

Dissonance op. 34 no.13 by S. Rachmaninoff.
Stylistic - interpretive analysis

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The song *Dissonance* - the longest in its genre written by Rachmaninoff is an extremely complex work in terms of expression and writing, combining stylistic features which go beyond the chamber miniature framework. It is a story of intense expression about the non-fulfillment drama, ideal, hope, disillusionment and happiness - as a state of completeness unattainable by those who can not live, but only exist; in order to be understood and interpreted, the ability of authentically reasoning at the essential dimensions of life is required.

The cyclic structure reveals a balanced architecture, the beginning and the end being marked by similar verses: 2nd verse - Пусть другой обладает моей красотой! / *Even if another enjoys my beauty*; last line: Пусть владеет он жалкой моей красотой! / *Even if others enjoys my sad beauty!* In the described framework, dominated by the emotional dissonance of the characters involved, I. Polonsky and S. Rachmaninoff create a unique artistic world, located in the realm of evocation.

In terms of performance, the most important aspect is how the contrast between the dramatic and lyrical episodes is rendered, the expressive ambitus of the work being circumscribed between *p dolce (pp leggiero) - ff con fuoco*. The chromatic diversity is also an important coordinate. By modelling the last dimension, the extension of the work acquires a new quality - the impression created being that of subjectively compressed temporality.

The introductory passages - *Non allegro agitato* – describe the inner state of the text which is beyond words; the legato rendering is important, with somber sound tone, not dynamic in itself / *f*. We suggest the gradual, progressive upwards realization of the repetitive formulas. Coda, firmly configured on the same structures (m. 80-94), will similarly summarize the implacability of the previously exposed happenings; therefore, the performance variant proposing the rendering of the final in identical tempo is due to formal (cyclic) reasons. Note that in the preamble, Tempo I concerns the piano match, invested with triggering role in the expressive scheme of the music - on this background the *Meno mosso* vocal interventions allow the expressive underlying of significant words (such as судьба / *fate*) with more expressive accuracy (*rit. portato*).

The **agogic** plan of the work intimately folds on the spiritual developments rendered by the text. This aspect should be taken into account from the first stage of the performance for it allows estimation of the overall expressive perspective. Due to its large dimensions, the shift between sections plays an important part: agogic-dynamic anticipations, sometimes the use of the *subito* effect (moods like expectation, anxiety expressed by the text predisposing

to metamorphosis of this kind - i.e. the moment Poco più mosso. Agitato / *pp* barely whispered, corresponding to the mood created by the word дрожу / trembling / m. 27). We see, as in other works belonging to op. 34, that the temporal variability created by the difference *a tempo*, *tempo I* plays an important part in rendering the overall agogic balance.

From the dynamic point of view, the particular character of each shade depends on the sensitive rendering of the associated expression indications: *p / mf dolce*, *pp / mf agitato*, *ff con fuoco*, *p / piu tranquillo*, *mf / cantabile*, etc. creating thus the moods diversity pre-requisites, which represents a fundamental goal. Thus, the climax living intensity may be singularized unlike the previous moment noted identically / *ff* (m.56). The climax / *con fuoco* corresponds to the word впервые / *for the first time* - a significant moment in the intimate history of the characters: подслушал ты душу мою.../ Я душою сливаюсь с твоею душой -- / *on this bench, where my soul and yours merged for the first time*. The *ff* moment of the measure 56 is placed in a different semantic space: Ты не смеешь отдаться безумствам любви / Я не смею дать волю влеченьям своим // *You do not dare to believe madly in love/ And I can not express freely my desire* (*ff* emphasizing the word влеченьям / *desire, inclination*). The culmination - other than climax - is located in the m. m. 59 / *pp / p* (Andante, on the same sound as the climax - si 2), on the word милый ты мой! / *my dear!* - zone of great tenderness, but on the piano motif (atypical context in Rachmaninoff's songs).

