

PROGRAM NOTES AND PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS OF
SELECT PIANO PIECES BY SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
WITH ACCOMPANYING CD RECORDING

by

DAWN DALANGIN HAWK

(Under the Direction of Evgeny Rivkin)

ABSTRACT

The majority of solo piano music by Sergei Rachmaninoff is comprised of short character pieces, with most belonging to a larger set. In order to examine a wide range of compositional techniques and performance interpretations, the following pieces are studied: 1) the eight *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, 2) the *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3, and 3) selected Preludes from Op. 23 and Op. 32. A comparison of several recordings is discussed, including available recordings by the composer himself. The purpose of this paper is to examine the scores and recordings, to create my own scholarly and artistic performance choices. The performance considerations are discussed and are supported by my accompanying CD recording.

INDEX WORDS: Rachmaninov, Rachmaninoff, *Études-Tableaux*, *Morceaux de Fantaisie*,
Fantasy Pieces, Preludes, Russian piano music

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Rachmaninov’s piano music was conceived by a man who understood to the last degree the possibilities and limitations of the instrument. That is why it is so attractive; it is pianist’s music, and its difficulties are always justifiable on musical grounds...”¹

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was known as a Russian composer, conductor, and pianist. As a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, he was a great pianist with excellent technique and was in high demand as a recitalist. It is evident in his piano compositions that he understood the capabilities of the piano and how to create pieces to convey particular atmospheres and emotional colors.

For his solo piano works, he is regarded as one of the masters of the piano miniature. The majority of his piano compositions are sets of smaller pieces, including the following major collections: two sets of *Études-Tableaux* (17 total, two of which are published posthumously), two books of *Preludes* (24 total preludes, one of which is in the *Morceaux de Fantaisie*), *Morceaux de Fantaisie* (5 total), *Morceaux de Salon* (7 total), and *Six Moments Musicaux*.

As a sample of Rachmaninoff’s solo piano works, I will be examining the five *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3, the eight *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, and selected Preludes. The purpose of this paper is to study the scores and compare recordings by distinguished pianists, in order to create my own informed performance choices as demonstrated by my recording. Additionally, I will compare these recordings to those which have been recorded by the composer himself.² Some of the issues that will be addressed are tempo considerations, phrasing, and how to play larger chords.

¹ John Culshaw, Rachmaninov: The Man and His Music, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 53.

² See Discography.

For each piece, I will provide a brief overview of compositional techniques and notable features. To maintain some consistency, I chose recordings by pianists who have recorded the complete works of Rachmaninoff. This is a rare feat that has only been done by a few people and only a few complete sets of solo piano works by Rachmaninoff are readily available. Therefore, I have chosen recordings by Vladimir Ashkenazy and Michael Ponti for comparison. Their recordings will also be compared to existing recordings by Rachmaninoff. My discussion includes comments of some of their performance choices not noted on the score, as well as comments on my own performance choices and interpretation.

CHAPTER 2

MORCEAUX DE FANTASIE, OP. 3

Rachmaninoff wrote this set of five “Fantasy Pieces” in 1892 and dedicated them to his composition teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, Anton Arensky. Originally, Rachmaninoff intended the first four, the *Elegy*, *Prelude*, *Melody*, and *Polichinelle*, to comprise the entire set. However, after he heard of an interview in which Tchaikovsky praised the young Rachmaninoff’s compositional talent, he was inspired to write the fifth piece, *Serenade*. Before sending the set to publishers, Rachmaninoff had Tchaikovsky look it over; he particularly liked the *Prelude* and *Melody*.³

The *Morceaux de Fantasia* was first published in 1893, however, *Melody* and *Serenade* were revised with second versions much later in 1940. Although all five were performed frequently by Rachmaninoff, it was these two that he performed in many different versions.

Rachmaninoff recorded the *Prelude* three times (1919, 1921, and 1928), the *Polichinelle* twice (1922 and 1936), and the second version of the *Melody* one time in 1940.

As earlier works by Rachmaninoff, these pieces generally have simple forms, textures and harmonies.

I. Elegy in E-flat minor

As the title suggests, the *Elegy* creates an atmosphere of sadness and is in simple ternary form. The A section in E-flat minor, like most of his slower piano works, starts with a single note melody in one hand supported by arpeggiated chords (Figure 1). The B section shifts to the relative major of G-flat major and switches the melody into the left hand (Figure 2).

³ Rakhmaninov, Sergei. Rakhmaninov: Fantasy Pieces for Piano, Op. 3. (Moscow: P. Jurgenson, 2011), 46.



Figure 1: Elegy in E-flat minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 1-8



Figure 2: Elegy in E-flat minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 41-48

This being an earlier work, Rachmaninoff uses simple parallel thirds and sixths to create harmonies underneath the melody with each statement in the A sections, compared to his thicker textures in later compositions.

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, they both perform the A sections at approximately $\text{♩}=65$. However, the major difference is that Ponti uses much more rubato and is quite a bit more flexible in his tempi. In the B sections, Ashkenazy performs at approximately $\text{♩}=120$, whereas Ponti is a bit faster at $\text{♩}=140$. One notable difference at the return of the A is that Ashkenazy takes the *ppp* section even slower (Figure 3), although the score makes no indication to do so. From this point, he keeps it at the slower pace and a generally softer dynamic until the coda, marked *ff*. Ponti, however, stays with the *Tempo I* as marked and is very clear in following all dynamics, which actually return to *mf* just a few measures after the *ppp*.

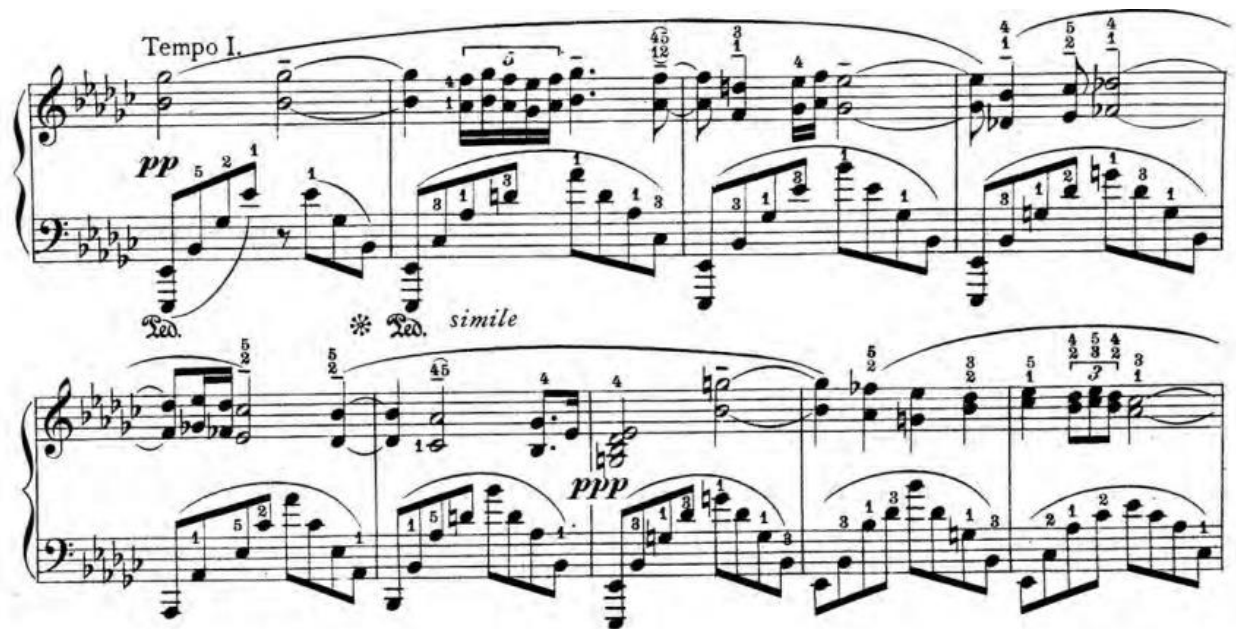


Figure 3: Elegy in E-flat minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 84-92

Although the beginning is actually marked *Moderato*, like these two pianists, I also wanted a generally slower tempo for a more desolate sound, performing the A section at approximately $\text{♩}=65$ with some rubato. I prefer Ashkenazy's tempo of the B section, to not rush

through the new melody in the left hand. However, like Ponti, I wanted to be more flexible with the tempo to make it sound more expressive. Leading up to the climax, for more dramatic effect, I tried to broaden the tempo even more than Ashkenazy and Ponti (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Elegy in E-flat minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 70-73

II. Prelude in C-sharp minor

The *Prelude* is widely regarded as Rachmaninoff's most famous solo piano work. He also transcribed it in 1938 for four hands. Although he kept it in his concert repertoire, he did not view it as a significant composition, since he wrote it when he was only nineteen years old. He frequently performed it as an encore piece until the end of his performing career in 1943, despite his annoyance at its popularity. It was additionally performed by other pianists, including his cousin and former piano teacher, Alexander Ziloti, who included Rachmaninoff's compositions in many recitals he held abroad.

