

An Analysis of the Structural Characteristics and Form of Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux—With a Focus on Op.33 No.8

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Abstract: Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a renowned Russian composer, conductor, and pianist of the 20th century, and a successor to Tchaikovsky's musical legacy. His works are characterized by distinct Russian national traits and a strong sense of tragedy, while continuing the traditions of Romantic composition and performance style. His life was filled with hardships, and his compositions were deeply influenced by the social turmoil of his time. This article uses Rachmaninoff's Étude-Tableau as a starting point, with a focus on Étude-Tableau Op. 33 No. 8, to explore its creation background. Through a brief analysis of the piece's form and style, the article examines the influence of Russian society at that time on the composition of the work. By combining the social environment and musical style of the period, the article highlights the relationship between history, society, and Rachmaninoff.

1. Overview

1.1 Introduction to Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was a renowned Russian composer, conductor, and pianist of the 20th century^[1]. His works are known for their rich melodies, and he excelled in composing grand, expansive pieces. Rachmaninoff's music spans across the piano, orchestral, and vocal genres, with his piano works being the most familiar to the general public. His compositions often feature characteristics of Russian folk music, blending various musical elements.

Rachmaninoff came from a privileged background, and his mother was his first piano teacher. He began playing the piano at the age of 4 and entered the Moscow Conservatory at the age of 16, where his compositional talents began to emerge. In 1891 and 1892, he graduated with honors from both the piano and composition departments, marking the beginning of his musical career.

Initially, Rachmaninoff was widely recognized in the music world, with his works full of imagination, idealism, honesty, and vibrant energy, which earned him enthusiastic admiration. However, his creative journey was far from smooth. Due to his strong allegiance to classical traditions, he found himself in conflict with the modernist movement, which posed a challenge for

him. At one point, Rachmaninoff became troubled by criticism that his style was outdated and backward. Nevertheless, he remained true to the noble qualities of his artistic character, which included a deep loyalty to his inner voice. He believed that the sounds he heard in his heart, which allowed him to hear the world, should not be easily changed to follow contemporary trends, firmly asserting that these were not "false sounds." However, living abroad had a profound negative impact on his later compositions^[2].

In September 1917, Rachmaninoff was invited to perform in Stockholm, Sweden. That same year, the Russian October Revolution began, and he, along with his wife and daughter, took the opportunity to leave Russia. With the loss of his stable income, Rachmaninoff increased the number of performances to make ends meet, but his situation remained precarious. The political upheaval in Russia, combined with his exile, caused him to feel an intense sense of loneliness. Ultimately, he reluctantly admitted that he could not align with the direction of modern music. By this time, his position had changed. Western audiences saw him as a talented musician, but the overwhelming sense of homesickness magnified his feelings. Naturally, his later works were deeply influenced by this sense of alienation, reflecting the dissonance between his thoughts and the surrounding society. After arriving in the United States in 1918, Rachmaninoff's financial situation improved. During his time in Europe and America, the painful thoughts that had plagued him became one of the most profound themes in his compositions. Thus, while evaluating Rachmaninoff's late works, which reflect tragic psychological portrayals, we must also give attention to his early and middle-period compositions, as these works resonate with the sounds of their time, depicting the suffering of the people and their yearning for a better future.

In 1942–1943, Rachmaninoff's health declined, and he passed away on March 28, 1943, from cancer at his home in Los Angeles at the age of 70.

Rachmaninoff's representative works for piano include Piano Preludes, Etudes-Tableaux, Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Piano Concerto No. 1, and Fantaisie-Tableaux.

Rachmaninoff aimed to express the emotions of ordinary people in his compositions. He wished that most people could understand and resonate with his grand works. His music often reflects his own thoughts and sadness, frequently conveying a sense of inner loneliness and melancholy. He skillfully used lyrical expression to communicate his emotions, which imbues his works with qualities reminiscent of Tchaikovsky. His compositions were also somewhat narrow in scope, as they primarily focus on expressing his personal spiritual and emotional experiences. At the same time, they contain deeply moving and poetic imagery. The significant events of a tumultuous Russia had a profound impact on Rachmaninoff's later works. Living through the transformative period in Russia, he experienced the psychological contrast between glory and decline, which allowed his compositions to reflect the development and changes in Russian society. It is rare to find another musician like him, one who truly represents the aspirations of the democratic intellectual class in Russia during that time.

