

“The Blind Abyss”: A Symbolist Reading of Rachmaninoff’s *Francesca da Rimini*
By Keenan Reesor

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[See appended slideshow for examples and figures.]

Rachmaninoff and Symbolism may seem an unlikely pair. The utopian idealism, the mystic occultism with its sensual overtones, the aesthetic abstraction engineered to express these sentiments in the arts—all these seem as uncharacteristic of Rachmaninoff as they seem characteristic of Scriabin, his direct contemporary. Having nursed philosophical inclinations from his youth, Scriabin entered the orbit of Russian Symbolist thinkers beginning in 1898 and ultimately came to be viewed from within the movement as one of its most important musical adherents, especially by the poet Viacheslav Ivanov.¹ These circumstances have led musicologists to describe Scriabin as “the supreme protagonist”² or “poster child”³ of mystic Russian Symbolism in music. Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, continues to be regarded as a Romantic bygone at best and a Tchaikovskian epigone at worst. His relationship with Russia’s

¹ Malcom Brown, “Scriabin and Russian ‘Mystic’ Symbolism,” *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 42–51; Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 320. A prominent dissenter from this view among Russian Symbolists was Andrei Belyi, who disliked Scriabin’s music and instead advocated that of Nikolai Medtner, with whom he enjoyed a personal friendship. Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 317–18.

² Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works Through Mavra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 437.

³ Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12.

Silver Age is downplayed or dismissed altogether, even by scholars of the period.⁴ Francis Maes has written: “Songs to texts by Konstantin Balmont, a few to texts by Andrey Bely and Valeriy Bruysov . . . ; a choral symphony based on Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Bells*, in Balmont’s translation—these are the only points of contact between Rachmaninoff’s music and symbolism.”⁵ Maes subsequently ignores these points of contact, save for two sentences about *The Bells* and a paragraph about *Isle of the Dead* that offers no comment on its Symbolist provenance.⁶ Simon Morrison similarly brushed off Rachmaninoff’s relationship with Symbolism when he wrote that the composer “disliked Scriabin and did not seek inspiration for his compositions from Symbolist poetry.”⁷ To point out that Rachmaninoff composed two opuses based on Symbolist poetry and was a known advocate of Scriabin’s music for several years after the latter’s untimely death in 1915 is to miss the point: Morrison’s oversight on these points suggests just how entrenched generalizations about Rachmaninoff’s music and attitudes still are, and how they can perpetuate themselves by discouraging inquiry. Rather, the obvious personal and musical *differences* between Rachmaninoff and Scriabin have generally preempted investigation of meaningful *similarities* in their music, and thus of Rachmaninoff’s relationship with the Silver Age. “The musical oeuvres of Rachmaninov and Scriabin,” writes Anatole

⁴ See, for example, John E. Bowl, *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900–1920: Art, Life, & Culture of the Russian Silver Age* (New York: Vendome, 2008), 90; Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 542.

⁵ Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 204–05.

⁷ Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, 24–25.

Leikin, “differ from each other as sharply as the two men themselves.”⁸ The problem with this statement is not that it is implausible but that the discussion it introduces, though informative, does nothing to complicate it; it is offered not as a hypothesis but as a statement of acknowledged fact.

The reasons for this state of affairs are not far to seek. Rachmaninoff was rejected by Scriabin’s worshipers, both as a composer and as an interpreter of Scriabin’s music; these, Rachmaninoff recalled, “maintained that one could not interpret his works without a mystic hypothesis” and “decided that my playing lacked the ‘sacred consecration’ which could only be expressed by a chosen few, to whom I certainly did not belong.”⁹ Rachmaninoff maintained a distaste for mystic Symbolist poetry until shortly before composing his opus 38 *Poems* for voice and piano (which feature it).¹⁰ He did not maintain any close associations with prominent Symbolists. He was introduced to the Medtner brothers through Marietta Shaginian but would not allow himself to be drawn into their philosophical conversations.¹¹ He rejected Shaginian’s public attempts to cast him as a musical prophet capable of saving humanity from a decaying

⁸ Anatole Leikin, “From Paganism to Orthodoxy to Theosophy: Reflections of Other Worlds in the Piano Music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin,” in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2002), 32 (25–44).

⁹ Oskar von Rieseemann, *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), 181–82.

¹⁰ Marietta Shaginian, “Vospominaniia o S. V. Rakhmaninove” [Recollections about Rachmaninoff], in *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*, ed. Zarui Apetian (Moscow: Muzykal’noe izdatel’stvo, 1961), 2:129–30.