Rachmaninoff first performed the *Prelude* in 1892, at an Electrical Exhibition festival. It was here where it first became popular. It was also particularly popular in England, where his British debut was in 1899, performing the *Prelude* along with the *Elegy* at the Queen's Hall. Much to Rachmaninoff's surprise, London publishers had given it subtitles such as "The Burning of Moscow" and "The Day of Judgement." He had simply written the *Prelude* a year after graduating from the Moscow Conservatory, for the purpose of having some income. Despite its later success, he sold it for only the equivalent of twenty dollars.

This first prelude in his complete cycle of 24 preludes (discussed in Chapter 4), opens with a three-note motive (A→G-sharp→C-sharp), which is also heard in the final D-flat major prelude (Figure 5). The piece is in ternary form, where the A section is marked at *ppp* and features the motive in the lower register, which is surrounded by middle range chords. In mm. 7-9 (Figure 6), we see a fragment of the *Dies Irae*, a favorite melody often used by the composer. At the B section, marked *Agitato*, there is a change of texture, containing triplets with a chromatic melody (Figure 7). These triplets change into alternating left and right chords, which serve to transition to the return of the A section (Figure 8). Here, Rachmaninoff has spread the chords into four staves, giving the piece an even heavier and dark sound as marked with *fff* and *pesante*.



Figure 5: Prelude in C-sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 1-4



Figure 6: Prelude in C-sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 7-9

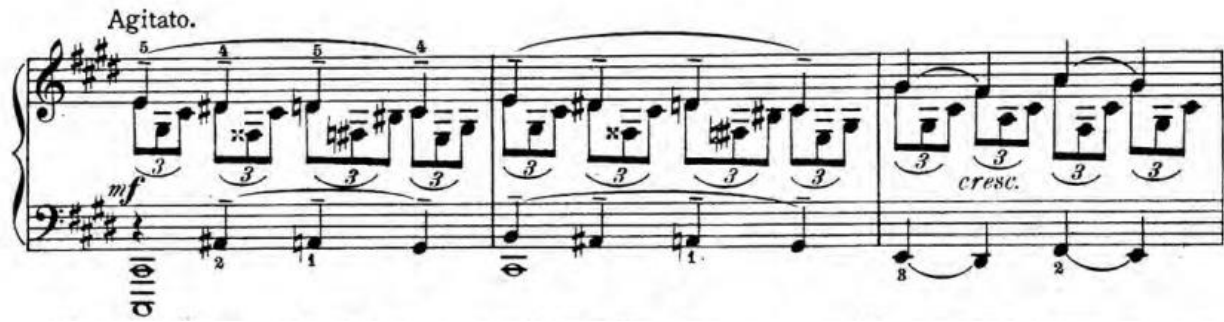


Figure 7: Prelude in C-sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 15-17

Figure 8: Prelude in C-sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 42-48

Rachmaninoff recorded this prelude three times, in 1919, 1921, and 1928. Compared to Ashkenazy, his opening three-note motive is played at a faster pace, which is similar to Ponti's version. In all three recordings, Rachmaninoff then performs the opening chords at a much slower pace (Figure 5) at around $\text{♩} = 35$, compared to the *Dies Irae* passage in mm. 7-9 (Figure 6),

which he plays at around $\text{♩}=55$. There is no indication on the score for a tempo change, however, there is a dynamic change from *ppp* to *mf*. In the B section (Figure 7), his tempo changes significantly starting at approximately $\text{♩}=210$. Here, we hear Rachmaninoff accelerate toward the middle of phrases and then *ritardando* toward the end of phrases. Also, in all three of Rachmaninoff's recordings, the return of the A section (Figure 8) is slightly faster than the opening, although it is marked *Tempo primo*. The consistency in his tempo changes in all three recordings gives us a clear understanding of what the composer's interpretation of this piece was.

Ashkenazy takes the entire *Prelude* slower than Rachmaninoff in all sections, resulting in a recording that is actually one minute longer than Rachmaninoff's. Unlike Rachmaninoff, his two A sections are equivalent in tempo. For the *Dies Irae*, he also speeds up these sections a bit, but not as much as Rachmaninoff. Like Rachmaninoff, he also accelerates toward the middle of phrases and then slows down at the ends of phrases in the B section.

Ponti's tempi are very similar to Rachmaninoff's and his only about ten seconds longer. Like Rachmaninoff, the second A section is faster than the first. One thing that is noticeable in his recording is in the first A section, he places emphasis on the second chord of m. 3 (Figure 5) and similar passages. Like Rachmaninoff, he also speeds up the *Dies Irae*.

For my recording, I like a slow opening of the three note motive, like Ashkenazy. Since it is the first statement, I wanted to bring it out more by slowing it down. I tried to choose a tempo somewhere between Ashkenazy's and Ponti's, since I feel Ashkenazy's drags a bit, however, Ponti's seems to rush the *Lento* marking. For the *Dies Irae*, I thought to follow Rachmaninoff's example of speeding up these sections, since that was clearly his intent. For the B section, I wanted a tempo more similar to Ashkenazy's, since there would be more time to enjoy some of the phrases at a slightly slower tempo than Rachmaninoff. For the return of the A section, I wanted to try to keep the same tempo as the beginning, since this slower tempo would allow for a heavier feel, as indicated.

III. Melody in E major

The *Melody* is the only piece in a major key of the Op. 3 set. The original version marked *Adagio sostenuto*, published in 1893, features the melody in the left hand, with accompanying blocked chords in the right hand (Figure 9). The revised version was published in 1940, with the major difference being that these chords were arpeggiated and marked at *Andante con moto* (Figure 10). I have chosen the second version for my recording, and it is that version which will be discussed here.



Figure 9: Melody in E major, first version, (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 1-3



Figure 10: Melody in E major, second version, (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 1-3

Again in ternary form, the melody is written in typical Rachmaninoff fashion: it follows a general stepwise arch shape. In the A section, it remains mostly in the left hand and is supported by arpeggiated triplets of the right hand (Figure 10). In the B section, marked *pìu mosso*, the melody switches to the right hand and is supported by triplets in both hands initially. Four measures later, marked *Animato*, the texture becomes thicker with chords in both hands (Figure

11). At the return of the A section, the melody is now in both hands and supported by a mix of arpeggiated figures and chords (Figure 12).



Figure 11: Melody in E major (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 30-31



Figure 12: Melody in E major (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), mm. 41-43

Ashkenazy chose to perform the second version of the *Melody*, while Ponti chose the first version. When comparing the tempo between the two, Ponti's is at a slower pace, with the first version indicated as *Adagio sostenuto*. Ashkenazy's performs this piece at a slightly faster pace, with the second version marked *Andante con moto*. With the two playing two different versions, it is difficult to make a direct comparison. As the title indicates, the melody is the main feature and both pianists take care to create expressive phrasing.

For my recording, I chose a tempo slightly faster than Ashkenazy's, to try to keep the melody flowing. In general, I tried to do a slight accelerando where the melody had sustained notes and a slight ritardando at the end of phrases, to try to imitate someone singing the melody. In the *Animato*, I decided to change the rhythm of the triplets so that the second note

was a dotted rhythm, as I have marked in Figure 13. This was Rachmaninoff's original indication in the first version, and I thought it more consistent to keep all of the triplets dotted, rather than playing the first two triplet groups even and the third as a dotted rhythm, as indicated in the score.



Figure 13: Melody in E major (from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3), m. 31

IV. Polichinelle in F-sharp minor

The *Polichinelle*, or “punch” puppet character is full of comedic episodes, often alternating between minor and major keys and alternating dynamic contrasts (Figure 14). It is in ternary form, with the A sections full of fanfares and rising bravura passages, which creates a similar scene at a fair or circus, as the Op. 33, No. 5 étude (Chapter 3). The B section, although marked *Agitato* has a very lyrical melody, surrounded by arpeggiated chords (Figure 15).



