

Emotional Expression and Performance Technique Training of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp Minor

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the emotional expression and performance skills required for Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor. Rachmaninoff is a famous Russian romantic composer, conductor, and piano player. Among the 24 preludes he wrote, Prelude in C-sharp minor holds particular significance, having been created when Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory of Music. An in-depth analysis and study of this work will help us better understand the feelings he intended to express and improve our playing skills. This paper briefly introduces Rachmaninoff's life experience and determines the emotional tone of his works by analysing the background of his works and the characteristics of Russian folk music, to help us better grasp the emotions contained in his works. In terms of performance skill training, this paper mainly expounds on the key chords and octaves, the fast triplet in the middle, the rapid alternation of hands, and syntax. Finally, this paper summarises all aspects of understanding the Prelude in C-sharp minor and offers some inspiration and suggestions to performers, including an in-depth understanding of the emotions the composer intended to express through the emotional changes in each paragraph. Attention is given to the performance of music and the training methods for playing techniques. Through this brief analysis of the emotional expression and performance skills required for Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, this paper aims to provide a useful reference for music learners and enthusiasts, helping them overcome difficulties in the emotional expression and technical performance of this work.

Keywords: Rachmaninoff; Prelude in C-sharp Minor; Emotional Expression; Playing Skill Training.

1. Introduction

Rachmaninoff is a Russian composer, pianist, and conductor with far-reaching influence. His works are rich in melody, strong in emotion, and complex in harmony. Among his 24 preludes, the "Prelude in C-sharp minor" is my favourite and the one I have practised extensively. To better understand and play this piece, I examined Rachmaninoff's life experience and the background of this piece, combining this with my practice experience to create this article, with a focus on emotional expression and performance technique training.

2. Rachmaninoff and the Background of His Works

2.1. Rachmaninoff

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was an outstanding pianist in the 20th century and one of the greatest composers of the late Romantic period. Born into an aristocratic family, Rachmaninoff was influenced by his mother and great-grandfather and received a strong musical education since childhood. He entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory at the age of nine and entered the Moscow Conservatory three years later. He studied under Deminarsky and Zverev, respectively, laying a solid foundation for his music studies. In 1889, Rachmaninoff was officially admitted to the Moscow Conservatory and began to receive more systematic education and training. He met famous composers such as Taneyev, Arensky, and Tchaikovsky, which had a profound impact on Rachmaninoff's subsequent music creation[1].

2.2. Background of the Work

"Prelude in C-sharp minor" is a solo piano piece composed

by Rachmaninoff in 1892. It was created when Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory with honours and was awarded the highest honour, the "Grand Gold Medal," and premiered at Rachmaninoff's first solo concert. It was later included in Rachmaninoff's piano collection "Fantasy Sketches." As a famous romantic musician, most of Rachmaninoff's works have a strong romantic colour, and this piece is no exception. The sound effect at the beginning is reminiscent of a bell, inspired by the church bell. At the end of the 19th century, Russia, under Tsarist autocratic rule, was in social turmoil. The creation of this piece reflects the author's intention to pray for his country and nation. As someone filled with melancholy, Rachmaninoff expresses his grief and helplessness about the social conditions in Russia at that time[3].

2.3. Russian Musical Style in the Work

When the work was created, Russian society was in turmoil, and conflicts with countries such as Britain and France were acute. This social context also impacted the Russian music style. In terms of emotional colour, many Russian piano works exhibit tragic, firm, and magnificent musical images. The "Prelude in C-sharp Minor," known as Rachmaninoff's "fate" theme, primarily reflects a tragic and resolute emotional tone.

In terms of composition, the harmonic colour of Russian music is highly diverse. Open voicings are often used, which better showcases the grandeur of the Russian nation. In the A section of the work, the progression from the auxiliary chord to the leading chord and then to the dominant chord is repeatedly used, followed by key changes. Most major chord arrangements are developed and are not limited to basic triads and seventh chords. This richness in harmonic colour is characteristic of the Russian music style[2].

3. Emotional Expression of the Work

as the main key throughout, and it is structured as a single three-part form with recapitulation, as shown in Table 1.

