ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE CULMINATION OF THE RUSSIAN ROMANTIC PIANO SCHOOL AS REPRESENTED BY EARLY AND LATE WORKS OF RACHMANINOFF, SCRIABIN, AND MEDTNER

Ekaterina Zaitseva, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2017

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Rachmaninoff, Medtner, and Scriabin are the most significant composers of the Russian Romantic piano school in the first half of the twentieth century. Their aesthetics, inspirations, and approaches to composition are each unique, and the representative works from their early and late periods provide an excellent opportunity to examine their differences. A disciple of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff composed most of his works before immigrating to the West in 1917. Unlike the emotionally charged, melodically directed compositions of the Russian period, such as *Morceaux de salon* and *Moments Musicaux,* his late work, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli,* is austere and philosophical. Medtner, on the other hand, was a Romantic seeking classical forms of expression, whose style remained mostly unchanged throughout his career. He emphasized structural clarity and contrapuntal writing, following the tradition of Beethoven and Brahms, along with the nostalgic quality

characteristic of Russian music. The blending of German and Russian elements is evident in both the *Sonata-Reminiscenza* and his last work for piano solo, *Elegy,* Op. 59 No. 2. Unlike Rachmaninoff and Medtner, both of whom disliked modernism and whose styles were deeply rooted in the nineteenth century, Scriabin was an innovator. He strove to create new sonorities, harmonies, and colors to musically represent his philosophical beliefs as the foundation for his music. The drastic evolution of his style throughout his short life is seen clearly in his early Chopinesque Preludes, Op. 11 and the late modernistic Preludes, Op. 74.

# THE CULMINATION OF THE RUSSIAN ROMANTIC PIANO SCHOOL AS REPRESENTED BY EARLY AND LATE WORKS OF RACHMANINOFF, SCRIABIN, AND MEDTNER

by

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**CD II:**

The period from the 1890s to the beginning of World War II, covered in this project, is mainly associated with the prevalence of modernistic trends in music. The first proponents of musical modernism, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and their followers searched for ways to create a new, un-romantic style, which manifested in texture, pitch organization, dissonance treatment, and structure of their works. Yet, at the same time, there were a number of composers who continued to write in a romantic idiom. Undoubtedly, the three most prominent representatives of the golden age of the Russian romantic piano school during this period were Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), and Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951). Although they were contemporaries, trained in the Western European tradition at the Moscow Conservatory and studying under the same theory and composition professors, Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky, they had quite different backgrounds and influences that ultimately shaped their musical styles. The purpose of this study is to examine these composers' unique musical aesthetics through an examination of both their early and late piano works.

Tchaikovsky, the musical idol of Moscow, became a major influence on the music of Rachmaninoff after the young composer's arrival in the city in 1895. According to Asafiev, the most characteristic feature of Rachmaninoff's music that can be traced directly to Tchaikovsky is the predominance of "emotionally charged *melos*"[1] or melody. Rachmaninoff declared that "Melodic inventiveness is the vital

[1] Boris Asafiev, *Russkaya Muzyka. XIX i nachalo XX veka* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1979), 248.

goal of the composer. If he is unable to make melodies which command the right to endure, he has little reason to proceed with his studies in musical composition."[2] Such superiority of the melody also affected Rachmaninoff's treatment of texture, which was rarely homophonic. Most often Rachmaninoff used multi-layered textures, in which the secondary voices frequently turned into the primary melodic material, never serving a simply decorative purpose. Asafiev calls this type of texture "polymelodic" or "melodic polyphony rooted in harmony."[3]

Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky, both disciples of Tchaikovsky, also had a profound effect on Rachmaninoff's stylistic development. Taneyev belonged to the Moscow group of musicians opposed to the ideals of the "Mighty Five" who can collectively be credited with nationalism in Russian music. He stressed the importance of studying not only contemporary European composers, but the older masters of counterpoint, such as Josquin, Palestrina, and J. S. Bach. This Western influence emphasized at the Moscow conservatory at the time was most likely the underlying reason that prevented Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Medtner from having any desire to pursue a nationalistic approach to music. Even though Rachmaninoff was interested in Russian folk songs and Orthodox chants, he never quoted them literally in his compositions. The polyphonic writing found in many of Rachmaninoff's works also stemmed directly from Taneyev's teaching. Seroff notes that Arensky's influence showed particularly in the full melodic accompaniments as

[2] Andreas Wehrmeyer, *Rakhmaninov* (London: St. Haus Publishing, 2004), 113.
[3] Asafiev, *Russkaya Muzyka. XIX i nachalo XX veka*, 249.

well as in the salon character of Rachmaninoff's early piano works, Op. 3 and Op. 10.[4]

Dedicated to pianist Pavel Pabst, Rachmaninoff's *Morceaux de salon*, Op. 10 was written between December 1893 and February 1894, a year after the composer's graduation from the Conservatory. Op. 10 included seven pieces: *Nocturne, Waltz, Barcarolle, Mélodie, Humoresque, Romance,* and *Mazurka*. The best-known piece of the set, *Barcarolle* in G minor, is written in ABA form with coda. The A section presents a poetic, melancholic melody with a gentle triplet accompaniment in the right hand, imitating a boat rocking on the water. The livelier B section with its rapid figurations in the right hand as well as the extreme shifts of dynamics (from *pppp* at *Presto* to *forte* in the course of a single measure), so characteristic of the youthful Rachmaninoff, brings the work to its climax right before the return of the A section. In the A', Rachmaninoff combines the main theme from the opening part with the chromatic descending motive from the B section hidden in the sixteenth-note figurations. The piece bears a strong resemblance to Rachmaninoff's *Barcarolle* in G minor from the Six Pieces, Op. 11 for piano duet.

