

PIANO CONCERTS FROM THE MOST PROLIFIC PERIOD OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

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Abstract: Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), also known as “the late Romantic composer”, composed and created his music almost up to the half of the twentieth century. Contrary to the interests of his contemporaries who strived to change the formal frameworks of their compositions, he remained loyal to traditional formal patterns which he upgraded using novel solutions. He composed four concerts for piano and orchestra. This paper analyses two of them: Concert no. 2 op. 18 (composed in 1901) and Concert no. 3 op. 30 (composed in 1909). The reason for such a choice lies in the fact that they were composed in the same and most prolific period of creation of this composer, whereas Concert no. 1 op.1 (1891) and Concert no. 4 op.40 (1926.) were composed at the very beginning of this prolific period and after it, respectively. This paper attempts to show to which extent these two concert are mutually interconnected, regarding their formal, structural and thematic characteristics.

Keywords: concert, sonata cycle, sonata form, formal similarity, thematic similarity

Sergei Rachmaninoff (Sergei Vassilyevich Rachmaninoff, 1873-1943), also known as “the late Romantic composer”, composed and created his music almost up to the half of the twentieth century.¹³⁸ Contrary to the interests of his contemporaries who strived to change the formal frameworks of their compositions, he remained loyal to traditional formal patterns which he upgraded using novel solutions. He composed four concerts for piano and orchestra.¹³⁹ This paper analyses two of them: Concert no. 2 op. 18 (composed in 1901) and Concert no. 3 op. 30 (composed in 1909). The reason for such a choice lies in the fact that they were composed in the same and most prolific period of creation of this composer, whereas Concert no. 1 op.1 (1891) and Concert no. 4 op.40 (1926.) were composed at the very beginning of this prolific period and after it, respectively.¹⁴⁰

Living and creative path of a composer may be divided in three periods, which Robert Threlfall, in his book¹⁴¹ according to chronological order, names Student, Composer and Pianist, conformant with the prevailing activity in each of these periods. In the first period (1873–1892), among some other pieces, there was created Piano Concerto No. 1 (1891). Anastasia Ivanova, in her work¹⁴² Piano Concerto No. 1, calls this - the first step of the composer. “The piano concerto, as a genre, had proven quite successful for Rachmaninoff in the years prior to 1917. His first published opus was the First Piano Concerto, a work completed in 1893 yet revised and republished in 1917/18.”¹⁴³ The second period (1893–1917) is his most productive creative period, when majority of compositions of his opus were created, which belong to his mature style, among which there are Piano Concerto No. 2 and Piano Concerto No. 3. “His most successful work for many years – certainly by popularity – was the Second Piano

¹³⁸John Anthony, Rego. *Skryabin, Rakmaninov and Prokofiev as composer-pianists: The Russian piano tradition, aesthetics and performance practices*, The Faculty of Princeton University, 2012.

¹³⁹Charles, Rosen. *The Romantic generation*, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press Cambridge, 1995.

¹⁴⁰Jeremy, Norris. *The Russian Piano Concerto. Vol. 1, The Nineteenth Century Russian Music Studies* (Bloomington, Ind.) Indiana University Press, 1994.

¹⁴¹Robert Threlfall, *Sergei Rachmaninoff – His Life and Music*, Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Limited, London, 1973.

¹⁴²Anastassia Ivanova, *Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos – The Odyssey of stylistic evolution*, Faculty of the Graduate School, University of Maryland at College Park, pp. 13, 2006.

¹⁴³Davie, Scott, *Structure and Contour in Melodies of S. Rachmaninoff*, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, 2009.

Concerto¹⁴⁴, composed immediately after the period of inactivity that followed the premiere of the First Symphony. The Third Piano Concerto was for some years a less popular relation to its predecessor but has, in the past fifty years, become a corner-stone of the Romantic repertoire.”¹⁴⁵ The possibility of their resemblance, owing to the same period in which they were created, inspired the author to make this research that resulted in this work.¹⁴⁶