Figure 14: Polichinelle in F sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 5-12



Figure 15: Polichinelle in F sharp minor (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 63-65

In Rachmaninoff's recording, he starts the piece at a slower tempo for the contrary motion passages in mm. 2-3. (See mm. 5-6 in Figure 14 which are similar.) The fanfare major key sections in mm. 11-12 are played with an *accelerando*, whereas the contrasting minor key sections are played at a slower tempo. In the *Agitato* (Figure 15), he seems to really take extra time on the triplets to stretch out those particular melodic half notes. At the last two measures, although not indicated, Rachmaninoff adds pedal and allows the final chord to ring out a bit.

Ashkenazy's performance of the *Polichinelle* is very steady, compared to Rachmaninoff's tempo. At the *Agitato*, he does not stretch out the triplets and just has touches of rubato to help shape the phrases. Unlike Rachmaninoff, he does not add pedal on the last chords, but does hold the last chord a bit longer.

Ponti's performance is closer to Rachmaninoff's, where he does change tempi in the same sections as Rachmaninoff, playing the *ff* passages faster and the *p* passages slower. However, Ponti does not have quite as drastic tempo changes as Rachmaninoff. Like Ashkenazy, he also does not stretch out the triplets and also does not add pedal on the final chords.

For my performance, like Ashkenazy, I wanted an overall steadier tempo, with just slight tempo changes between sections. In the *Agitato*, I also did not stretch out the triplets, but let the melody govern the tempo. At the final chords, I also did not add pedal, but went for a more staccato sounding final chord.

V. Serenade in B-flat minor

Along with the *Melody*, the *Serenade* was rewritten by Rachmaninoff in 1940. The main difference is in the first version, there are rolled chords, whereas the second version has staccato chords (Figures 16 and 17). Additionally, the second version includes embellishing chromatic passages. I chose to perform the second version, therefore only that version will be discussed.

Unlike the previous four pieces, this one begins with a slower introduction marked *Sostenuto*, which introduces a fragment of the first theme. It then goes into a waltz, marked *Tempo di Valse* at m. 31 (Figure 17). This waltz section is more like an étude, with the accompanying chords often overlapping in the same register as the melody. These waltz chords are particularly challenging with big leaps in the left hand, and they require the performer to overlap hands, sometimes right over left and sometimes left over right.

Unlike the previous four pieces, this one does not have a contrasting B section and maintains the waltz texture until the Coda, *Più vivo ed accelerando* (Figure 18).



Figure 16: Serenade in B-flat minor, first version, (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 31-37



Figure 17: Serenade in B-flat minor, second version, (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 31-37



Figure 18: Serenade in B-flat minor, second version, (from *Morceaux de Fantasia*, Op. 3), mm. 44-58

The existing recordings by Rachmaninoff are dated 1922 and 1936, which are before the second version was published. However, Rachmaninoff's 1922 recording is some rendition of the second version. He does not roll the left hand chords, but includes the florid chromatic passages at the end. The 1936 version also is the second version of the piece. The one notable change in this performance is that Rachmaninoff places an emphasis on beat two of the left hand chords, which helps to hear how this is related to the chords in the Coda (Figure 18) and similar passages. In both recordings, Rachmaninoff plays the waltz at approximately $\text{♩}=65$, which he maintains throughout.

Both Ashkenazy and Ponti perform the *Serenade* at a slightly faster tempo compared to Rachmaninoff. However, like *Melody*, Ashkenazy chose the second version, whereas Ponti chose the first for his recording. For the waltz section, which starts off similarly in both versions, Ponti is much more flexible with his rubato, compared to Ashkenazy and Rachmaninoff.

For my recording, I tried to choose a similar tempo and maintain a more steady beat, compared to Ponti, unless otherwise indicated in the score. Unlike Rachmaninoff's second recording, I chose to not accent the second beats of the waltz and instead keep the chords softer in order to bring attention to the melody.

CHAPTER 3

PRELUDES

Inspired by Chopin, Rachmaninoff also composed a set of 24 preludes in all the major and minor keys. The complete 24 Preludes include the Prelude in C-sharp minor from *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3 (1892), ten preludes in Op. 23 (1903), and thirteen preludes in Op. 32 (1910).

The Op. 23 set was completed while Rachmaninoff was waiting for the birth of his first child, Irina. This set was dedicated to his cousin, Ziloti, who regularly performed Rachmaninoff's music abroad and made them known to the public. In a productive period of Rachmaninoff's life, the Op. 32 set was written in just a few weeks, between August 23rd and September 10, 1910. He wrote three of them, Nos. 5, 11, and 12 in just one day.

Rachmaninoff regularly included selections from both opuses in his performances. The first prelude in C-sharp minor was always demanded as an encore by his audiences.

For this project, I selected some of my favorite preludes: 1) Op. 23, No. 4 in D major, 2) Op. 32, No. 5 in G major, and 3) Op. 32, No. 13 in D-flat major.

I. Prelude in D major, Op. 23, No. 4

This prelude bears some resemblance to the *Melody* in Op. 3. It begins with triplet arpeggiated chords and is followed by a stepwise melody two measures later (Figure 19). This *cantabile* melody is followed by its restatement, this time with the triplets in the upper register and with an eighth-note bass accompaniment (Figure 20).



Figure 19: Prelude in D major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 1-7

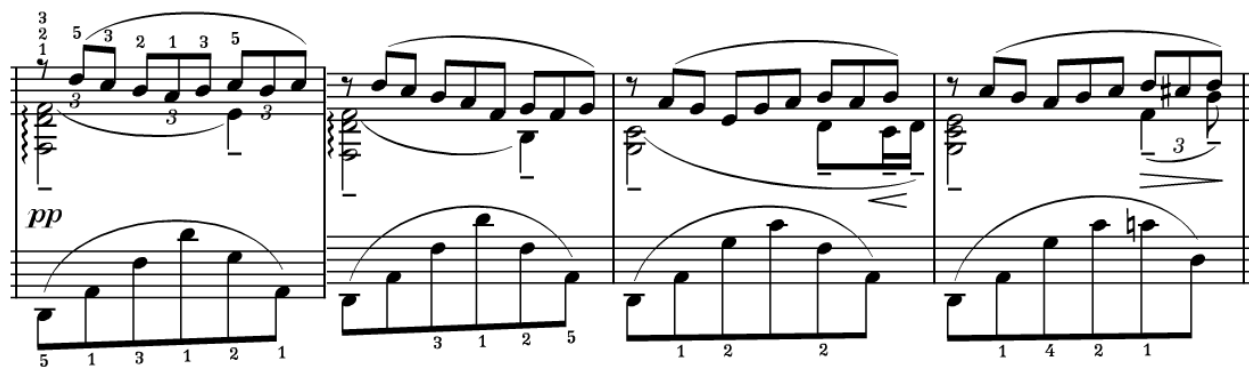


Figure 20: Prelude in D major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 19-22

Around the climax in m. 51, we hear two conventions which Rachmaninoff uses frequently: 1) his rising sequence of scalar passages (chords in right hand of Figure 21) and 2) bells starting in m. 53. The climax is followed by another appearance of the main theme, this time mostly in octave chords of the right hand. As is done in many Rachmaninoff pieces, the piece ends with the melody in the original register and at the same starting dynamic of *pp*.

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, although there is a specific tempo mark of $\text{♩} = 50$, there is a noticeable difference between performances. Ashkenazy plays slightly under

the tempo indication, whereas Ponti is faster at about $\text{♩}=65$, making Ashkenazy's recording more than one minute longer than Ponti's.

Figure 21: Prelude in D major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 48-54

Ashkenazy's slower tempo seems to drag and not allow some of the longer notes in the melody to connect. On the other hand, Ponti seems to rush through some passages, taking away from some of the expression. Therefore, for my recording, I wanted a tempo in between the two and tried to start at the indicated mark at $\text{♩}=50$.

II. Prelude in G major, Op. 32, No. 5

This prelude was one of Rachmaninoff's favorites and was performed regularly in his concerts. It is also only one of three preludes from Op. 32 which he recorded himself. It is one of his simplest preludes, having an overall thin texture and following a ternary form, with the B section shifting to the parallel minor.

