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Morceaux de fantaisie's Second Movement Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 3 and The
Famine of 1891-1892

Written and Composed by Sergei Rachmaninoff

In 1892 Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote *Morceaux de fantaisie*. This work consisted of five piano preludes. The second prelude is entitled "Prelude in C Sharp Minor." Rachmaninoff performed this prelude with two other piano pieces from *Morceaux de fantaisie* at a conservatory concert in Moscow, on September 26, 1892 (Ewen 443). He wrote this piece when he was studying at the Moscow Conservatory. After composing "Prelude in C Sharp Minor," Rachmaninoff became one of the most recognized new Romantic composers of the late 19th century. He even held onto the sound and philosophy of the Romantic period even in 20th century "Prelude in C-Sharp Minor" was displayed as a technical piece with a lot of dynamic emotions that seemed confusing to the ear (Ewen 443). It should also be noted that this piece was constructed in ABA form.

ABA is a form of music that, in a sense, can be confusing to a non-musical listener because he or she may not know when pattern changes in the music occur. This form consists of a complete unit, which is A, a contrasting unit, which is B, and a

repetition of the A section (Sommer 1). Absolute music is a piece that is set up to be heard just how it is composed with no visual imagery behind it.

Even though Rachmaninoff won a gold medal for his piano playing at the Moscow Conservatory, unfortunately he failed to copyright “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor,” and when he sold it, he received roughly nothing for it (Ewen 600). Nonetheless, Rachmaninoff kept on composing beautiful music and became one of the most popular musicians of his time.

There are no underlying messages or stories that are in place to interpret what “Prelude in C Sharp Minor” means. However, it should be noted that when Tchaikovsky died in 1893, Rachmaninoff played “Prelude in C Sharp Minor” in his honor (Clarkson 361). Rachmaninoff has a very distinct style which can be recognized almost immediately. Like other composers in the Romantic time period, especially Beethoven, hard hitting power chords are used to display emotion in a musical piece. At the start of “Prelude in C-sharp Minor,” Rachmaninoff pounds three chords, one after the other, that signify struggle and loss. These chords are played repeatedly throughout the piece with melody solos outlining them.

During the time that this piece was written, Russia was going through troubling times. A crippling famine swept through Russia during the years 1891 and 1892 and devastated Russia’s peasant class both politically and emotionally (Salisbury 38). Even though Rachmaninoff said that “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor” was a piece written in absolute form, it seems that some of the piece can interpret what was going on in Russia at the time.

While the famine was taking place, Rachmaninoff was composing great music in the Moscow Conservatory. Between the years 1891 and 1892 Russia saw some of the most devastating hardship it had ever gone through. It seems the famine of 1891 and 1892 started the downward spiral. It is estimated more than half a million people died as a result of this famine (Szamuely 413). There is a part in “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor” where Rachmaninoff plays a melody around the three power chords that sounds like it is going out of control in a descending scale and ending with the three power chords played harshly.

To me, this melody signifies the famine and the devastation that it caused the peasants in Russia. For instance, in 1892 Russian crop production fell 13% below normal. This may not seem like a large number, but in 1921 another famine happened that wiped out 85% of Russia’s harvest (Pipes 357). Even though 1892 is the year that is being discussed, the quick downward spiral melody that “Rachmaninoff plays in Prelude in C-Sharp Minor” can be interpreted as a downward plunge that is going to affect society in years to come.

The famine created great poverty for the peasants. The proletariat or lower class, of Russia, and ignited the peasant uprising against Russia’s upper class, the bourgeois (Thaden 317). In “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor,” it seems that the melody is the proletariat crying for the bourgeois to help them regain resources to bring back their harvest. Since the upper class in Russia was alarmed by the famine of 1892, various political classes and social groups in society began to preach different ideologies about how to mend this ungrateful event, which laid the foundation for the Russian Revolution (Riasanovsky 449). In “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor,” the melody can also be looked at as the political

parties bickering back and forth about how the government reacted to the proletariat's need for help. Some of the views from the parties are quite interesting.

The Populist Party thought that the famine was a result of financial policies placed by the government to impose economic industrialization. In this case, the Populist Party rallied a protest in the defense of the peasants against capitalism. The Liberal Party thought that the government's inability to cope with the famine crisis was a demonstration of the need for greater participation by society in regards to public affairs (Thaden 315). There is a segment in "Prelude in C-Sharp Minor" where the melody and the chords become in tune with one another. It seems that this unification of the melody and the chords represents the unification of the peasants and the Populist Party fighting together to gain attention from the government.

