

# In the name of style

## or

# How (not) to play Rachmaninoff

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*... What characterizes our art practice as performers?*  
*... What kind of knowledge and understanding are we talking about?*  
*... What can we say – articulate – share...?*  
*... How can we as performers document research processes?*

This sub-project seeks answers to these and many others questions in the authentic description of situations arising in the relationship between performer and composer. I believe it will find its place in the key idea of the project The Opener : sharing the performer's process.

## Introduction

In performance and pedagogical practice, including in a global context, one often encounters highly standardised approaches to well-known works and composers. These traditionally established and tested practices form that difficult to grasp notion of “*style*”. On the one hand, they are a way of identifying the manuscript code of the composer; on the other hand, the easy and painless conviction of correct style and stylishness risks vulgarising and simplifying the living and dynamic organism of the work. My choice of Rachmaninoff's figure is not aimed at a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of his interpretative language. It is not Rachmaninov himself who is the point of this text. As the best example, however, he represents the symbolic embodiment of many of our emotional and intellectual - that is, interpretive - simplifications in the name of style, leading ultimately to its loss. At the same time, a glimpse into his own interpretative practices in interpreting either his own music or the music of other composers best demonstrates the validity of the claim that it is important to be able to look at old and tried and tested situations with a new and fresh eye.

Just as older music often faces prejudices in terms of proper style, so too new music, or rather music from the early 20th century onwards, can be subject to simplistic views and a narrowing of the range of performance practices, especially in the area of tone creation. In this text I will try to explain why, when studying new music, it is important to be aware of the richness of the broad interpretative spectrum of the music that came before.

With a bit of metaphor, we can therefore express the basic motto - *look at the new as old and the old as new*.

Let us first clarify what the term *old* means. In this context, it is meant as a *terminus technicus* for works of the past, creations with which we, the people of today, are confronted, works of the highest artistic value selected by history and surrounded by hundreds, thousands of works whose existence have made it possible to select the most perfect ones. Creative confrontation with such works allows contact with the highest criteria placed on a work of art - its form, its story, its plot, its emotional world. In this sense, then, it is also possible within the framework of interpretation to “help” new works, to “inspire” them and draw them towards these highest criteria, regardless of whether they belong there.

We do not know today which new works will be the *old* and immortal ones. When we take on a new work, we do not know its future value to history. We do not even know its present value. It is hidden deep within it, and no one can tell us in advance - this is the new Beethoven, look at it that way. Situationally, it will only have the value that we convey in its

actual interpretation. We have no idea whether we are dealing with a work of regional significance or a work of great impact. Moreover ... what does regional significance mean? When are we allowed to name it? Who decides? And does it mean that a work of regional significance is allowed to be interpreted with lower criteria? If we don't view every interpreted work as potentially great, we don't give it a chance for its greatness to shine through. Very often we are tempted to say to ourselves - after all, this is enough. No one will recognize it anyway. If I were playing Chopin, then that wouldn't be enough, but here it's good... And here it sounds like such a weaker Brahms... ... But all the better! If we focus on this feature and apply the best we know of Brahms (i.e., knowledge and skill in applying interpretive finesse is essential), we may suddenly find a moment of original departure from Brahms and on that original departure we are able to build the originality of a new or unfamiliar work.

Another important point is that new works often bear signs of a certain overexposure of one of their parameters (or, on the contrary, underexposure). Perhaps this is because balance in the classical sense of the word has already "passed away" in music during the past centuries, and since the 20th century musical expression has been driven by the hypertrophy of individual principles. Thanks to a lively connection with the repertoire of the past - eo ipso perfect, brilliant works - we can contribute interpretively to compensate for the imbalance that would threaten the work.

And then there is the *old* in the interpretative sense - that is, the confrontation with the best that interpretative history has sorted out. Imagine if we had as many immortal interpretive achievements in a new work as we do in the established repertoire. It would put us in an entirely new situation and create entirely new criteria. But we must create them ourselves ... The new works will not have as many interpretive chances as the old ones. There is too much music in the world and too many other absorbing interests and stimuli. They probably won't get the chance for so much repeated and endless rehearsal, confrontation and experimentation, which will then, through the sweat and tears of the pianists, bring out the best and the unsurpassable in each other. More recent works, or rather music since the beginning of the 20th century, is subjected to simplistic views and a truncation of the range of performance means, especially in the field of tone creation.

New music often only gets a few tries - sometimes only one. It gets recorded (if it's lucky) and nobody invests in it anymore, another piece has to be played, this one has already been played. In the current Slovak setup of arts support, this moment is heavily represented. It is the cruel fate of new works, but that is precisely why the responsibility to it rests on the shoulders of us performers. We have to approach a new work, synthesizing all existing performance skills and selecting the most compelling ones. But if we don't stay in contact -

and by contact I mean endlessly comparing ourselves to higher and highest models - we won't get the most out of ourselves. The new work is utterly powerless. It lives trapped within itself, dependent on our interpretive criterion.

Therefore, when studying a new work, it is important to give chances to imaginary hundreds of interpretations of it, with which we imaginatively confront ourselves and thus lead ourselves to better and higher results. Conversely, when studying works that have been performed repeatedly, it is also important to be able to forget all context, all knowledge, all custom and prejudice, conventions and expectations, judgments and traditions, and to look at the work and its interpretation from the pure score, just as we have at our disposal with a new work.

My text, respecting today's demand for illustrative audiovisual perception, should have included a largely live interactive component - demonstrations, comparisons. However, hand surgery, whose recovery and rehabilitation are significantly slower and longer than I anticipated, has changed my plans and my current condition, which does not yet allow me to actively perform and thus demonstrate the hypotheses and theses of this artistic research. This plan remains as a challenge for the next - practical - part of the research on this topic. The aim of this sub-project, which, given these circumstances, is currently conceived as a textual reflection with analytical elements, is to inspire, perhaps to disrupt the established, to point out interesting moments, perhaps even to provoke a little. In the name of Stravinsky's idea that technique is the whole man. The style is the man. *Le style c'est l'homme.*

# I.

The subject of Rachmaninoff in the context of artistic research could give the impression that it is a worn-out, hundreds of times described and unoriginal theme. We all, especially in our youth, play Rachmaninoff, we all want to play Rachmaninoff, and we all know him well. In fact, few composers have faced as many devastating interpretations as he did, few composers have been able to turn themselves into "dough that sticks to your fingers and never rises" (Juraj Beneš, composer, professor of music theory at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava) as a result of interpretative approach. The Rachmaninoff enigma interested me twenty years ago, but even after such a long time I am aware of equally pressing need to contribute to changing the perception of this *"lonely offshoot of outmoded Romanticism, a very old composer indeed"* - as Stravinsky described Rachmaninoff - into an original and modern composer, as this would contribute greatly to the value of interpretations of his works. But that potential of an original and modern composer has to be seen by us – performers – first. In this chapter I will try to point out numerous moments and explain how the motto *look at the old as new* can lead to see his work from a fresh point of view.