¹¹ Shaginian, “Vospominaniia o S. V. Rakhmaninove,” 2:137.

world.¹² Philosophically, Rachmaninoff rejected the mystic “Symbolist utopia, the idea of ‘theurgy,’ the notion that art could actually alter life,” as Avril Pyman has described it.¹³ “Many optimists,” Rachmaninoff told Oskar von Riesemann in 1930, “looked upon the Bolshevists’ seizure of the reins as an unpleasant but short-lived interlude of the ‘Great Revolution,’ and hoped that each new day would, at last, bring them the promised heaven on earth. I am not one of those people who blind themselves to reality and indulge in vague Utopian illusions.”¹⁴ His objective as a composer was more traditional. Rather than *transform* the world with his music, as he once explained, Rachmaninoff wished to “*transport* [his listener] to an ideal planet. *Not utopia*. . . . But a place where suffering and peace are transcended into a healing whole [italics mine].”¹⁵

Rachmaninoff himself played no small role in establishing his regard as a bastion of anti-modernism, even though a careful inspection of his oeuvre reveals a more adventurous aesthetic than is generally recognized. Rachmaninoff expressed his apathy for modern music repeatedly in his relatively small body of extant articles and interviews. In his first interview in the West, given at the outset of his first American tour in 1909, he declared, “I have scant sympathy with those who have allowed themselves to succumb to the wanton eccentricities of latter-day musical sensationalism. . . . The methods of Strauss and Reger have come to stay. But I, for one, shall

¹² Rebecca Anne Mitchell, “Nietzsche’s Orphans: Music and the Search for Unity in Revolutionary Russia, 1905–1921” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), 287–95, 306–07.

¹³ Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 185.

¹⁴ Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections*, 185.

¹⁵ Quoted in Glenn Quilty, “Rachmaninoff: The Last Romantic Composer,” *HiFi Review*, October 1959, 28 (26–28).

steer clear of them.”¹⁶ This view softened but little. In 1941, just over one year before his death, Rachmaninoff wrote, “I have no sympathy with the composer who produces works according to preconceived formulas or preconceived theories. Or with the composer who writes in a certain style because it is the fashion to do so.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, departing from established aesthetic “laws” could be justified, Rachmaninoff wrote, if an artist had, through “an intense period of preparation,” mastered classic form, citing Igor Stravinsky and the Russian Symbolist painter Mikhail Vrubel as examples.¹⁸

These public declarations fit neatly with the works that gained Rachmaninoff entry into the international repertoire and remain to this day his most popular, most notably the Second Concerto. These works are, however, generally not those that best illustrate his musical kinship with his generation, and perceptions of his relationship with his age have varied according to the familiarity of the commentator with his oeuvre. Notice, for example, how Alfred Remy’s assessment of Rachmaninoff in the 1919 edition of *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians* distances Rachmaninoff from the prominent musical isms of the early-twentieth century with reference to musical characteristics that are clearly descriptive of works such as the Second Concerto or Second Symphony:

He keeps aloof from both impressionism and futurism. The stirring effect of his music proceeds from the inherent beauty and expressiveness of his themes and their logical, masterly development. . . . He excels in the portrayal of the heroic. Nobility, directness, fire, and strength are the prominent characteristics of his music.¹⁹

¹⁶ “Modernism is Rachmaninoff’s Bane,” *Musical America* 11, no. 2 (November 1909): 23.

¹⁷ Rachmaninoff, “Music Should Speak from the Heart,” *Etude* 59 no. 12 (December 1941), 804.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Alfred Remy, ed., *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 3rd ed. (New York: G. Schirmer, 1919), s.v. “Rachmaninov, Sergei Vassilievitch.”

By contrast, notice how a thorough knowledge of Rachmaninoff's oeuvre led French musicologist André Lischke, in a more recent assessment, to offer a rare affirmation of the composer's relationship with Symbolism:

All of his piano works have survived, even if the inordinate success of the Second Concerto and Prelude in C-sharp Minor may have harmed other compositions that are no less interesting. Among his numerous songs, some form part of the current vocal repertoire His operas enjoy relatively little favor on the stage despite pages of undeniable power in *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini*. Of his symphonic music, *Isle of the Dead* is an underappreciated masterpiece in which Rachmaninoff proves himself to be an authentic symbolist.²⁰

An assessment of Rachmaninoff's relationship with his generation founded on a general familiarity with his music and opinions will invariably lead nowhere.

A significant part of the difficulty in defining Rachmaninoff's musical relationship with Symbolism—and, paradoxically, a good rationale for positing it—stems from the nature of Symbolism itself and its manifestations in music. Ultimately, any discussion of musical Symbolism—even Scriabin's—must proceed on a foundation of qualifications, not the least of which is the fact that no prominent composer ever vied for the term the way Jean Moréas did for writers in his so-called Symbolist “manifesto” of 1886. Time will not allow for a thorough discussion of the ambiguity with which the term has been applied in art, literary, and music criticism and history, but I would like to draw briefly from art and music history to exemplify this basic point. Rodolphe Rapetti has written that “Symbolism has always posed a problem for

²⁰ “La totalité de son œuvre pianistique a survécu, même si le succès démesuré du 2^e Concerto ou du Prélude en *ut* dièse mineur a pu nuire à d'autres compositions non moins intéressantes. Parmi ses nombreuses mélodies, certaines font partie du répertoire courant des chanteurs Ses opéras connaissent relativement peu les faveurs de la scène, en dépit de pages d'une incontestable puissance dans *le Chevalier avare* et dans *Francesca da Rimini*. De son œuvre symphonique, *l'Île des morts* est un chef-d'œuvre trop peu connu, dans lequel Rachmaninov se montre authentiquement symboliste.” André Lischke, “Rachmaninov,” in *Larousse de musique*, 2nd ed., ed. Antoine Goléa and Marc Vignal, 2 vols. (Paris: Larousse, 1982).

