# Piano Virtuosity in the 20th century: Four Works by Composers-Pianists (Debussy, Bartók, Rachmaninov, Liszt/Horowitz)

by

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# Abstract

The final project for the Doctor of Music degree consists of the three requirements: a CD recording of four works for piano solo (Debussy's *Estampes L.108*, Bartók's *Piano Sonata Sz.80*, Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Sonata op.36 (2nd edition)* and *Danse Macabre* by Saint-Saens/Liszt/Horowitz); scholarly notes to accompany the CD recording; and a final solo recital of this program.

The repertoire chosen for the recital offers a clear and evocative theme – works written by composers who were brilliant virtuoso performers in their own right. For that reason, I will discuss all four works from the virtuosity perspective, rather than a purely historical or theoretical point of view. Similarly, in the chapters dedicated to the composers, I will not focus on the biographical or musicological aspects. Instead, I will discuss these artists' careers as concert pianists, as well as the various aspects of their writing for piano, and the impact of their exclusive knowledge of the instrument on their works. I intend to explore the term *virtuosity* and its meaning within a composition and for a pianist. Although the array of composers in my program is interconnected through the vastly different historical eras and generations, I aim to structure the scholarly notes chronologically.

# Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to everyone who helped me during my doctorate studies and this project in particular. First and foremost, thank you to Dr. Patricia Tao for her continuous support, encouragement, and motivation through the difficult times. Thank you to my committee members Dr. Julia Byl for her adventurous spirit and creativity; to Dr. Maryam Moshaver for her endless patience and believing in me when I had self-doubts; to Dr. Leonard Ratzlaff for his support and kindness; and to Dr. Guillaume Tardif for the immense academic expertise. I am grateful for Dr. Jacques Després' insights on the Debussy and Bartók pieces that he shared with me in preparation for the recording.

Enormous support was provided by the sound engineer Russell Baker. Without his advice, patience and encouragement my recording project would not have been successful. Also, thank you to Patrick Strain for his assistance and Calvin Wong for lifting our spirits every time he tunes the pianos, and to Gordon Giang for his wit while helping me out this year.

Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to my friends and family: to my parents, who set me on the path of the Classical piano; to my husband Hervé for embracing my doctoral studies as his own, and to our two boys for being incredibly patient and understanding when "Mama works on the piano."

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# Piano Virtuosity

Three of the works, discussed in this thesis, are written by titans of 20th century Classical music: Debussy, Rachmaninov, and Bartók. The fourth masterpiece, *Danse Macabre*, was originally composed by Saint-Saëns as an orchestral work, was transcribed by Liszt and subsequently by Horowitz, for solo piano. In addition to composition, all of them were concert pianists and virtuosos. Virtuosity has been an important element of musical practice for hundreds of years, though it became an essential aspect in the mid-19th century, when technical challenges in the piano repertory developed alongside the new possibilities of the instrument. While almost any piece holds one or another technical difficulty, there is a certain class of piano works which are based on one or multiple virtuosic techniques, pieces in which virtuosity is intrinsic to the musical meaning itself. Similar to the outstanding athletes or magicians, virtuoso pianists "cross the limit of what seems possible;"[1] they break the accepted limits and boundaries of the familiar, in sound, texture, and style.

Virtuosity is not a mere mechanical velocity and strength of the fingers, but the means to acquire another level of musical content. The term *virtuosity* is often used in opposition to musicality; however, not only are the two not mutually exclusive, but more importantly, virtuosity can function in a composition as a primary vehicle of musical expression. It is hard to imagine Rachmaninov's piano works without their textural density, by which he demonstrates the grandeur of the instrument. Likewise, it would be impossible to underestimate Liszt's delicate passagework, which can portray transcendental imagery. When asked about what

[1] Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

virtuosity means to the technical arsenal of the pianist, virtuoso Radu Lupu said, "velocity is only a very small part of a virtuoso technique. It deals with touch, dynamics, and control of sound. It's what's done with virtuosity that counts."[2]

All four pieces in my program represent different compositional styles, piano techniques, and approaches to the capabilities of the instrument. The four composers, as well as Horowitz, are also inter-connected in various ways. Liszt influenced the later composers through the use of program music. Both Rachmaninov and Horowitz continued the art of improvisation. Bartók, whose education was in the Neo-Hungarian tradition of Liszt, analyzed the composer's works and was inspired by Liszt's compositional techniques. Rachmaninov and Horowitz studied with Liszt's student Alexandr Ziloti and transcribed Liszt's works. Debussy and Rachmaninov heard Liszt in live performances, and Bartók greatly admired the work of Debussy and frequently performed his compositions in recitals.[3] Rachmaninov and Horowitz were acquainted and the latter artist created his own edition of Rachmaninov's *Piano Sonata No.2, op.36*. Liszt set the path for showpieces to become an independent, respectable and fashionable genre of their own. To begin a conversation about piano virtuosity, I will start with the composition and pianism, exemplified by Liszt.

## Franz Liszt

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[2] Robert Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and The Eight*. (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2002).

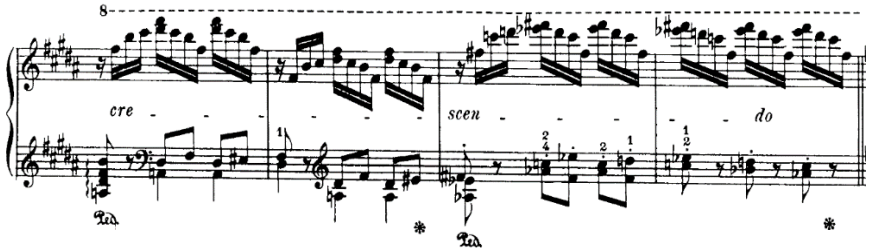
[3] Bartók about Debussy: "Debussy's great service to music was to reawaken among all musicians an awareness of harmony and its possibilities. In that he was just as important as Beethoven who revealed to us the meaning of progressive form, and as Bach who showed us the transcendent significance of counterpoint… Now, what I am always asking myself is this: is it possible to make a synthesis of these three great masters, a living synthesis that will be valid in our own time?" in Anthony Cross, "Debussy and Bartók" in *The Musical Times* vol.108, no.1488 (1967), 125-131.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was the first pianist to switch from the common practice of having multiple performers in a concert to solo recitals. A brilliant improviser, Liszt made a habit of improvising on stage – a tradition that sadly diminished in the 20th century after Vladimir Horowitz. In addition to his prolific career as a concert pianist, Liszt was the author of a massive quantity of piano transcriptions. By transcribing a multitude of symphonies and operas (Liszt's transcriptions, variations and fantasies on the works of other composers come to over three hundred-seventy-five), the composer wanted to embrace the massive orchestral sound on one instrument. Among Liszt's most commonly performed transcriptions are those of Schubert's lieder, *Grande Paraphrase de Concert sur le Rigoletto de Verdi*, *Réminscences de Don Juan* (Mozart), *Isoldens Liebestod* (Wagner), and *Danse Macabre* (Saint-Saëns). In those works, Liszt was able to capture the essence of an entire opera or symphony and reproduce their dramatic and musical moments condensed in a short piece. He succeeded in translating the orchestral sonorities by inventing new piano techniques. Among the most important was the distribution of the passages or chordal figurations between the pianist's hands in order to create an illusion of having present all registers sound at once. Double-note passages produced a mass of sound, which resulted in an incredible power and brilliancy, filling the entire keyboard.[4] This orchestral sonority forced a departure from traditional piano textures, where the music was separated between the hands, and limited in range. Liszt often used cross-hand technique and distributed the passage work between the hands. Though this method was not entirely new, it was Liszt who was the first to give the positional leaps across registers such a universal use. He distributed the

[4] "Liszt's virtuosity was phenomenal. It was a concert style of close-up performance made to impress large audiences. If in delicate passages and jewelry-like details Liszt had competitors such as Field and Genzelt, in playing octaves, thirds and chords he was at unreachable height" in A.D. Alekseev, *Istoria Fortepiannogo Iskusstva.* vol.1-2 (Moscow: Muzyka, 1988).