1.2 Etudes-Tableaux

Etudes-Tableaux is a distinctive genre, emerging from the 19th-century European Romantic movement known as the "program music movement," which sought to depict specific images or scenes through music^[3]. Rachmaninoff's favored piano style of Etudes is closely related to that of Chopin, and Chopin's innovations in the etude genre had a significant influence. In the 1830s, the piano became the center of social attention, marking a flourishing period for the instrument. During this time, the etude's role evolved from a "practice piece" to "highly technical concert works often performed in concerts." Renowned pianists of the time created and performed concert etudes, making it a popular trend in the music world. Unlike Chopin or Liszt's concert etudes,

Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux did not have specific titles but allowed performers to imagine the emotions and images the works sought to convey.

Etudes-Tableaux blends technical skill with musicality, capturing the essence of Romantic music while encouraging exploration of the deeper meanings behind the pieces.

Rachmaninoff composed the first set of Etudes-Tableaux (Op. 33) in 1911 while staying in Ivanovka, a picturesque area that inspired much of his creativity. He worked quickly, completing the entire set in just a month, sometimes composing a piece in a single day. The idyllic environment of Ivanovka significantly influenced the content of the works, providing inspiration for much of their imagery. Through these pieces, listeners can imagine the beautiful landscapes of central Russia alongside the performer.

The Etudes-Tableaux consist of vivid, profound, and visually evocative piano pieces. The reason these works are titled Etudes-Tableaux is due to their inherent pictorial qualities. The titles themselves give the music a more specific and visual context. Unlike Liszt's concert etudes, which emphasize virtuosic piano techniques, Rachmaninoff focused more on creating beautiful, evocative imagery, with less emphasis on technical display.

Rachmaninoff never officially provided titles for his Etudes-Tableaux; many of the titles we know today come from his personal correspondence. The conceptual inspiration for most of the works is drawn from nature, which played a large role in his life. Despite living in cities for most of his life, Rachmaninoff had a deep longing for nature. He wished to return to his birthplace and roam across endless plains, free from constraints and embracing the natural world. He had a delicate and keen sensitivity to nature, especially the poetic landscapes of Russia. His music often describes the powerful spring floods in Russia, the oppressive heat of summer, and the howling winter snowstorms. Rather than simply writing about these scenes, Rachmaninoff was more adept at conveying the emotions that these natural images evoked. He aimed to express these emotions fully, allowing the listener to visualize the same images he had in mind. These qualities highlight Rachmaninoff's unique approach to the etude genre, setting his Etudes-Tableaux apart from those of other composers. Their beauty, combined with their close ties to painting, makes the title Etudes-Tableaux particularly fitting and gives the works a unique character.

As one of Rachmaninoff's representative works from his mature compositional period, Etudes-Tableaux (Op. 33 and Op. 39) employs a variety of tonalities, most of which are in minor keys. These works are characterized by a relatively somber tone that resonates with the societal atmosphere of the time while also reflecting Rachmaninoff's consistent compositional style. Each piece features changes in rhythm, altering the flow of the music and enriching its sonic texture. Additionally, there are significant dynamic variations throughout each piece, along with a wide range of pitches. The use of harmony is also diverse, creating numerous musical images and providing the listener with ample space for imagination. The innovative formal techniques used in these works endow each piece with its unique personality and emphasize the pictorial nature of the compositions.