The *Humoresque,* Op. 10, written in a simple ternary form with a contrasting lyrical middle section, is an exciting virtuoso piece full of syncopations. The title *Humoresque* was used in the nineteenth century for works of humorous and whimsical character, and indeed, Rachmaninoff's *Humoresque* is notable for its wit, which, as Geoffrey Norris points out, "rarely entered Rachmaninoff's music."[5] Motivically and rhythmically, the piece foreshadows the sixteenth variation from

[4] Victor I. Seroff, *Rachmaninoff* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 28.
[5] Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 80.

Rachmaninoff's late work *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Op. 42. The composer revised the *Humoresque* in 1940, adding subtle touches of harmonic color that give the writing greater interest and originality. Even though the 1940 revision is richer in texture and more pianistic, I have chosen to record the original version in order to be consistent with Rachmaninoff's other early works included in this recording project.

Composed in 1896, the six *Moments Musicaux*, Op. 16 are Rachmaninoff's first truly mature piano works, demonstrating the composer's stylistic growth in terms of melodic originality and technical mastery. With their elaborate figurations, dense multi-layered textures, chromatic harmonies, and pianistic challenges, these pieces in many ways foreshadow some of Rachmaninoff's later Preludes. For example, No. 4 in E minor, with its bravura left-hand writing and agitated rhythms in the melody, looks forward to the Prelude Op. 23 No. 2 in B-flat major; while the tragic, profound character of No. 3 in B minor presages the Prelude Op. 32 No. 10 in the same key. Unlike Rachmaninoff's earlier pieces, the *Moments Musicaux*, Op. 16 do not bear programmatic titles, even though each one of them conforms to a musical genre - nocturne in No. 1, etude in Nos. 2, 4 and 6, elegy in No. 3, and barcarolle in No. 5.

The six pieces in the Op. 16 are ordered in such a way, that if played as a set, they would make an effective performance. The longest piece in the collection, No. 1 in B-flat minor, is written in ABA' form with coda. It opens with a beautiful and longing melody over a nocturne-like accompaniment in the left hand. The contrasting middle section in G-flat major, featuring an unusual 7/4 meter, is thematically related to the main theme from the A section. It rises to a climax and then gives way to an improvisatory transitional passage, leading to the varied reprise of the opening section, in which

Rachmaninoff masterfully masks the main theme in the elaborated, rapid figuration of the right hand. Overall, this *Moment Musical* is a good example of Asafiev's notion of "polymelody" - the type of Rachmaninoff's characteristic multi-layered texture, in which the secondary voices, sometimes hidden in figurations, grow into independent themes. A highly chromatic *Moment Musical* No. 2 in E-flat minor, written in simple ternary form, is in the style of a concert etude, presenting the agitated, syncopated melody in octaves over rapid sextuplet figurations in both hands. The middle section features dramatic sudden shifts in dynamics (from *sff* to *pp* within just one measure) and the exciting climax in E-flat major just before the reprise. Like the *Humoresque,* Op. 10, this piece was revised by the composer in 1940. The later version features some melodic modifications in the middle section as well as fuller, more pianistic texture, and therefore is more frequently performed than the original. However, because the other five pieces of the set did not undergo the revisions, I decided to record the earlier, 1896 original version to be consistent with Rachmaninoff's piano writing of that time. Emotionally intense *Moment Musical* No. 3 in B minor was written shortly after the death of the composer's cousin, Alexander Satin. In this piece Rachmaninoff's grief is reflected in the lament of the opening theme, which transforms into an explicit funeral march in the reprise, with its menacing left-hand staccato octaves that clearly outline the first four notes of the *Dies Irae* motive – a theme with which Rachmaninoff was fascinated and frequently used, as both explicit and disguised quotations, beginning from Symphony No. 1, Op. 13 to his very last work, the *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45. Notably, the same four-note *Dies Irae* motive (G-F#-G-E) also penetrates the restless sixteenth-note accompaniment of the following *Moment musical* No. 4, in E minor. This bravura piece is reminiscent of the

Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude,* Op. 10 No. 12. Written in ABA' form, it poses technical and emotional demands on the performer, particularly in the reprise, which reaches an enormous climax, stretching the characteristic figuration over the entire keyboard and culminating in the coda, marked *Prestissimo* and *ffff*. The fifth composition, in D-flat major, written in style of a barcarolle, is a lyrical interlude and the only emotionally relaxed piece in the entire set. With its monotonous left-hand accompaniment, it creates the feel of stasis reminiscent of Chopin's *Berceuse,* Op. 57. The final piece of the cycle, *Moment Musical* in C major is written in style of a virtuosic concert etude, employing the full range of dynamics and sonorities available to the piano. Extremely dense texturally, the opening section of the piece introduces simultaneously three distinct elements - the chordal, bell-like melody presented in longer note values, the continuous thirty-second note accompaniment, and the descending eighth-note motive. In the dynamically lighter B section of the piece, the thirty-second note accompaniment continues in both hands in addition to the melody in the top voice and the countermelody in the left hand. The greatest climax of the piece arrives at the beginning of the reprise, in which the bell-like chordal melody is treated in canon, encompassing the whole range of the keyboard and making the overall texture even thicker. The lengthy coda brings this exciting work and the whole set to its glorious conclusion.

