

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SONATAS

Rachmaninoff composed two large, virtuoso Sonatas that are fine examples of the romantic piano sonata. They were written six years apart, the first in 1907 and the second in 1913. Matthew-Walker suggests that similarities, contained in both Sonatas, such as the inclusion of comparably constructed second themes and a three movement cyclic form connect them to the Second Symphony and the Third Concerto.

It is possible that Rachmaninoff only composed two Sonatas because of the criticism he received concerning his use of large-scale form or his own dissatisfaction with both Sonatas, primarily because of their length (Pickard). There has been some controversy over the significance of the Sonatas. Culshaw dismisses them with only one paragraph, while Gordon suggests they are works that “show Rachmaninoff in full command of his style” (434). Faurot probably exaggerated when he ventured to say, “If [the Sonatas] had been written one hundred years ago, instead of seventy, the archeologists would already be programming them, for none of the forgotten nineteenth century sonata makers equaled them (Who, after Beethoven, did write great Sonatas?)” (240).

#### **Sonata no. 1 in D Minor, op. 28**

Date of composition: November, 1906-May 14, 1907

Number of measures: 1021

Approximate performance time: 37:15

Dedication: none

Rachmaninoff began composing this Sonata in Dresden, at the same time he was working on the opera, *Monna Vanna* and the Second Symphony. He considered recreating the Sonata as a Symphony, but chose not to after realizing the pianistic nature of the piece. Konstantin Igumnov gave the work its first performance on October 17, 1908 in Moscow, making this the first piece of Rachmaninoff's to be premiered by someone other than himself. It was only after Igumnov played the Sonata in Berlin and Leipzig that Rachmaninoff told him that the three movements of the work were inspired by Liszt's Faust Symphony. The first movement depicts Faust, the second Gretchen and Mephistopheles, and the third the flight to Brocken (Darrell).

Maurice Hinson summarizes the significance of the work well. He states, “The extreme demands on the pianist's technical skills and the relentless emotional intensity make this Sonata one of the most challenging works in the solo piano repertoire” (578). It is one of Rachmaninoff's most ambitious endeavors for solo piano. It is unusual in that it has not experienced any “clear cut success or failure, only a kind of dead-end limbo” (Darrell).

#### **Allegro moderato**

Number of measures: 357

Approximate performance time: 13:45

**Allegro moderato** (♩ = 76)



Darrell summarizes this complex movement:

[It contains] arresting piano/forte contrasts, the impetuosity of the ensuing drive, the rich variety of thematic materials, and the complexities of the formal structure that grips attentive listeners throughout the movement's undeniably demanding length."

It is written in Sonata-Allegro form and contains an unusual compositional device that is found in the Second Symphony. This device is the presentation of two main themes that contain the same tonal root (Matthew-Walker).

The opening motive contains a rising and falling fifth, followed by a variety of chordal cadences. This motive is expanded throughout the work, occasionally over a pedal point. A large cadenza appears two-thirds of the way through the movement. Instead of being merely a virtuoso style cadenza, this cadenza forms the climax of the development section. It is followed by a comparatively short recapitulation. The movement ends in D major. It is interesting that material taken from this movement is found in the Etude-Tableaux opus 33 no. 5 in D minor (Norris).

The movement is both technically and musically demanding. It includes large leaping chords of up to five voices that contain spans larger than an octave. Additionally, cross rhythms of continuous scalar and chordal passages occasionally interweave between the hands creating technical demands as well as problems of tonal balance. One also finds stemmed held notes that should be sustained as well as voiced. A sense of cohesiveness is essential within the tempo and meter changes that occur within this movement.

### **Lento**

Number of measures: 159

Approximate performance time: 9:30

**Lento** (♩ = 56)



The triplet accompaniment presented at the beginning of this movement becomes

the foundation of a scherzo-like section that appears in the middle of the movement. John Pickard describes this middle section as a “fleet footed waltz of almost Mendelssohnian delicacy.” This form, a slow movement that contains a scherzo in the middle section, is used frequently by Rachmaninoff and can be found in the Second Piano Concerto as well as the Third Symphony (Norris).