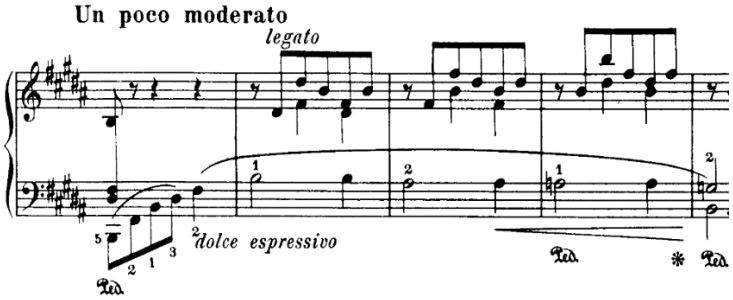
notes in the passages where five-note patterns travel throughout the keyboard. This technique achieved faster speeds by organizing notes into "handfuls," lessened the fatigue on each hand. Those "handfuls" of notes create a crisp kind of brilliancy that cannot be achieved through any other technical formula.

Ex.1 Liszt *Danse Macabre*, mm.389-392.




Liszt changed the approach to piano fingering. In order to achieve a sound of certain quality, he would habitually break customary fingering rules. For example, instead of scale-based fingerings in a passage, Liszt would cross the fourth finger over the fifth. He also used the difference in weighting of individual fingers' as an element of timbre. In the lyrical section of *Danse Macabre*, the theme is carried by the left-hand thumb, alternated with the second finger. Along with *dolce espressivo* marking this melody requires a special tone – a soft, indulgent and continuous legato sound. It is best achieved by playing with the side of the thumb.

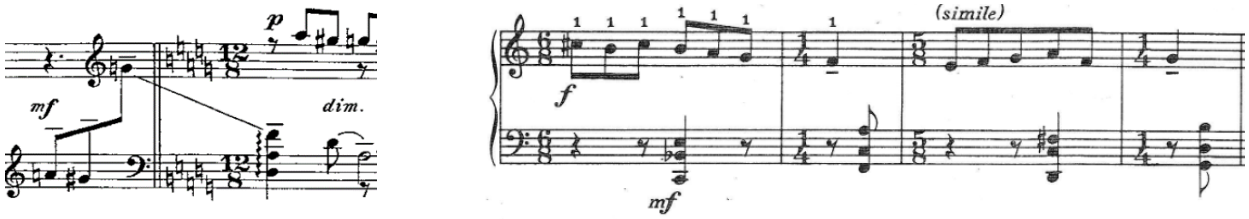
Ex. 2. Liszt *Danse Macabre*, mm. 317-321.




This technique was inherited by both Rachmaninov and Bartók. In the first movement of the Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*, the purpose of the thumb placement of the melody is the same

as Liszt's (Ex. 3). However, in the third movement of Bartók's *Piano Sonata*, the composer seeks a different quality from the thumb. Here using the first finger to play the entire melody gives this passage playfulness and imitates the articulation of the folk instruments (Ex.4).

Ex. 3. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata op.36*. Movement 1, mm. 58-59 (L).




Ex. 4. Bartók *Piano Sonata, Sz 80*. Movement 3, mm. 111-114 (R).

Franz Liszt revolutionized the idea of virtuosity; in his works he used virtuosic formulas not with an only desire to impress the audience with his brilliant technique, but as a powerful means for musical expression. This idea was adopted by the following generation of composers, including Claude Debussy, Béla Bartók and Sergei Rachmaninov.

## Claude Debussy

Regardless of one's perception of the term "impressionism," it is the most frequently mentioned movement in relation to Claude Debussy (1862-1918). His style of writing is notable for its complex tone production, blending of sonorities, juxtaposition of multiple harmonies, along with generous use of the pedals and complicated voicing to allow for the greatest resonance of overtones. Debussy wrote for piano throughout his life, favouring sets of short pieces over large-scale works. He did not compose any sonatas or concerti for solo piano; his

most well-known collections include *Images*, *Suite Bergamasque*, *Pour le Piano*, *Estampes, Préludes,* and *L'Isle Joyeuse.*

Despite being a very talented pianist and having won piano competitions in his student years, Debussy pursued a career in composition. The only surviving recordings are Debussy's accompaniments for the singer Mary Garden from 1904 and piano-roll recordings of subpar quality. However, the sheer number and variety of techniques required in his piano works demonstrates Debussy's high demands for piano playing. According to the composer's piano student Marguerite Long, Debussy favored *pianissimo* over all dynamics; "he encouraged his students to *entre dedans* ("get inside") the piano and taught his pupils to play chords by imagining that the keys 'rose toward their fingertips as if attracted by a magnet."[5]

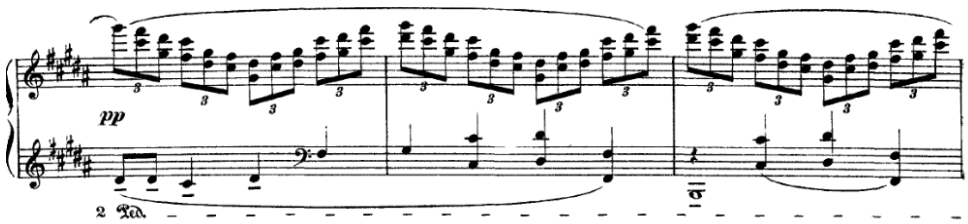
## *Estampes, L.108*

These three picturesque pieces, written in 1904, present the piano in all the delicacy and subtlety of this instrument. The first movement, *Pagodes*, makes the most iconic use of the pentatonic scale in classical piano music. It shows both Chinese and Javanese influences: gong-like bass, multi-layered structure, and bitonality. For his time, Debussy's score indications are unusually precise and are both technical and musical in nature ("*délicatement et presque sans nuances*" or "*dans une sonorité plus claire*.") The gong-like basses in the first two bars open the gates to a beautiful Japanese garden. With the spaced-out voices, Debussy creates a sense of open space. The listener can almost see the fish-ponds, exotic flowers, and the sloped roofs of the pagodas.

[5] Neil Rutman "Imagination in the Piano Works of Debussy: How it Affects Touch and Pedaling", in *The Pianist's Craft*, ed.by R.P.Anderson (Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press 2012), 145-155.

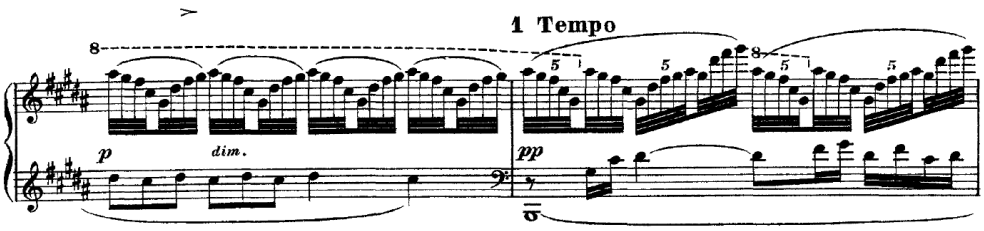
Using predominantly black keys is one of the main technical challenges of the piece – to master the evenness of all fingers, where one cannot hear the changes of position.

Ex. 5. Debussy *Estampes*. *Pagodes*, mm. 27-29.




The final section consists of three pages of delicate passagework in the right hand that imitates the flow of water. It requires pristine clarity in the sound, which is achieved through pearl-like fingers and precise pedaling. Nuanced pedaling is a major aspect of Debussy's virtuosity. Many times, where fingers are permitted to move slowly, the foot takes over the exercise. The pianist has half-pedal and quarter-pedal options, but above all, he or she must practice a certain virtuosity of the ear in order to differentiate the subtlest nuances of overtone production.