In his third period (1918–1943) Rachmaninoff composed the Piano Concerto No. 4 (in 1926). However, together with big changes in life, the composing style had changed, too. This concerto contains many new characteristics: “more economic orchestration, new harmonic language and humorous motives”¹⁴⁷. Moreover, many Russian theorists, the opinions of whom were exposed in the work of A. Ivanova, think that this Concerto is not on the same level as the two previous and that the most significant works of Rachmaninoff were created during his life in Russia.¹⁴⁸ Rachmaninoff, himself, realized the weaknesses of his last Piano Concerto, having in mind that he was trying to alter it many times and that this piece got its final revision during the last years of Rachmaninoff’s life (1941). Regarding Rachmaninoff’s attempts to find a better form for the work through revision, Barrie Martyn, in ‘Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor’, comments on the final version of the Fourth Piano Concerto: “.....the changes to which he subjected it were aimed specifically at improving its formal structure rather than its public acceptability. What audiences expected and wanted was a wholly different concerto from the one Rachmaninoff wrote; what he gave them is a work of considerable originality in an unfamiliar vein, a work which, though uneven, has several memorable moments of real inspiration.”¹⁴⁹

The first movements of both concertos were written in the form of sonata. Therefore, the same kind of symmetry exists in both cases: axial symmetry with “materialized” axial symmetry¹⁵⁰. (symmetry that contains three elements: exposition and repetition (first and third members) are the equivalent symmetry members, located at a distance, while the developmental part (second member) represents the contrasting inter-element. However, in both movements, there occurs the reduced repetition, that making this symmetry axis without the full equivalence, disturbing the movement symmetry. Opposite to this, such characteristic of both first movements in one, as well as in the other concerto, tells more about their equivalence on the movement levels.

Thematically significant introductions before the first theme, point out to one more common characteristic. Motif/motives, repeating in both cases are pre-thematic for the first subsequent themes, but for the entire first movements, as well (in Piano Concerto No. 2 it is the motif in 8th and 9th beats, subdominant function chord, bringing culmination, intensified by the pedal on the subdominant, while in the Concerto No. 3, there are two motives in the orchestral sections.¹⁵¹ The similarity of first themes in first movements represents the same structural model¹⁵² applied ($n + n + 2n$), where n has the role of a conditional clause (Concerto No. 2 – $n = 8$, while in the Concerto No.3 $n = 4$ beats). The balance has been established in the Piano Concerto No. 2 by applying the interior expansion, and in the Piano Concerto No. 3 by repeating the first sentence. The tonal plan, as well, is very similar: in the Concerto No. 2, the first theme goes to subdominant minor tonality in order to return back to tonic (C-minor major, F-minor, C-minor) while the first theme of the Concerto No. 3, modulates from the initial to subdominant

¹⁴⁴So-Ham Kim, Chung. *An Analysis of Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18: Aids Towards Performance*, The Ohio State University, 1988.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Campbell, Stuart, *Russian on Russian Music 1880-1917 An anthology*, Cambridge, University Press, pp 183, 2003.

¹⁴⁷Anastassia Ivanova, *mentioned work*, pp. 66.

¹⁴⁸*Ditto*, pp. 66.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Threlfall, ‘Rachmaninoff’s Revisions and an Unknown Version of his Fourth Concerto’, *Musical Opinion* 96 (February 1973), pp. 235-37. In this article, Threlfall outlines his discovery of the original manuscript in the Library of Congress in 1967. David Butler Cannata, *Rachmaninoff's Changing View of Symphonic Structure*, Ph.D. diss., University of New York, 1992. Ann Arbor Mich.: UMI 1993. op. cit., pp 308.

¹⁵⁰Berislav Popovic, *Muzicka forma ili smisao u muzici (Music Form and Sense in Music)*, Kulturni centar Beograda, Beograd, pp. 272-291, 1998.