## The "minorness" of Rachmaninoff's aesthetics and where (not) to look for its origins

In connection with Rachmaninoff, the question of his compositional originality is often raised. He is beloved and revered primarily for his piano compositions, but even then, more as grateful objects of pianistic vanity than as original great works. In my nine years of study, both conservatory and university, he has not been mentioned as a composer, either in music history, music theory or music analysis. Rachmaninoff lies outside the scope of interest because - objectively - he is not one of those who form the unmissable landmarks of the history of musical development.

Discussions of his works usually mention *the smoothness and plasticity of the form, the free-flowing, singing melodies and the virtuosic effects*, a perfectly unremarkable characteristic applicable to a multitude of other works by a multitude of other composers. A few basic and well-worn leitmotifs can usually be heard about his aesthetic: *a late-Romantic emotionally excited musical language of elegiac expression with contemplative musical moods... endless elegy, tragic pessimism, nostalgia for home...* The causes of these aesthetic tendencies are to be found in Rachmaninoff's nature and, above all, in the mentality of his nationality and his departure from his homeland. Certainly, the claims that he wrote his best works before leaving Russia or that the Third Symphony owes its sombre mood to Rachmaninoff's nostalgia for home were largely forced and beholden to the Soviet regime in order to be able to write about him at all, to publish sheet music and sound recordings. The problem is that they remained just that, and deeper or more sophisticated analyses never emerged. In general, these platitudes, these simplistic labels have taken hold for many decades or even a century, but unfortunately they have led to a tragic simplification of our whole interpretative approach.

Of course, elegy really is Rachmaninoff's essential hallmark. In correspondence, he himself confessed to a certain extent to this characteristic of his work: *'I don't do well with light tones!'*<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that minor keys attracted him, he felt best in them, they were the most appropriate to his language. Rachmaninov can make even such images of unbounded cheerfulness as the Etude in E flat major, Op. 33, the Prelude in E major, Op. 32, or the Etude in D major, Op. 39, seem unnerving; he unsettles their light-heartedness with overly aggressive, overly abrupt rhythms and menacing waves of sound. In Rachmaninoff, then, the

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1 RACHMANINOFF, Sergei Vasilyevich, Letters, Moscow 1955, p.420

tendency is really not just to minor keys but to **dark, minor themes**, to a range of images of a dark nature. According to M. Kogan, Rachmaninoff has the highest number of works in the minor key, and the American musicologist Jasser has stated that Rachmaninoff has broken all records of composers in quoting the *Dies irae*.

These are the minor themes that we notice at first glance, but this tendency manifests itself in multiple layers.

In his music there is a constant presence of a kind of "diabolico", an energy of darkness counteracting pure beauty. **But it is precisely this inner activity, dynamism and restlessness that distinguishes him significantly from the passive positions of the melancholic or nostalgic, that he is often described as.**

Rachmaninoff has his themes and his gestures, his images and his identifying code, which partly identify him as an artistic *décadence*. However, in the search for origins and, in particular, for fitting interpretative approaches, one should not remain in the first layer of flattened and simplistic evaluations. Personally, with a little lightness of touch, I find the term "*noble desesperado*" much more appropriate.

Therefore, in the search for the aesthetics of Rachmaninoff's music, we do not need annoying and worn-out associations, we need to start from pure music, its own language, its peculiar and autonomous musical world. The music alone possesses sufficient precision of expression. And then, too, one may find that this "nostalgic, late-romantic lyric" is made more interesting by something else entirely: its inventive and intellectually rich musical moments. Therefore, I would like to give attention to a few aspects that are enormously interesting in Rachmaninoff. They are not visible at first sight, but when they are understood, a new world opens up, decisive also for the depth of the interpretation.

## 1. Structural principle and gesture

What impresses first in Rachmaninoff's music is the strong emotional, gestural and affective information, based on his conservative aesthetics. However, it is important that in the perception of the composition one does not remain on the surface. For just as powerful as affect is Rachmaninoff's invented structural principle, which he observes and develops in the composition with a calculated and absolutely cool discretion. **This balance - that affect does not fall victim to principle, and, on the contrary, retains a strong expressive gesture despite the crystalline adherence to principle - is one of the most important moments of his music.**

Rachmaninoff invents a motif, a sub-motif, which carries significant emotional information (rhetorical figure, etc.), but he invents it in such a way that it is at the same time

a **structural element**, that "microbe" which, by its movement, causes the emergence of new and new relationships, has a great variety of forms and possibilities. Moreover, he is directly obsessed with the ideal of homogeneity of the musical material and so he creates from this one sub-motive all the layers, all the functional layers. Such a unity of material is strikingly noticeable, for example, in the Second Piano Sonata, where all the layers through all the movements of the piece are built up from a single cell referred to in the sonata's introduction. It is a fascinating moment: a **maximally minimalist motif in a maximally multilayered texture**. The motif is based on the movement of the second. His extensive use of the second is probably related to Rachmaninoff's preference of the multidimensionality of the musical fabric. The malleability and indefinability of the movement of the second allows him to change the world with a single shift, creating a multitude of combinations of voices and harmonic modifications as he constantly moves on sensitive notes.

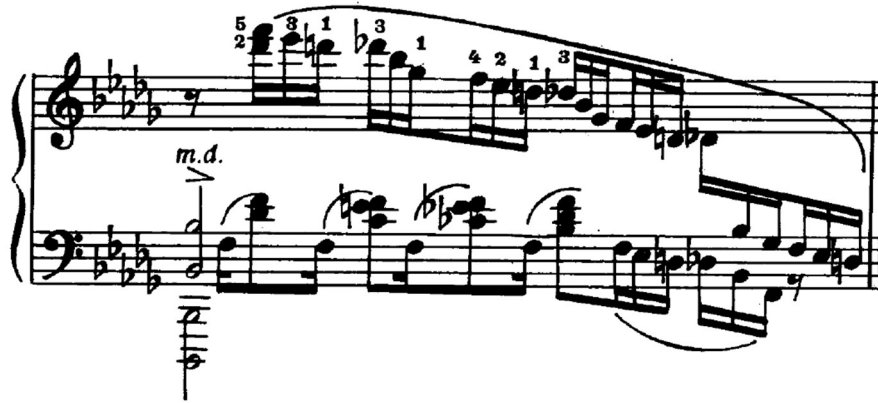
From the opening, seemingly mere gestural stroke, the collapse of the sound mass into the depths of the bass registers, the material of the whole piece is consistently and rigorously built up - the main theme as well as the contrasting theme, the accompanying figures, partner voices, the filler musical material, the various types of background... everything is sculpted in one piece.

Example no. 1: Rachmaninoff - Sonata no. 2, op. 36, 1<sup>st</sup> movement

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36. The score is in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major, and marked 'Allegro agitato'. It features a piano introduction with a 'f veloce' section and a 'ff' section. The main theme is marked 'm.s.' (maestros' score) and includes a 'rit.' (ritardando) section. The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as triplets, sixths, and dynamic markings like 'dim.' (diminuendo).