Most of Rachmaninoff's piano compositions, including Preludes Opp. 23 and 32, *Etudes-Tableaux,* Opp. 33 and 39, and two piano sonatas, were written before his immigration from Russia to the West in 1917. After that he composed only one work for solo piano, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Op. 42 (1931), written on the well-known Spanish tune *La folia*, used by Corelli in his Violin Sonata Op. 5 No. 12. Utilizing

a neutral theme so distant from romantic melody, gave Rachmaninoff an excellent opportunity for its dramatic development and transformation, creating contrasting characters and imagery from the same thematic idea, and thus reaching a new level of craftsmanship. In addition, the *Corelli Variations* feature a highly organized and logical structure. Rhythms are more vital than those found in the mature works of Rachmaninoff's Russian period, which is apparent, for instance, in the incisive fifth variation, with its constantly changing meter. Adventurous harmonies are particularly evident in the slower variations Nos. 3, 8, 9, and in the harmonically ambiguous *Intermezzo*. According to Norris, "All of these characteristics constitute a new, more subtle modes of expression and the new sparkle that overcame Rachmaninoff's style."[6] Compared to many Romantic and lyrical works by Rachmaninoff, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* is an austere work, in which the atmosphere of doom prevails. Featuring dark tone colors and the tragic key of D minor, this piece could be put in line with the composer's earlier works, such as the First Piano Sonata and the First Symphony both written in the same key. In this piece, Rachmaninoff portrays the struggle of Good versus Evil - the theme continued later in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43, the Symphony No. 3, and the *Symphonic Dances*.

Structurally, the *Corelli Variations* can be separated into four major sections, concluding with a coda. Section 1 comprises Variations 1-7 and can be subdivided into three sub-sections. The opening, containing the theme and the first two variations that still retain the contour of *La Folia,* is followed by the second sub-section, in which the

[6] Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, 91.

composer deviates from the original tune, presenting Variation 3 in the style of a dark minuet and Variation 4 in the style of a chorale with haunting bell-like sonorities. Section one concludes with a faster and more agitated sub-section, containing Variations 5-7, in which the music reaches its first climax marked by extremely harsh sonorities at the end of Variation 7. The beginning of the second part, containing variations 8-13, is clearly marked by means of the preceding fermata at the end of the seventh variation as well as by the change of tempo, dynamics, and character. The inner organization of this part is very clear and cohesive, with its gradual increase in both dynamics and tempo, progressing from *piano* and *adagio misterioso* markings in variation eight to *ff* and *agitato* in variation thirteen.

After all the struggle and turmoil, the appearance of the rhapsodic, improvisatory *Intermezzo*, opening the third section of the piece, offers even greater contrast than the one between the first two groups of variations. Harmonically complex, *Intermezzo* ends with the *cadenza*, whose purpose is not to prepare or smoothly transition into the next variation, but rather make its entrance most striking and unexpected. The fourteenth variation is presented in D-flat major, the key that Rachmaninoff often used to convey a lyrical and warm character, such as in the eighteenth variation from the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, secondary theme from the last movement of the Second Piano Concerto, and the *Moment Musical* No. 5. Reminiscent of Russian liturgical singing, the fourteenth variation is not just the theme presented in a major key, but rather Rachmaninoff's way of juxtaposing the "objective and cosmopolitan presentation of the original theme, heard at the very beginning of the piece, with its subjective and personal

version in the middle of the cycle."[7] The composer's personal voice shows even more in the fragile and lyrical fifteenth variation, which brings many associations with his earlier works, such as Prelude in G major, Op. 32, *Etude tableau* in A minor, Op. 39 No. 2, and the "Daisies," Op. 38.

Unlike the first three parts, the final group of variations (16-20) starts energetically with a fast tempo, *Allegro vivace.* The forceful sixteenth variation, reminiscent of the main theme from the first movement of the *Symphonic Dances*, is followed by the less energetic, seventeenth variation. With its softer dynamics, slower tempo, and thinner texture, Variation 17 presents a lonely and cold right-hand melody, juxtaposed to rapid triplet figures and empty fifths in the left hand. All of it creates an eerie feeling of the calm before the storm or perhaps portrays the inevitability of death. The next two variations of the final group represent the struggle between Good and Evil. The music serves to build an enormous tension leading to the last variation, which can be described as the "apotheosis of destruction"[8] with its extremely harsh rhythm, harmonies, and dynamics. After the tragic outcome of the dramatic collision at the end of the last variation, the work concludes with an epilogue - a highly expressive coda, symbolizing deep personal grief, hopelessness, and despair. Without any doubt, the *Corelli Variations* represents the peak in Rachmaninoff's stylistic evolution and compositional craftsmanship. As Norris points out, the Corelli Variations leave a feeling of regret that Rachmaninoff never again wrote a solo piano piece and allowed the new features of his later style to develop fully."[9]

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[7] Sergei Senkov, "Variatsii na temu Korelli, Op. 42 S. V. Rakhmaninova" in *Kak ispolniat' Rakhmaninova* (Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2016), 130.

