

PURPLE IN PATCHES

**THE MUSICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
ELENA KATS-CHEENIN AND SERGEI RACHMANINOV**

2002 HSC MUSIC 2 MUSICOLOGY ELECTIVE

**A COMPARISON OF STYLES BETWEEN THE MANDATORY TOPIC AND MUSIC
OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

**PURPLE IN PATCHES:
The Musical Relationship between Elena Kats-Chernin and
Sergei Rachmaninov**

Contemporary Australian music has often been described as a cultural melting pot, a homogeneous medley of musical movements from minimalism to death metal. A composer who embodies this almost paradoxical variety is Russian-born Elena Kats-Chernin, whose work combines all the characteristic devices of modern music with an underlying Romantic “Russian-ness”. Here, I shall attempt to trace these Russian influences in Kats-Chernin’s music – and with what better composer to do so, by comparison and contrast, than that quintessentially 19th century Russian Romantic Sergei Rachmaninov? Here we shall explore this musical relationship, and thus attempt to draw together some of the seemingly disparate musical threads of Romantic and contemporary idioms, by a comparative study of two characteristic piano works from each of the two composers, Rachmaninov’s Prelude in C Sharp Minor Op.3 No.2 and Prelude Op.23 No.5 in G minor, and Kats-Chernin’s “Russian Rag” and “Purple Prelude”, analysing the highly representative elements of melody, harmony, texture and dynamics.

Let us first, however, place these composers in their musical contexts – necessary, if we are to fully comprehend the significance of their musical affinities. Rachmaninov has often been dubbed “the last of the great Romantics”. Although he spanned the 19th and 20th centuries his work is situated adamantly in the former. The Romantic tradition was characterised by an emphasis on emotional expression and the accompanying rise of virtuosic pianism. Eloquent lyricism, rubato, frequent pedalling and dynamic contrast

were the order of the day. Rachmaninov grew up with this as his ethos, along with the influence of the “Mighty Handful” (Rimsky-Korsakov et al) who appropriated Russian folk melodies to create a new nationalistic idiom. Although Rachmaninov did not utilise folk melodies, his work is often regarded as more distinctly “Russian” because of his unique ability to convey the Russian physical and emotional landscape. Kats-Chernin, however, exhibits in her work a more eclectic range of influences, reflecting the experimental outlook of modern music, where dissonance, atonalism and chromaticism are found, in varying degrees, alongside more traditional devices.

In their approaches to composition (central to our analysis as it pervades every aspect of their work) we may perceive striking resemblances. Both place strong emphasis on emotional expression and regard music as the ideal medium for self-expression. Unlike many contemporary composers, Kats-Chernin does not consciously endeavour to work within any defined parameters, be they minimalism or post-modernism. Commenting on the Russian influences in her work, she remarks:

*“Subconsciously it’s there. Basically it’s like cooking – you put all the Russian composers in a pot... I try not to think about these things when I am writing. I like it to be streaming through the body, through the mind into the paper”.*¹

Rachmaninov’s modus operandi is conspicuously similar – he states:

¹ In an interview with Robert Davidson

“In my own compositions no conscious effort has been made to be original, Romantic, Nationalistic or anything else. When writing down my music, I try to make it say simply and directly what is in my heart when I am composing”.

This mutual reverence for the role of music on subconsciously expressing the deepest, most innately human emotions manifests itself in many parallels between their works, as we shall see.

Melody is the musical element which most simply and directly expresses human emotion and desire, so it is natural that this should be one of the most prominent features in the work of Rachmaninov and Kats-Chernin. Lyrical plaintive melodies are, in Rachmaninov’s work, the pivotal concern. Harmony serves mainly as a backdrop against which the vast pictorial contours of his melodic landscape may be placed, as seen in example 1:

Example 1. Rachmaninov, Prelude in G minor Op. 5 no. 2, Bar 35

Un poco meno mosso

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with a series of chords and moving notes, all under a single slur. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a harmonic accompaniment with a similar melodic contour, also under a slur. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The dynamics are marked 'pp' (pianissimo) at the beginning of the lower staff.