Example no. 2: Rachmaninoff – Sonata no. 2, op. 36, 1<sup>st</sup> movement



Example no. 3: Rachmaninoff – Sonata no. 2, op. 36, 1<sup>st</sup> movement



When a performer notices this and applies this insight to his performance approach - placing the same motif in ever-changing contexts and different expressions, the impression of the piece, the impression of its value (!) is dramatically different. Suddenly, apart from the superficial and worn-out sentimentality, and apart from admiration for the pianist's fingers, we watch with admiration Rachmaninoff's modern compositional construction.

The harmonic pulse in Rachmaninoff is often - and in the second Sonata especially - based on the pulse between the indifference of the diminished seventh chord and the infinite number of forms that arise from chromatic shifts within it.

Hindemith, in his characterization and classification of chords, says that a diminished seventh chord is a chord in which no central tone can be identified.

And it is the diminished seventh chord that has no central tone, because it is made up of four sensitive tones, two combined tritones, two tritone axes: *g/b-flat/c-sharp/e*, is *g/c-sharp* and *b-flat/e*, and therefore the diminished seventh chord is a colourless harmonic plasma that animates itself in the surrounding possible formations created by chromatic motion and is coloured by the displacement of one of its tones into another chord that already has its central tone, already has a tonal value.

The diminished and diminished minor seventh chord is thus the distributor, the ideal centre of harmonic collisions, because it just directs, it is pure directionality without tonal coherence. It is like mercury running away on four sensitive tones that give no peace, its mission is - to disappear. For Rachmaninoff, this is the ideal starting point. The interpenetration of seconds by the indifferent structure of the diminished seventh chords allows him great differentiation, an infinite universe of concrete chords, concrete relations, which have their own colouring, their own value, and can enter into relationships.

**Rachmaninoff's works are brilliant precisely because of the unity between the gestural and the structural. The principle works here on two levels, both as rhetoric and as structure.** The distilled Rachmaninovian principle is extremely speculative: there are hints of polymetry, multiplicity of movements in given schemes, great richness of emergent relations, cellularity with a multiplicity of forms. We could look for third relationships, altered chords, classical cadences, everything could be found here, but it is pushed far, far away by this "cellular" method and the intrinsic hidden polymetry into the realm of some kind of supra- or super-harmony, or meta-harmony, meta-tonality. There is a kind of meta-tonal principle at work here, **much more revolutionary than form**, than the gesture of composition, and **in an ingenious way connected with the gesture of composition**.

If we perceive only a shell of conservative, sentimental expressiveness and do not perceive this second moment, the most valuable thing is lost. Emotion is not lost, it always comes out, it is determined by the principle of macro-contrast and the evidentiality of emotional indices.

## **2. Old and New in Rachmaninoff's Manuscript**

As a composer, Rachmaninoff has no problem using old, tried-and-tested musical situations and reaching for things that have been tried hundreds of times. Another thing is that within them he plays refined games of his musical intellect, with means reminiscent of those of the "modernists".

Just as some painters paint over old artworks, Rachmaninoff also reaches for an old painting - a conservative musical situation - and begins to repaint it. He paints on the ground plan of 19th-century music, and I guess you could say that this is his way of dealing with the crisis of the tonal system.

While Schoenberg, for example, shook off the shackles of tonality and functionality, the pulse of consonance and dissonance, Rachmaninoff handled it differently. He took the Tristan motif into his laboratory, analysed it and brought it into the realm of some super or supra harmony, or meta harmony, meta tonality. And perhaps it was his good fortune to have this combination

of **progressive intellectual solutions and emotional conservatism** that preserved his form. Rachmaninoff realized that to acquiesce to the principle of chromaticism, to the emergent multiplicities and incessant flows, is like smashing an atom: particles fly and, unless they are mastered in space, they radiate into the void.

Many of his works - especially smaller forms such as preludes and some etudes - represent a paradigmatic gesture - the gesture of a nocturne, for example, the canto accompagnato. This is a very old and natural musical situation, but Rachmaninoff's conception of this image of singing is considerably more sophisticated.

Underneath the first layer of the pleasing quasi-nocturne, several peculiarities seep out, forming the essence of what distinguishes it from a true cliché. The minor complications, digressions and conflicts he conducts with schematic, conservative resolution **seem to constantly challenge the seemingly objective musical images**, giving rise even in such unambiguous lyrical compositions to the nervous poetics of a typical Rachmaninoff manuscript, a constant trembling that shines through from beneath the veneer of primordial likeability.

For example, in the objective image of a nocturne with a patterned accompagnato introduction followed by the entrance of a cantilena - he gradually begins to deny the melodic its clear dominance, confronts it with other layers, the accompanying voices cease to be accompaniments and enter into relationships, he plays a game with the chromaticism, exaggerates an inconspicuous element, and suddenly achieves a vision of the structure in a different way. And suddenly **there is a polyphony not only in the sense of material, but a polyphony of expression - which** is typical of 20th century modernism.

Example no. 4: Rachmaninoff – Prelude op. 23 no. 4



Example no. 5: Rachmaninoff – Prelude op. 23 no. 1

**Largo** (♩ = 58)

*pp* *mf*

*dim.* *pp*

Example no. 6: Rachmaninoff – Prelude op. 23 no. 1

*cresc.* *ff*

*dim.* *p*

*dim.* *p*

Example no. 6: Rachmaninoff – Etude-Tableaux op. 39 no.2



The interpretive pitfall of this type of texture - and especially in small areas - is incomprehensibility, and this is exactly what often happens when interpreting Rachmaninoff's works. In the great drama of the sonata, the composer otherwise builds relationships, gradations, imposes climaxes, and works in the passage of time. In the small form there is no space, it expands inwards, in depth, the time available is multi-layered. It is reduced, but all the characters, the psychological plot and the punchline need to be portrayed in the same way. The constant attack of new events, the multidimensionality of the musical flow can make the information too much, indigestible, impossible to relax, unable to discern what is primary, what is secondary. That's when it can be dangerously attractive to reach for just the horizontal and the wide-ranging phrase as a central solution.

### 3. Hypertrophy - but not in interpretation

Rachmaninoff often uses hypertrophy of a principle. He puts things under a magnifying glass and observes them. He monumentalizes a fundamentally simple element which, in context, comes across as wonderfully unambiguous, pure and powerful. This **effect of musical fabric monumentalization** is another of his favourite devices. As well as embellishing a scheme, a stereotype, he achieves by this close, magnified observation of things that the view of the structure is suddenly different. A striking example is the Etude-Tableaux, Op. 39, No. 7 in c minor, which is all one hypertrophy. In terms of musical texture, by exaggeration of the movement of the second, and in terms of the huge areas in the piano pianissimo shading.