[8] Ibid., 134.

[9] Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, 91.

Being one of Romanticism's last advocates, Rachmaninoff found it difficult throughout his life to come to terms with contemporary developments in music. In one of his interviews he explicitly stated: "My taste is conservative. I do not like modernism."[10] He further elaborated on this while replying to *Musical Courier* on a question about contemporary music:

> I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me...The new kind of music seems to come, not from the heart, but from the head. Its composers think rather than feel...Why calling this music modern? It grows old almost as soon as born, for it comes into being contaminated with dry rot."[11]

Rachmaninoff's younger contemporary, Nikolai Medtner, was also strongly opposed to modernism. His conservative philosophy is clearly defined in his treatise, *The Muse and the Fashion*, which he wrote "in defense of the foundations of the art of music."[12] As Barrie Martyn notes, "He reacted with horror at what he saw as the overthrowing of the immutable laws of art and all his life raged against modernist heresy."[13] Medtner was born in Moscow into a family of German ancestry. Despite his German heritage, throughout his life he considered himself Russian, deeply connected with his homeland and Russian culture. Through his music the composer was able to fuse the elements of German and Russian musical heritage into his own unique language. Russian influence, stemming from Tchaikovsky and Taneyev, as well as the composer's contemporaries, Rachmaninoff and Myaskovsky, shows in Medtner's frequent use of plagality and modes typical of Russian songs. Melancholic nostalgia is expressed in his

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[10] Wehrmeyer, *Rakhmaninov*, 105.
[11] Ibid., XII.
[12] Nicolas Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, translated by Alfred Swan (Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951), 1.
[13] Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), xi

compositions through "the ballade, storytelling tone, so characteristic of the Russian music."[14] At the same time, Medtner's style demonstrates strong ties with the western classical masters, particularly Beethoven and Brahms. Homage to composers of the past is apparent in Medtner's treatment of form, which is always clear and balanced, featuring logical development, strong thematic connections, and extensive use of counterpoint. As Martyn points out: "This self-declared 'pupil of Beethoven' was unquestionably a wonderful craftsman, a master contrapuntist and one of music's great architects. Taneyev described him as being 'born with sonata form', and certainly he had a grasp of large-scale structure such as few Russians have possessed."[15]

All of these stylistic traits are exhibited in Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Op. 38 No. 1, a masterfully crafted, one-movement work, featuring a double exposition and the arch form. Composed shortly after the 1917 Russian Revolution in a rural region far from Moscow, this Sonata is the music of remembrance and the composer's recollection of a vanished world. The first in the set of eight pieces from the first cycle of the *Forgotten Melodies*, it opens with the theme of reminiscence (heard again not only in the Sonata but elsewhere in the cycle), which serves as a preamble to the exposition. The main theme, appearing at *concentrando,* features the dramatic conflict between poetic lyricism and resolute determination present in the entire sonata. The transition, built on the thematic material of the main theme, is followed by the graceful secondary theme at *espressivo, meditamente*. After the polyphonic and rhythmically vital closing theme, with its characteristic ornamental slides and dotted rhythms, the composer brings back the modified repeat of the exposition, quite unusual for the solo works in the sonata form.

[14] Asafiev, *Russkaya Muzyka. XIX i nachalo XX veka*, 250.
[15] Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*, xi.

Among the most notable modifications in the second exposition are the absence of the main theme, a longer and more developed transition, and most importantly, the appearance of a new secondary theme at *tranquillo ma a tempo*. Starting very calmly in the key of the dominant minor, it gradually becomes more and more agitated, bringing the piece to its first climax at *appassionato (con moto)*, which also features the motive from the main theme in the top voice. The introductory theme of reminiscence, now in the key of E minor, underlines the boundaries of the form, bringing the double exposition to its conclusion.

With the beginning of the development section, featuring the composer's marking *svegliando* (waking up), the character drastically changes from the calm and peace of the preceding theme of reminiscence to a turbulent storm and agitation. The development can be divided into three sections. The first one is built on the conflict, or question-answer statements based on the material of the secondary theme from the first exposition, appearing in the left hand, and the closing theme, which is now transformed (*f risoluto*). The second part of the development, at *tranquillo ed espressivo*, returns the listener to the nostalgic mood of the Sonata. In this section Medtner masterfully intertwines the main theme and the secondary theme from the first exposition into the polyphonic texture, giving them new colors and nuances. The third and longest section of the development, at *poco a poco agitato e piu mosso (ma tanto)*, is characterized by a constant, wave-like chromatic movement of sixteenth notes. Beginning at *piano subito, tenebroso (sempre con moto),* built on the motive from the introductory theme, and featuring the dark colors of the low register of the piano and ostinato rhythms, the turbulence starts increasing. The most intensive phase of the development begins at *piano, poco marcato*, featuring the

motives of the main theme and bringing the work to its major climax at *piu mosso, quasi cadenza (accelerando)*, which, according to Vasyutinskaya, in its "improvisational freedom and the level of the dramatic and emotional tension could be compared to Rachmaninoff's culminations."[16]