Like the D major, Op. 23, No. 4, this prelude begins with an arpeggiated flowing figure in the left hand, then enters with a stepwise melody in the right hand (Figure 22). The quintuplets of the left hand change to sixteenth notes and, with this change in texture, the second theme enters (Figure 23). The B section shifts to the parallel G minor with material taken from the first theme and lasts for only five and a half measures. We then see a return of the A section, followed by chromatic right hand passages in the coda.



Figure 22: Prelude in G major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 1-4



Figure 23: Prelude in G major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 15-16

In Rachmaninoff's recording, he plays with some tempo variance, although it is not indicated on the score. He starts the first theme at about $\text{♩} = 90$ and then speeds up the second theme passages (Figure 23). Right before the key change in mm. 19-21, he changes the rhythm of

what is on the score, by holding on to the dotted notes longer (Figure 24). At the coda, similar to how he played the chromatic passages in *Melody*, Op. 3, he accelerates at any ascending chromatic scales and slows down the descending scales.



Figure 24: Prelude in G major, Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 19-22

Ashkenazy plays this prelude quite a bit slower than Rachmaninoff, with the first theme at approximately $\text{♩}=60$. Like Rachmaninoff, he also speeds up the second theme. Unlike Rachmaninoff, he does not hold the dotted rhythms longer in m. 19 and plays these rhythms in the same manner as the previous measures. At the coda, Ashkenazy maintains a steady tempo through the chromatic passages.

Ponti's tempo is approximately $\text{♩}=70$ and maintains this tempo through both themes. He also leaves the dotted rhythms undisturbed and keeps the rhythm flowing through these measures. Ponti also does not speed up the chromatic passages in the coda, but here he makes the most obvious *leggiero* passages as indicated in the score, with less pedal. Ashkenazy and Rachmaninoff don't seem to differ in their pedaling, by continuing legato pedal.

For my recording, I liked Ponti's slightly faster tempo, as it allows the melody to move without rushing through it. I also speed up slightly in the second theme, but not as much as Rachmaninoff, since there is no indication of this in the score. For the dotted rhythms, I also wanted to keep the same rhythm flowing into the cadential passage right before the B section for a more seamless transition and do not hold them longer than indicated. For the chromatic passages at the end, rather than disturbing the articulation by pedaling differently, I interpreted the *leggiero* to be more of a lighter dynamic, rather than changing the articulation. This would allow the quintuplets in the left hand to maintain their same legato sound throughout the piece.

III. Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13

The final prelude is in sections, marked by several tempo and key changes. It starts at a *Grave* tempo, opening with the first theme in chords (Figure 25). At the next section, marked *Meno mosso* with a key change to A major, the texture changes to a pulsing sextuplet rhythm in the left hand and single line melody in the right hand. This melody introduces a second melody also played in the right hand (Figure 26). It then moves back to D-flat major in a section marked *Allegro* which gets faster and changes keys one more time to C-sharp minor. In this *Vivo* section, in the key of the very first prelude, we see two quotes of that three-note motive of A→G-sharp→C-sharp (Figure 27). Following this quote, it returns to the first theme back to the original key and is now surrounded by additional chords and chromatic scales. This section becomes particularly challenging for the performer, with large jumps in both hands. The piece ends with a fragment of the first theme and emphasis on the tonic and dominant for a triumphant finish (Figure 28).

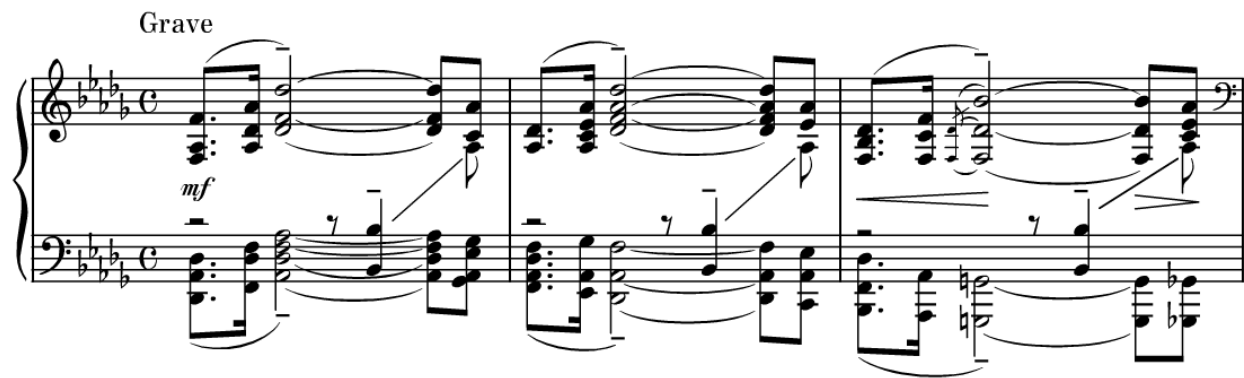


Figure 25: Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 1-3

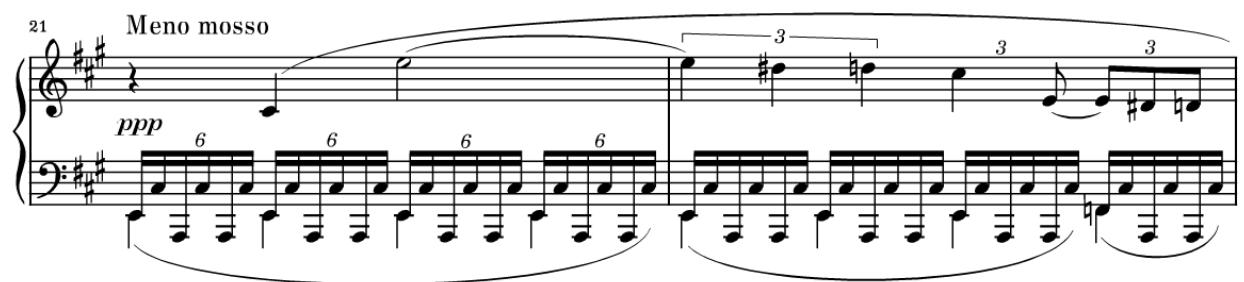


Figure 26: Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 21-22



Figure 27: Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 37-40



Figure 28: Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 60-62

Ashkenazy's beginning *Grave* is at approximately $\text{♩}=25$, compared to his tempo of about $\text{♩}=60$ at the return of the *Grave* at the end. At the final measures, Ashkenazy rolls the large chords, which Rachmaninoff would have been able to reach.

Ponti takes his *Grave* twice as fast, at approximately $\text{♩}=50$, which results in Ashkenazy's recording being almost a minute and a half longer than Ponti's. The second *Grave* section is approximately the same as Ashkenazy's, which makes his two tempi more consistent with the marking. Ponti also rolls his final chords, but not as slow as Ashkenazy.

For my recording, I chose a starting tempo somewhere between Ashkenazy's and Ponti's, at around $\text{♩}=40$. The length of this prelude ends up being also between the lengths of the two pianists. Rather than rolling the chords, I decided to take notes out of the final chords to try to keep the rhythm as written.

CHAPTER 4

ÉTUDES-TABLEAUX, OP. 33

Rachmaninoff composed his first étude in 1911, the year after he completed his set of 24 Preludes. In addition to the first Op. 33 set, he also completed a second set, Op. 39, in the next six years. Both sets were originally intended to have nine études each. However, Rachmaninoff withdrew three of them in Op. 33, in a last minute decision before publication: C Minor, D Minor, and A Minor. The A Minor étude was moved to his Op. 39 set, while the other two were not published during his lifetime. In 1950, Leeds Music published Op. 33 with eight études total: the six Rachmaninoff intended plus the two published posthumously, labeled “First complete edition.” This started a tradition of publishers and performers alike to keep all eight together in a set.

Like the previous études of Chopin and Liszt, Rachmaninoff’s address a particular technical issue. These “Picture-Etudes” suggest that Rachmaninoff intended these pieces to be more programmatic in nature. Each étude has its own character, with varying textures, tempos, dynamics, and articulations. Except for the sixth E-flat major étude, which was later orchestrated and described by Rachmaninoff as “a scene at the fair,” none of the other Op. 33 études were given descriptions. As Rachmaninoff himself said, “I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what they most suggest.”⁴

Of the études, two have been recorded by Rachmaninoff himself: the C Major étude and the E-flat major étude. Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, the first étude has the biggest difference in tempo. All other études have been recorded in similar tempi and interpretation between the two pianists.

