

## Rachmaninoff Sonatas Recording Sleeve Notes

### Sonata No. 1 op. 28

The composition of Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 1 op. 28 was inspired by Goethe's tragedy "Faust", and it is often suggested that the composer later abandoned this programme. However, we do not find any evidence of him giving up this idea. On the contrary, upon deeper analysis of the work it is obvious that the thematic structure of the Sonata and the way in which he consistently develops the original motifs throughout all three movements, point to the conscious, systematic realisation of this concept.

Rachmaninoff started composing the Sonata in the spring of 1907 in Dresden while simultaneously working on his Symphony No. 2 op. 27 and the opera "Monna Vanna". Working on it alongside two such huge compositions and his familiarity with Liszt's "Faust Symphony" must have influenced the truly symphonic scale of the Sonata.

However, there were also other reasons for its monumental scope. Rachmaninoff writes to his friend Nikita Morozov on 8 May 1907: "The Sonata is without any doubt wild and endlessly long. I think about 45 minutes. I was drawn into such dimensions by a programme or rather by some leading idea. It is three contrasting characters from a work of world literature. Of course, no programme will be given to the public, although I am beginning to think that if I were to reveal the programme, the Sonata would become much more comprehensible. No one will ever play this composition because of its difficulty and length but also, and maybe more importantly, because of its dubious musical merit. At some point I thought to re-work this Sonata into a symphony, but that proved to be impossible due to the purely pianistic nature of writing".

Rachmaninoff played the Sonata for the first time to a few colleagues in the spring of 1907. Those present included Nikolai Medtner, Georgy Catoire, Lev Conus and Konstantin Igumnov. According to Igumnov, as a result of his suggestions, Rachmaninoff "re-worked the significant part of the recapitulation section of the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, shortening it by more than 50 bars, and also cut out about 60 bars in the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, again mainly in the recapitulation section. Pianistic texture was only changed in the Finale. The 2<sup>nd</sup> movement remained unchanged".

The revised Sonata was completed on 12th April 1908 and sent by the author to be published on 13th April. When Igumnov, who later gave its premiere performances in Moscow, Leipzig and Berlin, visited Rachmaninoff in November 1908 after the Leipzig recital, the author told him that "when composing it, he had in mind Goethe's "Faust" and that the 1<sup>st</sup> movement related to Faust, the 2<sup>nd</sup> one to Gretchen and the 3<sup>rd</sup> was the flight to the Brocken and Mephistopheles." This meeting took place after the Sonata's publication, which is the further evidence that Rachmaninoff had not abandoned the programme idea.

I believe that the key to understanding this complex work is to be found in Faust's monologue at the beginning of the play, which reveals the inner conflict tearing him apart:

*In me there are two souls, alas, and their  
 Division tears my life in two.  
 One loves the world, it clutches her, it binds  
 Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;  
 The other longs to soar beyond the dust  
 Into the realm of high ancestral minds. (Trans. by D. Luke)*

Faust is powerfully drawn to earthly pleasures but at the same time is longing for heaven and spiritual rewards. Rachmaninoff uses this dichotomy to build up tremendous tension. He masterfully combines sonata form with the use of the leitmotif and thematic transformation. This calls for a highly polyphonic texture, making this composition arguably his most polyphonic piano work.

Faust is characterised by several motifs. For the ease of reference we shall assign each of them a name. The first of them, which opens the Sonata, is defined by the juxtaposition of the questioning interval of the fifth marked *p* – a very significant interval in this work, which we shall return to later – and a sudden defiant outburst in *f*. This theme expresses Faust's soul-searching, his state of mental unrest. We can call it the *motif of Questioning*.

Example 1 (Track 1, 0:02):



The descending, groaning 2<sup>nd</sup> theme that follows it creates the atmosphere of weariness and disillusionment. It will reappear throughout the Sonata in its original form several times. We shall call it the *motif of Sighs*.

Example 2 (Track 1, 0:33):



Through the sequence of rising phrases expressing the torment and turmoil of Faust's restless soul, we reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> theme. It combines a short, snake-like chromatic descent with a big upward leap of the interval of the minor ninth. Let's call it the *motif of Temptation*.

Example 3 (Track 1, 1:46):



At last, we arrive at the 4th theme depicting Faust's pursuit of the divine. It is deliberately limited in melodic range and gravitates to the note D, which makes it very similar in character to a Russian orthodox chant. We can call it the *motif of God*.

Example 4 (Track 1, 2:20):

When it is repeated in the higher register, another ascending contrapuntal line joins it in the middle voice. This ascending voice is there not only for harmony – it represents Faust's longing for heaven and spiritual rewards, and rises towards “the high ancestral minds”. This movement upwards is reconfirmed in a slightly altered form in the last bars of the exposition. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> theme, the *motif of Ascent*.