The beginning of the recapitulation grows out of this climax, hence, the main theme, the first chord of which is now underlined by the slide and apreggiation, sounds more stern and determined. The structural surprise comes at *poco giocoso, ma sempre espressivo*, where instead of the brooding transitional theme, Medtner presents a new, light and peaceful melody in the cello register. At *a tempo* in C minor, however, the music returns to its usual course with the material of the transition, eventually leading to the last major climax of the piece with the entrance of the secondary theme from the first exposition. Notably, it is presented in the subdominant key of D minor, encompassing the range of several octaves. The final phase of the recapitulation, at *meno mosso; ma poco a poco danzato ed a tempo*, presents the secondary theme from the second exposition, the closing from the first exposition, and the main theme in succession. The composer's marking *meno mosso* and the soft dynamics underline the feeling of a farewell. At the very end the introductory theme of reminiscence is presented the last time, forming a perfect arch with the beginning of the Sonata and bringing a sense of the formal balance and completion.

Throughout Medtner's compositional career, his style in general did not undergo significant change. As Martyn points out, "He emerged fully-fledged with his earliest

[16] Yevgenia Vasyutinskaya, *N. K. Medtner: lichnost', vzgliady, stil'* (St. Petersburg: "Kompozitor", 2014), 78.

published works, his entire oeuvre being remarkably consistent in quality."[17] The *Elegy* in E-flat minor, Op. 59 No. 2 is Medtner's last piece for solo piano, written in Wythall, England in 1940. The composer's musical response to the death of his brother, philosopher Emil Medtner, is a rarely performed, yet is an enormously deep and expressive piece, at times alluding to another famous elegy, Rachmaninoff's *Moment Musical* No. 3 in B minor. Composed in ternary form with the contrasting lyrical and pensive middle section in the distant key of G-sharp minor, the work is unified by means of a motto theme presented in the first measures of the piece, which later reappears several times throughout the composition.

Unlike Rachmaninoff and Medtner, Scriabin was an innovator, whose style evolved drastically away from a traditional Romantic idiom, highly influenced by Chopin, to a unique avant-garde style in his late works. Unlike other modernists, who tried to escape from Romanticism to more objective ways of musical expression, Scriabin's late modernist style was inspired by mysticism, a trait that influenced many other romantic artists. Therefore, even his late modernistic works stem from a truly romantic concept. Scriabin is unique among the composers because he considers his philosophical and mystical beliefs reasons for his music; therefore, it is impossible to look at Scriabin's works without connecting them to his ideology. From the beginning, Scriabin was interested in the Symbolist movement, which was a mixture of mysticism, philosophy, and religion. He later embraced Nietzsche's philosophy and the idea of a superhero. Finally Scriabin became preoccupied with theosophy, proponed in Helena Blavatskaya's book *Secret Doctrine*, which stated that the knowledge of God may be

[17] Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music,* xii.

achieved through spiritual ecstasy. Some of the most noticeable traits of Scriabin's style, the upward contours of his melodic motives (polyot - flight, and poriv - burst) were ways he used to convey this sense of uplift and his desire to transcend humanity through music. He based his own philosophy on these theosophical beliefs, which eventually shaped into the idea of creating his ultimate grandiose work, the *Mysterium*, inspired by the Wagnerian concept of the universal art, *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The *Mysterium* was intended to synthesize all forms of arts and senses, such as dance, color, light, and scent. The project was ultimately abandoned in favor of a "safer" version, "Prefatory Action" (Predvaritel'noe Deistvo), with its purpose to prepare an unready public for the "Mysterium." As a result, the majority of Scriabin's late modernistic works, including the Five Preludes, Op. 74, featured on this recording, were meant to be part of the Prefatory Action.

The evolution of Scriabin's style can be demonstrated using the genre of a prelude because it occupies a very significant place in the composer's oeuvre, as he wrote eighty-nine of them throughout his life. The first forty-seven preludes, Opp. 11, 13, 15, 16, and 17 were most likely conceived as one cycle with two preludes in each key. Because Scriabin's publisher, Mitrofan Belyayev, wanted an immediate release of the set in 1896, and the composer had not completed all forty-eight preludes by the deadline, they came out as separate opus numbers. Resisting Belyayev's pressure, Scriabin wrote in a letter to him on March 25, 1896: "Each prelude is a small composition capable of standing on its own, independently of the others. Of course, I could write the four missing pieces today, that is I could *devise* them, which I would have to do, since I haven't the faintest inclination to compose. But I really don't want to do that, as none of the other pieces were

invented."[18] As a result, the set of the Twenty-Four Preludes, written over a span of eight years from 1888 and 1896, was published as Op. 11 in Leipzig in 1897 and divided by Belyayev into four parts: Nos. 1-6 (1888-1896), Nos. 7-12 (1894-96), Nos. 13-18 (1895), and Nos. 19-24 (1895-6). Each prelude was inscribed with the date and location of its completion - Moscow, Kiev, Dresden, Heidelberg, Witznau, Amsterdam, and Paris. Scriabin did not compose the preludes in chronological order. For example, Prelude No. 4 in E minor came first in 1888, when the composer was only sixteen. This prelude bears the theme and a fragment of the composer's first poem, originally intended for his unfinished Ballade in F minor:

> O country of visions!
> How different from this life
> Where I have no place
> But there, I hear voices,
> A world of beatific souls I see.[19]

As many other works of Scriabin's early period, the cycle of the 24 Preludes, Op. 11 was inspired by his idol, Frédéric Chopin, and in particular Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28. Both sets have the same tonal plan (the ascending circle of fifths with relative minor), as well as the similar conception of a prelude as an independent miniature piece that expresses a single mood or idea. In addition, many of the preludes from Op. 11 utilize the stylistic features of the genres from Chopin's oeuvre, such as waltz and mazurka in Op. 11 No. 2 in A minor and No. 23 in F major; nocturne in No. 5 in D major, No. 13 in G - flat major, and No. 21 in B-flat major; waltz and barcarolle in No. 10 in C- sharp minor; etude in No. 1 in C major, No. 3 in G major, No. 6 in B minor, No. 14 in B-flat minor, No. 18 in F minor, and No. 24 in D minor; and the close resemblance to Chopin's Funeral

[18] Faubion Bowers, *The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 48.
[19] Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1969), 1:137

March from the Sonata No. 2 in B -flat minor, Op. 35 in the Prelude No. 16 written in the same key. Finally, like Chopin, Scriabin followed traditional formal structures, particularly favoring the form of a period, as well as binary, rounded binary, and ternary forms.

Despite the apparent influences of Chopin in these youthful works, Scriabin does not simply imitate him, but rather takes Chopin's musical language further by making it more supple and free, thus beginning to reveal his own style through original melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic treatment. Delson notes that many of Scriabin's themes from Op. 11 are "sophisticated and flexible,"[20] featuring frequent use of semitones, angular leaps by the intervals of 7th and 9th, as well as numerous chromatic nonharmonic tones and suspensions, such as in Preludes No. 2 in A minor and No. 4 in E minor. To achieve rhythmic flexibility, Scriabin frequently employs irregular rhythmic groupings, such as in No. 1 in C major, featuring quintuplet figures crossing the bar lines. Another example can be found in No. 14 in E-flat minor, written in 15/8 and presenting 3+2 groupings, interrupted by the *sforzando* octaves that stir the regularity formed by the accented downbeats of the bass line. Finally in No. 19 in E-flat major, one of the most rhythmically and technically complex preludes of the set, one can find that the ascending quintuplet figurations in the left-hand accompaniment constantly cross the bar line in a wave-like pattern. Among other rhythmic innovations in the set is the use of shifting meters, found in the Prelude No. 16 in B-flat minor, which alternates between 5/8 and 4/8; the Prelude No. 21 in B-flat major with no fixed time signature, the meter changes every measure; and the Prelude No. 24 in D minor, with an alternation of meters between 6/8 and 5/8.

[20] Viktor Delson, *Skriabin: ocherki zhizni i tvorchestva* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1971), 259.

In addition to rhythmic inventiveness, Scriabin's Preludes, Op. 11 reveal harmonic originalities that depart from Chopin's influences. In this set, the composer starts employing the extended dominant harmonies that he later used extensively in the works of his middle years. The dominant ninth chords are found in the C major Prelude, while eleventh and thirteenth extensions are present in the Prelude No. 7 in A major. In addition, Scriabin often creates harmonic ambiguity by delaying the establishment of the tonic until the end of the phrase or the entire piece. Some of the examples include the Prelude No. 2 in A minor, in which the clear arrival of the tonic occurs only at the third beat of measure 4; the Prelude No. 18 in F minor, which avoids the tonic until the end of the first period in measure 16; and most notably, the Prelude No. 20 in C minor, which is composed as if it were in F minor, affirming C minor as the tonic key only in the final cadence of the piece. Another notable harmonic feature of the cycle is the emphasis on the subdominant area. Some of the instances of the direct modulation to the subdominant right after the statement of the main idea can be found in Prelude No. 1 in C major, No. 10 in C-sharp minor, and No. 21 in B-flat major. Thus, despite Chopin's predominating influences in Scriabin's Preludes, Op. 11, the young composer's truly distinctive voice begins to originate, which manifests in his characteristic treatment of the melodic content, rhythm, and harmonic language.