⁴ Haylock, Julian. *Sergei Rachmaninov: An Essential Guide to His Life and Works*, (Great Britain: Pavilion Books Limited, 1996), 49.

I. No. 1 in F minor

This opening étude, marked *molto marcato* is march-like, with the alternating left and right hand chords being the underlying pulse. The main melody is in the upper voice of the right hand, with a secondary melody in the left hand bass line. In this bass line, a descending dotted eighth–sixteenth rhythm is found throughout the piece (Figure 29). The technical challenge is to hold melodic notes in the upper voice of the right hand, while simultaneously playing chords by the right hand.



Figure 29: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 1 in F minor, mm. 1-6

In this first étude alone, there are several notable techniques which Rachmaninoff uses frequently. The first is his rising sequence of scalar passages (Left hand in Figure 30). Second, is his fondness for bell-like effects (Figure 31 - sustained notes marked with tenutos). Third, is his use of “neighbor note figures⁵,” which are related to his consistent use of the *Dies Irae*. (Figure 32 – down a major second, up a major second, down a fourth)

⁵Caruthers, Glen. “The (re) appraisal of Rachmaninov’s music: contradictions and fallacies.” *The Musical Times*. 147.1896 (Autumn, 2006): 44-50.



Figure 30: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 1 in F minor, mm. 45-47

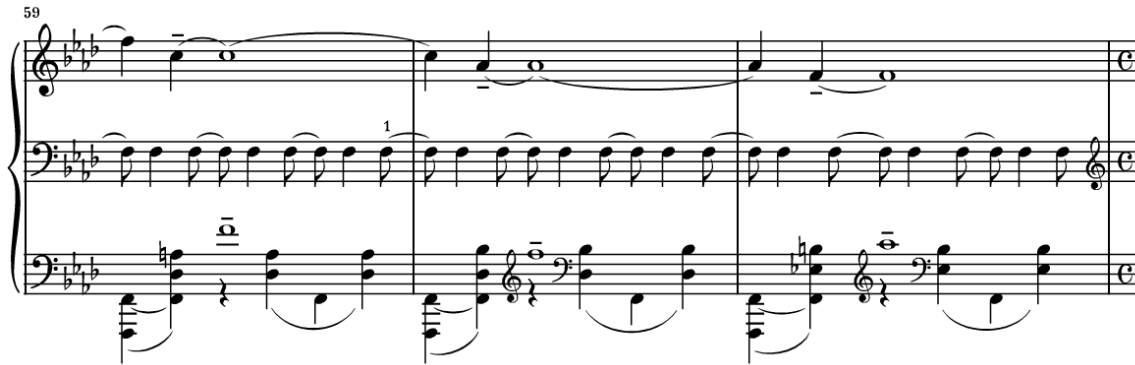


Figure 31: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 1 in F minor, mm. 59-61



Figure 32: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 1 in F minor, m. 62

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, Ashkenazy takes a slower tempo at about $\text{♩}=116$. This allows him to make a much heavier bass line articulation, compared to Ponti who performs at about $\text{♩}=150$, with a more staccato bass line. Ponti's dotted rhythms are not as clear as Ashkenazy's which is perhaps due to his faster tempo.

At the bell-like section (Figure 31), both pianists chose to slow the tempo down to the end of the piece, which is not indicated in the score.

For my recording, I prefer Ashkenazy's pace at about $\text{♩}=116$, to give it a more march-like feel. I also chose to play my bass line articulation more staccato, if the dynamic was under *forte* and more on the heavier side, if the dynamic was marked *forte* and above. Since the dotted rhythms are an important feature of this piece, I tried to improve on the clarity of my dotted rhythms, compared to Ponti's, which sound like triplets in some measures. At the bell-like section, I chose to slow down as well, since this allows the bells to ring out more and gave me greater accuracy for the hand crossings.

II. No. 2 in C major

This lyrical étude in 12/8 is marked with a *molto espressivo* melody over a repeating rhythm (Figure 33). The technical challenge is to keep the singing melodic line projecting over the repeated rhythm, although it involves some hand crossings. The repeated rhythm also exchanges from right to left and vice versa, which poses another technical challenge.

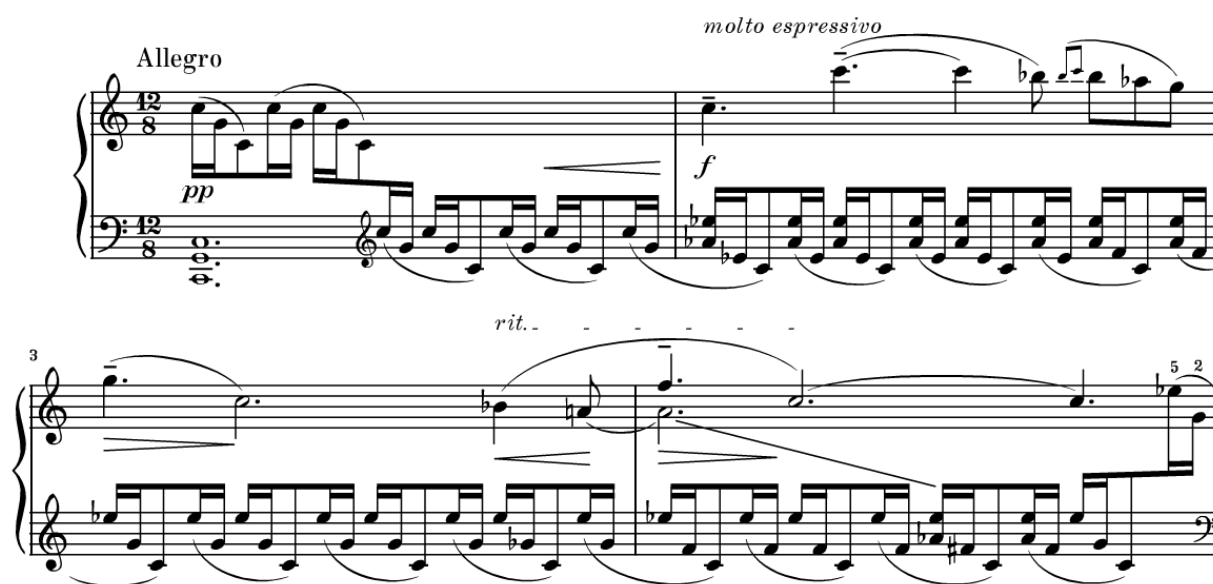


Figure 33: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 2 in C major, mm. 1-4

This étude has been recorded by Rachmaninoff himself. He plays this piece at approximately $\text{♩} = 80$, while being flexible with the tempo to allow for more expression. He is careful to project the melodic line, while shaping the melody and adjusting the tempo to reflect the phrases. In his recording, the dynamic changes are very obvious and true to the score, with one exception. In mm. 35-36, he starts the crescendo a bit earlier, rather than waiting until the end of m. 36 as marked in the score (Figure 34).

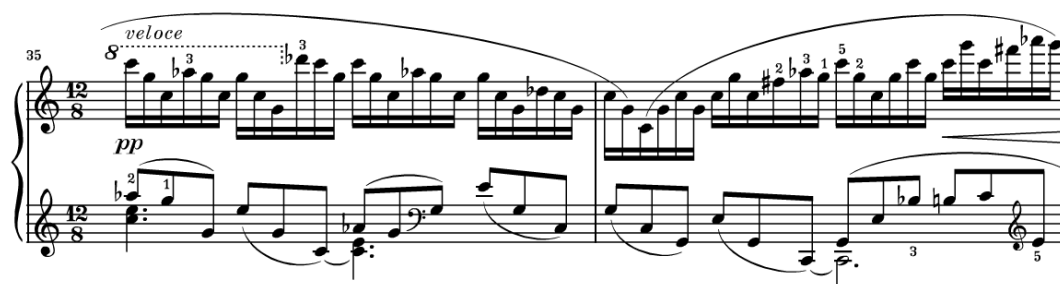


Figure 34: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 2 in C major, mm. 35-36

Ponti's recording displays an almost identical performance compared to Rachmaninoff's. One minor difference is that Rachmaninoff takes even more time at the very last few measures marked *meno mosso* (Figure 35).