art history, insofar as it did not manifest itself as a style with clearly definable features.”²¹ This stylistic disunity, as well as the movement’s heavy philosophical underpinnings, have complicated its straightforward definition: was it primarily an aesthetic or a philosophical movement? And is it to be identified on the basis of stylistic traits or content? Rapetti describes the movement as “a philosophical trend that challenged contemporary conventions, . . . part of a wave of reaction against doctrinal positivism”—a rejection of the material world in pursuit of a higher reality that lay beyond reason.²² What bound its artistic manifestations together, he continues, was a complex of themes—often mythological, religious, or erotic—treated in such a way as to bring “a timeless perspective to human affairs.”²³ Michelle Facos, by contrast, rejects such a content-based definition as a misapplication “to art of criteria established for Symbolist literature” that fails “to distinguish Symbolist works clearly from those that followed the pictorial conventions against which Symbolists rebelled.”²⁴ “Other criteria are needed,” she reasons, “to make the designation ‘Symbolist’ meaningful,” for example “(1) an artist’s desire to represent ideas and (2) a manipulation of color, form, and composition that signals the artist’s relative indifference to worldly appearances.”²⁵ These definitions suit somewhat different interests: Rapetti’s emphasizes the movement’s basis in intellectual culture, Facos’s serves as a tool for making meaningful distinctions between aesthetically similar artworks. Together they

²¹ Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 104.

²² *Ibid.*, 7–11.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

²⁴ Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

indicate that art history is still in the process of reaching a shared vision of Symbolism. Perhaps it is fitting that a movement that reveled in suggestion should prove so difficult to define.

If art historians may be said nonetheless to be approaching consensus, music historians have not yet agreed that the term is worth using at all. For much of the twentieth century, historians tended to view the period from the late-nineteenth century to World War I as a period of “decline.”²⁶ In 1929, the English music critic and popularizer Percy Scholes indicated that his sympathies were “very much more on the side of the Anti-Romantics and Neo-Classics than on the side of the later Romantics, because, temperamentally, he prefers immaturity to *over-ripeness* [emphasis added].”²⁷ “Over-ripe” is precisely how Gerald Abraham described music of the period in his tellingly titled chapter in the *New Oxford History of Music*, “The Apogee and Decline of Romanticism.”²⁸ He had stated his view rather more bluntly in his earlier history *100 Years of Music*: “In the music of Strauss, in early Schönberg and in Skryabin we have seen the romantic Wagnerian harmonic idiom turning over-ripe and then rotten.”²⁹ Blessed with greater hindsight, more recent general music histories have dealt more sympathetically with the period. There has been an acknowledgment that, at the very least, terminology and isms relating to early-

²⁶ Paul Henry Lang, for example, considered this period a time when “lack of spiritual ideals submission to materialism and technicalism, and a resultant hunger for sensation and bluff, created an atmosphere in which philosophical and aesthetic judgments were vacillating and a normal and purposeful development of artistic individuality was made exceedingly difficult.” Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941), 1025.

²⁷ Percy A. Scholes, *The Listener’s History of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923–29), 3:120.

²⁸ Gerald Abraham, “The Apogee and Decline of Romanticism, 1890–1914,” in *The Modern Age, 1890–1960*, vol. 10 of *The New Oxford History of Music*, ed. Martin Cooper (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 78.

²⁹ Abraham, *100 Years of Music: After Beethoven and Wagner*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Aldine, 1964; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine, 2008), 227.

twentieth-century music represent a gray area. “Of all the style periods of Western music history,” reads one recent history, “only the one beginning around 1900 has no generally accepted name.”³⁰ These have, however, shown little more interest in positing a musical Symbolism than earlier music historians. We already have other isms, first and foremost Modernism, a term that, for all its vagueness, continues to be used generally in reference to the twentieth century. Finer distinctions are encountered with Debussy, who in spite of his close personal associations with Symbolists, continues to be identified with Impressionism, and with Schoenberg, who is associated with Expressionism. While mention of Symbolism in connection with Debussy is not unusual, it is rarely dwelt upon as it is in Richard Taruskin’s *Oxford History of Music*. Scriabin’s affinity with Symbolism was mentioned earlier, but Symbolism has not achieved as much general recognition as theosophy and mysticism as a philosophical influence on his music.

Assigning a strict definition to musical Symbolism is thus not a straightforward task. Just as Facos lamented the misapplication of literary criteria to Symbolist painting, so we might note that her criteria for identifying and evaluating Symbolist painting must be relaxed or adapted in order to suit music. Her statement, for example, that a Symbolist work must “suggest something other than what is actually represented”³¹ cannot really be applied to music, because music by its very nature cannot “actually represent” anything with the precision of literature or painting. Moreover, such iconic works of musical Symbolism as Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Scriabin’s *Prometei* adhere to a programmatic idea—they express what they say they express. In order to arrive at a more practical definition of musical Symbolism, Facos’s criterion has to be

³⁰ Bryan Simms and Craig Wright, *Music in Western Civilization* (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2009), 620.