The movement begins tranquilly in the key of D major, with an unusual introduction made up of single note triplets in the right hand and a bass consisting of a single, descending line, made up of consecutive fifths. The theme begins in F major and is accompanied by the triplet figure that first appeared in the introduction. This theme bears some similarity to the theme found in the second movement of the Third Concerto. The theme grows in intensity, continuing through the middle section, and leads to a short cadenza that recalls the second subject of the first movement (Anderson). The return of the main theme leads to a quiet ending in F major.

This expressive movement requires a cantabile, singing tone. Voicing and tonal balance are essential, especially as the texture thickens and the work becomes more intense. Rhythmic control is necessary to maintain the pulse, which remains constant throughout the scherzo section. This section contains passagework that requires fast finger technique and accuracy, especially in passages that contain large intervallic spans. There are unusual trills, contained in the alto voice of large octave chords that are extremely difficult to execute.

### **Allegro molto**

Number of measures: 505

Approximate performance time: 14:00



This is the most complex movement in the Sonata. Its fortissimo opening contains a brief introduction made up of octaves. The main theme follows, presented in quarter-notes that are played simultaneously with thick, chordal triplet figures. The development section is scherzando-like. It is unusually long and contains themes heard in the first movement. The recapitulation presents the opening section with more drama and intensity. The second subject appears in full romantic style, another characteristic of Rachmaninoff’s larger works. Additional themes from earlier movements as well as the *dies irae* theme appear before the movement ends with fortissimo D major chords (Norris).

This movement is one of the most difficult in Rachmaninoff’s large-scale piano works. The primary challenge is endurance while executing the exceptional technical feats presented in the movement. Additionally the movement requires a strong, rapid,

chordal technique that includes voicing held notes, sometimes presented in the inner voices. Accuracy is difficult to maintain in sections that contain large leaps involving thick chords and octaves. The many meter and tempo changes must be rhythmically controlled to maintain cohesion within the work. Other details that must be addressed in this treacherous movement are articulation, dynamic contrasts and control of cross-rhythmic passages.

**Sonata no. 2 in B-flat Minor, op. 28**

Date of composition: January-August 1913, revised 1931

Number of measures: 814 (original version), 643 (revised version)

Approximate performance time: 26:15 (original version)

19:20 (revised version)

Dedication: Matvei Pressman

This Sonata was begun during a visit Rachmaninoff made to Rome and completed later when he returned to his estate, Ivanovka. It was published by Gutheil in June 1914, bearing a dedication to a childhood friend and fellow pupil, Matvei Pressman (Norris 115).

Even though it is by no means short, it is less massive than the First Sonata. Rachmaninoff was dissatisfied with its length and created a revision of the piece in 1931 that cut approximately seven minutes from its performance time. He expressed his displeasure with the work:

I look at my earlier works and see much that is superfluous. Even in this [Second] Sonata so many voices are moving simultaneously, and it is too long (Swan 8).

This Sonata is more popular than the First Sonata, possibly because it provides the performer and audience more drama and virtuosity within a more compact form (Darrell). Additionally, it has experienced a revival in the past few years, being heard frequently at major piano competitions and played by most well-known performing pianists.

It was written at the same time as Rachmaninoff's choral symphony, *The Bells*. Rachmaninoff premiered the Sonata in Moscow, December 16, 1913, three days after he conducted the first performance of *The Bells*. In the same way the Second Symphony overshadowed the First Sonata, *The Bells* became more influential than the Second Sonata (Matthew-Walker).

It contains three movements, although it is essentially a continuous work. The second movement is treated as a short intermezzo that connects two larger movements (Norris). Throughout the work a cyclic form is created by thematic cross-references. This tradition is found in the Third and Fourth Piano Concerti. The Sonata is also similar to the Third Concerto in the continuous movement between the slow movement and the finale as well as the appearance of a large, romantic melody as the second subject of the finale that eventually climaxes before a final presto section (Pickard).