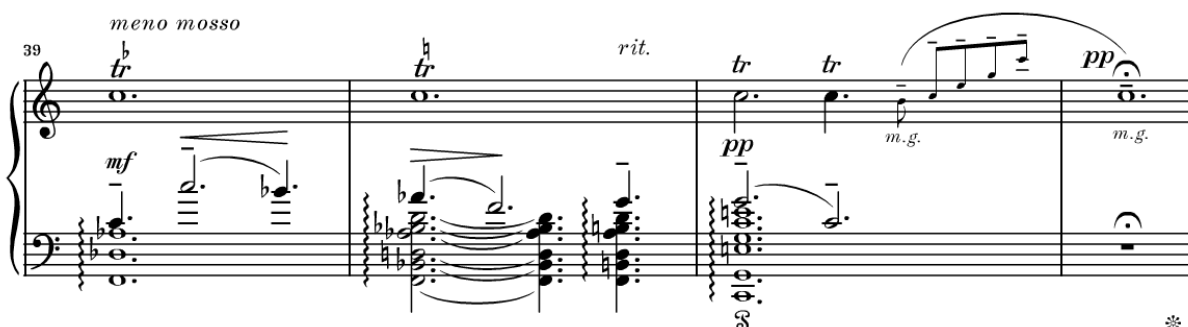


Figure 35: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 2 in C major, mm. 39-42

Ashkenazy takes this étude at a slower tempo and uses even more rubato. Like Ponti, Ashkenazy does not slow down as much as Rachmaninoff in the final *meno mosso* measures.

I decided on a tempo somewhere between the Ponti-Rachmaninoff and Ashkenazy tempo, in order to keep the melody moving, while still allowing room for expression. For the final measures, I prefer Rachmaninoff's slower tempo, since it is marked "*meno*" *mosso*. Since the rhythmic values are longer (the dotted quarter is the fastest value and this is the only time there aren't sixteenth notes), I believe the composer's intent was to slow down and let the music fade away.

III. No. 3 in C minor

This étude is one of the three that was withdrawn by Rachmaninoff before publication. It was not actually published during his lifetime. However, Rachmaninoff decided to use some of the end material in his fourth piano concerto, at the end of the second movement. The opening starts with a darker mood in C minor and features held chords and bell effects (Figure 36). It then shifts into a more peaceful mood, marked *Molto tranquillo* and shifts into C major (Figure 37). As is done in many of Rachmaninoff's music, this piece starts from a low point (marked *ppp*), grows in intensity (marked *f*), and then fades away into the end (down to *p*). Near the end, marked *poco a poco agitato*, at m. 30 is the start of the section of music he quotes in his fourth concerto (Figure 38).

The technical challenge is to be able to hear all of the different layers by controlling their timbre, phrasing, and dynamics. There are three general layers: an underlying low sustained bass (Rachmaninoff used the extreme low register, using multiple ledger lines), a middle chordal texture, and an upper register which starts as bells (Figure 36) and then turns into the melody in the *Molto tranquillo* section (Figure 37). It is in this section where controlling the dynamic of all three layers becomes increasingly difficult due to the wide reaches in both hands.

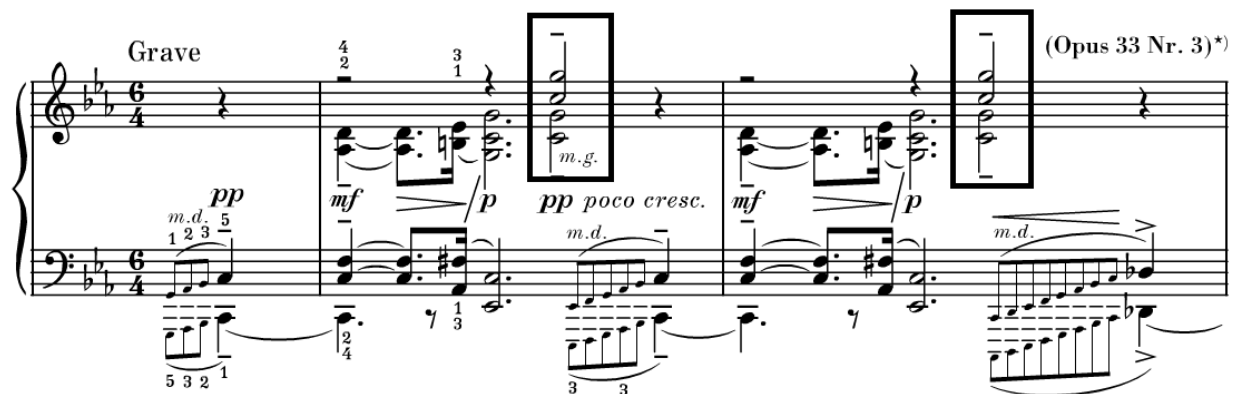


Figure 36: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 3 in C minor, mm. 1-2

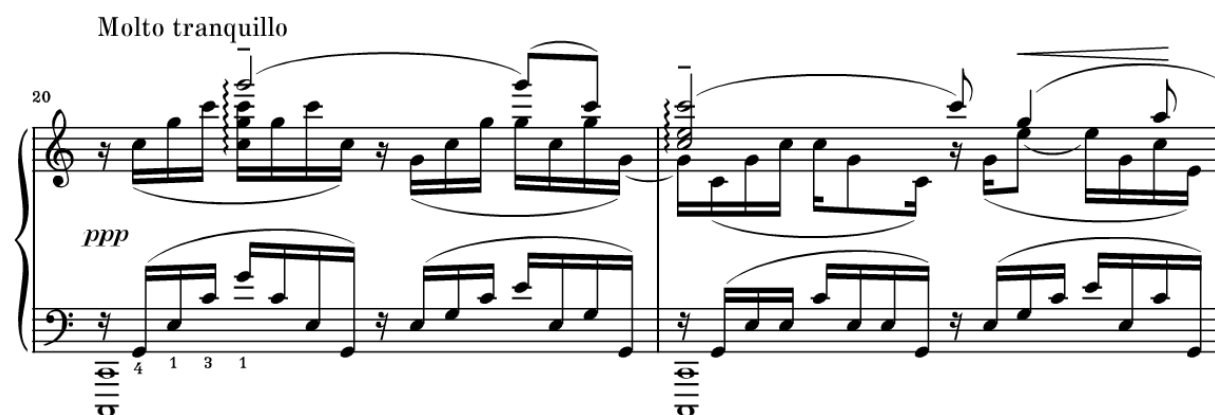


Figure 37: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 3 in C minor, mm. 20-21



Figure 38: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 3 in C minor, mm. 30-31

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, they both take the *Grave* tempo marking seriously, playing at approximately $\text{♩}=40$ and with much rubato. One of the major differences is that Ashkenazy rolls some of the larger chords, whereas Ponti does not. (It is difficult to determine from the recording whether Ponti takes notes out or is actually able to reach the large chords.) Also, in m. 30 (Figure 38), Ponti brings out an additional layer marked with up and down stems in the bass clef. Ashkenazy's recording does not bring these notes out and treats all of the sixteenth notes in the bass clef equally.

In my recording, I decided to take the opening *Grave* slightly faster to give it a more funeral march pace, rather than the slower pace of Ashkenazy and Ponti. I wanted to save the rubato for the more expressive C major section. Like Ponti, in order to preserve the rhythm which Rachmaninoff has written, I decided to not roll the larger chords. Instead, I preserved the bass line and took out some of the upper notes in the left hand. For the additional layer in m. 30, since Rachmaninoff's score does have these notes double stemmed, unlike Ashkenazy who blends these sixteenth notes in with the others, I thought to bring some attention to these notes, while not accenting them as much as Ponti. I wanted instead to bring attention to the main melody in the middle register to help build the climax.

IV. No. 4 in D minor

Like the previous étude, this one was also withdrawn by Rachmaninoff and not published during his lifetime. This piece is like a march, with the left hand having a texture very similar to the first étude and also in 4/4 (Figure 39). The main technical challenge is to bring out the melody in the upper notes of the left hand, within a thicker texture of the chords around it (Figure 40).