2. Etudes-Tableaux — A Case Study of Op. 33 No. 8

2.1 The Background of Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8

The piano originated in Europe, and by the early 19th century during the Romantic music period, many Western European pianists, including great masters like Liszt, visited Russia to give lessons. This facilitated greater exchange between Russian musicians and the West, allowing Russian composers to learn from and emulate Western music. Rachmaninoff was one of the outstanding representatives of Russian music during this period. His virtuoso pianism garnered recognition in

international competitions and performances, and the Russian piano school he belonged to was adept at combining technical prowess with emotional depth. The Russian piano school emphasized the importance of touch and expression, believing that the piano should convey singing tones and sensitive emotional nuances. It also highlighted the close connection between technique, the intellect, and auditory perception, arguing that mechanical practice was insufficient. Compared to the classical period's traditional use of scales or broken chords, the Russian school's etudes placed more emphasis on artistic expression, and a strong national style became a hallmark of Russian piano music.

In 19th-century Russia, the nobility held political power and controlled vast land resources. Under the feudal serfdom system, peasants suffered political oppression and were economically dependent on the landowners. The sheer number of peasants laid the foundation for the further development of capitalism. Gradually, capitalist methods replaced the natural economy, and the market economy began to thrive. By the early 1880s, Russia had completed its industrial revolution, emerging as a major industrial power, following England, France, and the United States. However, Russia still maintained an autocratic system, with little concrete reform. Initially, Rachmaninoff chose to remain in Russia, continuing his role as conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic. However, due to the escalating threat of war, like many aristocratic artists, he was forced to leave his homeland and began his life in exile.

During this period, Russia was transitioning from old to new, with the development of capitalism bringing hope to the people, who dreamed of a new life and progress. Meanwhile, the nobility nostalgically looked back on their past privileges. This shift in the era deeply affected every individual in society, and it also left a significant mark on the works of artists.

Rachmaninoff's creative output is typically divided into three periods: the early period (1891–1900), during which he displayed an extraordinary compositional talent while studying at the Conservatory; the middle period (1900–1917), when he experienced the failure of his First Symphony and, after adjusting his mindset, began composing again, including works like Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8 which represents his matured compositional style; and the late period (1917–1943), during which Rachmaninoff, now living in exile, was consumed with longing for his homeland^[4]. This deep sense of homesickness profoundly influenced many of his later compositions. In this article, we will focus on Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8 to explore how the social and religious climate of the time impacted Rachmaninoff's music.

2.2 Analysis of Harmonic Effects and Formal Characteristics



Figure 1 The piece is in G minor, with a moderate tempo and melody has a lyrical

Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33 No. 8 adopts a contrasting ternary (ABA) structure. As seen in Figure 1, the piece is in G minor, with a moderate tempo. The melody has a lyrical, song-like quality, and the accompaniment consists of broken chords (Figure 1). These characteristics reveal that this is a

typical *melodie sans paroles* (song without words). The broken chords in the accompaniment sometimes appear independently and sometimes closely intertwine with the melody. The alternating use of both hands creates an integrated texture that blends the melodic and accompanimental elements.

The theme features a descending melodic line, with a particularly noticeable downward second interval. Coupled with the broken chord accompaniment in the left hand, this creates a sense of sorrow, reflecting the composer's melancholy state of mind. The melodic treatment is highly effective, evoking a vivid image for the listener while maintaining a romantic atmosphere.

The accompanying voice has a wave-like motion that is fitting for the emotional atmosphere of the piece. The use of broken chords imbues the work with a sense of constant movement, as if it is flowing without interruption, enhancing the emotional depth of the composition. This fluidity of accompaniment adds to the overall impression of the piece, further emphasizing the emotional weight and the lingering sadness conveyed through the music.



Figure 2 Measure 21 employs a 2/4 time signature

Figure 2 shows that in measure 21, the piece employs a 2/4 time signature, introducing a mixed meter. There is a significant variation in dynamic range, and the performer needs to manage the strong contrast created by these dynamic differences. The ending of the piece is dramatic (Figure 2)^[5].



Figure 3 The hands alternate playing, with a 32nd note rhythm creating a sense of urgency.



Figure 4 The tempo slows down and the dynamics soften, preparing for the return to the original tempo.

