

**PARTING THOUGHTS:
FORM, MOTIVIC TRANSFORMATION,
AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN RACHMANINOFF'S FINAL WORK**

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“I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me.”¹

~ Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1939

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was among the most influential pianists of the twentieth century. His piano concerti (in particular the second and third) are among the most beloved and frequently programed in the entire repertoire. While there is conflicting evidence as to his own personal religious convictions, there can be no doubt that he drew a lifetime of inspiration from sacred music, specifically plainchant and that of the Eastern Orthodox Church. His two major works for unaccompanied choir, the *All-Night Vigil* (1915) and *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (1910) are both masterpieces among sacred choral literature. Of no less import, when considering sacred musical influences in the compositions of Rachmaninoff, would be his lifelong obsession with the 13th century plainchant hymn, the *Dies Irae*. Motives and themes derived from this hymn are integral to more than a few of his works, including his tone poem *Isle of the Dead*, his third piano concerto, his first symphony, and his final work and subject of this research paper, *Symphonic Dances, Op. 45*. This analysis will delve into the intricacies of the final movement of this work to illustrate its form and structure, Rachmaninoff’s extraordinary skill at generating motivic transformation, and religious symbolism.

¹ Alex Ross. *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2007, 160.

In 1941, during the early stage of composing the three movements which comprise the *Symphonic Dances* (“*Fantastic Dances*”, as originally titled), Rachmaninoff had been speaking with Mikhail Fokine about choreographing them as part of a new ballet production.² (Fokine had already produced a ballet from *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*.) There were originally titles associated with each movement, namely, “Noon, Twilight, and Midnight”, the metaphors suggesting different stages of one’s life (youth, midlife, and old age).³ Ultimately, Fokine died before he could bring about a ballet from this new work. As for Rachmaninoff, though he lived for an additional two years after having completed it, this proved to be his last composition for the orchestra. Rachmaninoff referred to it as his, “last spark” of creativity.⁴

The third movement of *Symphonic Dances* is in ternary form, bookended by both an introduction and coda. As shall be revealed, the **A** sections of this form feel as if a battle is being waged between two opposing chant sources: a 13th century hymn about death, the *Dies Irae*, and a contra factum from Rachmaninoff’s own chant - the ninth movement of his *All-Night Vigil*, the subject of which is resurrection. (Please refer to the attached notated score and color key to score markings, and line-diagram for reference through the following pages.) Though begun with a key signature in D-maj, the work is highly chromatic, and often veers between diatonic keys (including Dmaj, e-min, Emaj, and Db-maj) and modes akin to the chant sources on which the work is based (e-dorian and d-dorian). The opening 8 measures of the introduction (marked *Lento assai*) is a greatly augmented version of that which opens the **A** section. The first phrase in

² Malcolm MacDonald. “Preface”, *Symphonic Dances, Op. 45*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2005, v.

³ *Ibid.*, v.

⁴ David Butler Cannata. *Rachmaninoff and the symphony*. New York: Studien Verlag, 1999, 170.

the oboe, and the second in clarinet, this step-upward followed by a downward-third characterizes a first motivic element drawn from the *Dies Irae*.

The first large **A** section of our ternary form begins in measure 12 and continues to measure 132. This section is further divided as follows: a first area labelled **a** from measures 12-92 is composed of interwoven rhythmic and melodic motives derived from the *Dies Irae*. Following this, from measures 93-113, is a second area labelled **b** which is based almost entirely on Rachmaninoff's own *Vigil* chant. True to the *znamenny* orthodox chant practice on which this chant itself is based, this **b** area is composed in e-dorian mode.⁵

Delving deeper into the motivic transformations which form the building blocks of the little zone **a** (measures 12-92), please refer to the attached sheet labelled "Motivic Transformations" (in conjunction with the score), wherein I have described a number of these transformations in detail all arranged note-for-note in succession beneath the original *Dies Irae* chant fragment on which they are based. These transformations are labelled both on this sheet and the score identically, numbered in purple within a diamond box.