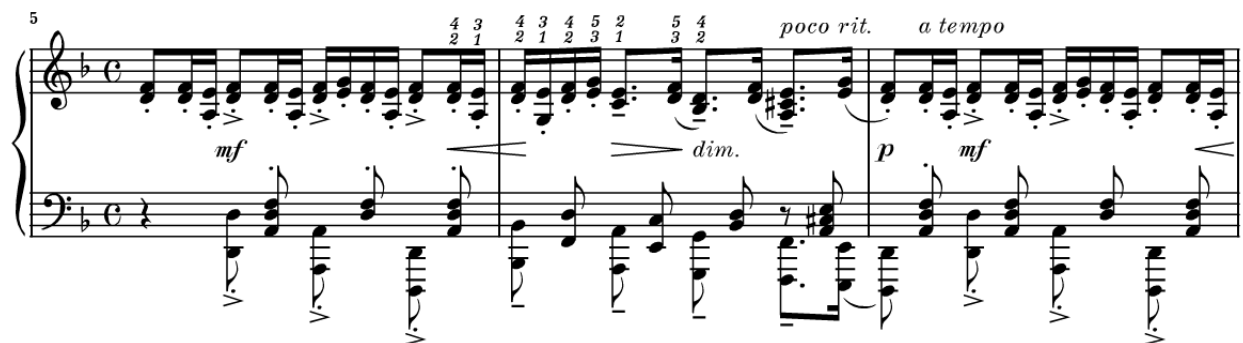


Figure 39: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 4 in D minor, mm. 5-7

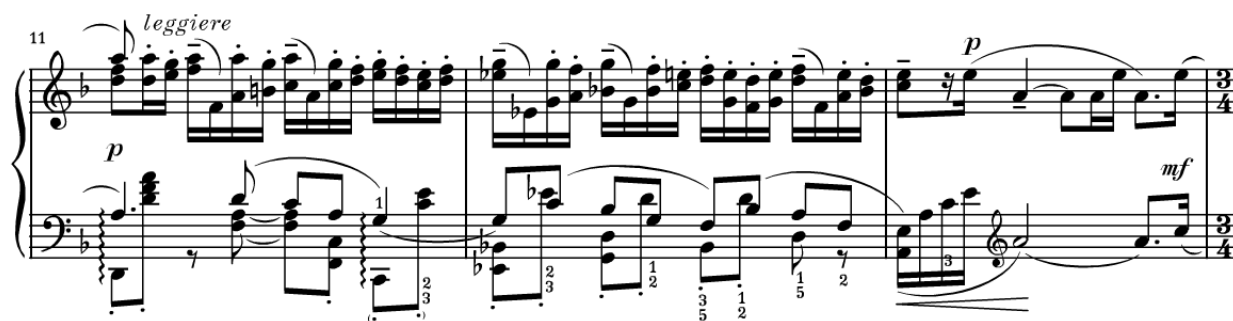


Figure 40: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 4 in D minor, mm. 11-13

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, there are not many differences between their interpretations. They both perform this piece at around $\text{♩}=90$, speeding up in the beginning of phrases and slowing down at the end of phrases. In general, Ponti takes a bit more liberty with the tempo, while Ashkenazy adheres to a steadier tempo.

For my performance, I decided on a slightly slower tempo, for the many technical challenges within the piece: parallel thirds in the right hand, fast rolled chords in the left hand, and sections of very thick chords. Like Ashkenazy and Ponti, the left hand chords with the melodic line had to be rolled, in order to obtain the wide reaches and maintain both the melodic line and the bass. At the last measures, I wanted the piece to fade away somewhat and added a ritardando at the very end, unlike Ponti who does follows the score and like Ashkenzy who also slows down a bit (Figure 41).

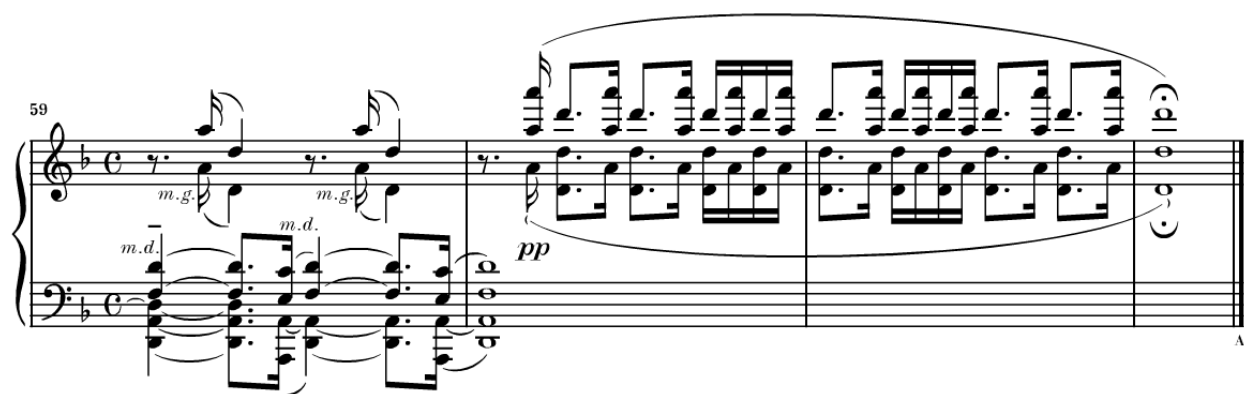


Figure 41: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 4 in D minor, mm. 59-62

V. No. 5 in E-flat minor

This étude, in 12/8 features a steady stream of sixteenth notes with chromatic passages and wide hand positions in a *presto* tempo. The main technical difficulty is to keep these sixteenth notes steady, despite the different hand positions that are required. In general, these sixteenths have an arch shape, with some twists and turns, and interjected with some left hand chords (Figure 42). Phrases are often marked with a crescendo followed by a diminuendo. This creates a sound like gusts of wind, which is why this étude has been nicknamed “winter wind” or “snow storm.”



Figure 42: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 5 in E-flat minor, mm. 3-4

Like the first étude, Rachmaninoff inserts a *Dies Irae* fragment in the left hand chords of m. 9 (Figure 43). This also appears later in m. 17 transposed to a different key.

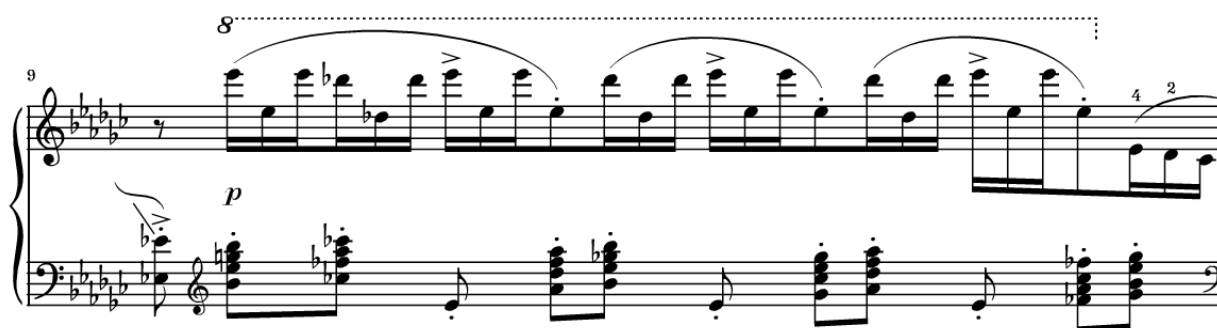


Figure 43: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 5 in E-flat minor, m. 9

There is not much difference between the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings. They both perform this étude somewhere between $\text{♩} = 80$ and 100. All dynamics, tempi, and articulations are followed. Perhaps one slight difference is that Ponti's recording seems to be more dry, with less pedal, which could be a venue difference.

For my recording, I decided on a slightly slower tempo, to allow for more clarity in the notes. Compared to Ashkenazy and Ponti who did not seem to bring out the *Dies Irae*, I tried to bring attention to this by voicing to the left hand chords in those passages, since this is a melody Rachmaninoff uses in many of his compositions.

VI. No. 6 in E-flat major

This étude was selected by Rachmaninoff to be orchestrated by Italian composer Ottorino Respighi, along with four other études from Op. 39. After discussions with Rachmaninoff on interpretation, Respighi named this piece *La foire* (The Fair). In Respighi's version, for a fanfare effect and celebratory sound, he uses brass instruments for the opening chords and most melodic passages. Strings and woodwinds are used for any of the running sixteenth note passages (Figure 44).

Allegro con fuoco
molto marcato

ff Brass

pp Strings

Figure 44: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 6 in E-flat major, mm. 1-5

The technical challenge here is to bring out the melody, which is predominantly in the left hand, while the right hand has rapid rotating chords (Figure 45).