The large breathing musical phrases can be properly delimited considering as landmark the literary text and the organization (metamorphosis) of the musical structures and not the specific signs indicated in the score - impossible to note according to the real musical meaning. It is important to follow the melodic line in connection with the phrasing configuration in the instrumental plan, with the suggestion that the portato slight voice withholdings should not harm the piano fluency sometimes expressly required, as it happens in the following passage

m. 11-15:

The musical score for measures 11-15 consists of two systems. The first system (measures 11-12) features a vocal line starting with a *p* dynamic and the lyrics "Из объ- я- тий е- го,". The piano accompaniment includes a *dim.* marking and a *simile* instruction. The second system (measures 13-15) continues the vocal line with lyrics "из ночной ду-хо- ты у- на- шусь- я да- ле- ко на крыльях меч- ты." and includes dynamic markings such as *cresc.*, *dim. rit.*, *colla parte*, *mf*, *dim.*, and *p dolce*.

where the emphasis falls on the word *крыльях* / *wings* (*dream wings*), which is a shade within the context. Relevant here is this continuity of the piano melodic phrase - which represents the first symbolic freeing (musical analogon of the idea suggested by the text⁰ from the psychological fixity of the introductory formula. We suggest comparing the moment (initial turmoil dispersion towards evocation)¹ with the final one (where music moves in the opposite direction - conclusive).

m. 1-2:
Non allegro. Agitato

Returning to the idea of developing uniform interpretation, it becomes obvious that the sections of the work are built on a small number of formal structures - noticeable in the piano part, for the metamorphosis of the main musical material occurs in this plan.

The chromatic element, basic in this work, takes three shapes: 1) thematic motif (dramatic in character) 2) its variation by diminishing the interval range in attenuated expressive context (*pp*, *dolce*, *Tranquillo*, *Meno mosso* / m. 22-26, 39-42) 3) chromatic background (*Più tranquillo* m. 49- 58).

For instance, the *p dolce* passage / m. 39-42, which sketches the initial cell of the motif, aims to create a new state (the piano plays a major role in the configuration of the expression - by means of colour, dynamic and articulation)²; the cantability of the half-tone unit - adjacent structure derived from chromatism - will subsequently render fluency to the entire *Meno* episode. (*p dolce* / m. 38).

m. 35: *meno*
нул?!

m. 38-39: *meno*
я на шестна-гов твоих

¹ The beginning of the passage / m. 11 must be rendered softly, with a subtle *legato*, at the key surface, that suggests the non-reality / subjectivity that pervades the entire work.

² The moments of dense texture stand in contrast with the transparency of the *dolce* passages. The soft episodes (i.e. *Meno mosso*, *Tranquillo* / m. 15-21) balance the bursting moments. To render them tenderly, we suggest a thin *legato*, resonant and without any strike of the key / i.e. the repeated notes in the left hand part (their expression and articulation will be taken over by the bass-pedal of the next passage).

It is found again in m. 49-57, on extended chromatic background:

m. 52-53:



In its original, thematic form, it expressively unifies the middle part of the work.

m. 23:



m. 27



The final arching (m. 74-83), consistently descending (with small illuminations, quickly turned off), will be shaped by the same structure.

At the background of the structural unit described, we emphasize **the role of timbrality** in organizing the work expression. The colours create shape, perspective, allowing the accentuation of the language structures. Dense piano writing contains at least two relevant moments of latent timbral poliphony: m. 22-26 end 49-52. In both, the harmonic pedal requires distinct colour - as a static background of the sound developments / depending on the next meaning: in the first case, / m. 22-26, descriptive - За прудом, где-то в роще, урчит соловей... / *over the pond, somewhere in the grove, where the nightingale sings...*; in the second / m. 49-52, highly emotional - С болью в трепетном сердце, с волнением в крови / Ты не смеешь отдаться безумствам любви / *Heart trembling with pain / I can see that you do not dare to believe madly in love.*

m. 22-24:



In terms of performance, it is useful to notice that this moment (m. 49-51) is the variation of the beginning measures of the song, both contexts being centered on the same ground - aspect provided with expressive and architectural significations at the level of the whole work.

m. 49-50

m. 1:

The female character soul obsession is played in the episode *Più tranquillo*, through the sound-axis movement in various registers (see the *si portato* sound avatars, on the pitch-scale between m. 50-59, anticipatory to the resumption). The harmonic changes comprehending the point endowed with expression requires equally the chromatic subtle differentiation of the sonority - not only dynamic - while maintaining the agogic linearity.

m. 54:

m. 56-60:

Finally, the *pesante* passage (m. 43-47), customized by the *portato* means of articulation, has nothing rhetorical, despite the great nuance and the boarded chord writing; we suggest a *legato* (on the contour of the soprano line, in great values), with warm, vibrating sonority, achievable through non-attack (controlled application of the piano weight) because the text express only a moment of lightness in the personal drama of a soul that is, in fact, alone ... Это ты меня за руку взял, милый друг?! / Это ты осторожно так обнял меня, / Это твой поцелуй -- поцелуй без огня! / *Are you the one holding my hand, dear friend? / You embrace me tenderly! / and kiss me ... But your kiss is weak, passionless.*

A final issue, from the perspective of balancing sound relations. The complexe piano writing compels sometimes to syntheses on the harmonic coordinate so that the functional similarity creates a non-redundant sound-effect (simple echo of the main function - i.e. m. 53-55 la 7/9, m. 74-77). Also, because of the frequent exceeding of the vocal registry by the accompanying part (a constant feature in Rachmaninoff's songs, starting with op. 21),

discretion is imposed while performing it, despite the high dynamic level, which must be related to context³.

Finally, we consider useful to make some observations regarding the area of the technical-musical problematic of the vocal part.

The voice is confronted here with a large ambitus - si/small octave, si 2; also, one must cope with the requirements of playing (soft nuances on high notes situated on vowels difficult to utter - exemple the end of the development - - si flat 2 on the “i” vowel / *милый*); finally, a challenge from the vocal point of view (as from the accompanying perspective) is to create colour diversity. Beyond many techniques specific to the vocal training, the solution to many problems of the soprano’s part locates in the chamber music area coordination - the mutual dynamic, agogic and colour folding so that the ensemble contours, by mutual support on the mentioned coordinates, the impression suggested by the text. After all, the key of a successful chamber music performance is still the mutual adjustment of the partners’ intentions in a common direction - continuously variable from a hermeneutical point of view, as new perspectives are discovered in the surface or depth layers of the writing.

The succinct observations done on the work, prior from the piano point of view, emphasized some aspects which allow the ordering of signs around landmark-senses which helps the understanding of the artistic message.

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Abstract

The stylistic - interpretative analysis of the song, primarily done from a pianistic point of view, emphasized some aspects which allow the ordering of signs around landmark-senses which helps the understanding of the artistic message. The main coordinates - specifically interpretative - dynamic, agogic, timbre, sound (sound form in relation to the written one) ordered their meanings by relating to the coherence required by the chamber ensemble exigencies, with its own laws of configuration. Their inter-relationship stylistically nuanced on the mentioned background enables the whole architectural balance.

Because *Dissonance* op. 34 nr. 13 is a final opus of the composer in the song’s genre, we consider useful the synthetic observations where the text allowed their insertion, in order to create the semantic environment necessary to understand the particular aspects. Also, we made references to similar works of other composers, despite the different stylistic areas compared. Thus, specificity is easily highlighted by contrast. An important topic of the study is represented by the non-coincidence between the climax of the work and the culmination - main landmarks based on which the interpretation can be truly constructed, as they express the expressive ambitus of the work, beyond the surface indications.

³ The dense piano writing reminds of the *Le balcon*, by Cl. Debussy (Cinq Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire - no.1), written in 1888. Even though the authors’ stylistic origin is different, the comparison is useful from the point of view of the piano sonority analysis.