Example 5 (Track 1, 3:50):

Having climbed with difficulty up to the upper A-flat, it then falls back “to earth” – down the same interval of minor ninth that we had already encountered in the *motif of Temptation*, leading us back to the *motif of Questioning* and ushering in the development section.

This scale pattern will be one of the most significant components of the development, constantly pushing and pulling upwards (towards heaven) and downwards (to earth), creating a powerful conflict between the forces of good and evil.

The constant collision of all the motifs mounts up the tension, eventually reaching boiling point. By the time we arrive at the recapitulation the divine forces seem to have won, and the *motif of God* sounds like a hymn. However, its victory is only temporary: it quickly turns from the triumphant major to the vulnerable, unsettling minor.

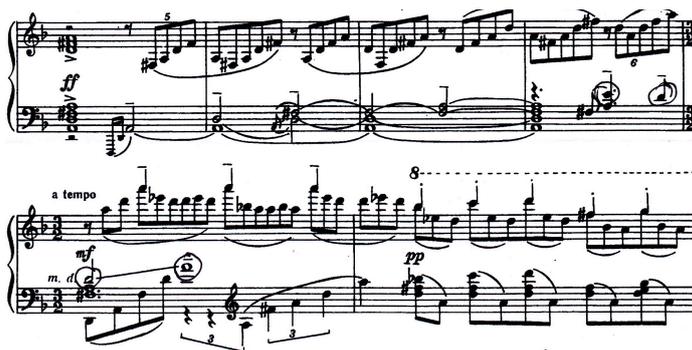
The *motifs of God and Temptation* are intertwined in a new confrontation: Rachmaninoff polyphonically superimposes one over the other.

Example 6 (Track 1, 9:30):



The tension resulting from this clash soon turns into an agony and explodes into a violent climax. Here the composer uses the most extraordinary device: at the point of the most violent conflict the resolution comes in the form of a new theme. This is the *motif of Gretchen*, which makes its first appearance not in the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, but here, at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup>.

Example 7 (Track 1, 11:10):



I consider this to be a philosophical statement on the composer's part: he introduces the theme of love at the moment of most intense turmoil, as if to say: "only love can offer salvation". The storm dies down and the "weary" *motifs of God and Ascent* make their last appearances before the *motif of Questioning* peacefully concludes the movement. For now the question is answered and the forces of good have won.

The Mahleresque 2<sup>nd</sup> movement is the hymn to Gretchen's love for Faust. It is built around the interval of the fifth, for which there may be several reasons: it is the main interval characterising Faust (see the *motif of Questioning*); also, as the fifth is the most pure interval in music, the composer may be deliberately using it to express the purity and innocence of Gretchen's love. The interval is used in the introduction, then as a gently rocking figuration in the left hand accompaniment and again in the melody. The latter is constructed out of the elements of two of the Faust themes: the descending interval of the second from the *motif of Sighs* and the ascending interval of the fifth from the *motif of Questioning*. The *motif of Ascend* also appears several times in the melodic line.

Despite the simplicity of the main theme, the piano texture of this movement is densely polyphonic. The tender *motif of Gretchen* is obsessively repeated over and over, as if relentlessly speaking the words of love, eventually reaching a state of fervour. These pages contain some of Rachmaninoff's most inspired lyricism. The movement closes with an impassioned duet, as if the lovers are bidding an emotional farewell.

The 3rd movement with its frenzied galloping is undoubtedly the realm of Mephistopheles, but Faust is never far away: we can identify him by now demonic-sounding *motif of Sighs*.

Example 8 (Track 3, 0:44):

Musical score for Example 8, showing a piano texture. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It features a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices. A handwritten annotation 'Motif of Sighs' is placed above the right-hand staff. Performance markings include *dim.* and *p*.

The galloping pace soon gives way to a sinister march, which is based on the *Dies Irae*, the medieval chant from the Catholic Mass for the Dead that Rachmaninoff used in several of his works. Perhaps, it is no coincidence that this march is descending.

Example 9 (Track 3, 1:28)

Musical score for Example 9, showing a piano texture. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It features a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices. Performance markings include *Meno mosso (♩=88)*, *f dim.*, and *p dim.*

The motifs of Mephistopheles and Faust are now inextricably linked, the *motifs of Ascend, Questioning* and *Sighs* having been devilishly metamorphosed.