³¹ Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 4.

relaxed or adapted. We might observe that what these iconic works share is an emphasis on suggestion and stasis as opposed to narrative and kinesis, achieved through the disruption of functional tonal syntax that is analogous to the Symbolists' disruption of verbal and visual syntax. If we relax the definition of Symbolism still further, adopting Rapetti's content-oriented view, more musical applications become possible: we might admit works that utilize narrative-inhibiting devices without express Symbolist intent, or something approaching the opposite—works that are directly inspired by Symbolist art but that don't necessarily exhibit the expected stylistic traits. This broader view—one that assumes a balanced approach to style and content in evaluating a Symbolist musical work—has, in fact, served as the basis existing discussions of musical Symbolism.³² Ultimately, we would do well to remember that style terms ought to derive their usefulness for what they reveal about music, and not the other way around.

Rachmaninoff composed examples of all these hypothetical types of musical Symbolism, growing more focused in his depiction of Symbolist subject matter with each encounter. Works inspired by Symbolist art and literature in fact played a significant role in the chromaticization of his musical language up to 1917, culminating with the assimilation of an increasing number of symmetrical harmonic structures. As time will not allow for comprehensive discussion of all Rachmaninoff's works that were influenced by Symbolism, in the remainder of this talk I wish to postulate a musical Symbolism based on the broader view of the movement described by Rapetti that builds on previous discussions of musical Symbolism to suggest a Symbolist reading of Rachmaninoff's opera *Francesca da Rimini* (1905). The opera shows how a work can reflect Symbolist attitudes, in this case the inhibition of linear narrative, without having been inspired by an expressly Symbolist subject or even with Symbolism in mind. Yet for this very reason, the

³² See, for example, Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, 12–18; and Taruskin's discussion of Debussy in his *Oxford History of Western Music*.

presence of these features suggests that Symbolism can serve as an informative mode of critical inquiry for music of the period. Though conducive to Symbolist treatment, the opera's salient programmatic themes of death, hell, lust, treachery, murder had long excited the Romantic imagination in general, indeed had attracted operatic treatment from the early days of the genre. It is not the mere presence of these themes but rather, as with Symbolist painting and literature, the way these themes are manipulated and their effect on audience perception that suggest an informative connection with Symbolism.

The opera depicts Dante's meeting with Francesca and her adulterous lover, Paolo, in the second circle of hell. Their ill-fated love was conceived in intrigue and frustrated by Francesca's marriage to Lanceotto, whose jealousy led him first to place Francesca and Paolo in a compromising situation and then to murder them both at their first show of weakness. Comparing Rachmaninoff's musical treatment of this literary subject with its treatment in two prominent musical precedents, the first movement of Liszt's *Dante Symphony* (1857) and Tchaikovsky's "symphonic fantasia" *Francesca da Rimini* (1876), illustrates what might usefully be construed as distinctions between a Symbolist and a more squarely Romantic approach. Both the Liszt and the Tchaikovsky derive their impetus from ordered musical events—gestures, thematic fragments, and phrases marked off with dramatic crescendos and sforzandos and equally dramatic pauses—that suggest dramatic and temporal continuity. There is much bombast. Much harmonic motion derives from the use of parallel diminished seventh chords in various transpositions and contrapuntal configurations, leading to passages that border on pure octatonicism and, in the Liszt, passages featuring bass movement by tritone. Liszt begins at the gates of hell, depicted by declamatory phrases that are superscribed in the score with Dante's verse, after which a recurring descending chromatic scale seems to depict Dante's descent into

hell, his arrival corresponding with the appearance of a metered theme. Like Liszt, Tchaikovsky opens with an introduction, this one more pensive and anxious. It is built of carefully constructed sequences that ensure a slow and relentless accumulation of dramatic tension, which it ultimately discharges when, having reached the tempestuous principal theme, the tonal ambiguity of the opening gives way to more straightforwardly functional harmony.

Rachmaninoff's *Francesca*, by contrast, begins almost inaudibly, avoids chiseled gestures and clear formal junctures, and suppresses functional harmonic syntax. The syncopated descending two-note suspensions that open the opera at first suggest D minor but slip imperceptibly into a G-sharp diminished seventh chord (**see example 1a**). Oscillating sixteenth notes materialize in a ghostly fashion, prolonging this diminished harmony as they slither upward. An E enters in the bass in m. 17, imbuing the sonority with a dominant character as the sixteenth notes oscillate in and out of the immediate harmonic orbit—a distortion that creates a distinctly macabre effect (**see example 1b**). Rather than generate motion through parallel diminished seventh chords, Rachmaninoff suspends the harmonic tension of this single sonority for twenty-seven slow measures (counting from the beginning), about two minutes of music. In measure twenty-seven, a thirteenth is added to the sonority, hailed by a strike of the tam-tam, but when this charged sonority resolves in the following measure, it does so not to A minor (as a functioning E dominant chord ought) but through stepwise motion in the bass to D minor (**see example 1c**). **[Play audio example 1.]**