- Number **1** (m.1, oboe and flutes): Rachmaninoff's augmented motive from the introduction. Besides the obvious harmonic differences provided mostly by parallel thirds, the final note of the oboe is lowered by a ½ step, as compared to the *Dies Irae* on which it is based.
- Number **2** (m. 13, cellos): this fragment and its variations are as much rhythmic as melodic in its usage throughout the movement. The first note corresponds to the second

⁵ Don M. Randel, Ed. "Russia", *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1969.

note of the *Dies Irae* above, the third note is a neighbor embellishment (*Gb*), and the final two notes are pushed apart, each by a $\frac{1}{2}$ step.

- Number **3** (m. 30, violin I): rewritten in $\frac{9}{8}$ time, this melodic fragment is little changed intervallically from its source, and is the most frequent motive used throughout this area **a**, within this large ternary section **A**.
- Number **4** (m. 50, clarinets): this transformation, augmented and in parallel thirds, is further altered by compressing the melodic intervals to all $\frac{1}{2}$ steps
- Number **5** (m. 57, violin I): this fragment is greatly accelerated to 16th notes, and repeated thrice per measure. Also, the first interval is increased to a whole step.
- Number **6** (m. 70, cellos): this transformation is again in $\frac{9}{8}$ time, short rhythmic eighth notes, and the second note is increased intervallically to a whole step
- Number **7** (m. 77, violin I): this fragment is a retrograde transformation beginning on the second note of the *Dies Irae*, the third note of which is lowered by $\frac{1}{2}$ step
- Number **8** (m. 79, piccolo): this fragment is a hybrid between *both* major themes of this work – it is composed of the melodic content of the *Dies Irae*, but the rhythm of the *Vigil contra factum chant*.
- Number **9** (m. 328, Horns): this transformation is from the last section of the movement, **A**¹, and represents one of the most climactic moments of the work. It is so pronounced, written in *ff* and “molto marcato”, the *Dies Irae* here clearly calls out over the entire ensemble. The third note is lowered by $\frac{1}{2}$ step. In these few measures we see an exercise in mode mixture, the first two measures moving from Dmaj to min. twice, followed by a minor v^6 , and a *bVI*, all leading to a powerful and convincing PAC in Dmaj in m. 334.

Thus far, I have detailed the types of motivic transformations which populate the first small **a** section. However, all of these have been based on the *Dies Irae*. Elsewhere in this same section, there is a small motivic fragment which foreshadows the coming small **b** section and the *Vigil* theme. The source of this fragment is labelled at the very first measure of **b** (m. 93) and highlighted in blue. This neighbor motion, down a whole-step and back, following by a tie can be found in the prior **a** section in measures: 66, 69, 71, 72, 74, and 75. It is highlighted in blue in each case.

Moving on to the **b** section (m. 93-113), we find a rather martial sounding *vigil* chant theme in e-dorian. This section proceeds directly into what I have labelled a “Pre-Coda”, from measure 114-124. This Pre-coda (here in the wrong key of Emaj, as opposed to the tonic of Dmaj) features rhythmic material which only appears again at the very end of the movement. In this case however, it races to an abrupt halt (m. 124) as we enter a dependent transition ending section **A** of our ternary form. This transition is the same material as the Introduction (m. 1-12), again *Lento assai*, though now in the strings.

Reminiscent of a Russian nesting doll, the middle large section **B** (m.133-234) of this ternary form itself contains a mini-ternary form with sections labelled **c** – **d** – **c**¹. The **c** sections (mm. 133-151, and mm. 200-234) are characterized by highly chromatic, lyrical rising and falling 3-measure motives, separated by runs of chromatic scales in the winds and glissandi in the strings. These motives have been labelled by large slurs in red for rising chromaticism, and green for falling chromaticism. There follows next, from m. 152-161 an area of tonal instability which I have determined to be transition material. However, the material on which this transition is based (labelled in pink slurs) foreshadows the coming section **d**.

Little section **d** begins in the key signature of *Db*, though is again highly chromatic and moves through key areas with rapidity. Again we see rising and falling chromatic, lyrical sequential melodic fragments (labelled in red and green), building in intensity to the emotional climax of our ‘little ternary’ form in mm. 219-234. Having been lulled into a sense of peace, the large **A**¹ section begins without preparation in m. 235.