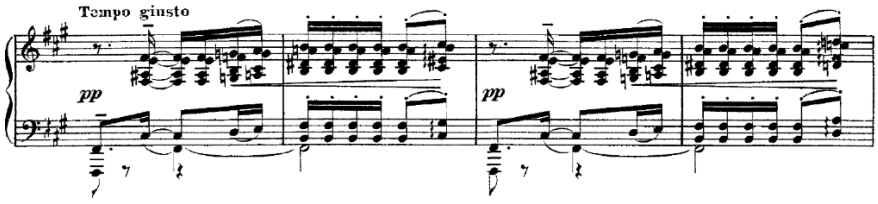
Ex 6. Debussy *Estampes*. *Pagodes*, mm. 79-80.



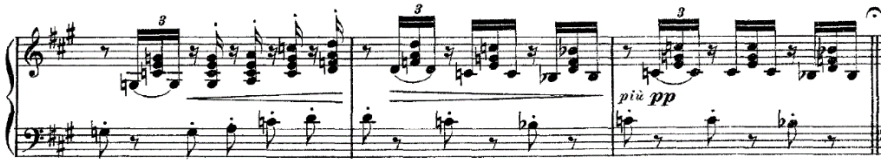

The second piece – *La Soirée dans Grenade* – takes us into a melancholic evening in Spain. A sensual habanera starts from afar, approaches and takes a real shape. The constantly changing tempi and characters complicate this piece with the question of rubato – its appropriateness, placement and amount. On one hand, the habanera must never lose the movement of a dance. On the other hand, it is an echo, a memory of the dance, therefore the

rhythm cannot be overly strict. The second challenge is the achievement of a sound that is sensual, enveloping, and by all means, non-percussive. In terms of technical difficulties, there are short motives which imitate the strumming of a guitar (Ex. 7) and castanets (Ex. 8).

Ex 7. Debussy *Estampes*. *La Soirée dans Grenade*, mm. 29-32.



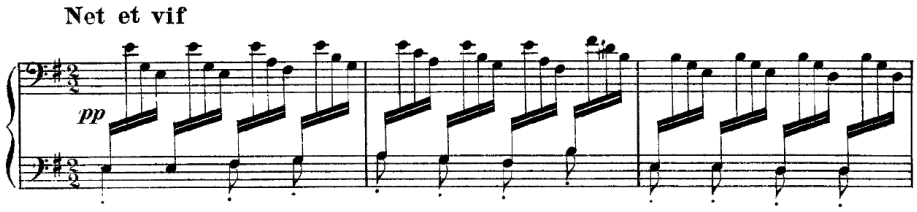

Ex. 8. Debussy *Estampes*. *La Soirée dans Grenade*, mm.110-112.




Finally, after the two mostly atmospheric and evocative sketches, we arrive at a true staple of the piano virtuosic literature. *Jardins sous la pluie* takes us into a rainy day in a French garden. Debussy depicts drumming, at times pouring rain, and the subsequent rainbow in a moment of "unattainable sweetness and perfection."[6] I imagine the rose bushes and statues, covered in rain droplets in Paris' *Jardin des Tuileries*. In this toccata, the pianist must learn rapid, hand-over-hand finger work that must be extremely even and soft. The performer should imitate the raindrop-like sonority and achieve a shining clarity of the tone.

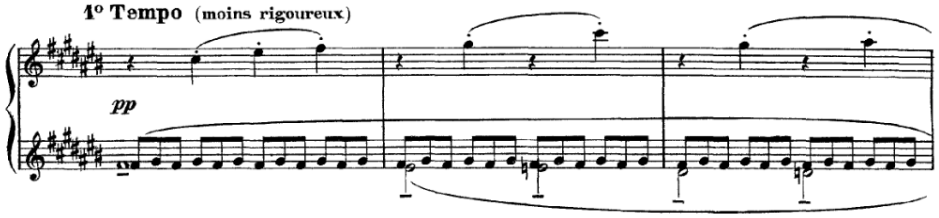
[6] Guido M. Gatti, Frederick H. Martens, "The Piano Works of Claude Debussy" in *Music Quarterly*, vol. 7, no.3 (1921), 418-460.

Ex. 9. Debussy *Estampes*. *Jardins sous la pluie,* mm.1-3.




In my recording of this piece, in the F-sharp major section I wanted to make the portato raindrops in the right-hand sound playful, yet not abruptly short, and to keep the murmur between the first and second fingers quiet and even, while the tenuto half-notes remain prominent, yet gentle.

Ex. 10. Debussy *Estampes*. *Jardins sous la pluie*, mm. 65-67




*Estampes* is the opening role of my recital – the beginning move of a conversation about the virtuosic piano pieces in the 20th century. It is a starting point where the piano is shown as the instrument capable of an exquisitely subtle and airy sound.

## Béla Bartók

In his early works, Béla Bartók's (1881-1945) musical language derived from the tradition of Liszt, though it shared similarities with Debussy's style, including use of pentatonicism, the whole-tone scale, and modality. However, all these features were used by

Bartók in a unique manner. His most notable piano works include the *Mikrokosmos*, *Out of Doors* suite, *Sonatina*, *Allegro Barbaro*, *Suite Op.14*, *Sonata for Piano*, and multiple collections of folk-themed pieces.

The composer was sceptical about what he called the "Bartókian" manner of playing that was common among pianists then, and sadly, still frequent these days. "Overly percussive," "primitive," "barbarian," "wild" – these were the descriptions often used in regard to Bartók's music, which was performed accordingly. However, the composer himself performed his pieces differently, with great variety of touch and character. Bartók became a well-known pianist early in his life and recorded thirteen LPs of his own works, as well as the works by Bach, Scarlatti, and Chopin. His contemporaries agreed that his playing was free of shallow virtuosity and instead aimed at the inner meaning of the musical pieces he played. As a pianist, he was most attentive to rhythm and had a large range of piano touches that included *staccatissimo* and *legatissimo*, and "percussive" and "non-percussive" articulations, which demonstrated his attention to this aspect of pianistic expression. Bartók's posture, according to his colleagues, was "angular and rigid," while his wrists and arms were fixed. Not all contemporaries agreed on the pianist's sound. Some noted its colour and quality,[7] while others believed it to be not coloristic enough.[8]

## ***Piano Sonata, Sz 80.***

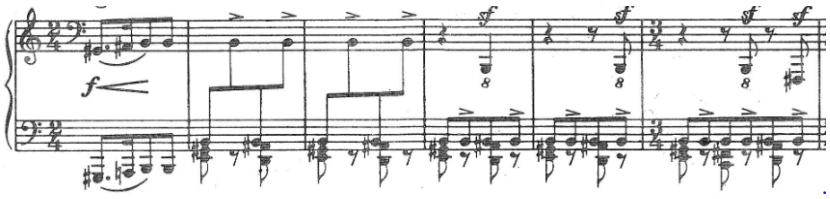
[7] In a lesson with Andor Foldes, 'Ask the greatest piano virtuoso in the world to hit a note on the piano," Bartók said, "just one single note – then ask the nearest taxi-driver to do the same – and you will find that each note was hit by two men exactly alike – one didn't sound a bit finer or more beautiful than the other. In order to discover a difference between a taxi-driver and a great artist – they have to hit *two* notes …*there*, each will reveal himself, for it is the *relationship* between the sounds upon which the colouring hinges" in Andor Foldes, "Béla Bartók" *Tempo New Series* 43 (1957), pp. 20-26.

[8] Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano: A Performer's View*. Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2002).