Up to this point, then, the music has progressed from its single opening pitch, D, to a full symphonic statement of the D minor triad, driven by the gradual expansion of an unstable neighboring harmony. This triad wanes for six bars and then disappears into another ascending sequence, this one driven by overlapping lines in contrary motion. A pedal point on A is

introduced in m. 66, suggesting an eventual goal of D minor and lasting for twelve bars. This expectation is thwarted strongly. Rather than finding resolution in D minor, the accumulating harmonic tension of this A dominant pedal is heightened through a sudden chromatic shift to F minor in m. 78 (**see example 2a**). This particular shift to a chromatic mediant has been defined in neo-Riemannian theory as movement among *hexatonic poles*: two triads that are modally mismatched and share no common pitches but whose members each lie just a half-step apart; together, they form a symmetrical hexatonic scale.³³ Their symmetry, as Richard Cohn explains, makes them uniquely resistant to “interpretation in terms of diatonic tonality,”³⁴ which is to say that they disrupt tonal syntax, obscuring the basic point of reference for a logical musical narrative. “As a consequence of their diatonically paradoxical aspects,” Cohn continues, “hexatonic polar progressions are frequently affiliated, by both composers and listeners, with an ethos of uncanniness,” offering as an example their use in Wagner’s *Parsifal* to depict the removal of Kundry’s soul from her body.³⁵ The correspondence of this example with the work at hand is obvious. The uncanniness of this moment in the prologue is further heightened by a simultaneous thickening of the texture and a change in the voice-leading from contrary to parallel motion. Individual oscillating lines that formerly served as connective tissue between adjoining harmonies now become chromatically oscillating triads, distorting the music’s surface at precisely the same moment when hexatonic movement has distorted the music’s tonal orientation.

³³ Richard Cohn, “Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions,” *Music Analysis* 15, no. 1 (March 1996: 19 (9–40).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

The measures that follow submit to at least two different analytical perspectives, both of which continue to distort the texture and destabilize the tonal orientation (**see example 2b**). The first of these is further use of symmetrical structures: the E major and G minor sonorities in mm. 79–80 are related by octatonic scale (1,2), and the F-sharp major and D minor sonorities in mm. 81–82 feature another hexatonic polar progression. The second, perhaps a simpler view is that this passage fleshes out the descending two-note motive that opens the prologue into neighboring triads whose roots lie a semitone apart: the F minor sonority in m. 78 slides down to an E major one in m. 79, and the G minor sonority in m. 80 slides down to an F-sharp major one in m. 81, these four bars comprising a four bar sequence. Although the melody ascends again into m. 82, the descending bass movement breaks the established linear pattern in a surprise gesture that heightens the impact of the arrival to D minor. The appearance of the much awaited D minor cadential six-four chord three-and-a-half bars later suggests impending closure, but cadence is again avoided. Rather, the energy dissipates as the voices revert to contrary motion and the texture gradually evaporates down to a pedal point on A. The effect of these chromatic gestures and avoided cadences is to animate an extremely slow structural harmonic rhythm, giving rise to a class of closely related emotional states rather than a sequence of dramatic events. **[Play audio example 2.]**

This music might profitably be compared with Vrubel's painting *Demon Cast Down* (1902), one of many works by the artist inspired by the Romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov's well-known poem *The Demon*. **[Display illustration 1.]** The poem tells of a demon who attempts to woo a young Georgian woman, Tamara. His desperate pleas and grandiose promises weaken her to the point of acquiescence, but she dies immediately from their first, burning kiss. Vrubel's painting depicts the demon after his thwarted attempt to intercept Tamara's spirit from

the angel conveying her to paradise. After this, Lermontov writes, “the defeated demon cursed his crazy dreams and was left once again, haughty, alone, as before, in the universe without hope and love” (I proklial Demon pobezhdenyi mechty bezumnye svoi, i vnov’ ostalsia on, nadmennyi, odin, kak prezhde, vo vselennoi bez upovan’ia i liubvi!). Several parallels between the Rachmaninoff and the Vrubeľ are worth noting. By fascinating coincidence, both depict the gloomy aftermath of a fatal kiss. Both distort their subject in a manner not inherently suggested by their poetic sources. Whereas Dante (and thence Modest Tchaikovsky) and Lermontov derive their expressive power from description within the confines of conventional syntax, Rachmaninoff and Vrubeľ disrupt the syntax of their respective mediums: the harmonic distortions in the prologue outlined earlier resonate with the demon’s disfigured torso and arms, the unnatural color scheme, and the skewed, inverted landscape in the background of Vrubeľ’ s painting. In neither work are recognizable forms abandoned altogether—we can make out D minor in the Rachmaninoff just as we can identify the objects in the Vrubeľ; rather, the very recognizability of these forms is what facilitates their disconcerting effect.