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¹⁵² Милош, Заткалик и Оливера Стамболић, *Реченица у тоналној инструменталној музици*, Факултет музичке уметности, Београд, 2005.

and its parallel tonality, after which it is going back to the basic one (D-minor, G-minor, D-minor, B-major, D-minor, G-minor, D-minor)¹⁵³. There is also obvious the equivalence in thematic material organization, where, on the occasion of presentation of the first potential sentence, it often happens to have the circling around one central tone, tonic in these cases; in the second one, culmination is reached, and after that the quietus of musical flow. In his work¹⁵⁴, the theorist, Scott Davie names such form of melody flow ABC type, where letters represent previously mentioned stages in a melody development.). The bridge of the Concerto No. 2 contains two sections, while the bridge of Piano Concerto No. 3 has three sections. In both cases the same treatment of thematic material is present: first sections contain dissolution of first themes thematic material, in order the pre-thematic material began, indicating the other theme. Other themes have the minimum level of similarity, that only in the sense that their structure is more labile than those of first ones and that sentences present in them, do not make the entities of the higher order. While in the Concerto No. 2 the other theme goes in the parallel tonality, in the Concerto No. 3 the second theme comes in third related. The second theme of the Concerto No. 2 contains four sentences: three sentences $n + n + n + n$, where $n = 2$ beats, while in the fourth sentence $n + n + n$, $n = 5$ beats. Concerto No. 3 contains a group of the other theme (B1 and B2), in which the interior structure is different (B1 is composed of a chain of sentence segments of the same length $n + n + n + n$, and $n = 4$ beats, while B2 is a complex sentence of the structure $n + n + 2n$, where $n = 5$ beats and represents a conditional (potential) sentence). According to classification of S. Davie, this form of melodic structure belongs to D-type of Rachmaninoff's melodies¹⁵⁵. The second theme of Piano Concerto No. 3 (section B2) belongs to ABC type¹⁵⁶ of this classification. The final groups of both first movements possess a great degree of structural similarity: motif fragmentation and its translation from voice to voice, as well as multiple cadence. Developmental parts of both first movements contain five sections each. In both cases, the first three sections finish with half-cadence, the fourth section with third degree, and the fifth section with tonic. One more similarity is reflected in the fact that both developmental parts work out thematic materials of the introduction and the first theme. In the Concerto No. 2 cadence is omitted, opposite to the Concerto No. 3 which contains the large scale cadence, with even five sections. As already mentioned, reduced repetitions bring omissions of some parts. In the Concerto No. 2, the bridge has been omitted, and second sentence of the second topic, while in the Concerto No. 3 the repetition has been reduced to such an extent that it contains just the introduction and the first sentence of the first theme. Such appearance of repetition impacts shifting of the symmetry center, that dynamizing both first movements. Codas appear in both examples with the conclusive role and the basic tonality confirmation.

Although other movements differ according to the used formal pattern, (in Concerto No. 2 form it is to do with rarer and more complex form of song, i.e., the combination a simple and complex three-part combination – A b A1, while in the second movement of Concerto No. 3, there are present formal patterns permeating – rondo with one theme of free variations). It may be proven, however, that in the concrete examples, there exists morphological connection in formal terms. Viewing the symmetry, which occurs in the second movement of the Concerto No.2, the same type is encountered as in the first movements of these concertos. It is to do with the symmetry with “materialized” axis, where the symmetry is disturbed, because the part A1, in relation to the part A is reduced. The part b is contrasting. If you view the symmetry of each particular part, you find one more type of symmetry. The part A (a b a1 b1 a2) comprises four equivalent members (a, a1, a2 and a) located at distance and there are contrasting internal members between them (b, b1). After the part A, there comes the central part (b), and it is noticed that all the members of symmetry “circle around the common center in the middle of imaginary circle”¹⁵⁷ In

¹⁵³ Blair Allen, Johnston, *Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff*, The University of Michigan, 2009.

¹⁵⁴ Based on the analysis of almost entire creative work of S. Rachmaninoff, Scott Davie in his work, established that many works of this composer have melodic lines of very similar structures and contours. Moreover, he came to the conclusion that in most of the compositions, three patterns in melodies forming prevail, making the theme, which he called C-type, D-type, and ABC-type of melody. Descending melody belongs to C-type, D-type implies the theme comprising two parts – the melody with ascending movement and melody, characterized by descending movement and ABC type, the structure of which has already been described. More about this to see: Scott Davie, *Structure And Contour in Melodies of S. Rachmaninoff*, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, 2009.

¹⁵⁵ *Ditto*, pp. 130-133.

¹⁵⁶ *Ditto*, pp. 152-156.