Kats-Chernin's work is rather more harmonically intricate, yet reveals Rachmaninov's influence in the treatment of melody. The broad legato phrasing and arching sonority of the "legato non virtuoso" section in "Russian Rag" is strongly reminiscent of Rachmaninov's own melodic shapes:

Example 2. Kats-Chernin, "Russian Rag", Bars 49-50



The tendency towards basing an entire piece on a single melodic nucleus is evident in Rachmaninov's C Sharp Minor Prelude and Kats-Chernin's "Purple Prelude", for example:

Example 3a) Rachmaninov, Prelude Op.3 No.2, Bars 1-4



Example 3b) Kats-Chernin, "Purple Prelude", Bars 1-3

Handwritten annotations in the score include: *mf sempre Ped. molto*, *pp*, and various fingering numbers (2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 2, 3). A *8vb* marking is present at the beginning.

Rachmaninov's bell-like motif and Kats-Chernin's sinuous, snaking theme are then expanded and developed to reach a stirring climax. We may also observe here, and in the G minor Prelude and "Russian Rag", frequent use of sequential, largely conjunct harmonic and melodic progression which aurally prepares the listener for the impassioned culmination of the composer's melodic intent. For instance, the descending four-note chromatic progression of the middle section of the C Sharp Minor Prelude, which gives an impression of undulating motion:

Example 4. Rachmaninov, Prelude Op.3 No.2, Bars 15-17

Tempo marking: *Agitato*
 Dynamics: *mf*, *simile*, *cresc.*
 Performance markings: *3* (triplets), *3* (triplets), *3* (triplets), *3* (triplets)

An exploration into the harmonic correlations between the two yields interesting results. Rachmaninov was no harmonic innovator, composing primarily within the traditional emotionally appealing modulations of the Romantic tradition (occasionally veering towards slightly more daring chromaticism). The tonic-dominant harmony of the vigorous “Alla Marcia” motif in example 5 typifies this:

Example 5. Rachmaninov, Prelude Op.23 No.5, Bars 1-3

Alla marcìa (♩ = 108)

The musical score shows three bars of music. The right hand (treble clef) plays a rhythmic motif of eighth notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a similar motif. The music is in C major and consists of three bars. The right hand starts with a piano (p) dynamic and a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The left hand starts with a piano (p) dynamic. The tempo is marked as *Alla marcìa* (♩ = 108).

Kats-Chernin will often use these traditional harmonic ideas (such as the repeated perfect cadence of the C Sharp Minor Prelude) yet subvert these by the use of added notes which bring an element of dissonance to the work. “Purple Prelude” begins with the “clean” harmony of E Flat Minor, then gradually becomes more dissonant with the addition of added notes extraneous to the chord:

Example 6. Kats-Chernin, "Purple Prelude", Bars 64-65



Here the tonic-dominant harmony of the melody has been offset by the jarring addition of a C natural in the left hand, as if Kats-Chernin has absorbed Rachmaninov's harmonic objectives and brought forth her own contemporary version.

It is minor rather than major tonality which most perfectly embodies the pathos and grandeur of nineteenth century Romanticism. Thus, it is hardly surprising that both Rachmaninov and Kats-Chernin should return passionately to their minor homelands when given the slightest opportunity. In all four works there is a predisposition towards chordal harmony with recurrent use of minor thirds and sixths. The entire first section of the Prelude Op.3 No.2 has the left hand doubling the melody a minor third above the right hand, and in both "Russian Rag" and "Purple Prelude" the melody is enhanced through the use of these chords.

Example 7. Kats-Chernin, "Russian Rag", Bars 22-28

The musical score consists of two systems of piano music. The first system, labeled '22', spans bars 22 to 25. It features a complex melodic line in the right hand with numerous accidentals and slurs, and a dense harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. A 'cresc.' marking is visible in the first system. The second system, labeled '26', spans bars 26 to 28, continuing the intricate melodic and harmonic textures.

Kats-Chernin, however, is far more inclined to complement these chords with the more complex harmonies of diminished sevenths and ninths and augmented fourths and fifths, as seen in the above example. This perhaps reflects the subconscious influences of twentieth century Impressionism.

Rachmaninov and Kats-Chernin share a love of heavy pianism, which is manifested in their treatment of texture and expressive devices. Both composers use the technique of octave doubling of the melody in the left and right hands and density of chords to create a thicker, almost orchestral texture (as may be seen in previous examples 3 and 5). These "purple patches" of Rachmaninov's consonant textures are, however, translated into a

more dissonant (and thus thicker) texture through the afore-mentioned complex harmonies of diminished and augmented chords and added notes.