Bartók's *Piano Sonata, Sz 80* is one of his mature compositions and the only sonata he wrote for solo piano. Composed in 1926, it combines classical forms with folk musical language. It features tonal ambiguity, polymodality, contrapuntal technique, changes of meter, and rhythmic and harmonic complexity. This turbulent work was not well-received at first and Bartók, realizing the difficulty of this piece for audiences, was cautious in programming it.[9]

The first movement is written in a classical sonata-allegro form, except it possesses unusual proportions: exactly half of the movement is the exposition, while the second half includes development, recapitulation and coda. Although, the themes have contrasting characters, the melodic basis of all the themes is the opening motive. The cohesion is achieved by the driven eighth-note accompaniment found in the left hand, and the repetitive Bs in the bass. The continuous drive and the frequency of inter-related themes gives this movement a sense of turbulence and unrest. The demanding rhythm presents one of the main technical problems for performers. The placement of motives does not necessarily correlate with "strong" beats, which creates complex coordination issues for the pianist. This exciting first movement is often played too fast, with harsh attacks and an overly aggressive approach. However, instead of a motoric performance, I was encouraged by my piano professors to pursue a more diverse sound with glimpses of humour.

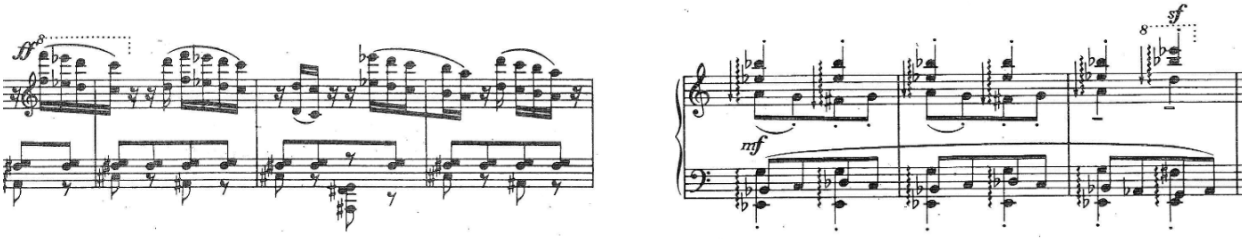
Ex. 11. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 1, mm.1-6.



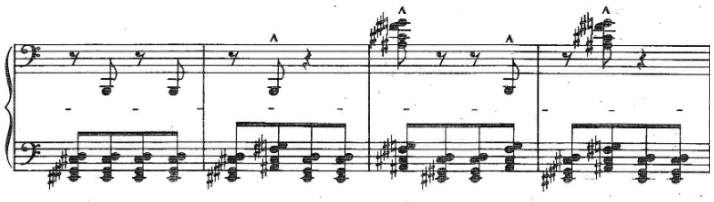
[9] Stephen Herbert Smith, "Playing and Teaching the Piano Music of Béla Bartók" in *The Pianist's Craft: Mastering the Works of Great Composers*, ed.by R.P. Anderson, 2012, 220-240.

Other technical challenges of the movement include frequent changes of meter, large chord spans, fast octave passages and arpeggios in both hands in opposite directions (Ex.12), and leaps of chords and clusters (Ex.13).

Ex. 12. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 1, mm. 203-206 (L) and mm.116-118.



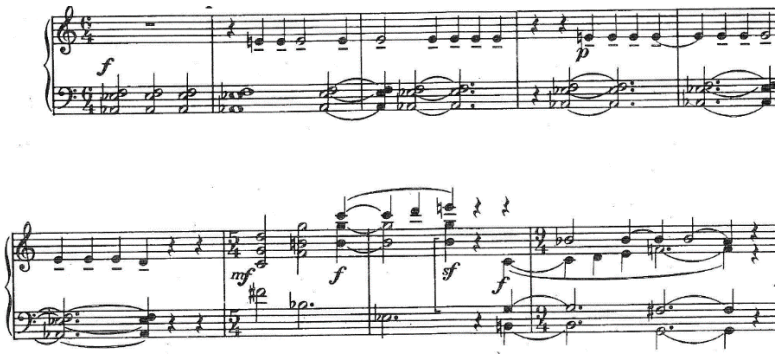

Ex. 13. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 1, mm. 259-262.



The second movement is contemplative and painful. The longest of the three, it is the most difficult movement to understand musically. Its tritones and open fourth and fifth chords, along with the monotonous rhythm – where the melody moves in quarter and half notes – requires thoughtful shaping.[10] The opening includes a bell-like gesture between an A-flat-E-flat-F chord in the left hand and repetitive Es in the right hand. These first six bars startle the audience with their stillness of harmony and rhythm. One loses hope that the E in the right hand will ever resolve. The sharp sonorities and suddenly changing dynamics evoke a painful reminder of wartime.

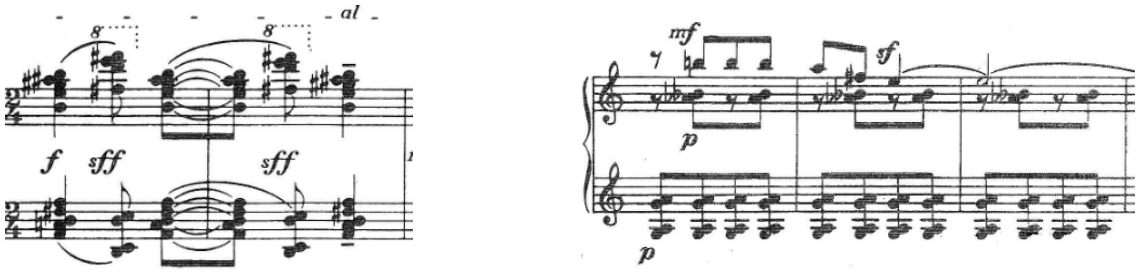
[10] In 1943 Bartók tried to dissuade his student Andor Foldes from performing this sonata in public, afraid that it wouldn't be accepted well. Specifically, he advised to leave the second movement out. "It's the hardest one to digest, this way you won't risk being booed" (Foldes, 1957).

Ex. 14. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 2, mm.1-9.



The third movement is a playful and entertaining folk dance, written in rondo form with elements of variation. Clusters and multiple leaps between registers in both hands in the ever-increasing tempo classifies this movement as one of the most virtuosic pieces in the piano literature.[11] The quick tempo assumes the light attack and economy of movement. Phrases are not always comprised of traditional four bars, and similarly to the first movement, the frequent meter changes hint at the musical breathing.

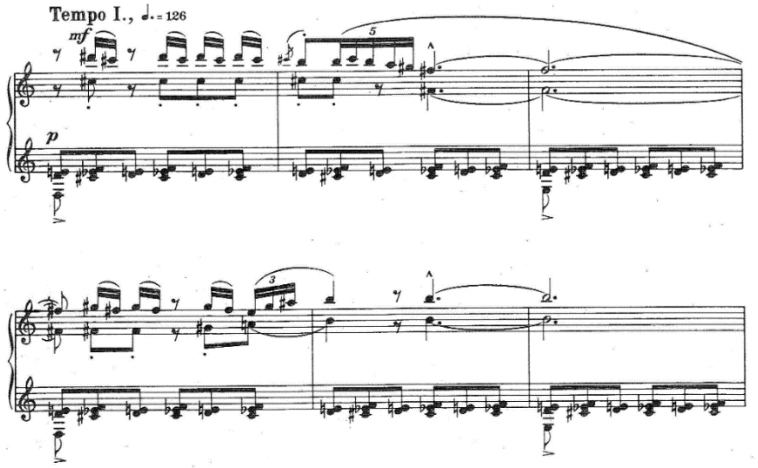
Ex. 15. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 3, mm.38-39 (L) and mm.53-55 (R).



[11] Bartók was inspired by the work of the American composer Henry Cowell and asked him for his permission to use clusters (Smith, 2012).

The composer demonstrated to his students how to play the short notes tied by a slur – the first one significantly shorter, nearly as if it were a grace note. Using this technique in one of the variations, Bartók achieves a "chirping" sonority.

Ex. 16. Bartók *Piano Sonata*. Movement 3, mm.143-145.