Example no. 7: Rachmaninoff – Etude-Tableaux op. 39 no.7

The musical score for Rachmaninoff's Etude-Tableaux op. 39 no. 7 is presented in seven systems, each consisting of a piano (right) and bass (left) staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Performance instructions and dynamics include:

- sempre ppp* (pianissimo)
- staccato*
- a tempo*
- sempre staccato*
- pp* (piano)
- poco cresc.* (poco crescendo)
- dim.* (diminuendo)
- ppp* (pianissimo)
- sempre staccato*
- poco cresc.* (poco crescendo)

However, by the fact that the hypertrophy is already used in the texture itself, the role of the performer is rather to "cool", purify and illuminate it well. To let it stand out, and to get out of its way. (*Forget that you are the poet and let the phenomenon take place without your knowledge...*) To magnify the already magnified, unless our intention is caricature, is a common and fatal interpretive error.

#### 4. **Appassionato vs sostenuto**

It could be said that all good music, whose composers have a strong structural sensibility, is moved by the interacting and opposing forces of the Apollonian and Dionysian elements - that is, the forces of **appassionato vs sostenuto**. Agens versus stable form, gesture versus structure, melding of form versus individualizing of components, articulatory minutiae and the charm of the moment versus farsighted vision to and beyond the horizon. Though they are antithetical and in perpetual conflict, they are fruitful precisely because of their tensions and constant clashes.

When I look for interpretive approaches to works of music, it is usually very important to follow these two principles and their interrelationships, which form the unique poetics of a particular author. The Apollonian principle emphasizes order, control, harmony; the principle of intoxication with beauty, on the other hand, abolishes all distinctions and boundaries, restoring the original elemental unity. On the one hand, there is present a movement of individuation, differentiation of shapes, boundaries, lines, which results in the emergence of a rich, internally differentiated world of voices, states, nuances and layers. This can lead to the risk that emerging boundaries and limits separate elements from each other, set them against each other, and the pursuit of structural ordering could turn into stasis, blocking transformation and movement. Harmony and beauty, if they are not to fossilise, must renew and move as they are born out of a tension towards their opposite - towards ugliness and disharmony. Against this Apollonian line of individuation, then, stands the great gesture of rejecting all differences and restoring the original unity. Intoxication eliminates differences, releasing vital resources. And so, the measure and contours need to be reestablished, made transparent, calmed down, thanks to which the work acquires depth and articulation, the composition lives on several levels and layers. **This polarity and the search for its unity and balance is, perhaps more than with anyone else, the starting point and the key to understanding a functioning Rachmaninovian aesthetic.** And that is why a clear-eyed mind, a pure and unencumbered outlook, free from the accretions of experienced convention, is vital. Just as we do with new works that we see for the very first time and have no customary right to them.

From an interpretive point of view, if we want to bring this dimension to life, it is essential to see it first - to see into the musical texture (! himself saying: *"it is necessary to dismantle every bolt, every cog, so that everything can then be pieced together."*<sup>2</sup>), to explore its peculiar "polyrhythmia" and polyphony, with great rigor for purity and precision, and then to let go little by little, exposing the structure to emotional trembling. There is no need to worry about the emotion; **the emotional relief is amplified, gains nobility, precisely through such work.** Far from being revelatory, this interpretive approach to Rachmaninoff is very little used. Why does the author himself, who takes so much "liberty" in interpreting other composer's works and bringing their aesthetics to the edge of the possible, play his own stuff - the most refined and moving sections - with extreme restraint, even **chastity**, highly sophisticatedly, downright **antisentimentally**? It is a question that leads to one of the most fundamental moments in Rachmaninoff's world.

## 5. Feel - and what to do with it?

*"All the sediment and convention must disappear from the internal structure of your role. You must affect exclusively the core of this inner structure, the purely **organic essence of emotion** (MB emphasized), not the incidental embellishment attributed to this or that emotion and its corresponding action on stage."*<sup>3</sup>

There is nothing worse than the intrusiveness of emotion, taught the great theatre teacher Stanislavsky. The most terrible thing in artistic creation is to sweeten the sweet, salt the salty, spice the spicy, artificially inflate and falsely exaggerate. Instead of loving, we see the artist straining.

Stanislavsky taught actors to tame passion, to realise that **the artistic tension is not so much in the passion itself, but in the force that seeks to overcome it.** And the power of tragedy arises precisely from the moment that the fortitude of our determination suffers a fiasco and succumbs to passion "at the right moment." But these subtle and powerful emotions in artistic creation are not to be dealt with in a merely elemental way - how could we always find the right and powerful moment? The captured advice of Stanislavsky, Gogol, and Chekhov to actors is extremely inspiring, wise, and surprisingly congruent:

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2 NEŽDANOVA, Antonina: About Rachmaninoff, in: Remembering Rachmaninoff 2, Moscow 1957, p. 63

3 ANTAROVA, Concordia: Discussions with Stanislavsky. Svoboda, Prague 1949, p. 120



*“Try ... to let the viewer see your efforts to refrain from crying and not really see you cry. The impression will be several times stronger.” (...) “When you depict the unfortunate and want to make the reader sad, try to be cooler – this will create a sort of backdrop to the stranger's grief, against which it will be drawn in relief.”*<sup>4</sup>

*“In art it is important not to say anything unnecessary, to express only condensed impressions – then a strong place will make an extraordinary impression”*<sup>5</sup>

The theme of "too much emotion hidden under a mask of cold restraint" is an old Romantic theme, from Wertherism, stretching through Villiers, Maupassant, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and into 20th century modern literature. It works in music in exactly the same way. It is up to us, the performers, to be able to capture and decipher the subtle possibilities of texture that make up the unique emotional and intellectual content. The sediment of custom and convention – this is how it is supposed to be played, this is how it is played – is dangerous precisely because it closes our minds, our clairvoyance, and the modern outlook I keep mentioning.

*“How often Rachmaninoff's compositions, which have a specific smell, are vulgarised, how pianists rush to meet the emotion, 'interpret the emotion' and thus pass it by in cheap sentimental outpourings!”*<sup>6</sup>

That is why Rachmaninoff himself is constantly selecting, so to speak cooling his music. To make the perfection of structure recognizable, to make the principle appreciated, he lets the conservatism of emotional ideas, gestures and rhetoric act as a base, not as an end goal, and draws more attention to the inner rich dimension of the composition. And it is in doing so that he reveals the concentrated **core, the organic essence of emotion**, of which Stanislavsky spoke.