Both works also display impeccable technique, but while Vrubeľ’ s surface exhibits a dizzying combination of fine and blunt brushwork, Rachmaninoff opts for a more homogeneous texture, and this is very characteristic for the composer. The carefully graded accumulation and dissipation of chromatic tension in the prologue is executed with great finesse, its changes of texture and voice-leading carried out in a seamless manipulation of the counterpoint and orchestration. The neighboring triads in mm. 78–81, derived from the descending two-note motive of the opening, progress from one to the next with staggered voice-leading in order to avoid angular parallel fifths. The derivation of this passage from that opening motive also points to an underlying unity at this moment of apparent disorder, for that motive is projected

simultaneously at three different structural levels: in the upper voices, as the basic unit of motion from one eighth note to the next; in the inner voices, in rhythmic augmentation and overlapping the bar lines; and in the bass, also in rhythmic augmentation, where the motive serves both a linear and a harmonic role. The effect sounds so natural as almost to go unnoticed, and it is ironically this finely polished handling of his musical materials that has generally blinded Rachmaninoff's critics to his more daring harmonic procedures.

If the foregoing devices operate primarily on the local level to thwart narrative cognition, Rachmaninoff does so on a macro level as well, through structural repetition. The curtain rises while the orchestra is holding the pedal point on A, and after a transition based on the slithering sixteenth-note figuration, the choir enters, singing with closed mouths. It is soon apparent that we are hearing the same music that opened the prologue, transposed up a major third. This section culminates, as before, with a strike of the tam-tam and another dominant thirteenth chord that resolves improperly through stepwise motion in the bass, this time to E minor. The repetition of these musical events at so great a distance from their first hearing establishes a macro-rhythm, inducing a circular, non-linear perception of time very different from the linear, sequential temporal continuity we observed in Liszt and Tchaikovsky. We might say that this circular structure—in which events that are familiar and ought to impart a sense of security actually disconcert by threatening to ensnare us in an inescapable vortex—evokes the fate of Francesca and Paolo, forever blown about the second circle of hell by the winds of insatiate desire. Dramatic action is, of course, necessary for a story to be advanced, and so the prevailing atemporality of the prologue is occasionally interrupted, for example, when Dante and Virgil's Shadow timid steps are portrayed with measured rising leaps in the bass. In the prologue, however, it is the supra-temporal suggestion that prevails. As Virgil's Shadow and Dante begin

their descent into the second circle of hell, their steps are first lost amid a rising tide of swirling chromaticism and eventually assimilated (rehearsal sixteen onward).

The dominant thirteenth chord, accompanied by the tam-tam or cymbals, emerges as an important symbol in the opera—not an imitative symbol but a sonic encapsulation of the opera’s supernatural setting. We have already noted that the structural repetition of this chord in the prologue helps to establish a sense of macro-rhythm. The frequency alone with which the sonority appears would suggest its significance as a symbol of the inconceivable terrors of hell. This interpretation is confirmed by its appearance under the first line of sung text in the opera, by Virgil’s Shadow: “We now enter into *the blind abyss* [emphasis mine]” (Teper’ vstupaem my v slepuiu bezdnu), he says to a trembling Dante (**see example 3a**). It is used to symbolize the “total darkness” that Dante and Virgil’s Shadow experience as they cross the threshold into the second circle (**see example 3b**). The chord’s symbolic importance is established beyond all doubt by its prominent statement nine measures from the end of the opera, where it serves as the work’s penultimate harmony (**see example 3c**). In this last appearance, as in some before, the chord sheds its minor ninth, so that its four remaining constituent pitches form a subset of the whole-tone scale—a striking emblem, long accepted among Russian composers, of the irrational and the fantastic. (Incidentally, this chord has the same intervallic makeup as the so-called “Scriabin sixth,” a modified augmented sixth chord. Rachmaninoff’s does not, however, function like an augmented sixth chord; it serves a more strictly coloristic role.)

As suggested earlier, the linearity of the story that unfolds in the two central tableaux is dampened by a compound conception of temporality. The tableaux relate a past event, the chain of events that led to Francesca’s and Paolo’s murder and banishment to hell, from a narrative present. A moment in the second tableau adds a third dimension. In this tableau, Paolo is reading