The *Piano Sonata, Sz. 80* is a drastic change from the delicateness of Debussy's *Estampes*. Bartók reimagines the piano as a folk band with a fiddle, a flute, and a drum. The virtuosity in the sonata derives from the composer's desire to reproduce on the piano the sound of other instruments. While Debussy uses the multitude of the piano sonorities to paint an expressive picture, Bartók accepts and explores the percussive nature of the instrument in order to develop a new piano language.

## Sergei Rachmaninov

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) was admired for his talent in composition and piano performance throughout his life. His works for piano include five concerti, two piano sonatas, two sets of *Préludes* and *Études-Tableaux* each, variations on themes by Chopin and Corelli, and

numerous transcriptions. We are lucky to be able to appreciate Rachmaninov's piano playing through his studio recordings. He had very large hands, reaching a twelfth on the keyboard, an overwhelming range of color and a brilliant technique. Economy of movement helped him eliminate tension from the hands and the body. Above all, Rachmaninov was admired for his sound. His lifelong friend, singer Fedor Shaliapin once said, "When he plays for me, I can truly say, not that 'I'm singing, but 'we are singing." Alexandr Scriabin said, "in his sound there is so much of materialism, so much meat…almost some kind of boiled ham."[12] These two descriptions – the singing tone and the "meatiness" of the sound – are two of the features of Rachmaninov's piano music, as well as two of the most serious challenges for the performer.

## *Piano Sonata No.2, Op.36*

There are three versions of Rachmaninov's second piano sonata: the original score, written in 1913, the composer's revision in 1931 and Vladimir Horowitz's version in 1940. I chose the second (1931) version to perform at the recital, as it is a more concise one between the composer's editions. Rachmaninov said about his revision: "I look at my early works and see how much there is that is superfluous. Even in this sonata so many voices are moving simultaneously and it is too long. Chopin's sonata lasts nineteen minutes and all has been said."[13] Rachmaninov succeeded at shortening the sonata (nineteen minutes in a usual performance instead of the original twenty-five minutes). However, it did not become technically easier.

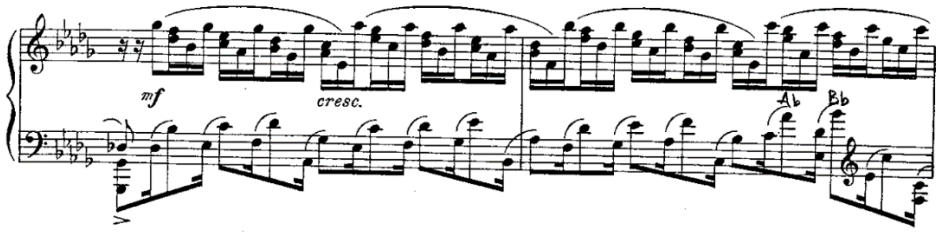
The sonata has three movements that are connected by the *attacca* transitions. The first movement, written in sonata-allegro form, opens with a theme that will become the leitmotif of

[12] These citations are from Robert Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and The Eight,* 2002.
[13] Z.A.Apetyan, *S.Rachmaninov: Literary Legacy. Volume 3. Letters* (Moscow: Soviet Composer, 1980).

the entire piece. Its main theme's character is turbulent and passionate, while the D-flat Major second theme is lyrical and poignant. The work was conceived at the same time as the symphonic poem *The Bells, op.35*. This factor certainly brings about many allusions to bells: the main theme of the first movement has the ringing B-flat in the bass against the chordal motive in dotted rhythm and the chiming sextuplets between the two. The second movement is a manifestation of Rachmaninov's melodic genius. Its theme is reflective and full of reserved sadness and nostalgia, similar to the lyricism of slow themes in the composer's concerti. The third movement is also in sonata-allegro form. The brilliant and virtuosic main theme is juxtaposed with the lyrical, yet passionate theme in E-flat major. Its return in the recapitulation is the culmination of the whole work.

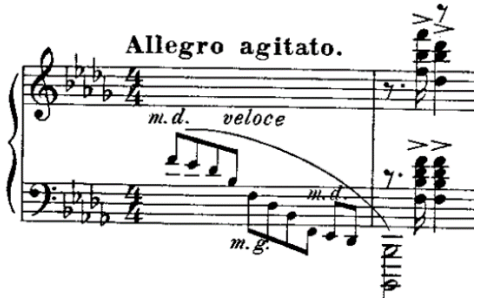
As any pianist who has learned a piece by Rachmaninov would undoubtedly agree, his works are always exceptionally difficult, both musically and technically. The composer's textures are incredibly dense and are comprised of spread-out chords that reach over an octave and involve all ten fingers simultaneously; brilliant passagework that requires steel-strong fingers and inventive fingering; and frequent sub-melodies that need careful voicing. Oftentimes, these melodic lines occur in different voices simultaneously. It is quite a pursuit to find all the existing inner melodies, especially those which the composer did not highlight by elongating the tones of the melody or by using a different touch or dynamic. In the transitional passage in the first movement, the inner melody can be discovered between the notes, played by the thumb in the left hand and the last notes of the slurs in the right hand.

Ex. 17. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 1, mm. 28-29

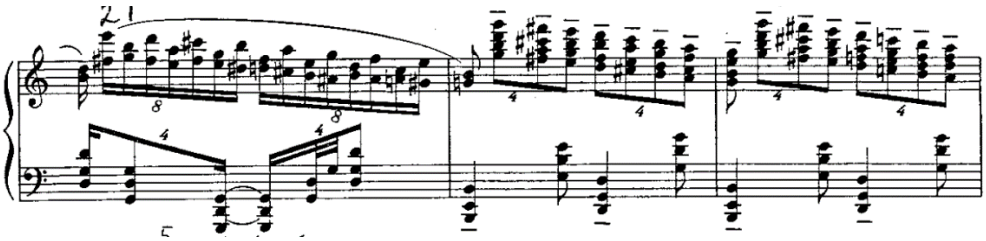



I would not find a page in Rachmaninov's score that does not require virtuosic skills. Clearly, an advanced technical level is required for the turbulent first passage in the first movement (Ex.18), or the epic chords in the development (Ex.19). However, it is no less necessary in the lyrical chorale of the second theme, where the pianist must voice the melody in the fourth and fifth finger of the right hand, while maintaining a beautiful tone and keeping the uniformity of the chorale's chords (Ex.20).

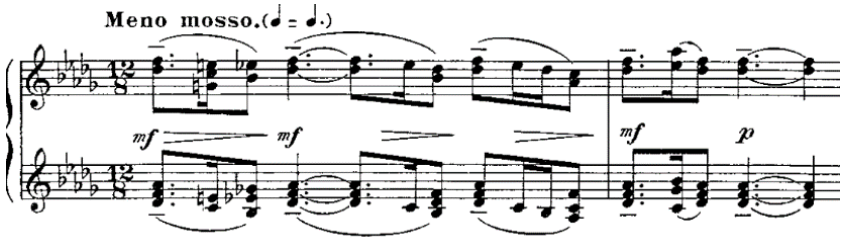
Ex. 18. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Movement 1, mm. 1-2