What is particularly interesting is that this principle is also typical of Rachmaninoff as a performer. He always shapes the emotion in a deeply considered and distributed proportionality and hierarchy. With strict tempo and restrained dynamics, he often holds back the emotional exuberance of climaxes – the inner energy is not so much manifested in the climax itself as in its gradation, on the way to it. In the gradations it creates immense pressure, but the climax of the climax already takes place without pathos, one can say “dry”. By this

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4 KOGAN, Grigory: Voprosy pianism. Soviet Composer, Moscow 1968, p. 245-6

5 MILSTEIN, Jakov: Music is a Living Speech, in: Etudes on the Piano. Editio Supraphon, Prague 1987, p. 65

6 KOGAN, Grigory: Rachmaninoff – Pianist, in: Etudes on the Piano. Editio Supraphon, Prague 1987, p. 47

contrast, the gradation gains in retrospect in strength, making its incandescence much more impressive to the listener. It is also one of the reasons why climaxes in Rachmaninoff's works often sound banal to the point of triviality in other interpretations.

Despite the effect of “emotional programmaticism”, Rachmaninoff's musical thinking was “absolute”, he was interested in “pure music” and so was his playing. Sophisticated by deep concentration, analytical compositional thinking, wilful steadfastness and a kind of inner closedness.

## **6. How the “very old composer” Rachmaninov teaches new things**

I would like to dwell on one of the most important moments forming Rachmaninoff's manuscript - his interpretative handling of musical time. It can be said that *it* is extremely modern and absolutely timeless. In the sense of subjectivism, it is the most striking and the most contested feature of his performance art, but I am convinced that it is precisely this feature that constitutes an important clue to the search for convincing interpretative approaches. The immense sense of rhythm also extends to his compositions; as Kogan says, Rachmaninoff is one of the most rhythmic composers ever, apart from him perhaps only in Beethoven and Prokofiev does the element of rhythm play such a large, decisive role. Performers, besides being overwhelmed by romantic emotion, take very little notice of it. The specific rhythmic pulse of his compositions, however, is far from the lifeless metricity and formal evenness that can often be heard in his works such as the Prelude in g minor op. 23 or the Etude-Tableaux in b minor, Op. 39.

Many - and not only his - “rhythmic” pieces such as his Humoresque or Polichinelle, Beethoven-Rubinstein's Turkish March, Prélude or the March of the Davids from Schumann's Carnival, Golliwogs CakeWalk from Debussy's Children's Corner, etc., which often sound very banal and ordinary under other hands, and also to many pieces in which the performers struggle with a certain “instructiveness” of passages and arpeggios, such as Beethoven's 32 Variations in c minor, or some of the variations from the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini... Rachmaninoff was able to breathe a lively, elastic energy. He can use the rhythmic ostentation that often turns against pianists in these works to just the right advantage. He does this above all by modifying the length of the chords, some of which he shortens unnoticeably, others he adds tenuto or accent, by playing with dashes, slight digressions, subtle delays of main beats, he creates a tremendous tension, suggestiveness, a full-bloodedness that gives new life to many, even somewhat profane or “worn-out” compositions. Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, for example, is very typical

in this sense. Because of the harmonic simplicity of the theme, many sections move only in basic harmonic functions, and under the hands of pianists this piece often turns into a showcase of instructive exercises.

Under Rachmaninoff's hands the music seems to be constantly stretched on a spring, swaying and expanding like a living organism. His rhythm is very closely linked to dynamic nuance. He plays with rhythm by underlining the sonority of this or that note or chord, while extending some lengths in the bar to compensate for the shortening of others. This includes his rhythmic “magic” in stylized dances or other dance pieces such as Chopin's waltzes, Grieg's waltzes, various minuets, the Valse noble, the Valse allemande from Schumann's Carnival and many others.

And what is very important, even in compositions where the rhythmic component does not at first sight play a primary role, for example in his Prelude in F major, Op. 32, he is able to add another layer, another dimension to the music by subtly emphasizing and modelling the repeating rhythmic shape in the middle voice. Literally, one could say that he **also creates a kind of rhythmic polyphony in the works**, where the individual voices are differentiated not only in their sonority but also in their rhythmic charge, thus creating a new image and a new character.

The peculiar and organic rhythmicity has a particularly meaning-making impact: by means of tempo and rhythm, above all by “tuning” them, Rachmaninoff achieves the **separation and contrast of individual ideas, individualizes them, heightens their tension, unexpectedness, and content significance.**

As if in the intent of Stanislavsky's method of restraining emotion, he begins to build a gradation and at a certain point he breaks it, in an attempt to hold back the spinning wheel or accelerating whirlpool, while at the same time he develops a twofold thrust, thus causing a huge effect. What's fascinating here is not just the detail itself, but especially the context and the way it bridges further. It's ejection back into momentum and force that happens not even after the restraint, but **as if already right along with it**, right on top of it.

And just as he likes to break or suspend the rhythm in terms of the architecture of the composition, by handling the tempo and rhythm, he, on the contrary, **integrates and envelops the form**, connects the individual sections, knits them together, lets them flow out of each other and into each other. Often a single line of the whole development grows out of the initial tempo of the main theme. The movement that Rachmaninoff establishes runs periodically through the whole piece, returning to the pulse from the beginning of the piece **to unify the structurally distinct sections of the piece**. All the sections are characterised by precise rhythmic correspondence and so, despite their contrasting nature, are logical and

inseparable from each other. It is therefore not a good solution to imitate Rachmaninoff's tempi only in selected sections of the works, wherever we please. The same applies to his slowing-down 'mannerisms'. Imitating them without Rachmaninoff's ability to put them into context and bridge them can create a real mannerism, empty and false.

I would like to mention one more feature that demonstrates **Rachmaninoff's modern and timeless insight into works of all styles and centuries**, and that is the **extremely restrained use of the sustain pedal**. One of the greatest transgressions, even against Rachmaninoff's texture, is precisely the obscuring and destroying of the inner richness of the voices by the sustain pedal over large areas. In fact, Rachmaninoff often moves over a larger surface in one key, but within that key he changes characters, uses dashes and chromaticisms to break it up and create multiple bands. If the performer does not respect this, and overuses the sustain pedal, very bad music indeed is produced.

As long as whole areas are kept under sustain pedal, as is often the case, they become a ponderous, droning flood of harmonic elements with no other meaning than the feeling that there are too many notes.

Whether it is Chopin's waltzes, Mendelssohn's etudes, or his own preludes and etudes, Rachmaninoff uses the pedal everywhere in an extremely restrained manner. Characteristic, for example, is his sparse use of the pedal in the schlager Prelude in g minor, Op. 23, which allows the rhythmic charge and psychological pressure of the outer movements of the piece to shine through in a different, attractive light. All the details, rhythmic games, the intrigues of the texture, all its enlivening elements come out. In Schumann's Carnival, as performed by Rachmaninoff, there are perhaps more areas without pedal than with pedal, which is by no means a common performance practice in this piece. We can argue about the degree of 'arbitrariness', but the truth is that in such a performance the characters and contrasts come alive in a marvellous way, the articulation, the rhythmic and articulatory liveliness, even the motivic richness is emphasised - and all at once the redoubtable Schumann is a concise and modern composer! Rachmaninoff approaches even the most virtuosic works in this way, where he lets everything ring out in the utter purity, the crystalline clarity of every note. He does not resort to deception, he does not use delays and stops in virtuosic, polyphonic or otherwise complex textures as is often heard in other pianists, nor does he use the sustain pedal as a crutch to virtuosity.