the story of Lancelot and Guinevere to Francesca and frankly comparing it to their own story of suppressed romance in an attempt to seduce Francesca against their better judgment. She resists these advances firmly for a time, reminding Paolo that eternal bliss awaits them if they can but maintain their own fidelity in life: “There, on high, beyond the world, soaring in your arms, in heaven’s bright ether I will be yours forever!” (Tam, v vycote, za gran’iu mira, v tvoikh ob’iatiiakh paria, v lazuri svetlogo efira ia budu v vechnosti tvoia!) Paolo challenges this reasoning: “What good is paradise and its passionless beauty, when a tempest rages in my veins?” (Na shto mne rai sevo krasoi besstrastnoi, kogda bushuet vikhr’ v krovi?) He would exchange all that “for a single moment, a moment to press my burning mouth to yours” (za mig odin, za mig prikosnoven’ia ognem goriashchikh ust k ustam). To Francesca’s warning that “the torments of hell await us” (nas ozhidaiut muki ada), Paolo declares, “I will be there with you!” (S toboi tam budu ia !) and she at last succumbs and embraces him. (This moment, by the way, is strikingly similar to the dialogue between Lermontov’s demon and Tamara before their kiss.) At this pivotal moment, when, as their next line reveals, they agree that hell with each other would be better than paradise, the sinuous chromaticism from the prologue suddenly invades the musical fabric, nervously buzzing around their impassioned declarations of affection (**see examples 4a and b**). This musical invasion collapses the temporal boundaries that had seemed up to this point to separate this narrative from the act of its recounting. In the immediate context of their love story, this chromaticism portends the fateful outcome of their actions. But in the broader context of the whole opera, it reminds us of something we have already witnessed. It thus foreshadows a reality that has already come into being, binding together past, present, and future. **[Play audio example 3.]** Thus, although the two central tableaux of the opera tell a story in a relatively plain, linear fashion, they are ultimately framed and objectified by the hellish

prologue and epilogue; the narrative belongs to the past, only the telling of it to the present. The opera ends not far from where it began. Again, a comparison with Liszt and Tchaikovsky is instructive. Their depictions also exhibit a tripartite structure that ends with a return to earlier material. However, their central episodes, which likewise relate Francesca's story, do not collapse temporal boundaries. Their recapitulations thus serve a more traditional, formal role.

This presentation has suggested the utility of Symbolism as a plausible mode of general critical inquiry for early-twentieth-century music. Rachmaninoff's *Francesca da Rimini* exemplifies this critical concept by inducing an alternative perception of reality. It does this by avoiding abrupt formal junctures, compromising tonal syntax, obscuring tonal orientation, employing structural repetition and musical symbols, and collapsing temporal boundaries. Although the opera was composed without Symbolist intent, these features suggest a subtle but concrete kinship with other works of the period that have been more readily associated with Symbolism, as well as with Symbolist works in other artistic media. This suggests in turn that Rachmaninoff's relationship with his musical contemporaries in general is open to reevaluation and that persistent, self-perpetuating generalizations concerning his style and taste—generalizations sometimes encouraged by his own public commentary—ought to be abandoned in favor of objective inquiry. Thank you.

“The Blind Abyss”:
A Symbolist Reading of Rachmaninoff’s
Francesca da Rimini

Keenan Reesor
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Example 1a. Rachmaninoff *Francesca da Rimini*, Prologue, mm. 1–7.

Музыка С. Рахманинова, Соч. 25.
Musik von S. Rachmaninow, Op. 25.

Largo. (♩=76. 80.)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 4, and the second system contains measures 5 through 7. The tempo is marked 'Largo' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 76-80. The music is in 6/8 time and features a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p) and accents (>). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Example 1b. Prologue, mm. 17–18

The image displays a musical score for two staves, likely piano and violin/viola. The score is divided into two measures, 17 and 18, by a vertical bar line. The upper staff is in treble clef, and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The dynamic marking *mf* (mezzo-forte) is present in the first measure of the upper staff. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and rests. The lower staff contains several measures of music, including a prominent sixteenth-note figure. The notation includes various accidentals (sharps, naturals, flats) and articulation marks (accents, slurs).

Example 1c. Prologue, mm. 27–29

f dim.

p

m.g.

dim.

p.

Example 2a. Prologue, mm. 73–78. The staff below abstracts the hexatonic polar progression in mm. 77–78.