Ex.19. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 1, mm. 88-90

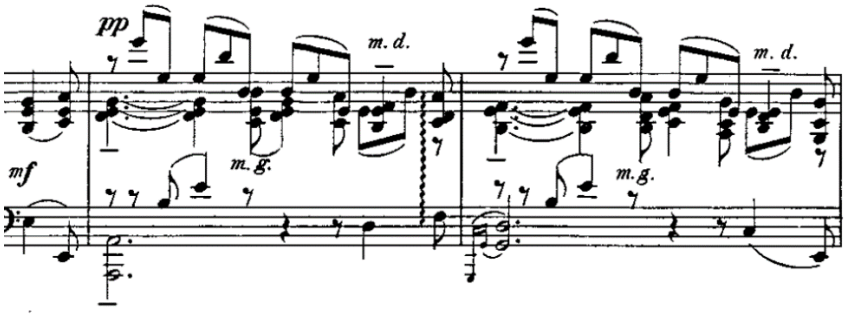


Ex. 20. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 1, mm. 38-39



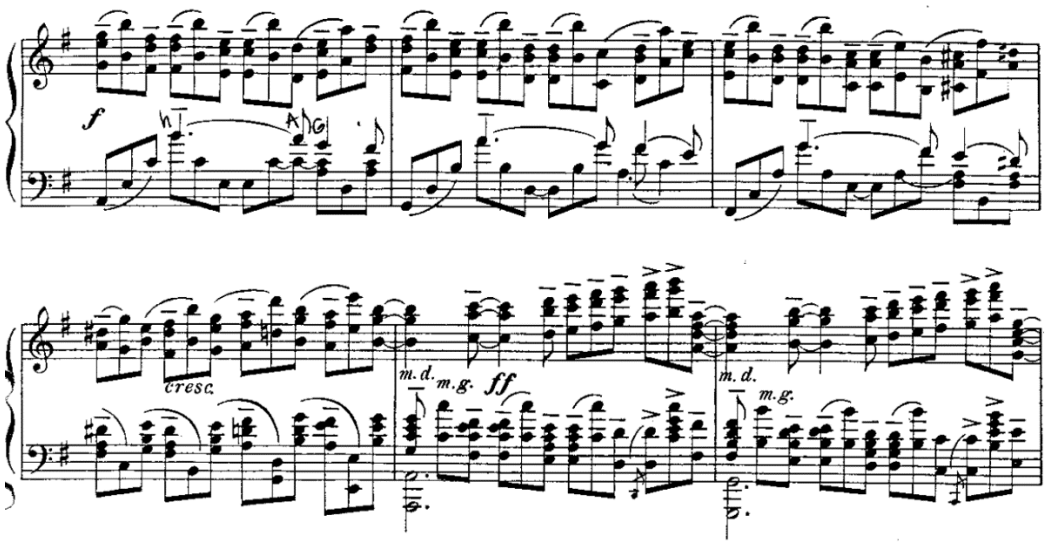

The second movement's main melody has long phrases and various "distractions", such as echo gestures ("coocoo's call,") additional subvoices and re-harmonizations. Each layer requires its own character and touch, which makes this movement virtuosic as the pianist juggles with all these tasks.

Ex. 21. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 2, mm. 24-26



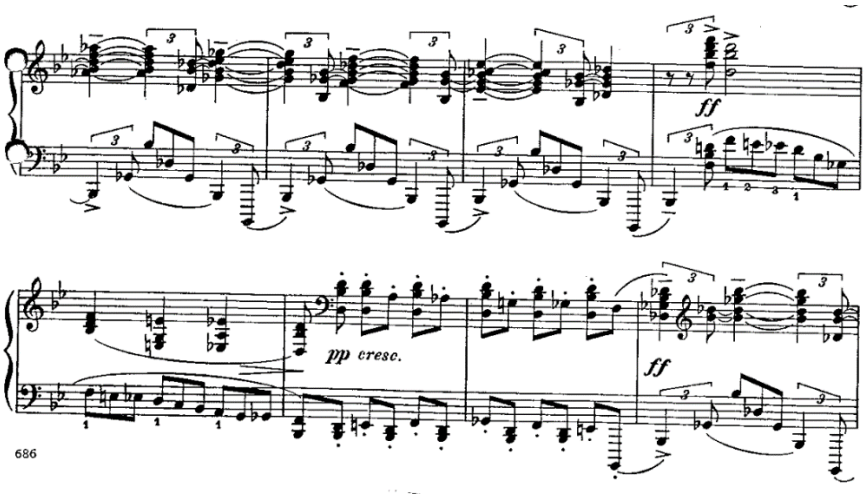

Similarly, in the culmination in mm. 29-36, there are three equally important features: the chordal triplets with the first and third notes played *tenuto*, the middle voice with a "sighing" intonation, and the harmonic sequential progression. Attention to each verticality, while keeping the long phrase in mind, is an example of Rachmaninov's virtuosity. It poses the challenge of pacing, which includes control of dynamics, musical continuity of the phrase, and extreme attention to the tone of the melodic line.

Ex. 22. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*, Movement 2, mm.29-34



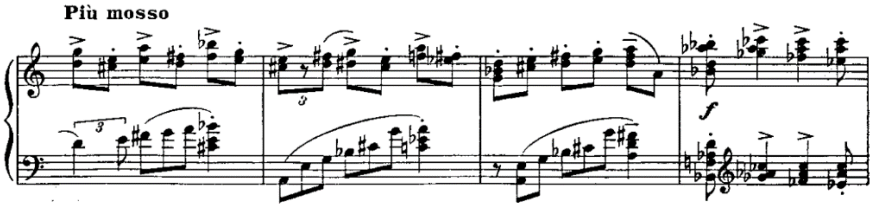

The third movement is a turbulent cascade of passagework, large chords, and octave jumps.

Ex. 23. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 3, mm. 17-24



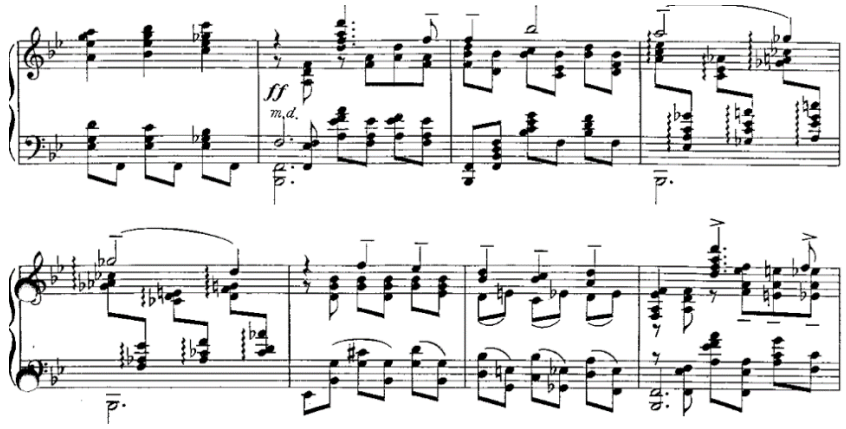

One of the most physically demanding sections of this movement is the *Piu Mosso*. It is reminiscent of the cadenzas in Rachmaninov's piano concerti. The tempo accelerates after possible fatigue that has been built up to this point. The importance of clarity and brilliance of the fingers cannot be overlooked.

Ex. 24. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 3, mm. 158-161




Rachmaninov strongly believed that a climax is the point of every musical work and should be calculated and prepared in order for the whole structure not to collapse. In the sonata this epic climax takes place in the third movement. The composer endows the secondary, traditionally lyrical theme with the loudest peak of the work. An instinct to "bang out" this section, along with the coda, must be resisted. Instead, the listener should still be able to recognise the lyricism of the theme despite the glorious fortissimo dynamic and the multitude of the chords in the accompaniment, which in their turn can and should be voiced as well. "The great Russian soul" proclaims itself in this culmination – the most beautiful moment of the dignified passion and poignant sentimentality.

Ex. 25. Rachmaninov *Piano Sonata No.2*. Movement 3, mm. 184-186




Virtuosity in Rachmaninov's sonata is yet of a different kind than in the music of Debussy or Bartók. Instead of depicting a variety of external concepts, such as an image of nature or a folk dance, Rachmaninov expresses the most inner human feelings. The music grips

the listeners from the first cascading passage and does not release them until the last chord. The composer uses the crispness of the piano's high registers to evoke the most intimate feelings, while the roaring chordal passages inspire and thrill. With Rachmaninov, we visit church at the sound of the first movement's chorale, ache with nostalgia about bygone days in the second movement, and get swept off our feet with the energy of the third movement. This ability of Rachamaninov's music to make the listener feel – the reason for its lasting popularity – would not be possible without the virtuosic element.