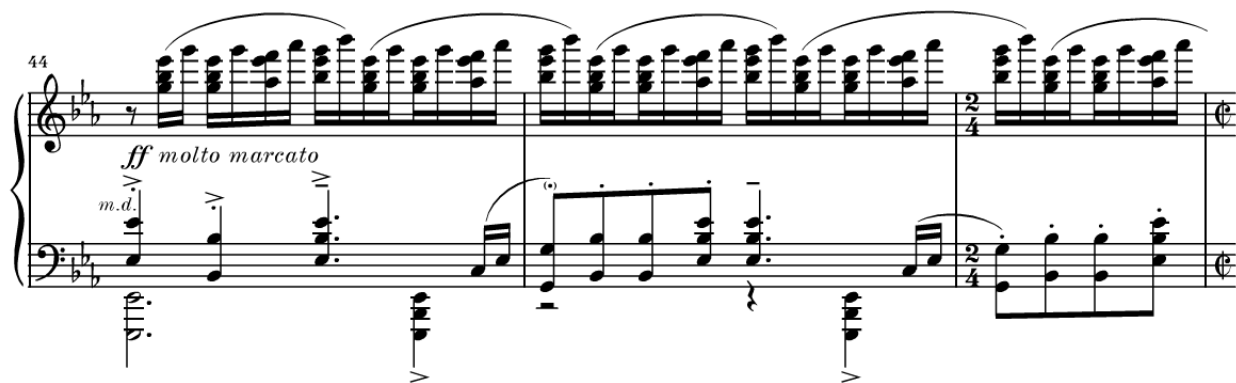


Figure 45: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 6 in E-flat major, mm. 44-46

This is one of the two études (along with the second one in C major) which was recorded by Rachmaninoff himself. Compared to the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, Rachmaninoff takes much more time in his passages marked *poco rit.* His overall tempo is also very similar to the other recordings, at approximately $\text{♩} = 140+$.

Again, the recordings of Ashkenazy and Ponti are very similar. Ashkenazy performs this piece at a slighter slower tempo than Ponti. At this slower tempo, this allows the bass line to sound heavier in Ashkenazy's recording, whereas Ponti's bass has a more staccato sound.

For my interpretation, to produce a more pronounced fanfare at the opening, I chose a slower tempo than that of Ashkenazy. Additionally, like the previous étude, a slower tempo would allow for more clarity. Like Ashkenazy, and to produce a more heavy brass sound as in Respighi's orchestration, I also wanted a heavier left hand, rather than the lightness of Ponti's chords. Like Rachmaninoff, I took more time in the *poco rit.* sections for more dramatic effect.

VII. No. 7 in G minor

This étude is one of the few lyrical pieces of the Op. 33 set, marked *molto legato e cantabile* at the entrance of the melody. It features a melancholy melodic line accompanied by arpeggiated sixteenth notes (Figure 46).



Figure 46: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 7 in G minor, mm. 1-6

This étude does not necessarily have a particular technical challenge, but represents a “picture” or impression of perhaps sadness. In many of Rachmaninoff’s slower piano works (like the C major étude), he has a single note melody in one hand, with accompanying arpeggiated notes surrounding it.

Comparing the Ashkenazy and Ponti recordings, Ashkenazy plays this piece at a slower tempo at approximately $\text{♩}=55$, whereas Ponti is closer to $\text{♩}=70$, with more tempo rubato. Perhaps Ponti’s faster tempo is due to the *moderato* tempo marking. One section where Ponti really stretches the tempo is in m. 16-18 (Figure 47), where this is the first climax point.



Figure 47: *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 7 in G minor, mm. 14-20

The tempo I chose is closer to Ashkenazy's slower tempo, since I wanted this piece to depict a feeling of sadness. Like Ponti, I also wanted to stretch out mm. 16-18, for more dramatic effect and to allow the dynamic to decrease from *f* to *pp* in just one measure. The extra time allowed for more decay. My main focus was to have a *cantabile* melody, so I tried to shape the phrases carefully and use tempo rubato to help guide the phrases.

VIII. No. 8 in C-sharp minor

This final étude in Op. 33 is the loudest of the set, reaching a *fff* dynamic and starting and ending at *ff*. It features the lower register of the piano, having accented low chords and running sextuplets in the left hand (Figure 48). One of the main technical challenges is the sextuplets, which require rapid octave changes in the left hand. This becomes increasingly difficult towards the end of the piece, when the right hand also has to jump rapidly for the octaves in the middle layer (Figure 49).

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Grave" by Franz Liszt. The score is written for piano and is divided into two systems. The first system is marked "Grave" and features a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a piano introduction marked "ff" (fortissimo) and includes dynamic markings "sf" (sforzando) and "ff". The second system is marked with a 6/8 time signature and includes a measure number "4" at the beginning. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and includes various musical notations such as treble and bass staves, clefs, time signatures, and dynamic markings.

36

poco meno mosso

fff

m.d.

4

3

Although both Ashkenazy and Ponti start this étude at about the same tempo, at $\text{♩}=50$, Ponti slows down significantly after the first scalar passage and keeps this slower tempo until the end. His tempi are not consistent with the markings in the score. The middle section is marked *Tempo Primo*, however, he does not return to his opening tempo. Ponti otherwise follows all dynamics and articulations as indicated in the score.

I preferred Ashkenazy's overall faster tempo, to end the entire Op. 33 set with more bravura and excitement. For me, this étude has a demonic quality and at the *poco meno mosso* (Figure 39), I interpreted as a vortex going down into the underworld. Therefore, I decided to start this passage at about *mf*, rather than *fff*, to allow for a more tumultuous descent to the end.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Sergei Rachmaninoff's music remains a staple in any pianist's repertoire and continues to see new interpretations by musicians today. We are fortunate to have a few recordings available of the composer playing his own works for greater insight on how to interpret his music.

Listening to and comparing two other great pianists, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Michael Ponti, gives additional ideas for how to perform Rachmaninoff's music. Rachmaninoff was very specific in his articulations, dynamics, and smaller tempo indications, so the main differences between recordings was in overall tempi and phrase shaping. In general, Ashkenazy kept a more steady beat and liked to play slower pieces even slower than indicated. Ponti employed tempo rubato very similar to Rachmaninoff, often having fast tempo changes.

When making decisions on how to interpret any music, it is important to know what a piece sounds like in its polished form, in the initial stages of learning repertoire. Listening to recordings of different musicians perform the same piece can be very useful to aid one's own performance choices.

One technical factor many pianists have to take into consideration is how to play the wide chords, which Rachmaninoff could easily reach. Ashkenazy generally rolled the chords, however, Ponti either omitted notes or was perhaps able to reach some of the chords. (At times, it is difficult to hear whether Ponti omits notes or actually plays all of the notes in his recordings.) Since my hand stretches to a maximum of a ninth, I had to consider whether to roll chords or omit notes. This changed, depending on how the chords fit into the context of the music. If I thought the rhythm was an important feature, such as the end of the prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13 (Figure 28), I omitted notes to keep the rhythm intact. In slower and more

expressive sections, I decided to roll the chords, which I thought was suitable to the style of that particular piece or moment.

From this project, I have gained new ideas on shaping phrases and how to relate tempi to dynamic indications. In Rachmaninoff's own recordings, where there is a softer dynamic, he slows down the tempo. If the dynamic is louder, he has a faster tempo. A crescendo is accompanied with an *accelerando* and a *diminuendo* also means to *ritardando*. His recordings of the infamous prelude in C-sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2 demonstrates these tempi to dynamic relations in all three recorded versions. Before this project, my interpretation of this piece did not have as drastic tempo changes, unless there was actually a tempo change indication. After hearing the different recordings, and especially those by the composer, I have tried to be more flexible with my own tempi and experiment with bigger tempo contrasts where the dynamics also change.

Listening to Rachmaninoff himself has changed my own interpretations of his music and has opened my mind to more performance possibilities. Additionally, listening critically to my own playing has also been a valuable learning experience and I plan to continue recording myself to prepare for future performances. When learning repertoire, I would highly recommend this process of comparing existing recordings, in addition to listening to your own recordings to all performers, teachers, and students alike.

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⁶ There are multiple spellings of Rachmaninoff's name, due to the various spellings on these sources. In this paper, I used the spelling of "Rachmaninoff", since this is how the composer himself signed his name.

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