Example 10.1 (Track 3, 2:24):

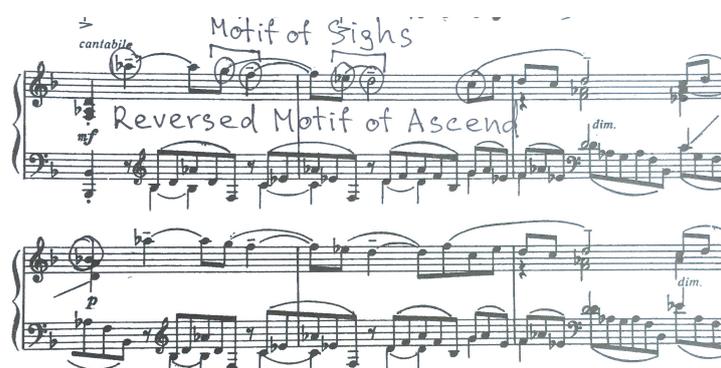
Musical score for Example 10.1, showing a piano texture. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It features a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices. Handwritten annotations include 'Motif of Ascend' and 'Motif of Questioning'. Performance markings include *mf*, *poco a poco cresc.*, *rit.*, and *marcato*. A page number '39' is visible in the top right corner.

Example 10.2 (Track 3, 2:43):



The ecstatic theme that follows the march may appease the listener associating Rachmaninoff mostly with grand sweeping tunes, but it is a masterful disguise: it is constructed simultaneously out of the *motif of Sighs* and the reversed *motif of Ascent*.

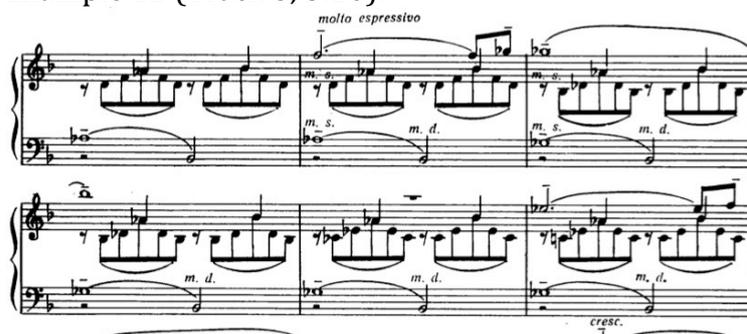
Example 11 (Track 3, 3:08):



When the exhilaration reaches fever pitch, the theme breaks down and Faust's *motif of Sighs* leads to the much darker, vulnerable version of the *motif of Gretchen*. This corresponds directly to Faust's vision of the spirit of Gretchen at the Walpurgis Night:

*FAUST. Mephisto, look! Right over there:  
A young girl stands, so pale, so fair,  
All by herself! How slowly she moves now,  
As if her feet were fastened somehow!  
And as I look, it seems to me  
It's poor dear Gretchen that I see!* (trans. D. Luke)

Example 12 (Track 3, 5:20):



The theme is mercilessly interrupted by the interjecting Dies Irae march. This is Mephistopheles trying to divert Faust's attention:

*MEPHISROPHELLES. Let it alone! That is no wholesome vision,  
But a dead thing, a magic apparition;  
I warn you to avoid it.*

But Faust cannot shake off the memory of his tragic love. The weeping theme returns for the second time:

*FAUST. It's true, it's true! Those eyes are open wide,  
Closed by no loving hand! I know  
Gretchen's sweet body which I have enjoyed,  
Her breast that lay by mine not long ago!*

The second cynical outburst of diabolical laughter succeeds in breaking the eerie spell and starts pushing the music with terrifying inevitability back towards the *theme of Mephistopheles*. The most blatant version of the *Dies Irae* thrusts us with crushing force into the recapitulation.

Unsurprisingly, most of the coda is built on the ubiquitous *Dies Irae*. Faust's time on the earth is up and this is the final decisive clash between the infernal and divine forces. Faust's theme from the 1<sup>st</sup> movement strives upwards for the last time, while the *Question* in the bass desperately begs to be answered, and then it comes crashing down in fiendish, chromatic cascades. We hear Faust's agonising soul in the throes of death. The *motif of God* in augmentation reaffirms its power and claim over Faust's soul with colossal, terrifying force.

Example 13 (Track 3, 14:08):

The image displays a musical score for Example 13, which is a section of a sonata. The score is written for two staves, likely representing the upper and lower parts of a piano. The top staff features a melodic line with a handwritten annotation 'Theme of God' above it. The bottom staff shows a more complex, rhythmic accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. A handwritten annotation 'In Augmentation' is placed above the bottom staff, indicating a change in the tempo or the way the music is performed. The score is set in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The overall mood is dramatic and intense, reflecting the 'fiendish, chromatic cascades' mentioned in the text.

The ending of the Sonata is ambiguous. Mephistopheles has the last word, but is it a cry of defeat or triumph?

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