## Vladimir Horowitz

Vladimir Horowitz (1903-1989) became one the most famous virtuosos since Liszt. Often called "the last Romantic," Horowitz focused most of his career on the masterpieces of the Romantic era, dazzling the audiences with his unique piano technique. As an admirer of Rachmaninov, Horowitz dreamed of becoming a pianist/composer as well. Horowitz took up Liszt's tradition of improvising onstage, which in time became his own transcriptions of Liszt's works. It is no surprise that his most famous interpretations were of Liszt's works: *Hungarian Rhapsodies No.2 and 15, Rákóczi March*, Saint-Saëns/Liszt's *Danse macabre*, Mendelssohn/Liszt's *Wedding March and Variations* from *Midsummer's Night Dream*, and Liszt/Busoni's *Mephisto-Waltz No.1*.

Horowitz despised playing a piece the same way twice, did not write down his transcriptions, and refused to make his compositions public.[14] Horowitz's transcriptions used his unique piano technique to further develop Liszt's idiomatic piano writing. The pianist achieved

[14] The publicly available score of the Horowitz' *Danse Macabre* was transcribed in 1998 by Dennis Gustafsson. David Dubal recorded Horowitz's response to his question why the pianist would not write the transcriptions down, "let [other pianists] come up with their own" in David Dubal, *Evenings with Horowitz: A Personal Portrait* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991).

that by further exploring the expressive abilities of the instrument and the ways to perform virtuosic pieces most efficiently. Horowitz varied the duration of the sections, but never tampered with the linear continuity of Liszt's original compositions.[15] The pianist made the most of his technical abilities and "virtuosically" hid any shortcomings. The audience, and even his colleagues could not always tell how Horowitz achieved certain sonorities. Glenn Gould was certain that Horowitz "faked the octaves," while Rachmaninov called his octaves "colossal," but it was Claudio Arrau, who realized that Horowitz avoided playing octave passages for a long stretch.[16] To reduce physical fatigue, Horowitz was noticed to take an occasional break by shortening some passages, omitting a note or two, or redistributing notes between hands on the spot. Horowitz presented an extraordinary level of skill, unseen since Liszt, Chopin and Thalberg; he made the virtuosic pieces sound easy, or at least easy for him. Similar to Liszt, Horowitz's playing was often criticized as "supersensuous, superromantic and supermysterious."[17] Many called his performances devoid of a deep musicianship.[18] However, Horowitz was extremely sensitive to critique and even stopped his concert career for twelve years.

Horowitz used a customised grand piano, designed by pianist Josef Hofmann together with Steinway, with a fast, swift action and hardened hammers. These allowed the pianist to achieve a faster speed for repeated notes and a crystalline sound. Horowitz only performed on his own piano, requiring elaborate preparation in the concert halls around the world and only played in the halls where the piano was placed well acoustically. Many of the pianists who wrote

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[15] Virgil Thompson "Master of Distortion and Exaggeration" in Mark Mitchell, *Virtuosi: A Defense and a (Sometimes Erotic) Celebration of Great Pianists.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).
[16] David Dubal, *Remembering Horowitz: 125 Pianists Recall a Legend.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1993).
[17] Dubal, 1991
[18] Sergei Rachmaninov: Many thought that once married to Toscanini's daughter, [Horowitz's] musicality would improve. That hasn't happened yet, but they haven't been married long…" (Apetyan, 1980)

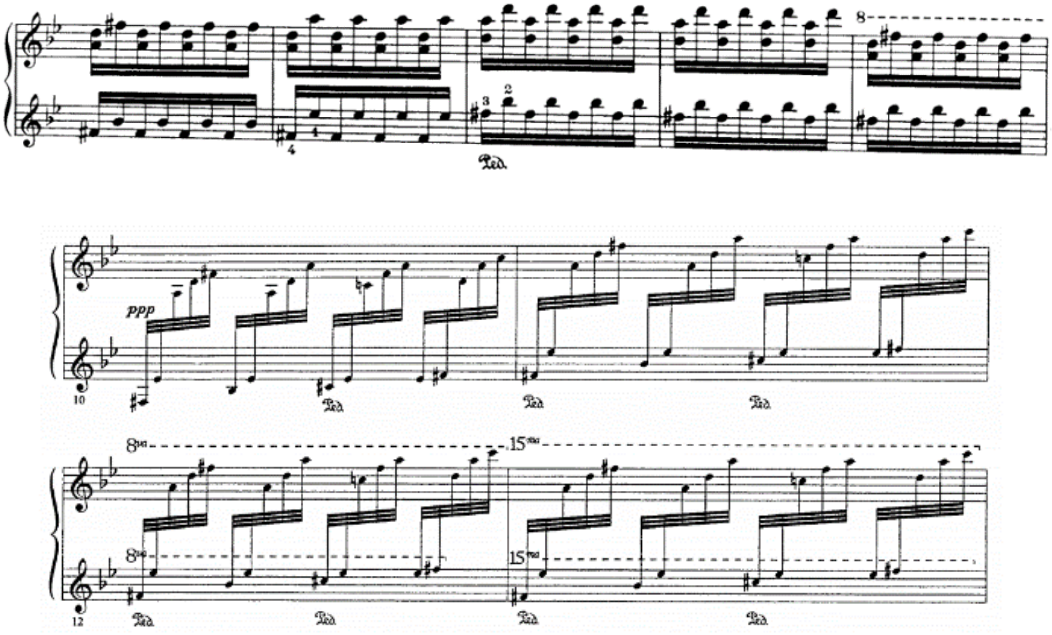
contributing articles remark on Horowitz's unique and exceptional use of colour. They noted the unparalleled sound, the colouristic effects perfectly matching the piano's mechanism, a one-of-a-kind phrasing with several levels of melodic intensity, and his unique voicing which all spoke of the deepest level of musicianship.[19]

## The Journey of *Danse Macabre*

Composed in 1872 by Camille Saint-Saëns, *Danse Macabre* was originally an art song, revised into a tone poem two years later. It depicts the dance of the dead at the Death's ball. In 1876, Franz Liszt transcribed the *Danse Macabre* for solo piano (S.555 in his catalog.)[20] Liszt's transcription is much longer and more elaborate than the original with the insertion of new passages. Nikolay Rubinstein popularised the work in piano repertoire and, according to Liszt, was the best interpreter of the piece. Vladimir Horowitz transcribed Liszt's *Danse Macabre* in 1942. His version is uniquely tailored to his piano technique and has both complications and facilitations of Liszt's transcription to reimagine orchestral pianism, as well as to showcase his strengths and hide any weaknesses. For example, on the first page Horowitz simplified the tremolos in measures 5-8 and transformed Liszt's continuing tremolos into an arpeggiated passage. In addition to being pianistically easier to perform, this modification changed the sound into airy and whimsical. By creating a melodic line from the basses of the arpeggios, Horowitz reorchestrated the passage in a different way.

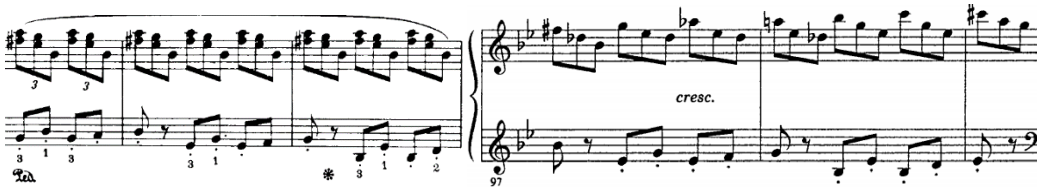
[19] Dubal, 1993.
[20] Liszt's *Totentanz*: *Paraphrase on Dies Irae S.126* is an independent work on the same theme.

Ex. 26. *Danse Macabre*, mm. 15-19 (Liszt) and mm. 10-13 (Horowitz):




Horowitz also omitted double notes in certain passages to lighten the texture and gain brilliancy.