The final little **a** section (m. 235-346) seems again to be a battle between the *Dies Irae* (“death”) and the *Vigil* (“resurrection”) themes, but it feels as though the stakes are now higher. Both themes are more pronounced, and the rhythmic intensity has noticeably increased with greater use of percussion. Fragments of the *Dies Irae* have been highlighted in yellow, and the *Vigil* in orange. The *Vigil* theme enters with greatest force from mm. 318-327, stated across three repeated fragments each rising stepwise and all the while *ff* in the brass. These three assertions of the “resurrection” motive lead to the greatest and most pronounced statement of the *Dies Irae* theme of the movement and perhaps the climax of the entire three-movement work. It takes the form of our final example from the “Motivic Transformations” sheet (Number 9). This leads, as stated before, to the very convincing PAC in m. 334, setting the listener up for the final section **b**.

The **b** section (mm. 347-374) is firmly in d-dorian this time, having just been preceded by three falling scales in this mode (mm. 344-346). Rachmaninoff has labelled this final section “Poco meno mosso”, giving our “resurrection” theme on which it is based a sense of weight and finality, and the snare drum adds again a martial quality. The final statement of *Vigil* (mm. 360-374) is a direct and full contra factum from movement 9 of his *All-Night Vigil*. At this point in Rachmaninoff’s manuscript he wrote the word “Alleluya”.

The Coda (mm. 375-392), begins confidently in D-maj, but the waters get muddied a bit by a rush of chromatic scales in thirds in the winds from measure 383. The final few measures at first may seem to be a tonic Dmaj (I) with a non-harmonic tone in the form of a $^b6^{\text{th}}$ scale degree pulling towards a resolution down to the 5^{th} . However, the off-beats in the 16^{ths} of the winds in mm. 386-387, together with the $^b6^{\text{th}}$ scale degree, form a iv^6 which gives this ending an almost plagal feel. Further adding weight to this idea, Rachmaninoff wrote into his manuscript at the end of this work, “I thank thee, Lord.”⁶ It is reasonable to believe that Rachmaninoff was well aware that this was the last work he would compose, and it is my belief that he was giving thanks for a career, a life of creativity.

Lastly, I will address further religious symbolism in this work. As has already been suggested, this movement seems as if a battle has been waged between death (represented by the *Dies Irae*) and resurrection (the subject of the text from Rachmaninoff’s own *Vigil* No. 9). Also mentioned throughout the text of Rachmaninoff’s *Vigil* movement is the Trinity, “Father, and His Son, and the Holy Spirit.” It is hard to miss the frequency of the number 3 in this work










- the entire work has three movements
- the first *and* last movements are constructed in 3 large sections
- the middle **B** section of this final movement also has three sections
- you will find on the attached score, in section **B** that I have noted how often these lyrical, chromatic motives repeat in 3’s (i.e. mm 133-135, 137-139, etc). Another compelling occurrence of 3’s is between mm. 318-327 wherein the *Vigil* theme is stated three times before “death” interrupts in m. 328

⁶ MacDonald, v.

This work ultimately ends with *resurrection* having won the day. It has the final say, followed by a quasi-plagal ending. Interestingly, the final five chords while in D are not clearly in Dmaj *or* minor, but are only open fifths and octaves. The thirds are left out – true to the ancient origins of the chants on which this entire movement is based

(A score of Rachmaninoff's *Vigil* chant is also attached to this analysis, with the quoted section highlighted in orange, and a playlist accompanies this research paper that can be found here: http://bit.ly/MW_RachSD).

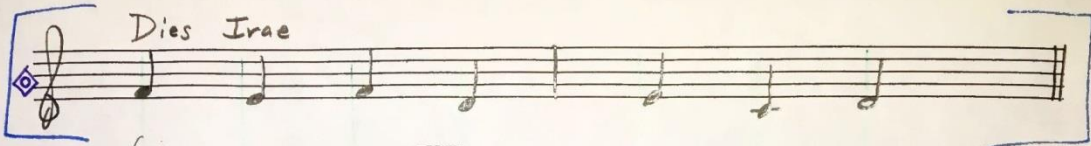
Key to reading score notations:

		Complete statements of <i>Dies Irae</i> theme	
		Motivic (transformed) statements of <i>Dies Irae</i>	
		Complete statements of <i>Vigil</i> chant theme	
		Motivic (transformed) statements of <i>Vigil</i>	
		Form notations, outlines, key areas	
		Occurrences of <i>Vigil</i> -based neighbor motive	
B Section only		c – Falling chromatic motion	
			c – Rising chromatic motion
			d motive