His interpretations are similar to a living organism, in which everything is in interrelation and functions. Taken in isolation from their context, some features of Rachmaninoff's playing are highly individual and often different from experienced performance practice but taken as a whole they come together in perfect harmony. It is

therefore necessary to perceive Rachmaninoff's interpretation in its entirety. To focus on details without context and to label them as transgressions, e.g.: this passage in Chopin's Ballade No. 3 is too slow... the tempo of the conclusion of Carnival is too fast... etc., as one sometimes hears, shows a lack of understanding of the living organism of Rachmaninoff's playing, a loss of artistic clairvoyance.

In my study, I have pointed out several moments that encourage approaching Rachmaninoff's manuscript with revision and without convention. He as a performer is the best proof of this. His rule-breaking is often called too much subjectivism. However, if a master strives for expressiveness, he does not think about correctness. Nor does he think about generally accepted stylishness. This supposed interpretive subjectivism in the area of rubato, rhythm or diction is in fact precisely what this study seeks to point out. Bach, Chopin or Schumann, and finally his own compositions, are timeless and eminently contemporary works under his hands. Rachmaninoff's interpretation is the best proof of the necessity of looking at works of all styles and centuries as unencumbered and pure.

# II.

In our Slovak performance practice for decades, the widespread opinion among pianists was that new music is dedicated to those who fail to play the established music and would not stand up in its performance competition. I believe that the reason for this phenomenon is the relative youth of professional Slovak performance art, which has been and still is searching for its identity, and this is most easily done by comparing it to a proven space. There is a gulf between old and new music - often in terms of performance demands, which creates a vicious circle. As if dissonance means it doesn't have to sound beautiful. As if unfamiliar music means that the most important thing is just to play it- even then, there is nothing to compare the interpretation to. Unlike the one click that separates us from the most accomplished historical interpretative creations of a Beethoven sonata or a Chopin etude, new music has no interpretive models. To study it - and to perform it - is respectable in itself. I have faced being categorised as a promoter of new or unknown music, and often this assessment has implied a diminished interest in such productions, followed by the question of when I will play something “normal”. I consider it one of my most important professional roles in life to contribute to building bridges between centuries and to levelling the playing field in terms of views and expectations of the level of performance of music known and unknown, old and new.

In this part of my text, I will try to approach the second half of the motto *look at the old as the new and the new as the old* my experiences as a performer with a very aesthetically distinct and peculiar contemporary composer.

25 years ago, I met an important Slovak composer Ilja Zeljenka, who at that time opened the next chapter of his specific compositional - aesthetic transformation. I was lucky enough to be his *court* performer and to see up close what this transformation meant for interpretative approaches of his works, his demands and formulations towards us performers. It was very interesting to see how easily his imperatives led the performers to a dead end. It was a very complex set of procedures, and in the course of which - as well as in watching better and worse interpretive attempts - I was strongly aware of how important it is, alongside an open mind to aesthetic innovation, to be aware of the full range of interpretive means, and thus to be able to help the author formulate his not-quite-traditional ideas.

Ilja Zeljenka was an author who became a *persona non grata*, a banned author during the socialist normalization for his attitudes and work. Living with himself and his music in seclusion had already in the seventies triggered in him a process of enormous deepening of his own technique and an outright obsession with material selection, which reached its peak in the well-known Zeljenka's "cell". We speak of the compositional method as the maximum reduction of the compositional material to a four-tone model forming the basis of all compositional operations. These are a peculiar mix of Renaissance counterpoint, Baroque polyphony, Haydnian motive work and Webernian serialism. Already then, his lifelong simplification, abbreviation, and concentration was underway.

Zeljenka explained the cell by the example of a living organism organized from the smallest elements, which have different functions but one unifying principle. The smallest model is the four tones, internally differentiated by minor and major seconds, and only by means of transpositions and the manifold stacking of cells against each other, above each other, below each other, can a whole functional organism be created, and functional not only structurally, but also with great expressive potential. All these techniques do not end in themselves, they should be subordinate to the expressionist gesture.

In some ways it's a variation of serial technique, but with a huge scope for imagination. **Fantasy versus determination** - this dual tension winds through Zeljenka's work like a thread and **forms a clue to the vivid and fitting interpretation of his compositions.**

Example no. 8: Zeljenka – Sonata per pianoforte no. 2

The musical score is written on five systems of grand staves. The first system shows a treble staff with a quintuplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with a simple accompaniment. The second system includes a triplet of eighth notes in the treble and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. The third system features a treble staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth system shows a treble staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. The fifth system includes a treble staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. The score is marked with various dynamics and articulations, including accents and slurs.



Example no. 9: Zeljenka – Sonata per pianoforte no. 2

Handwritten musical score for the first system. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lower staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. A crescendo marking 'de... cres..... cen..... do.....' is written below the lower staff.

Handwritten musical score for the second system. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lower staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. A 'p' (piano) marking is present in the lower staff.

Handwritten musical score for the third system. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lower staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. A 'p' (piano) marking is present in the lower staff.

Handwritten musical score for the fourth system. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lower staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. A 'mf' (mezzo-forte) marking is present in the upper staff. The system concludes with a 'ssante' marking in the lower staff.

However, the structural principle was so novel and striking that it often drowned out the performers' ability to perceive the expressive potential of the piece, which thus became a parade of the principles of cell use. The result was tragic - a novel, highly original composition of high intellectual value, but utterly dead and ugly in expression. As if it amplified the ugliest of the piano's potential. Yet the interval of the second and, conversely, of the seventh contains within itself a great potential for expressive gestures and provides a wide manoeuvring area for choices of proportions of tone creation, rubato or other means of expression. When studying new music, therefore, a mental connection with the music of the past tends to be extremely important, indeed crucial, for me. Not for the sake of imitating situations or "stealing" performance practices. But for feeling the whole range of possibilities that the composers of new music themselves are often unaware of. They often are not pianists, or good pianists, and they don't have to know the whole spectrum of pianistic richness. Whatever the distilled principle of a piece - when the notes sound, the essence of the composer's inspiration is always an emotion that the performer must rediscover, understand and revive, and this is equally true of the music of Bach, Chopin - and Zeljenka.