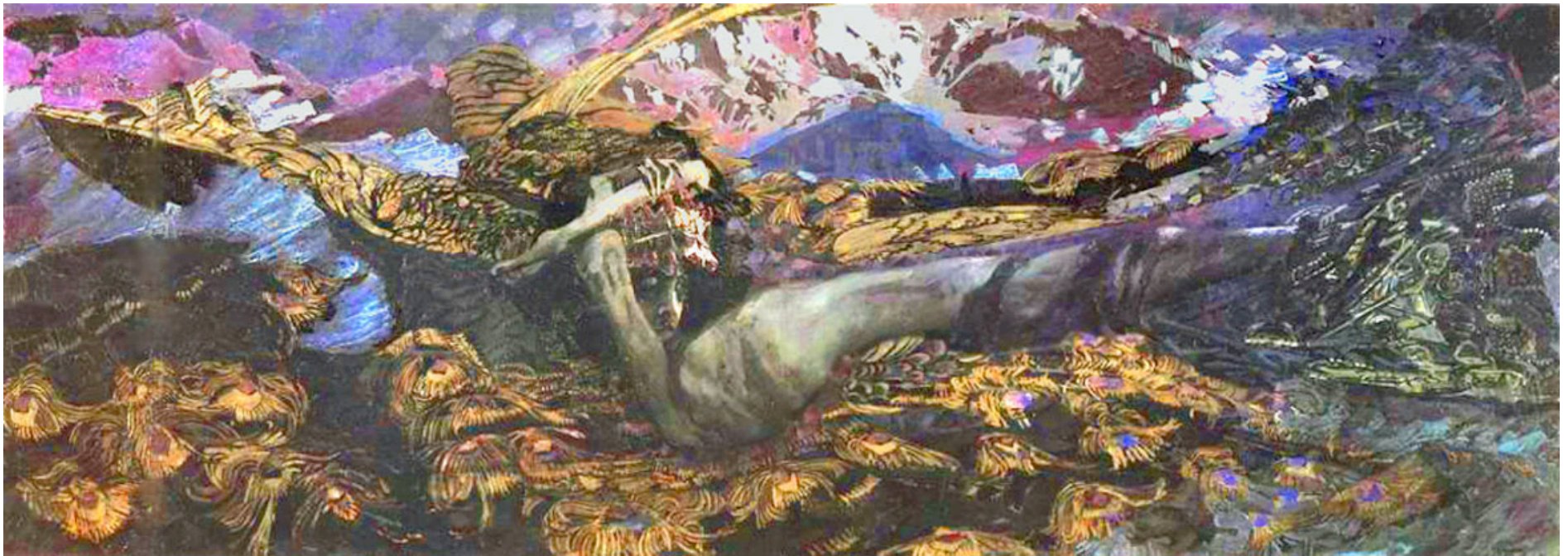
The image displays a musical score for piano. The first two systems are piano accompaniment for measures 73-78. The first system shows measures 73 and 74, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system shows measures 75, 76, and 77, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The third system shows measure 78, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The final system is an abstracted chord progression for measures 77-78, consisting of two measures: the first measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#), and the second measure has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The chords are represented by block letters: the first measure contains a treble clef and a block letter '8', and the second measure contains a bass clef and a block letter '8'.

Example 2b. Prologue, mm. 79–84

The first system of the musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The music is written in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature. The upper staff features a series of chords, with a *cresc.* marking below the first measure. The lower staff contains a melodic line with eighth notes and rests, also marked with a *cresc.* dynamic.

The second system of the musical score continues the two-staff arrangement. The upper staff has a *ff* dynamic marking at the beginning. The lower staff has a *dim.* dynamic marking at the end. The notation includes various chordal textures and melodic fragments, with some notes beamed together. The system concludes with a *dim.* marking in the upper staff.

Illustration 1. Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Cast Down* (1902), State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Example 3a. *Bezдна* (abyss) chord, Prologue, Virgil's Shadow's entrance

ТѢНЬ Виргилія.
Virgils Schatten.

mf *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p*

Те. перь всту. паемъ мы въ слѣ. пу. ю без. дну.
Und nun be. treten wir. die fin. stre Tie. fe.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line in bass clef and a piano accompaniment in treble and bass clefs. The vocal line begins with a half rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The piano accompaniment starts with a half rest in the bass and a series of chords in the treble. The second system continues the vocal line with a half rest, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7. The piano accompaniment continues with chords in the treble and a half rest in the bass.

Example 3b. “Abyss” chord, descent to second circle (“Total darkness reins”)

Воцаряется полный мракъ.
Völliges Dunkel hat sich eingestellt.

pp
m. d.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment and the vocal line. The piano part has a right hand with a descending chromatic line (F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G3) and a left hand with a sustained chord (F#3, A3, C#4, E4). The vocal line has a right hand with a descending chromatic line (F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G3) and a left hand with a sustained chord (F#3, A3, C#4, E4). The second system shows the piano accompaniment and the vocal line. The piano part has a right hand with a descending chromatic line (F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G3) and a left hand with a sustained chord (F#3, A3, C#4, E4). The vocal line has a right hand with a descending chromatic line (F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G3) and a left hand with a sustained chord (F#3, A3, C#4, E4).

Example 3c. Final “abyss” chord, without minor ninth, nine bars before end



Example 4a. Tableau II, Presto

Musical score for "Tableau II, Presto". The score is written for a single melodic line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Presto. (♩ = 152.)". The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The score is divided into three measures. The first measure contains a melodic line starting with a rest, followed by eighth notes, and ends with "etc.". The piano accompaniment begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes a fortissimo (*ff*) marking. The second and third measures feature a melodic line with a slur and a piano accompaniment with a mezzo-forte (*m. g.*) dynamic. The piano part in the second and third measures consists of sustained chords with a tremolo effect.

Example 4b. Tableau II, Presto (cont'd;
“With you, I prefer hell to paradise!”/“Where
you are, there is happiness without end!”)

Франческа.
Francesca.
Съ - то - - бо - - ю ахъ мнѣ
Die Höl - - le selbst miß

Паоло.
Paolo.
Гдѣ ты тамъ сча - - стье
Wo du bist, wei - - let

Франц.
Franc.
луч - ше ра - я!
Heil mir brin - - gen;

П.
P.
безъ кон - ца!
end - los Glück!

f *m. g.* *pp* *cresc.*