Motivic Transformations

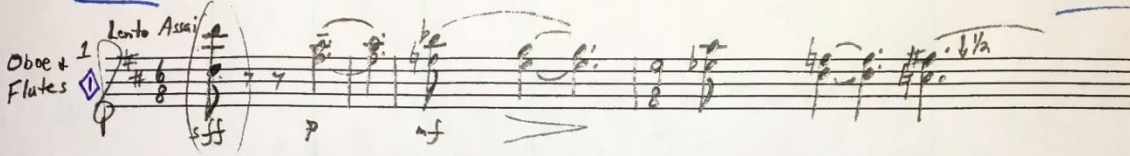
M. Wheatley

Dies Irae



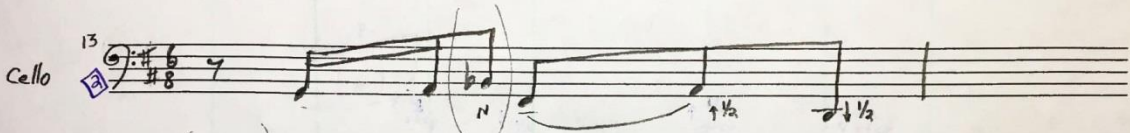
Oboe + Flutes 1

Lento Assai



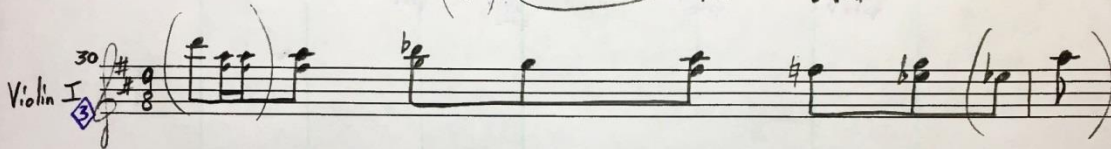
Cello

13



Violin I

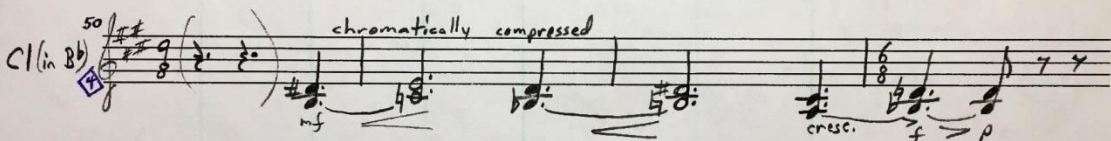
30



Cl (in Bb)

50

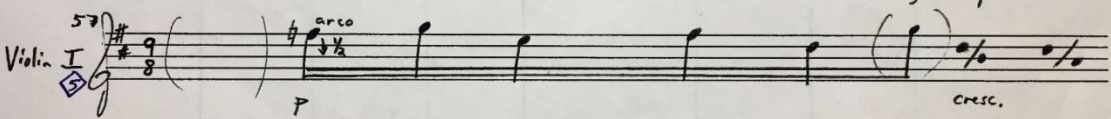
chromatically compressed



Violin I

57

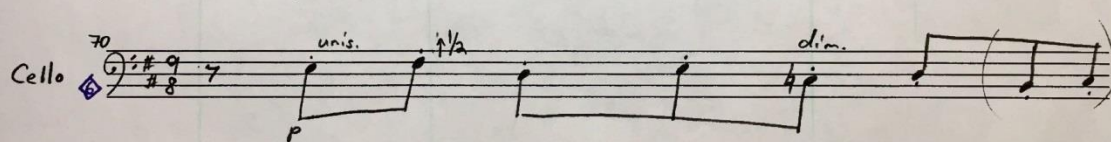
arco



Cello

70

unis.

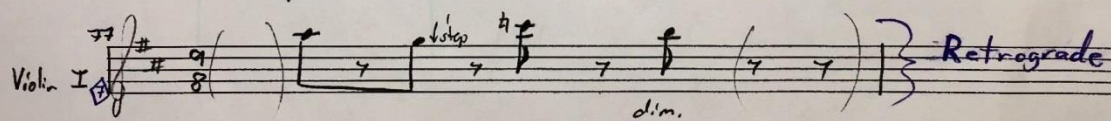


Violin I

77

dim.