From around 1997, after a massive rehabilitation of banned authors, Zeljenka opened a new chapter of his peculiar creative aesthetics, with his work being very much present on the stages. An extreme diligence has resulted in a huge number of opuses mostly dedicated to specific performers. There was probably no performer active in Slovakia at the time who did not have a composition dedicated to him by Zeljenka. (... *"What would a composer do without good performers? Would he play his music in his own ears?"* <sup>7</sup>)

After the initial enthusiasm and pride, this fact, together with the easily recognizable new compositional language with its understandable signs of repetition, resulted in despair from several composers and performers. However, what it really came down to was Zeljenka's obsession with constantly validating himself through work, constantly purging himself of the dross of life. After all, every work or piece from this fertility-laden period is professionally unquestionable. His language moved away from its previous expressive pathos and toward clarity, Apollonian beauty, and simplicity. He was very fond of talking about it, everywhere and to everyone ... he rejoiced in his own abbreviation. He knew that performers were marked by their performance practice to the point of routine, by tradition and by the type of repertoire, and therefore approached his compositions "by custom", from a side that did not conform to his new aesthetic ideas. The expression of Ilja's works from earlier periods had to be rendered interpretively in accordance with the means used for music of the first half of the 20th century,

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7 ZELJENKA, Ilja: Interviews and Texts, Music Centre Slovakia, Bratislava 2018

and in this sense, it was not easy for us performers to understand what the next change he envisioned lays in.

What bothered him most about the interpretation of his recent works was the lump expressive emotion, its overuse, misplaced rubato, use of sustain pedal in inappropriate places, and in general the practice of **routine** treatment of the musical material of previous decades. Requirements like *senza rubato* or *senza pedale* are capturable by authorial instructions, but the essence of this new poetics of his, is dependent on the understanding and perception of the performer, who himself must find a way of dealing with such musical material.

Ilja tirelessly explained: "*Less pedal, less expression, no rubato here...*", his favourite was "*don't preach!*" These simplistic imperatives made it very easy to reach a dead end. A new tradition quickly emerged of correctly interpreting Zeljenka's recent works as music to be devoid of expression, with precise to the point of mathematical rhythmic assignment always and everywhere, and with a minimum of personal interpretive zeal - essentially the opposite of artistic beauty. Another excruciating new music! I have gone through a crystallization of the interpretive approach to his compositions. Although I understood him, it was and is very difficult to teeter on the edge of order and feeling, in strange, restrained expressions interspersed with a concentrate of sometimes almost barbaric energy. He couldn't explain it himself. He just said: "*Yes, yes! - play it like that, it's nice!*"

Although the value of the contact between performer and composer is considered by us performers to be priceless, even essential, it is important to be aware of its limits and not to rely on it to the full extent, or - as is often the case - to adore the contact between performer and composer as the principal source of performing know-how. Ilja's simplifications - "*play it like this, it's nice*" and "*don't play it like this, it's not nice*" - used to drive me to despair. He didn't say much more. He hated talking about music, it annoyed him and made him bored. He just liked music as a sonic entity, which is why he was so happy that I didn't need him to explain anything about his music. Just a few fresh and funny words helping us to enjoy the music itself was enough: "*this is where the Ostinates walk (...) here is the music box and here is Peckering-do*"

But for me, as a performer and teacher with a strong relationship to the analytical component of performance, and ultimately for future generations of performers, it was important to figure out and try to name what it is that disturbs him (and why) and what doesn't, and how this can be seen directly in the way the musical matter is composed. It is my deep conviction that the performer should not be dependent on the consultation with composer, even for unfamiliar or new works, but must try his or her best to read directly from the musical notation all that is necessary to decipher the adjacent poetics. And I don't just mean the performance instructions.

At a certain point I needed to detach myself from the multitude of Zeljenka's piano works premiered over the years, to clarify or revise the burning questions of the aesthetics of his music, and especially - to confront it with other, especially old, musical material. I had the nagging feeling that, despite our creative understanding, there was something I hadn't yet grasped. It was precisely that neuralgic point of Zeljenka's new music, the imperative of withdrawal, the amputation of sensuality. That the order he constantly emphasized is only a way; but that even more important than the order itself is the preservation of its nature, including its disruption and the way it is illuminated. The challenging point is that the compositions of the last decade are often so lucid that they can easily fall into an instructional or infantile mode, and it is important that their adult and mature musical ideas remain evident. That this simplification represents a **shortcut as a result of wisdom, not a loss of criterion.**

In the first years of our collaboration, it seemed to me that the relationship between the rigor of the structure and the asceticism of its execution was both the beginning and the end. Delighted by how much he liked my creations, I thought the achievement was complete, although deep down I clearly felt the nagging question of what to do with the order next, because my interpretations are ... rigid.

Zeljenka's compositions were dominated by a dictate of his own combinatorics, but at the same time my interpretation was also dominated by this Apollo's deception - this deceptive eternity of beautiful form: *This is how I am to be and forever ...* In a way, these works are an expression of homage to the musical past, admittedly in a sophisticated form of Zeljenkavian musical esprit. Tangible is his spiritual affinity with the greats of Europe's musical past, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. He was also very fond of Schoenberg and Bartók and sometimes wanted me to play their *Suites* for him. This was quite extraordinary, because he had only a minimal amount of ability to listen to other composers' works, and most of the time it disturbed him.

*"I believe that titles in musical works are redundant. They commit the listener to an interpretation that confuses him."*<sup>8</sup>

With such and similar statements, spiced with the imperative "*Don't preach!*" Ilja was directly signing the verdict of the reputation of a "heartless" composer who had gone mad in his old age. The titles of his compositions of the last period are mostly just basic character references: *energico, dolce, capriccioso, barbaro, scherzando, robusto...* while the character of

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8 ZELJENKA, Ilja: Interviews and Texts, Music Centre Slovakia, Bratislava 2018

the compositions is closely related to the texture itself - most strikingly in miniatures such as Tales of Music.

So how is it with the amputation of feeling in favour of structure in a work where the instructions dolce - triste - grazioso - robusto - barbaro - teneramente - giocoso meet? How can a miniature in which the positions sweetly - sadly - gracefully - robustly - barbarically, tenderly and jokingly occur in various proportions and combinations be deprived of feeling? It is not and never was about the removal of emotionality or expression, but about their special leanness and a kind of different emotional class.

*“The order itself, preserved naturally, can add enormous tension to the music, turning it into an emotional experience. (...)”*<sup>9</sup>

But what does it mean *order preserved naturally*? Lines, cells, contours, models, shapes placed and flowing in the uncompromising dictate of time above or beside each other, in this realm of time... How much structure and how much feeling? And what feeling? When does order cause rigidity and emotion clumsy spontaneity? And isn't structure itself already an emotion here...? Does it even exist independently? But how to illuminate it, to make it stand out, to make it come alive? If this or that illumination is then determinative of its energy, its content?

*“(...) I have not consciously tried to be philosophical in my music. If anyone found it there, it was part of myself and my work. (...) I think music is authentic, as the world is authentic. It expresses itself by its own means in time, sounding sounds in certain rhythms, in certain rules of the game. If something in my music seems sad, cheerful or melancholic, nostalgic, one way or another, it was never the intention, the first plan, the attempt to subordinate other things to it. Of course, when one does something, one doesn't avoid this dimension that people like to take out of music as the first information, but it's not the intention. (...) I don't need to put other meanings into music. If someone finds them there, I'm not against it, because they are there, even if I don't want them. (...)”*<sup>10</sup>

How simple the distortion is that he doesn't actually care if his music comes across as sad or happy, either way, and doesn't want the meaning. How simple it is to say: Zeljenka's compositional asceticism. But how important it is to make it ***"authentic as the world is authentic,"*** and natural ...