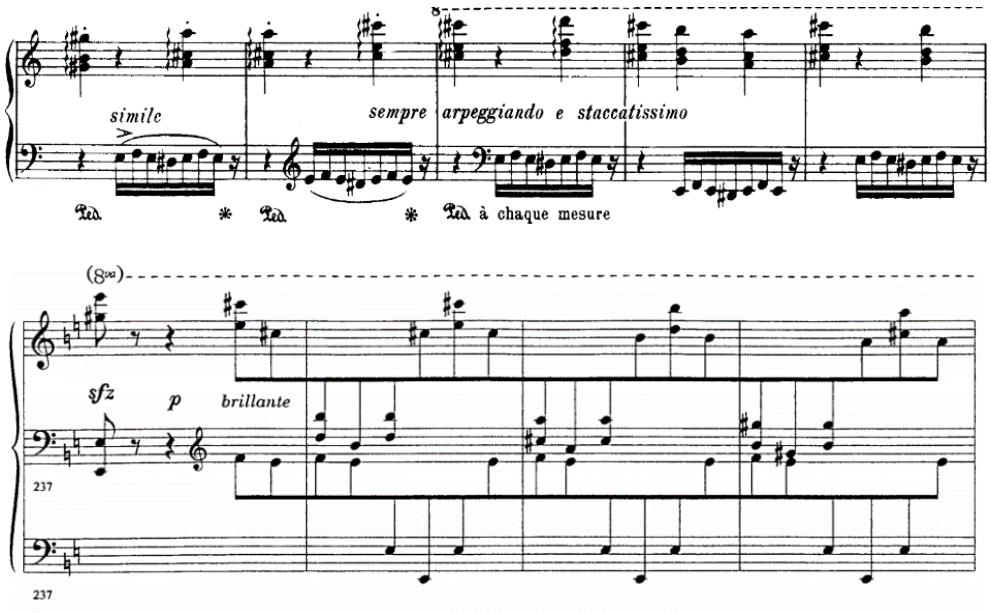
Ex. 27. *Danse* Macabre, mm.123-125 (Liszt) and mm. 97-99 (Horowitz):




On the other hand, instead of Liszt's relatively easy variation with trills, Horowitz composed the unplayable, at least up to tempo, section with the off-beat leaps in both hands. While, in Liszt's transcription this section plays a transitional role, for Horowitz it becomes one of the most intense culminations. In Liszt's work the trills have a stable rhythm and regular pedal, which gives the section a stalling effect. Horowitz swings and accelerates the tempo, changes the

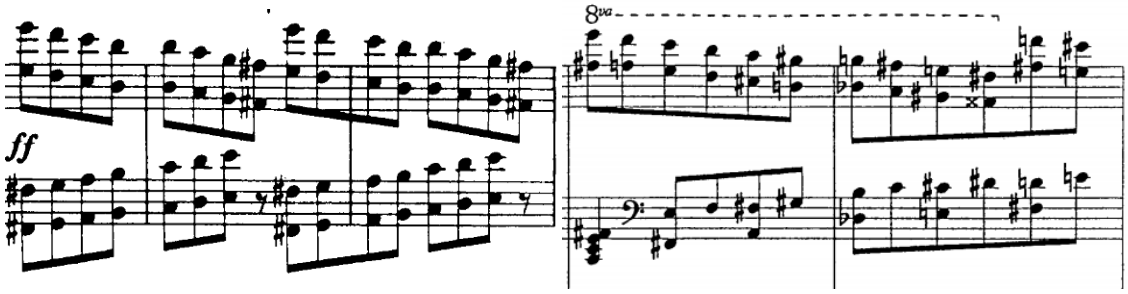
texture, both of which build the tension, and the following *pesante* becomes a much needed release.

Ex. 28. *Danse Macabre*, mm. 279-283 (Liszt) and mm. 237-240 (Horowitz)




In the climactic passage, Liszt uses plain octaves in both hands, while Horowitz chromatisized the passage by adding sixths in both hands. Both versions have a roaring effect, however the addition of the chromatism highlights the diabolic nature of the piece.

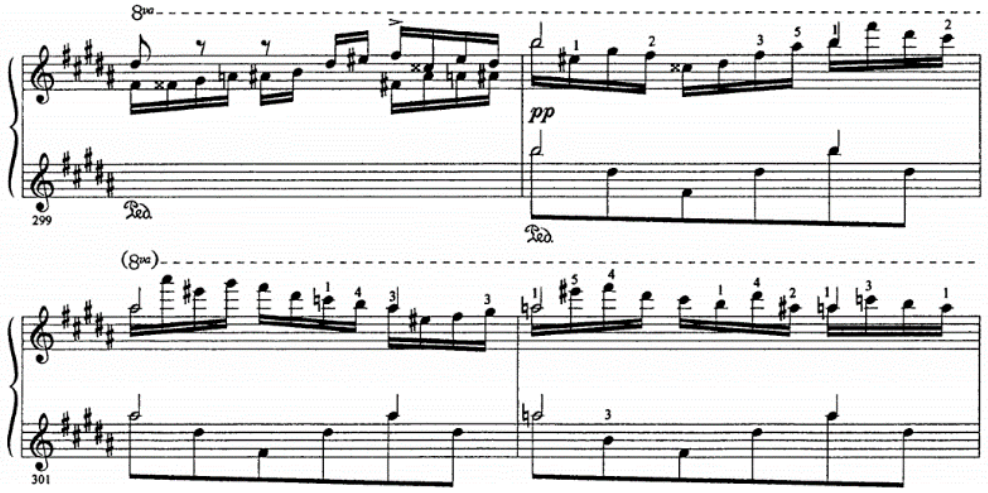
Ex. 29. *Danse Macabre*, mm. 492-494 (Liszt) and mm. 431-432 (Horowitz)




To Horowitz's credit, his version decreased the amount of repetition in *Danse Macabre*. Based essentially on two motives with the same harmonization, Liszt's transcription suffers from unnecessary reiteration of the same material. Instead of Liszt's eight-bar variations, Horowitz

took the first two or four bars and later varied the motive texturally or omitted it altogether. This allowed for a greater variety and new ways of expressiveness. In the lyrical episode in B Major, Liszt repeats the theme exactly with the same texture, though transposed to E-flat Major. Horowitz stays in B Major but moves to the higher register and uses flourished passages to harmonize the melody. As opposed to Liszt's version, this creates a transcending shift in the character of the theme and offers an opportunity to demonstrate a lighter, jewel-like touch.

Ex. 30. *Danse Macabre*, mm. 299-302.




Liszt/Horowitz's *Danse Macabre* is a logical continuation in the discussion of the development of piano virtuosity in the 20th century. Within the post-Romantic tradition, Horowitz expanded the array of piano sonorities and raised the performance expectations for future pianists. For Horowitz, virtuosic playing was both showmanship and a means to push the boundaries and limitations of the piano. Adopting Liszt's orchestral approach to piano writing, Horowitz adapted and transformed it into an efficient and often more effective pianistic technique.

# Conclusion

All four compositions in this program: Debussy's *Estampes*, Bartók's *Piano Sonata*, Rachmaninov's *Piano Sonata No.2* and Liszt/Horowitz's *Danse Macabre* are the examples of the piano works intended to expand the possibilities of the instrument. The humbleness of a single instrument, though not a humble one, is comparable to the power and coloristic abilities of a full orchestra. In the timespan of under fifty years, the question of what a sonorous language a piano is capable of, was interpreted in a variety of ways: from Debussy's exquisite, gentle and coloristic approach to the turbulent and percussive Bartók; from Rachmaninov's introverted emotionality to Horowitz's flashy brilliance. In all these works and across musical styles the piano plays the most important role of the medium between the composer's score and the audience. And in many ways, it is the piano that becomes the protagonist of the musical works. By exploring the virtuosic element of my recital program, I arrived at a more replete understanding of the term *virtuosity* and its ability to both astonish and to evoke reflection.

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