¹⁵⁷ Berislav Popović, *Muzička forma ili smisao u muzici*, Klio: KBC, Beograd, pp. 287, 1998.

the second movement of the Concerto No. 3, there is encountered permeating of formal rondo patterns with one theme and free variations. If we mark themes with A (in interpretation as variation cycle, they would represent the first part of the theme and each variation, as well.), we may notice that they appear four times. Between them, there are contrasting parts, not sufficiently independent (AE1 A1 E2 A2 E3 A3). Here, it is to do with symmetry with four equivalent members (A, A1, A2 and A3) located at distance, separated by “materialized” axes of symmetry (episodes or other parts of the theme and each variation). It may be concluded that, likewise in the second movement of the Concerto No.2, the principle of “circling” around the common center in the middle of imaginary cycle is present here, as well. The imaginary axis of symmetry would «pass» through the part E3, due to the biggest contrast and instability it brings, and also because of the beat change and faster tempo, in which the center of symmetry was relocated (comprises not fully equivalent members, since the ones, up to the episode E3 and the last appearance of the theme represent the first and third members, while E3 is the second member, i.e., the contrasting inter-member of symmetry). The relation at distance, which is very important for thematic connection of the cycle movements, also occurs at this point (simultaneous exposing of the first movement first theme, motif *c* from the second theme of the first movement, as well as theme elaboration of the second movement), while in the Concerto No. 2 central part (b) of the second movement there are occurring the motives of introduction and the theme of the first movement. The Concerto No. 3, comprises motives of the first and second themes of the first movement within the contrasting sections, while in the second episode, the motif of the first movement first theme is present and in the third episode the second theme motif of the first movement is present, as well as the tone of the first movement first theme. On the occasion of the comparative method in the analysis of these two other movements, there is observed one more common characteristic of theirs – both movements were written in slow tempo. The similarity of these two second movements on the tonal and structural plan is not possible to find.

Since both finales were written in sonata form, here it may be also stated that there is axial symmetry with “materialized” axis between the two equivalent members, located at distance. Both finales contain pre-thematic introductions (the incurring motif announces the first theme but also pervades the entire movement). Its structure is fragmented, in that, it lasts much longer in Concerto No. 2 and has richer tonal plan (C-minor, E-major, C-major, F-minor and C-minor, once again). The first themes of both finales are formally similar (aa1 ba2), and structural, too (in Concerto No.2, all a sentences have the structure $n + n + 2n$, as well as the first sentence of Concerto No.3, while its other sentences a1 and a2 structure is $n + n + n$). Parts of b are fragmentary. There is the difference in the finish of first themes, because in Concerto No.3 it outgrows into a bridge after the end signal on the natural seventh degree. Symmetry, present in first themes is the axial symmetry with three members, where the part b represents “materialized” axis of symmetry. The existence of disturbed symmetry resembles the same type present in previous movement, too. Organization of thematic material, occurring in both first themes, S. Davie describes and classifies as Rachmaninoff C-type¹⁵⁸ melody, characterized by that descending movement of melodic line by sequential repeating. Transitions in these movements were constructed in different ways: In Concerto No. 2, it is to do with developmental selective sentence, while in the Concerto No.3, the fragmentary structure was used. What they have in common is the presence of the initial motif of the part a, as well as the end signal on the tonality tonic of the second theme. Both concertos have sets of two sentences each in the second theme (structure $n + n + n + n$ in Concerto No.2 and $n + n + n$ in Concerto No.3). The similarity of these two finales is in the choice of «inadequate» tonalities in which some other themes incur: in Concerto No.2 is seconds similar B-major, subsequently modulating into third similar tonality – S-major, while in the Concerto No.3 it is to do with major subdominant G-major. By the analysis of other themes thematic contents there may be realized the similarity in their melodic structure (wavy melodies comprising three stages in their development). As mentioned before, S. Davie calls this form of Rachmaninoff melodies ABC type, where each letter represents a special stage.¹⁵⁹ In the Piano Concerto No. 2, this theorist mentions only the second sentence of the theme¹⁶⁰ as ABC type. The final groups of these movements, as well, contain the equivalent relation: They modulate from the tonality in which the second theme ended to the tonality of development part, preparing it in tonal terms, as some kind of transition, a well as inadequate» thematic contents: introduction motif elaboration (in Concertino No.3) and the first theme (in Concerto No.2), preparing the

¹⁵⁸Scott Davie, *Structure And Contour In Melodies Of S. Rachmaninoff*, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, pp. 100, 2009.