3.1. Musical Form

In the "Prelude in C-sharp minor," C-sharp minor is used

Table 1. Re-enactment of a three-part musical form

Introduction (1-2)	Section A (3-14)	Section B (15-43)	Connect (44-45)	Section A (46-55)	End(56-62)
2	a + a ₁ 6 + 6	B + b ₁ 14 + 15	2	a + a ₁ 6 + 4	7

3.2. Emotional Expression of Works

The overall emotional tone is gloomy. For example, at the beginning of the piece, the bass descends with *ff* intensity, creating a solemn effect. This is also referred to as Rachmaninoff's "fate" theme. The intensity in the second bar shifts from strong to weak. The chords of the left and right hands are very full, simulating the effect of "bells" with a touch of approach. At the outset, two different emotions are expressed at a *lento* speed. The first bar highlights a heavy, firm, and rebellious power, while the second bar becomes quiet and melancholy, reflecting Rachmaninoff's own feelings. The sound of the chords seems to narrate the author's repeated suffering with a hint of helplessness amidst constant struggle. In the first two beats of the fifth bar, a slightly stronger major chord returns to the previous weak intensity in the third and

fourth beats. This self-affirmation followed by immediate self-denial reflects Rachmaninoff's inner contradictions. This change in intensity drives the change in emotion, enhancing the drama and appeal of the music, and allows us to more intuitively feel the complex emotions Rachmaninoff experienced when composing this work. In the 67th bar, this change in emotion appears again as the intensity gradually increases and decreases. The intensity of the last 12th bar of the A section changes to *ppp*, indicating the lowest point of emotion and foreshadowing the tranquillity before the emotional outburst. In the heavy descending major chord progression throughout the A section, we can feel Rachmaninoff's inner pain and struggle, reflecting his resistance to reality and his hope for a better future. The author conveys this complex emotion in the A section, infusing the music with vitality and appeal[6].



Figure 1. Music example 3-1

For example, in Example 3-2, the *agitato* at the beginning of the B section marks the gradual excitement of emotions. The rapid running of triplets highlights the descending

chromatic melody, showing Rachmaninoff's grief and excitement that can no longer be suppressed.

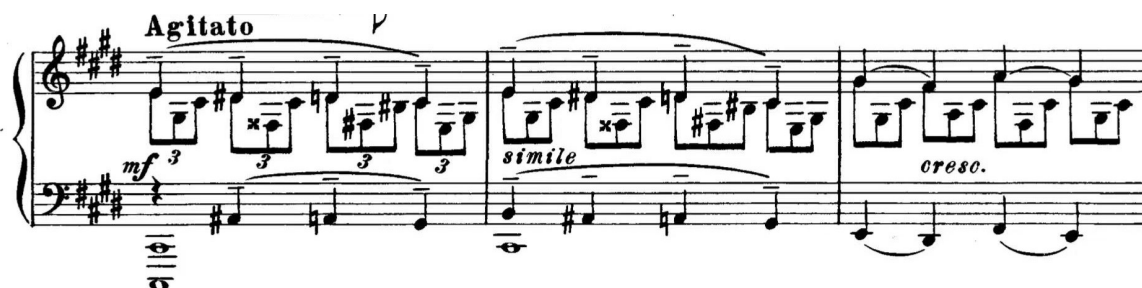


Figure 2. Music example 3-2

The entire B section constantly alternates between the two forces of dim and cresc. Each time it experiences a gradual decrease, the intensity becomes stronger, shifting from the initial mf to the subsequent ff and then to fff in the connecting part. The repeated crescendos and decrescendos resemble the author's ongoing struggle between the outburst and convergence of emotions, yet he remains unable to escape the suffering of fate. The emotions progress layer by layer, with the intense emotions that are on the verge of becoming uncontrollable being suppressed and creating suspense. Finally, in the connecting part of B and A1, the long-suppressed emotions are expressed through the alternating chords of both hands, like a storm.

The long-accumulated, depressed emotions of the A1 section that reappear at the end completely erupted. For example, in Example 2-4, the change from the ppp of the A section to the extremely strong sfff indicates that the author's emotions completely erupted. The performer must use their whole body's strength to play as if fighting against the cruel

reality. Although this section is consistent with the A section in terms of harmony, it features a significant increase in intensity and emotion. To express the emotions of this section well, attention must be paid to speed, key stability, and accuracy, using full body strength to convey the author's criticism of the harsh realities of society and his longing for peace. The coda is played with a slow and weak treatment, imitating the effect of a bell gradually fading away. After a period of unbridled venting, it returns to the emotions of the A section at the beginning, but with a sense of relief following the intense struggle[5].

The entire piece of music features ups and downs in emotions. To convey the emotions of this "Prelude in C-sharp Minor," the performer needs a clear understanding of the connotation of the music and precise control of breathing between phrases. In addition, personal interpretations may vary, allowing for the expression of both the author's and the performer's intended emotions[8].