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9 ZELJENKA, Ilja: Interviews and Texts, Music Centre Slovakia, Bratislava 2018

10 ZELJENKA, Ilja: Interviews and Texts, Music Centre Slovakia, Bratislava 2018

And here we come to the immense need for a connection with the *old* - figuratively speaking, the best of the performing arts of the past and of the poetics of, for example, Couperin or Bach's sons. And it was my duty as a performer - not as the author of Zeljenka.

Above all, complete mastery of the matter - down to the last note - was necessary. Rhythmic drawings, the smallest intervals even in the fastest passages and, last but not least, the utmost devotion to the last fingertip on the keyboard. A phrase whose aim should be to create a *teneramente* - a feeling of tenderness, for example - is not free to be solved "as it comes, as I will feel". It often happens then that the feeling takes place in other parts of our physicality and is inaudible in the phrase. However, it is not at all desirable even to resort to a cold sounding of mutually disconnected tones, as happened to me in the early periods. But it's desirable to constantly control mixing of dynamic nuances, and above all **the way of pouring tone into tone** - unencumbered by our own and often vicarious (!) physical feelings - this is what Ilja meant by the simplistic imperative "*Don't preach!*".

Example no. 10: Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 5

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 5". The score is written on three systems of grand staves (treble and bass clef). The tempo/mood is marked "Largo, tranquillo". The first system starts with a 3/1 time signature and a tempo marking "cca 56". The second system continues with 3/1 and 2/1 time signatures. The third system continues with 2/1 and 3/1 time signatures. Dynamics include p, mp, and pp. The notation includes various note values, rests, and slurs.

Example no. 11: Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 3

The image displays a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 3". The score is written on four systems of grand staves (treble and bass clefs joined by a brace). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Key features of the score include:

- First System:** Starts with a  $\frac{2}{4}$  time signature and the instruction "energy". It features a series of chords and eighth notes in the right hand, and a bass line with eighth notes in the left hand.
- Second System:** Includes the instruction "lunga" (long) and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature. It shows a melodic line in the right hand with a long note, and a bass line with a  $p$  (piano) dynamic marking.
- Third System:** Features a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature and a  $\frac{2}{4}$  time signature. It includes a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a  $pp$  (pianissimo) dynamic marking.
- Fourth System:** Includes a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature, a  $\frac{2}{4}$  time signature, and a  $\frac{4}{4}$  time signature. It features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a  $3$  (triple) marking and a  $espr$  (espressivo) instruction.

Example no. 12: Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 3

- 13 -

The image displays a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 3". The score is written on four systems of grand staves (treble and bass clefs joined by a brace). The first system includes a handwritten page number "- 13 -" centered above the staff. The notation is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The first system features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. A handwritten "mp" (mezzo-piano) dynamic marking is present. The second system continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system shows further melodic movement. The fourth system concludes with a double bar line and the tempo marking "allarg." (ritardando) written above the staff. The handwriting is in dark ink on aged paper.



This unique asceticism, which demands clarity, purity, absolute control over the matter is necessary to combine in unity **with the attributes of sensibility**: a special slender sound, an impressive and “true” melos without the hypertrophy of colour, which must be modelled by the interrelationships of the tones to resemble a living speech. Very often the choice of the climactic tone of a phrase is decisive - if we use the most imposing one at first sight or enrich it further *legatissimo* by linking it with the preceding tone(s) - just then! the result is a traditional, inappropriately overwrought, “fat” (as Ilja and I called it) line. Since it lacks the necessary surrounding texture filling for this kind of expression, the result is strangely banal, at odds with the essentialism of the matter.

A very good example is Zeljenka's favourite model of the triola in cantabile music - he was extremely disturbed by its rhythmic distortion, he was allergic to it. Whereas, for example, in the 50-year-old Sonata No. 2 in conjunction with tragic intervals of second it is possible, indeed necessary, to use *rubato* in the modelling of the triola, in the music of Zeljenka's last period the rhythmic simplicity of the triola even in cantabile music is part of a certain pastoral restraint. Therefore, it is inappropriate to place the intonation peaks of phrases on a broad triola, however much we may wish to do so, and even though the graphic notation tells us to do so on a superficial glance. It is much more convenient to his new aesthetic to make the triola restrained and to place the climax of a phrase before it or, conversely, after it, in combination with the saturation of the phrasing. In a text of this kind, and especially divorced from the piano, it is difficult to explain such detailed procedures, but it is in them that the necessary arrows and clues fundamentally decisive of the result are hidden. Of particular importance was his idea of sound: even in *leggiero* or *delicato*, which he liked and used often, he demanded a certain tip, a pervasiveness of each note. This does not mean, however, that using this more penetrating timbre would not be desirable to model the relationships of the tones - that would be a big mistake! Anyway, it is important not to slip into a different tone colour and to keep even *legato* relationships pure, without conspicuous flattery and superficial emotional appeal. Paradoxically ... in the result they are both flattering and appealing... but somehow different... quieter, more inner, more real.

In the same way, the much-repeated and well-known requirement of rhythmic precision is not enough - his rhythmic games need to be understood more deeply, enjoyed together with him, and placed on the edge, as if they wanted to escape from precision, but must not be allowed to do so. Through my own trial and error, I have found that this music is at its most magical when rhythmic precision, graphic purity of contour, crystalline purity of line become not **the goal but the starting point** upon which the performer plays further games with articulation, voicing, diction or nuance, intonation and multi-layering. There the

performer is given scope for creativity, taste and ideas. In this interpretive approach, the dry relationships of tones and rhythms are transformed into a brilliant firework of shapes, and the music acquires the desired expressiveness.

Example no. 13: Zeljenka – Tales of Music, no. 4

*6/8 (4/8)*

*sim.*

*(3+3/8)*  
*sim.*

*Sim.*  
*ff*

*“Fortunately, all art begins to feel a certain self-hatred in the very embryo of its existence. Good art contains a strong self-reflection. It always seeks to find where the fault lies.”<sup>11</sup>*

And with that, I return in a great arc to the introduction and the motto of this text. This powerful idea of Zeljenka encompasses in three sentences what I discuss in many pages. To look at the old as new, to be able to push aside habits, routine, and the comfort zone of one's own professionalism, and, conversely, to allow the new work to draw on the full spectrum of the best that has already been created by human endeavour. This is the search for “fault”. The sap feeding the organism of mutually opposing forces - finding freedom in determination and law in arbitrariness. Whether that means tradition, habit or - us.

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11 ZELJENKA, Ilja: Interviews and Texts, Music Centre Slovakia, Bratislava 2018