¹⁵⁹*Ditto*, pp. 143-144.

¹⁶⁰*Ditto*, pp. 191-194.

introductory section of the development part. Concerto No. 2 has six sections in the development part, while in Concerto No. 3, there are seven sections recognized. The poor tonal plans of these parts, as well as thematic materials (in Concerto No. 2, the development part elaborates the first theme material of this movement, while Concerto No.3 deals with the motif of the first movement second theme), “announce” dynamization of repetition (reprise). The fifth section of Concerto No. 2 develops the introduction material and introduces new motif, while in Concerto No. 3, this section contains motif elaboration of the first movement first theme, connecting them, in thematic terms, into even stronger entity.

Dynamization of reprises with appearance of incomplete equivalence of reprise and exposition, was realized by the first theme reduction (in Concerto No.2) and the appearance of the second theme in the distant tonalities: D-flat major and B-minor. It is only by the end of the final group where the stability of tonic tonality is established with the end signal on the dominant seventh chord. In Concerto No. 3 “inadequate” tonal start of the first theme (the basic tonality, after numerous modulations, was achieved in the part a2) and the second theme (first, there prevail the parallel and subdominant tonalities, and the basic tonality was achieved during the second sentence of the theme), the coming of the final group is stabilized by the tonic tonality (coquetting between its minor and major orientations). Since some other themes appear in reprises, in an inadequate tonality, this codas show the presence of the second theme thematic material in the homonymous tonality, that finally providing for tonal reconciliation of the first and second themes

Piano concertos No. 2 and No. 3 were written by S. Rachmaninoff, as sonata cycles, continuing the tradition of his forerunners. In both of these, the first and the last (third) movements were written in sonata form and in tonic tonality, that proving again its faith in stability, created in classicism already. These movements, however, end in homonymous tonality, which can draw a parallel with creative works of L. Van Beethoven. The last, also common characteristic of these two cycles is that third movements end in homonymous tonality. The central (second) movements bring the contrast in the form of third octave related tonalities. In the Concerto No. 2, the second movement is in E-major (third octave related tonality, in relation to the initial one...), while the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 3 starts with the basic tonality, after which there is created a rich tonal plan, introducing contrast in the entire cycle (F-sharp minor). In both concertos, except the tonal plan contrast, the central movements were written as: rarer and freer form of a song¹⁶¹ in the Concerto No.2 (AbA1) and permeation of formal rondo patterns and variations in the Concerto No. 3. It is very characteristic that both cycles use the tonality in which the previous movement was finished to begin the subsequent one: Concerto No.2: the first movement is in C-minor, the second starts with C-minor, to end in E-major, while the third starts with E-major, subsequently mutating via C-minor to C-major; Concert No. 3 comprises the first movement, written in D-minor, the second which continues in that tonality, and then goes to F-sharp minor with repeated return to D-minor and the third movement, mutating from D-minor to D-major. Such relatedness of movements even more indicates the strong bond between them, but also the similarity and the same idea of the composer on the tonal plan of both concertos. Formal patterns symmetry used in both cycles, as well as the tonal solutions symmetry in them, fully proves the symmetry on both levels, and by that, on the cycle level. If the kind of symmetry is analyzed on the structural plan in both these concertos, the first and the third movements, written in the same formal pattern, (sonata forms), represent two equivalent elements (members), located at distance. The central movements, having in this case the role of contrast, both in the formal and tonal sense, represent the movements, the symmetry axis “passes” through. It proves that both mentioned cycles are characterized by axial symmetry with “materialized” symmetry axis.

Piano concertos No. 2 and No. 3 were created in the most important creative period of Sergei Rachmaninoff. “Second Piano Concerto (...) has won worldwide fame; the Concerto is one of the most capital phenomena in the contemporary piano repertory in the power and beauty of its sincere, dreamy content and completeness of form”¹⁶². Based on comparative analytical process, it may be concluded that Rachmaninoff tended to similar morphological principles in music courses building of Piano concertos No. 2 and No. 3, which impacted their formal and tonal similarity.

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