Figure 3. Music example 3-3

4. Technical Training for Performance of Works

4.1. Chord and Octave Technique

The composer used many octaves and chords in this work, which requires a particularly high finger span. When the finger span is not enough, you can stretch it as much as possible by spreading the thumb and little finger flat on the plane. When playing a major chord, such as the one in Example 4-1, make sure to open the palm completely. Each finger needs to locate its note in advance and play it simultaneously. Especially when there are many notes in a chord in the example, the chord must be played neatly. If the fingers fall unevenly during the performance, the notes will come out sequentially, which can significantly affect the

emotional mood of the piece. When playing the softer parts of the A section, keep your fingers close to the keys and maintain relaxed wrists and arms. To achieve the ppp dynamic indicated in the score, you cannot rely solely on relaxed fingers; you need to tighten your fingertips to control the strength and sink the force; otherwise, the sound will be weak. It is noteworthy that not every note in the chord has the same strength. We need to highlight the melody while maintaining neatness. The strength of the little finger should be slightly greater than that of the other fingers. In terms of pedal usage, the depth of the sustain pedal in the A1 section should be adjusted according to the different dynamic markings in the score. Except for the beginning ff and the mf indicated, the sustain pedal of other chords should be pressed halfway to achieve the ppp dynamic effect. In very soft passages, the soft pedal can also be used appropriately to control the volume[4].



Figure 4. Music example 4-1

When playing the A1 section, as shown in Example 4-2, the large chord span and big jumps impose extremely high requirements for the coordination of the entire body. When moving from bass to treble, your body should slightly tilt to the right with the chord, and it should remain relaxed and not tense. At the same time, the dynamic marking of *fff* requires the correct use of strength of the whole body. Playing this part requires attention to the following two points; Lower the shoulders, spread the legs, and let the arms hang naturally so that the weight is completely supported by the piano. Since the strength of the naturally hanging arms is far from reaching the strength of *fff* in the score, the second point is crucial:

use the strength of the whole body, especially the waist, to help transmit the strength to the fingertips and achieve an explosive effect. Ensure that the strength is released outward completely, not pushed inward. Combining the above two points can help us better play similar chords. The span of this part is very large, so we need to use the pedal to compensate for the continuity lost due to the big jumps. Given the highly intense force required for this part, the sustain pedal needs to be fully pressed down. At the same time, you should also be mindful of changing the pedal; otherwise, the extremely strong force can make the performance sound muddy if the pedal is not replaced in time[9].



Figure 5. Music example 4-2

4.2. Triplet Technique Training

When playing triplets, the most common problem is the rhythm problem. For example, how to play three to two and three to four to match the beat. However, in Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C-sharp Minor", a relatively neat form of three to one is used. Thus, we will focus on the technical training of fingers for this piece. As the middle section of the piece, to meet the *agitato* mark and convey a fierce and exciting feeling, the speed of this part's triplets must be brisk. This demands a high level of finger function. Before tackling this part, you can practice Hanon exercises frequently, using the method of slowly raising your fingers high to sink the power thoroughly, thereby enhancing the flexibility of the palm joint. When training the part, such as Example 4-3, first practise the

method of slowly sinking the power through Hanon, and raise your fingers as high as possible. After some time, try to reduce the weight while still practising with your fingers raised high. Once these two methods are well-practised, start slow legato practice with fingers close to the keys. Through weight transfer, at this stage, you will feel a force pushing and accelerating, so maintaining a steady speed is crucial. After extensive practice, gradually increase the speed with a metronome. Finally, as the speed increases, focus on strength. The first note of each group of triplets is the main melody note. When training at a slow speed, you should pay attention to highlighting the melody note. When practising slowly, highlight the melody note and consider humming it; this helps to emphasise musicality[4].

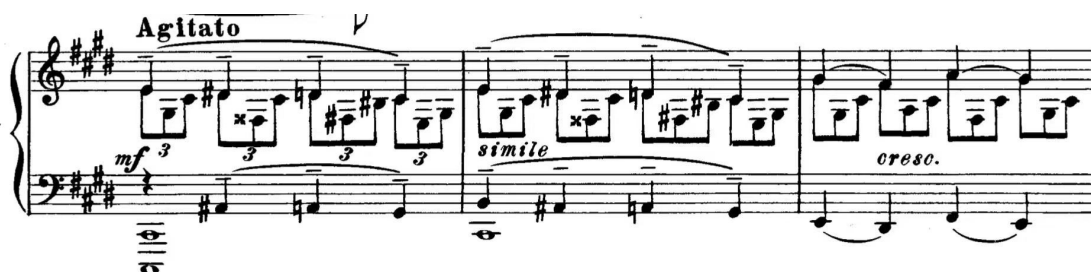


Figure 6. Music example 4-3

4.3. Rapid Alternation of Hands

There are eight bars between the B section and the A1 section, played alternately with both hands in a fast downward movement, as shown in Example 4-4. These eight bars are very challenging for hand coordination. When playing this part, ensure neatness and avoid leaving your right hand on the keys while playing with the left hand. Keep your arms and