Of course, Figure 3 and Figure 4 shows that before the return of the theme, the thirty-second note rhythm in the score is tightly compact, played consecutively by both hands. The melody intertwines the rhythm of the right and left hands in a regular, driving manner, propelling the entire piece toward its climax (Figure 3). This creates a tense atmosphere, which is suddenly interrupted by a pause. Then, as the recapitulation arrives, the piece regains the peaceful and distant feeling of the previous *melodie sans paroles* (Figure 4).

2.3 The Influence of the Period on Op.33 No.8

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia was experiencing a period of transition^[6]. The country was undergoing significant social and political changes, and this turbulent time greatly influenced Rachmaninoff's music. Living in a time of national upheaval, Rachmaninoff was filled with anxiety and helplessness about his country's future. He expressed these feelings through his music, using the style of the *melodie sans paroles* to convey his emotional distress. The piece is imbued with a deep sense of Romantic nationalism and lyricism. As the music flows, it reflects Rachmaninoff's longing for a better world and invites the listener into a new realm of aspiration^[7].

2.4 The Impact of Romanticism on Rachmaninoff's Composition

The rise of Romanticism in Western music during the 19th century marked a major shift in musical style, focusing on the expression of individual emotion and the exploration of personal experiences. This period saw composers break away from the structured norms of the Classical and Baroque eras, bringing forth more open, bold, and emotionally driven works. Romantic music also saw the blending of sacred and secular themes, with composers like Beethoven, Rossini, Schumann, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky pushing the boundaries of musical expression.

Rachmaninoff, influenced by the Romantic tradition, integrated elements of Russian folk music and lyrical expression in his compositions. He was profoundly influenced by Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Chopin, while also borrowing from Liszt's rich sound world. His works often explore the grandeur of Russian nature and the nation's cultural heritage, expressing a deep sense of patriotism and a longing for the idealized beauty of Russia. This fusion of national sentiment with sophisticated technique created music that was deeply expressive and resonant with the Russian spirit.

Rachmaninoff's compositions reflect his Russian roots and his struggle to balance personal emotions with broader cultural themes. Through his use of lush melodies, sweeping harmonies, and virtuoso piano techniques, he conveys a powerful emotional range, from longing and sorrow to strength and resilience, which speaks to the enduring Russian spirit.

Among the many musicians in Russia, Rachmaninoff's works have a strong Russian national character, with tragic elements that are particularly evident. He inherited the Romantic tradition of composition and performance, and his musical melodies have unique characteristics that leave a deep impression on listeners. Rachmaninoff holds a special place in music history, and his influence in the music world has persisted to this day. While many composers focused on creating modern music, he consistently adhered to the Romantic style of composition^[8]. Within the constraints of traditional techniques, he maintained a commitment to creating rich variations. Rachmaninoff's works clearly reflect Russian national cultural traits, and this cultural influence has had a profound impact on other composers. However, it is precisely this dedication expressed in his works that has allowed Rachmaninoff to stand the test of time and remain remembered in the world of music for centuries.

3. Conclusion

As one of Russia's outstanding musicians, Rachmaninoff was always able to depict the beauty of his homeland through his works, constantly reflecting his deep love for his country. At the same time, his works are also filled with his personal characteristics. *Étude-Tableau Op. 33 No. 8* was composed during the middle period of his creative career, and this piece shows Rachmaninoff's distinct personal style. In the work, listeners can feel the sorrow he felt for his homeland, while the melodic accompaniment and the lyrical nature of the entire piece reflect the characteristics of late Romantic music.

This article introduces the social and religious background of the creation of *Étude-Tableau Op. 33 No. 8*, and analyzes the structure, emotional expression, and the relationship between the work and its era and religion. The piece adopts an ABA ternary form, and the broken chord figures that continue until the end enhance the atmosphere, allowing the sorrowful emotions to be conveyed throughout the work.

Through studying and analyzing this piece, I have gained a deeper understanding of Rachmaninoff's relationship with his era and religion, and I have come to realize that a great piece of music is closely connected to the development of society. To truly understand and learn a piece of music, it is not only important to play the notes but also to understand the story behind the work.

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