After 1903, when Scriabin's philosophical insight started to take shape, the composer continued to expand the possibilities of harmonies and tonalities. Influenced by theosophical beliefs, Scriabin was striving to create a new kind of sound, suitable for the expression of mystical elements and experiences. As a result, a novel sonority, which became known as the "Mystic Chord", emerged in Scriabin's *Prometheus* (1910) and

opened a new phase in his compositional development. The initial chord, C-F#-Bb-E-A-D, as well as its reduction to an acoustic scale, C-D-F-F#-A-Bb became the foundation of the composer's late works. Scriabin's brother-in-law, musicologist Boris Schloezer, further elaborates on this concept, pointing out that none of the six tones of this acoustic scale assumes the function of the tonic:

> This peculiarity is closely related to the manner in which Scriabin treats this scale; he uses all its components simultaneously, often in superimposed fourths. Thus the concept of the scale is fused with that of the chord, and this chord, embracing the entire scale, appears perfectly stable, reposing upon itself without requiring resolution. It synthesizes and summarizes the scale. From this standpoint any transposition of the chord is equivalent to a freely effected modulation. [21]

Scriabin's search for harmonic structures that would reflect unheard sonorities, brought the composer to an original idiom masterfully projected in his late works, including his very last composition, the set of Five Preludes, Op. 74, composed in 1914, one year before his sudden death. These five short pieces are unified thematically and harmonically by the use of the Mystic Chord. The incomplete form of the chord is presented right at the beginning of the Prelude No. 1, reappearing throughout the piece and marking its climax in measure 12. In the same measure the chromatic ascent of the soprano line completes its rise from E# to E that starts at the beginning of the piece, thus enhancing the distress and heartbreak portrayed in this composition. Both Preludes Op. 74 No. 3 and No. 5 feature the exact repetition of the first part, transposed a tritone away. In the last prelude, Op. 74 No. 5, the figurations in the right hand are explicit linear manifestations of the Mystic Chord, which supports Scriabin's notion that "there is no difference between melody and harmony. They are one and the same."[22] Stylistically similar to Alban Berg, the Prelude Op. 74 No. 4 is characterized by the combined

[21] Boris Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 322.
[22] Bowers, *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer*, 2:204.

sonority of the A major/minor triads, hence contributing to the character of obscurity and indecisiveness projected in this piece. Perhaps most outstanding piece of the set and Scriabin's favorite, Prelude No. 2 is deep and profound, and, according to Delson, could be viewed as Scriabin's "miniature requiem."[23] The ostinato empty fifths in the bass create the sense of stasis, similar to the mood of Chopin's Prelude in A minor, Op. 28. In his personal conversation with Leonid Sabaneyev, Scriabin said about this Prelude: "This is death! [...] death and love [...] this is the abyss. This is the Mysterium."[24]

Without any doubt, Rachmaninoff, Medtner, and Scriabin were the most significant composers of the Russian Romantic piano school in the first half of the twentieth century. Their aesthetics, inspirations, and approaches to composition are each unique, and the representative works from their early and late periods provide an excellent opportunity to examine these differences. A disciple of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff composed most of his works before immigrating to the West in 1917. Unlike the emotionally charged, melodically directed compositions of the Russian period, such as *Morceaux de salon* and *Moments Musicaux,* his late work, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli,* is austere and philosophical. Medtner, on the other hand, was a Romantic seeking classical forms of expression, whose style remained mostly unchanged throughout his career. He emphasized structural clarity and contrapuntal writing, following the tradition of Beethoven and Brahms, along with the nostalgic quality characteristic of Russian music. The blending of German and Russian elements is evident in both the *Sonata-Reminiscenza* and his last work for piano solo, *Elegy,* Op. 59 No. 2. Unlike Rachmaninoff and Medtner, both of whom disliked modernism and whose styles

[23] Delson, *Skriabin: ocherki zhizni i tvorchestva*, 271.
[24] Leonid Sabaneyev, *Vospominania o Skriabine* (Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2000), 315.

were deeply rooted in the nineteenth century, Scriabin was an innovator. He strove to create new sonorities, harmonies, and colors to musically represent his philosophical beliefs as the foundation for his music. The drastic evolution of his style throughout his short life is seen clearly in his early Chopinesque Preludes, Op. 11 and the late modernistic Preludes, Op. 74.

# Annotated Bibliography

Asafiev, Boris. *Russkaya Muzyka. XIX i nachalo XX veka* [The Russian Music. XIX and Beginning of the XX centuries], 2nd edition. Leningrad: Muzyka, 1979.
Written in 1928 by the Russian composer, writer, and musicologist Boris Asafiev, the book consists of the following chapters - Russian Opera, Russian Romance of the 19th century, The Cultivation of the Russian Folk Song, Vocal Chamber Music, Choral Music, Russian Instrumental Music, and Thoughts about Music. The appendix contains the detailed chronological table of important Russian works organized by genre. The subsection on Russian piano music from the chapter "Russian Instrumental Music" is particularly helpful for my research, as it discusses the differences and similarities in the compositional styles of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Medtner (pp. 247-253).

Bowers, Faubion. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer, 1871-1915*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1969.
The definitive biography of Scriabin in two volumes, containing the detailed biographical information on the composer, as well as many confessional letters and personal reminiscences, giving an insight into his life, relationships, and philosophical views. The author does not, however, provide the stylistic analysis of Scriabin's compositions.