wrists level and relaxed. Use your fingertips to hook the chords, provide strong support with your palms, lock the joints, and sink the power completely. Use the reaction force of playing to quickly change chords. When playing the current chord, your hand should quickly and accurately find the position of the next chord to prepare. After practising with weight, at a slow speed, and in phrases and sections, connect the entire sentence and practice faster. Another common

mistake is losing control and having the left and right hands overlap or one hand play more. When I practise this part, I use the method of practising each hand separately first, then combine them. This approach effectively resolves this problem. As the connecting part between section B and

section A1, it links the previous and the next sections. At the beginning of this part, you can use rubato appropriately, then gradually speed up as you approach section A1. The intensity should always be maintained at *fff*[2].

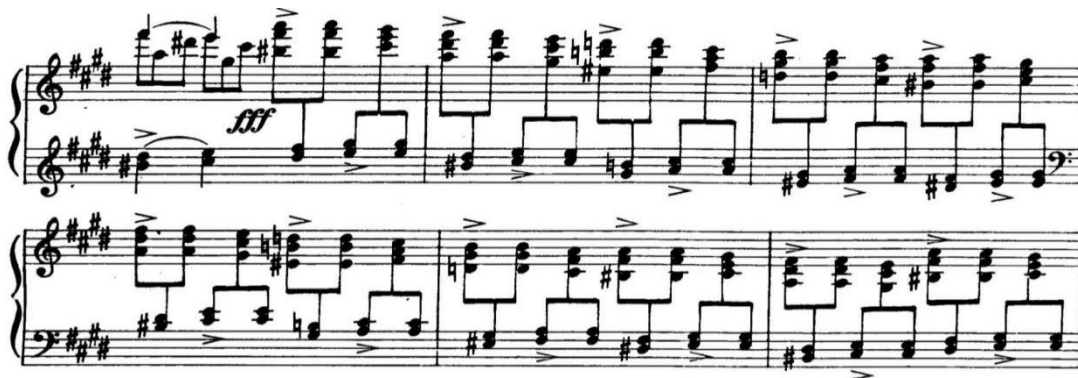


Figure 7. Music example 4-4

4.4. Syntax Training

Generally speaking, syntax refers to the composition of phrases and sentences in spoken language, while syntax in music refers to the composition method of musical passages, phrases, and rhythms. Whether the performer can accurately analyse and understand musical phrases directly affects the quality of the performance. When we play a piece of music, to accurately and completely express its contents, we need to have accurate punctuation, just like speaking. The most obvious way to distinguish syntax in the score is the legato line. Generally, the melody contained in a legato line is a musical sentence. To play this sentence clearly, practice the short phrases separately before playing them together. This

approach ensures the integrity of the piece while maintaining punctuation and tone, making the music more pleasant and expressive. Breathing between phrases and changes in dynamics are crucial. As shown in Example 4-5, the melody within the legato line descends in two degrees. Starting from the first weak note, gradually increasing the volume of the two middle notes, and then weakening the final note achieves a similar effect to the rise and fall in a spoken sentence. When finishing a sentence, a sense of breathing before continuing to the next sentence is necessary. In my understanding, syntax is not static but a unity of sensibility and rationality. Within a certain framework, one can use musical intuition to process and punctuate the phrases in different ways to achieve different effects[10].



Figure 8. Music example 4-5

5. Summarise

5.1. The Combination of Art and Technology

Piano playing is not only about showcasing technical skills but also about expressing the artistry of the work. Combining technology with artistry presents the work to the audience in its best form. In terms of art, performers should deepen their perception and understanding of the work by learning about the background of the work, the composer's life, and the emotions the composer intended to express through the work. Technically, performers should focus on targeted technical training for the difficult points in the piece while practising basic skills. For example, in Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C-sharp Minor," octave and chord techniques are predominant, so specific training for these aspects is essential. After separately learning and training in the art and technology of the work, the most critical step is to combine the two. With smooth playing, the artistry of the work can also be displayed

through the control of pedals, dynamic variations, and tempo adjustments, to achieve a better performance effect[7].

5.2. Advice and Inspiration for Performers

When playing the "Prelude in C-sharp Minor", performers should pay attention to the following points:

- (1) Grasp the correct emotional expression of the work: deeply understand Rachmaninoff's life experience and the creative background of the work, to grasp the emotional changes and expression methods of the work.
- (2) Accurately play the dynamics in the work: This work has two extreme dynamics, strong and weak, so we need to pay particular attention to the dynamic contrast.
- (3) Strengthen technical training: This work has technical difficulties such as major chords, rapid passages, hand alternation, and more. Extensive practice is needed to achieve a stable speed and accuracy.

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