speak from the Heart'. *The Etude.* Vol 59, p 804 and p 848. SRIHOW 264, RAHW 211

[7] Teal, D. J. (7 December 1918) 'Rachmaninoff Champions Music of Native Land', *Musical America* 29/6: SRIHOW 72, 3-4. RAHW 197

[8] *https://independent.academia.edu/DerekFlynn2*

[9] (20 November 1909) 'Modernism is Rachmaninoff's Bane', *Musical America*. 11/2: 23. SRIHOW 26, RAHW 186

[10] Teal, D. J. (7 December 1918) 'Rachmaninoff Champions Music of Native Land', *Musical America* 29/6: SRIHOW 71, 3-4. RAHW 197

[11] Ewen, D., (December 1941). 'Music Should Speak from the Heart: A Conference with Sergei Rachmaninoff, the World-Famous Composer-Pianist', *The Etude*, 59/12: 804 and 849. SRIHOW 264, RAHW 212

[12] Derek Flynn. '*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C major, Op. 33 No.2'.*
https://www.academia.edu/145355867

[13] Derek Flynn. '*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in E-flat minor, Op. 33 No.6'.* *https://www.academia.edu/145465988*

[14] Derek Flynn. '*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C-sharp minor, Op. 33 No.9'.* *https://www.academia.edu/144613634*

[15] Rachmaninoff, S. (February 1910). 'My Prelude in C sharp Minor', *The Delineator,* vol. 75, pp 127. SRIHOW 35, RAHW 186, 187

[16] Rachmaninoff, S. (February 1910). 'My Prelude in C sharp Minor', *The Delineator*, vol. 75, pp 127. SRIHOW 36, RAHW 189

[17] Leonard, F., (April 1932). 'Interpretation Depends on Talent and Personality: An interview with the Renowned Composer-Pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff', *The Etude,* vol. 50, pp 239-240. SRIHOW 187

[18] Music Publishing House, Moscow, second edition, 1962. State Central Museum of Musical Culture. '*Recollections about Rachmaninoff - Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove'*. Drafting by Z. Apetyan, edited by A. Seslavinskaya. Volume 2. pp 138

[19] Kemp, S., (November 1925). 'How Rachmaninoff Plays the C Sharp Minor Prelude'. *The Musical Observer.* Vol 24, No. 11, p1. SRIHOW 142

[20] Rachmaninoff, S. (February 1910). 'My Prelude in C sharp Minor', *The Delineator,* vol. 75, pp 127. *SRIHOW 35, RAHW 186, 187*

[21] *https://bachtrack.com/interview-nikolai-lugansky-rachmaninov-january-2023 a*ccessed 23 April 2026

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ewen, D., (December 1941). 'Music Should Speak from the Heart: A Conference with Sergei Rachmaninoff, the World-Famous Composer-Pianist', *The Etude*, 59/12: 804 and 849. SRIHOW 264, RAHW 212

[24] Ibid.

[25] Derek Flynn. '*Rachmaninoff's program for his Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux'.* *https://www.academia.edu/145408196*

[26] Rachmaninoff, S. (February 1910). 'My Prelude in C sharp Minor', *The Delineator*, vol. 75, p 127. SRIHOW 35, RAHW 189

[27] Filmed interview of the pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch which recounts a discussion he had with Rachmaninoff. DVD: *The Art of Piano – Great Pianists of the 20th Century.* NVC Arts. Also *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFobyhwznng accessed 23 April 2026*

[28] Riesemann, O. von (1932). '*Rachmaninoff's Recollections*'. 236

[29] Bertensson, S. and Leyda, J. Sergei Rachmaninoff: '*A Lifetime in Music'.* Indiana University Press. Originally printed 1956 by New York University Press. Reprinted in 2001. 263-264

[30] A list of the author's research papers concerning the Etudes Tableaux is provided at the start of the references.

[31] Derek Flynn. *'Rachmaninoff's program for his Op. 33 Etudes Tableaux'.* *https://www.academia.edu/145408196*

[32] Rachmaninoff, S., (March 1910), 'Ten Important Attributes of Beautiful Pianoforte Playing'. *The Etude.* Secured from an interview with Rachmaninoff, at the time the Supervisor General of the Imperial Conservatories of Russia. 153-154. SRIHOW 43

[33] Adams, A. D., (Oct 2012). *'Sergei Rachmaninoff School of Musicianship and Technique: A Guide for Keyboard Players'.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

[34] Slenczynska, R., (March 1976). '*Music at your Fingertips: Advice for the Artist and Amateur on Playing the Piano'.* Da Capo Press. (Ruth Slenczynska studied with Rachmaninoff - and also Schnabel and Cortot).

[35] Quilty, G., (October 1959), 'Rachmaninoff - The Last Romantic Composer'. *HIFI Review*, 26 and 28. (As elsewhere, the words reproduced are Rachmaninoff's actual spoken words). SRIHOW 280, RAHW 213

[36] Toobes, E. O., (February 1922), 'America Must Have a National Conservatory, Says Rachmaninoff'. *Good Housekeeping*. 7 and 132-134. SRIHOW 106

[37] Rachmaninoff, S., (March 1910), 'Ten Important Attributes of Beautiful Pianoforte Playing'. *The Etude.* Secured from an interview with Rachmaninoff, at the time the Supervisor General of the Imperial Conservatories of Russia. 153-154. SRIHOW 47

[38] Quilty, G., (October 1959), 'Rachmaninoff - The Last Romantic Composer'. *HIFI Review*, 26 and 28. (As elsewhere, the words reproduced are Rachmaninoff's actual spoken words). SRIHOW 281, RAHW 214

[39] Ibid. (p 280)

[40] Music Publishing House, Moscow, second edition, 1962. State Central Museum of Musical Culture. '*Recollections about Rachmaninoff - Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove'.* Drafting by Z. Apetyan, edited by A. Seslavinskaya. Volume 2. p 172. Shaginyan reminiscences.

[41] Rachmaninoff, S., (March 1910), 'Ten Important Attributes of Beautiful Pianoforte Playing'. *The Etude.* Secured from an interview with Rachmaninoff, at the time the Supervisor General of the Imperial Conservatories of Russia. 153-154. SRIHOW 49

[42] Derek Flynn. '*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in C major, Op. 33 No.2'.* *https://www.academia.edu/145355867*

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[45] Cameron, N., (November 1934), 'The Composer as Interpreter'. *The Monthly Musical Record.* Vol. 64. p 201. SRIHOW 205

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[49] Filmed interview of the pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch which recounts a discussion he had with Rachmaninoff. DVD: *The Art of Piano – Great Pianists of the 20th Century.* NVC Arts. Also *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFobyhwznng accessed 23 April 2026*

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[53] Derek Flynn. *'The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in G minor, Op. 33 No. 8'.* *https://www.academia.edu/129128440*

[54] Derek Flynn. '*The Inspiration for Rachmaninoff's Etude Tableau in E-flat minor, Op. 33 No.6'.* *https://www.academia.edu/145465988*

[55] Rachmaninoff, S. (February 1919). 'My Prelude in C sharp Minor', *The Delineator*, vol. 75, pp 127. SRIHOW 33-39

[56] Kemp, S., (November 1925). 'How Rachmaninoff Plays the C Sharp Minor Prelude'. *The Musical Observer.* Vol 24, No. 11, p1. SRIHOW 141-145

[57] *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcG-DnGdWRw* accessed 30th March, 2026.

[58] Bertensson, S. and Leyda, J. Sergei Rachmaninoff: 'A Lifetime in Music'. Indiana University Press. Originally printed 1956 by New York University Press. Reprinted in 2001. 420-438