Kats-Chernin also displays Rachmaninov's influence in her exploitation of the extreme registers of the piano (typically Romantic), contrasting the brilliance of the higher registers with the rich sonority of the bass. Imaginative use of dynamic contrast is also a trademark of both composers. Turbulent emotions are poured out in quadruple fortissimo and intimately whispered in pianissimo, most notably in the C Sharp Minor Prelude where the theme, initially ppp, returns in all its high-mimetic fff glory:

Example 8. Rachmaninov, Prelude Op.3 No.2, Bars 45-47

Tempo primo

The musical score for Example 8, Rachmaninov's Prelude Op. 3 No. 2, bars 45-47, is presented in a four-staff format. The top two staves are for the right hand (treble clef), and the bottom two staves are for the left hand (bass clef). The key signature is C major (one sharp, F#). The tempo is marked "Tempo primo". The dynamics are marked "ff pesante" and "sfff". The music is characterized by dense, complex chords and a thick texture. The right hand plays a series of chords with a descending line, while the left hand plays a series of chords with an ascending line. The texture is very thick and dissonant, with many notes in each chord. The dynamics are marked "ff pesante" and "sfff".

Kats-Chernin, in “Russian Rag”, displays Romantic influences in the continual contrast between *f* and *subito pp*:

Example 9. Kats-Chernin, “Russian Rag”, Bars 40-41

This dynamic contrast is used to heighten the emotional effects of the sonorous melodies and harmonies on the listener, creating depth and beauty of pianistic tone colour. This is also achieved through use of pedalling and rubato, called on (or implied) frequently by both composers to accentuate a melodic or harmonic climax, as in the “another world” section of “Russian Rag”:

Example 10. Kats-Chernin, “Russian Rag”, Bars 57-60

What may we conclude from this musical investigation? It is evident that, despite her many contemporary leanings, Kats-Chernin clearly betrays the influences of Rachmaninov in particular and the Romantic tradition in general in her treatment of melody, harmony, texture and expressive devices. In performing “Russian Rag”, this conclusion has made me far more aware of the importance of cantabile melodies and dynamic contrast in Kats-Chernin’s overall vision, and thus place more emphasis on these elements.

Though there may be many musical and personal differences between them, Kats-Chernin and this “six-and-a-half-foot scowl”² evidently belong to the same emotional landscape – a landscape where high drama and the expression of the joys and despairs of human existence have not yet become obsolete traditions. Rachmaninov’s twentieth century detractors, who saw his music as “trite” and “anachronistic”, and having no future in the contemporary world, have been proven wrong. It is possible to reconcile the musical threads of Romantic and contemporary idioms, using, as Kats-Chernin does , the former as a framework within which to develop new musical directions yet still retain the emotional power that is Romanticism’s universal prerogative.

² Stravinsky’s impression of Rachmaninov

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DISCOGRAPHY:

COMPOSER	TITLE	PERFORMER/S	LABEL NO.	TRACK
1. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op. 23 No.5	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	6
2. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op.3 No. 2	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	1
3. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op. 23 No.10	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	11
4. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op.32 No.1	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	14
5. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op.32 No.5	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	18
6. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op.32 No.10	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	23
7. Rachmaninov	Prelude Op.32 No.15	Vladimir Askenazy	Decca 443 841-2	28
8. Rachmaninov	Piano Concerto No.2	Cyril Smith with Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra Cond. by Malcolm Sargent	Dutton CLP-4004	1
9. Rachmaninov	Piano Concerto No.3	Lazar Berman with London Symphony Orchestra Claudio Abbado	EMI MYK-447	1
10. Kats-Chernin	Purple Prelude	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	1
11. Kats-Chernin	Russian Rag	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	2
12. Kats-Chernin	Sonata Lost and Found	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	4
13. Kats-Chernin	Stur in Dur	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	8
14. Kats-Chernin	Suburban Rag	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	9
15. Kats-Chernin	Schubert Blues	Lisa Moore	Tall Poppies TP-147	10

MUSIC 2 – Elective Musicology

Band 5/6

Annotation – sample 2

Title: Purple in Patches

Topic: Nineteenth Century Music

A clear and well conceived discussion that is adhered to throughout the essay. A thorough analysis is supported by relevant musical observations and score excerpts that are integrated into the essay. The candidate demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the musical concepts but is occasionally inconsistent by including unsupported or unproven statements such as on pages 4 and 7. A well structured essay supported by a relevant bibliography and discography.