Retrograde



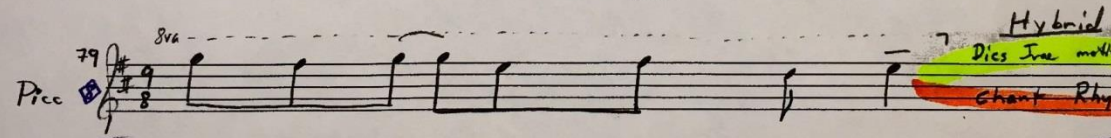
Picc

79

sva

Hybrid Dies Irae motive

chant Rhythm



Horn I & II

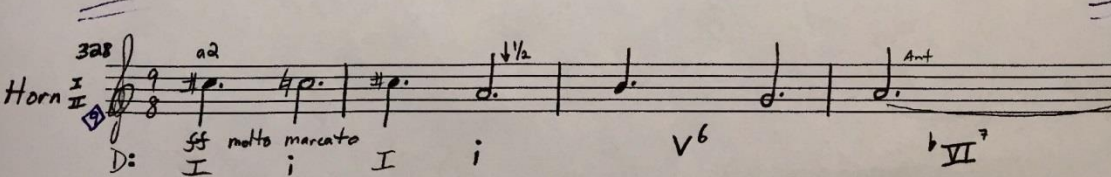
328

ff molto marcato

Ant

[PAC]

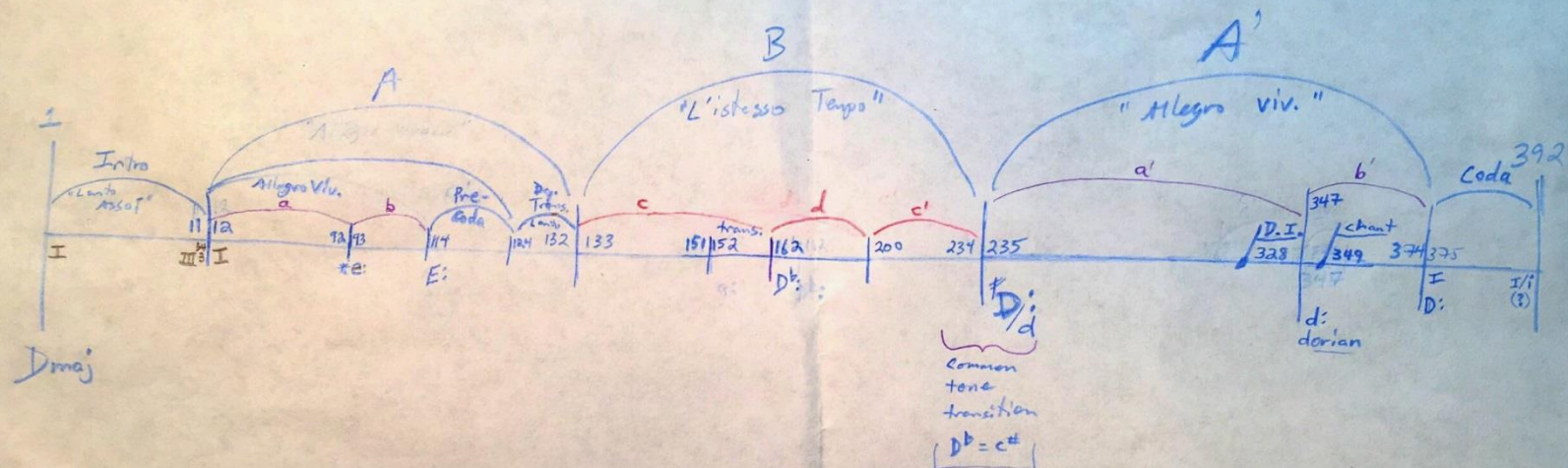
D: I i I i V6 VI7 V→I



Rachmaninoff - Symphonic Dances Op. 45, mvt. III

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Ternary Form w/ Introduction and Coda



* m. 93, church mode: e dorian

† m. 235, Dmaj / d-dorian

Bibliography

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Randel, Don M., Ed. "Russia", *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1969.

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