**Allegro agitato**

Number of measures: 179 (original version), 137 (revised version)

Approximate performance time: 11:15 (original version) 8:00 (revised version)



This powerful movement is dramatic as well as virtuosic. The introduction begins with a cascading, chromatic, arpeggiated figure that ends in the lower register of the piano with a B-flat octave. The main theme begins with thick octave chords in dotted rhythms supported by triplet figures that are divided between the hands. Docheva suggests that even though the movement is in Sonata-Allegro form, the middle section is treated as a free variation instead of a traditional development section. This section contains a reference to bells that is reminiscent of the choral symphony, *The Bells* (Pickard). After the recapitulation the movement ends with an “unanswered question” that leads to the second movement (Matthew-Walker).

The thick texture of the movement requires a large, resonant sound and proper voicing and tonal balance to project melodies and countermelodies. Contrasting piano sections should be played with delicacy and evenness. Passages that contain large intervallic spans and leaps are challenging. Other problems in this movement are characteristic arpeggiated figures that include double notes and rapid successions of four-note chords.

#### **Non allegro-Lento**

Number of measures: 291 (original version), 266 (revised version)

Approximate performance time: 7:30 (original version), 6:00 (revised version)



This movement epitomizes Rachmaninoff's exquisite lyricism and passionate climaxes. There is a tenderly descending modulation that connects the first movement to the second. It begins in D major and moves to E minor, the key of the opening section. Marked *Lento*, this opening section contains a gently lilting theme based on a descending progression. A romantic G major section follows that begins in the new meter of 4/4. The original E minor theme returns with an added texture that contains a triplet descant in the soprano. The return of the opening section later climaxes dramatically with the descant becoming octave chords. A reminiscence of the first movement follows that builds to a cadenza like section before the movement ends with a *Non allegro* section that quotes extensively from the first movement and begins in the new key of C major. The movement ends on an E major chord.

This movement requires a command of expressive playing that includes a cantabile singing tone and well-projected voicings. Several textures are presented simultaneously that require different varieties of tone, dynamics, and articulations. Voicing becomes even more important in these sections as well as the large chordal section of the climax. The cadenza like section fits well within the hand, but requires evenness and rhythmic control.

### **Allegro molto**

Number of measures: 344 (original version), 240 (revised version)

Approximate performance time: 7:15 (original version), 5:45 (revised version)



A brief bravura passage at the beginning of this movement connects the final chord of the second movement, marked *attacca*, to this movement. The movement opens with a descending passage that is taken from the introductory passage of the first movement. This time it ends on a B-flat major chord. The main theme is presented in a chordal, triplet texture. It is followed by a march like section in D major. A lyrical, romantic, middle section marked *a tempo*, *poco meno mosso*, appears prior to the return of the first tempo. With the *a tempo*, several sequences of the introductory passages are presented. Statements of the triplet material of the opening section interrupt these sequences. A final climax marked *Tempo rubato* presents all of the textures mentioned above. This is followed by a *Presto* triplet section that contains material derived from the opening triplet section. A final dramatic cadence to B-flat major ends the movement.

This is the most challenging movement of the Sonata, due to the problem of logistics, i.e. playing large, leaping four-voice chords at a rapid speed. Other performance problems include the execution of arpeggiated figures that contain large intervallic spans. The different textures presented in the work require proper articulation and dynamic variety. The meter and tempo changes require a strong rhythmic pulse control and lyrical sections must be expressive and well-voiced. Delicacy and evenness must be maintained in the *Piu mosso* section presented prior to the recapitulation. Presenting the entire sonata continuously is taxing and demands endurance. Summarizing the importance of this movement, Dubal states, "The finale must be counted as one of the composer's most electrifying works." (387)