On the other hand, the Marxist Party had a different view on the famine of 1892. Unlike the liberal and the populist parties, the Marxist party, as Edward Thaden states, "Condemned terror and argued that capitalistic industrialization was inevitable and, indeed, a necessary condition for the anticipated triumph of socialism in Russia (315). Unfortunately, the Marxist Party won governmental appreciation and a man named S. Iu. Witte, who became the Minister of Finances from 1892-1903, was put into power. This can be heard when the melody and the chords stop for a moment and all is quiet to the ear; then the three power chords come in a thunderous tone, and the melody quiets almost to a submissive resonance. For a moment, when the melody and the chords are joined together, it seems that everything is going to be unified in Russia, the peasants are going to get government support, and Russia will be restored back to its original self. However, the Marxist acceptance by the government marks a change in Russia forever.

When the working class realized that the government was not going to give them economic support, they revolted. The workers got together with a bunch of students and the students educated them about how to fight against the Marxist's tight grip. By 1893, they called themselves the Social Democratic (Riasanovsky 450). The rise of this party would mark the first uprising against the bourgeoisie by the proletariat. These peasants and students were the foundation of the Social Democratic party; however, after a year of protesting, they were quickly subdued in St. Petersburg and kept under careful surveillance by the Russian police (Thaden 344). This would mark years of dissension throughout Russia's government and the different social classes.

For a moment, listen to how "Prelude in C-Sharp Minor" ends. Rachmaninoff makes the melody and the chords sound like church bells. It seems that after the devastation of the famine of 1891-1892, the proletariat sounded the bell of war against the Russian government. The bell of the Russian government struck down upon the Social Democrats with the verbal sounds of "You're under arrest," as well as the clinking sounds of cold steel shackles being applied.

"Prelude in C-Sharp Minor" ends with the bells becoming softer and softer. However, emotionally, politically, and economically the bells between the Social Democrats and the Russian government were still tolling as loud as can be. The power chords in the middle of "Prelude in C-Sharp Minor" seem to emphasize the bourgeoisie rejecting the proletariat plea of having them support the restoration of their crops. Towards the end of the piece, the bells start to dim and then fade out into quiet air. It should be noted that this dimming of the bells between the lower and the upper classes of

Russia will not happen for a long time. Russia is about to embark on years of economic and social change.

The dimming of the bells can be looked at in two ways. One way to look at them is as marking a change in Russian society, and the old ways of living being revised. The other way to look at the dimming of the bells is that one day the fighting and unbalanced rule in Russia will be rebalance and restored to a homeostatic median. The bells can be looked at as fighting wars and going through hard times. Once the bells sound no more and air is the only thing that is heard, maybe Russia will have opulence and peace.

Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 3 (1892). Written and Composed by Sergei Rachmaninoff as part of a five piano prelude musical composition called *Morceaux de fantaisie*.

0:00: Quiet

0:08: three thunderous cords that will be the backbone of the prelude.

0:23: slow gentle melody that outlines the three power cords.

0:25- slow gentle melody picks up. The tone of the melody and the power cords pick up together.

0:32- Melody changes staying at the louder tone, but the power cords remain the same.

0:40- The melodies tone cadence flows up and down like a roller coaster. Power cords soften.

0:50- Power cord pick bad up with the thunderous strength from when the piece begun.

1:03: power cords and melody.

1:20- Melody builds up around the power cords. The melody changes a little at this part.

1:22- Melody returns back to what it was at the beginning of the song. The same with the power cords.

1:41- melody changes and makes a sound as if it were traveling in a downward spiral.

1:53- Melody cadence quickens. Power cords start to soften.

2:01- Fast melody at a steady rolling cadence. Power cords are softening.

2:09- very fast melody almost out of control and if someone is in distress. Cords stop.

2:17: Melody stops and the powers return.

2:24- Melody starts up again returning to how it started in the beginning of the piece. Only this time it matches the same tone of the power cords.

2:51- Melody and cords stay powerful staying at the same cadence with no fluctuation in tone. The cadence is fairly quick.

3:00- The cadence of the melody and the cords slow down. The cords return back to its original sound in the beginning. The melody is played softly in the original pattern of when it began in the beginning of the song.

3:11- The melody and the power cords go into a motion pattern where they should like church bells. The power cords sound one bell and the melody, which is a cord answers.

3:16- cadence of the power cords and melody softens.

3:25- melody cadence goes even softer.

3:32- Melody and the cords grow softer and begin to make the sounds of church bells.

3:41- the melody and the cords fade out with a soft tap of the right fingers of a high tone cord played softly.

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