_____. *The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973.
Compared to Bowers's first two-volume study about Scriabin, *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer, 1871-1915,* this book is significantly shorter; however, it includes materials previously unavailable to the author, in particular the work of such Russian scholars as Yavorsky and Dernova. The first five chapters comprise a concise biography of the composer and are particularly good at depicting the Russian cultural scene of Scriabin's time. The next six chapters are more relevant to my topic because they are devoted to aspects of Scriabin's creative process and include many direct quotes by the composer about his vision, including the rigid structures of his form.

Delson, Viktor. *Skriabin: ocherki zhizni i tvorchestva* [Skryabin: essays on his life and works]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1971.
Written by a famous Russian musicologist and a piano student of Sofronitsky, who was the Scriabin's son-in law, this study by Delson is an invaluable source. The book contains five essays that examine Scriabin's biography, style, works, and his influence on other composers. The essays "Evolution of Scriabin's Style" and "Piano Works" with the analysis of the preludes are specifically relevant to my research.

Martyn, Barrie. *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
Written by the enthusiastic devotee of Medtner's music, this book is one of the most comprehensive monographs on Medtner. The work contains many fascinating biographical details and excellent descriptions of Medtner's music with numerous musical examples to illustrate the author's points.

Medtner, Nicolas. *The Muse and the Fashion*, translated by Alfred Swan. Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951.
Published in France in 1935, the treatise was later translated into English by a notable musicologist Alfred Swan, who personally knew Medtner. The book is separated into two parts. Part I discusses the importance of knowing and establishing the connection with the music of the past. Medtner also talks about such elements of music as form, melody, and rhythm. He strongly opposes atonality and polytonality, saying that such music is written according to a scheme and without inspiration. In Part II, Medtner mainly discusses modernism, pointing out that the modern generation of composers is trying to replace the Muse with Fashion. His main idea is that the great composers of the past who tried to bring something new, never destroyed the boundaries of the art and its link to the past. This primary source was extremely important in my research, as it gave an insight into the composer's view of the modernism in music.

Norris, Geoffrey. *Rachmaninoff.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1993.
Divided into 12 chapters, the book includes both, the composer's biography (in chapters 1-5) and the discussion of his works (chapters 7-12). Chapter 6, The Piano Works, was particularly pertinent to my research. The book also offers a superb reference material, including a detailed life and times chronology, a complete list of works, a personalia glossary, highlighting the important people in the composer's life, and a select bibliography.

Sabaneyev, Leonid. *Vospominania o Skriabine* [Reminiscences of Scriabin]. Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2000.
The book was written in 1925 by a notable musicologist, music critic, Scriabin's personal acquaintance, and his first biographer, Leonid Sabaneyev. From the *Reminiscences* a reader can learn a number of factual information about Scriabin, and how the composer himself presented his work. Despite the fact that this book represents a great scientific interest, some scholars think that it contains a number of inaccuracies, and that it cannot be the only correct interpretation of the events from the life of the composer.

Schloezer, Boris. *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
The book was written in 1919 by Scholezer - Scriabin's brother-in-law and a sympathetic exponent of the composer's mystical beliefs. The book contains introductory essays by Scriabin's daughter, Marina. After presenting a short biography of the composer as well as the chronological list of the his works, Schloezer mainly discusses Scriabin's personality and philosophical views. The second part of the book mainly deals with the Scriabin's grandiose project, the "Mysterium."

Senkov, Seroff. "Variatsii na temu Korelli, Op. 42 S. V. Rakhmaninova" in *Kak ispolniat' Rakhmaninova* [Performing Rachmaninoff]., edited by S. Grohotov. Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2016.
This is an insightful essay, discussing the structure, style, and character of the *Corelli Variations.* The author suggests a biographical interpretation of this work, pointing out that the psychological conflict of the *Corelli Variations* lies not only in the struggle of the

Good and Evil, but also in the conflict of the inner world of the composer, representing the humanistic side, versus alien and destructive elements, representing inevitability of death. The numerous musical examples, showing thematic connections with other works by Rachmaninoff are particularly helpful.

Seroff, Victor, *Rachmaninoff*. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.
Written in 1950, this is a thorough biography of Rachmaninoff from the childhood to his last years. The last chapter deals with reinstatement of Rachmaninoff's music in Soviet Russia. The inclusion of Rachmaninoff personal letters and reminiscences is particularly valuable.

Vasyutinskaya, Yevgenia . *N. K. Medtner: lichnost', vzgliady, stil'* [N. K. Medtner: Personality, Views, Style]. St. Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2014.
The book begins with two chapters containing Medtner's short biography and notes on his style, and then proceeds with several chapters about the stylistic analysis and performance interpretation of several Mednter's works, including the *Tragic Sonata, Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Sonata in G minor, Op. 22, and Concerto No. 1. Then the author discusses the pedagogical principals of Medtner, particularly stressing Medtner's practice suggestions in the composer's *Daily Work of a Pianist and Composer.* The book concludes with the commentaries on the composer's treatise the *Muse and the Fashion*.

Wehrmeyer, Andreas. *Rakhmaninov*. London: St. Haus Publishing, 2004.
A short, but insightful biography of Rachmaninoff containing many personal letters, reminiscences and photographs. The appendices include chronology, list of works, and testimonials by famous pianists.