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Rachmaninoff and France: 1920–30s

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Abstract. As a concert pianist, Rachmaninoff performed in France notably less frequently than in many other countries. The reasons for this are of undoubted interest for historical and biographical research. The attitude of Parisians towards his creative personality was ambiguous: while enthusiastic reviews of their compatriot's concerts regularly appeared in the Russian émigré press, French-language critics paid him much less attention.

The lyrical and dramatic line of Russian music (Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff) did not find a favourable response among Parisians. And although Rachmaninoff's phenomenal skill and powerful artistic individuality remained beyond doubt, the stereotypes of French perception in the 1920s and 1930s were clearly evident in the published descriptions of his appearance and playing. However, Rachmaninoff's interpretations of famous and beloved works frequently provoked strong protests: in particular, critics noted the "rationality" and "dryness" in the performance of romantic music. The discussion about the performance style of Rachmaninoff's late years continues to this day. The general impression is formed that Rachmaninoff was not attracted by the noisy and "bustling" atmosphere of Parisian life and the exaggerated recourse to extra-musical criteria for evaluating and perceiving his work as reflected in the press reviews.

Keywords: Rachmaninoff the pianist, Russian music, France, Parisian press, Russian emigration, Russian émigré press

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*История музыки
в письмах и документах*

Научная статья

**С. В. Рахманинов и Франция:
1920–1930-е годы**

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Аннотация. Рахманинов-пианист выступал во Франции гораздо реже, чем во многих других странах. Причины этого представляют несомненный интерес для историко-биографического исследования. Отношение парижан к его творческой личности отличалось неоднозначностью. Русские эмигрантские издания регулярно публиковали восторженные отклики на концерты соотечественника, в то время как франкоязычная пресса уделяла ему несравненно меньше внимания, многое не принимая в его искусстве. Лирико-драматическая линия русской музыки (П. И. Чайковский и Рахманинов) явно не нашла достойного отклика у парижан. Стереотипы французского восприятия в 1920–1930-е годы ярко проявились в газетных описаниях внешности и игры Рахманинова, при этом вне сомнений оставались его феноменальное мастерство и мощная артистическая индивидуальность.

Однако рахманиновские трактовки известных и любимых произведений часто вызывали решительные протесты: критики отмечали «рациональность» и «сухость» в исполнении романтической музыки. Дискуссия об исполнительской манере позднего Рахманинова продолжается и в наше время. Итогом всех наблюдений становится вывод о том, что Рахманинова не привлекала шумная и «суетная» атмосфера парижской жизни и отраженное в отзывах прессы преувеличение внемузыкальных критериев оценки и восприятия его творчества.

Ключевые слова: Рахманинов-пианист, русская музыка, Франция, парижская пресса, русская эмиграция, русские эмигрантские издания

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Introduction

The tours of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff generally left a noticeable mark on the musical life of those cities and countries where he performed. The press and public reactions to these performances provide expressive evidence of the public perceptions not only of Rachmaninoff's own art, but of Russian music in general. These responses also provide the opportunity to evaluate many features of the artist's performing style and creative evolution. Moreover, the reactions to Rachmaninoff's concerts in the various countries in which he performed had their own specifics that reflect the characteristics of the national mentality. In earlier works, the present author considered the reception of Rachmaninoff's creative personality in the USA and Britain [1; 2]. The present article is a continuation of the same line of research using material relating to a different country.

Rachmaninoff's creative contacts with France are marked by an obvious paradox: on the one hand, they are marked by unconditional success and the enthusiastic love of listeners (especially Russian emigrants), while on the other hand, they bear testament to the very modest position that France occupied in the concert schedule of the famous musician. This paradox was first noted by Stuart Campbell in his 2021 article *The Russian Paris of Sergei Rachmaninoff* [3]. Continuing Campbell's observations, it is interesting to examine this contradiction in more detail.

Rachmaninoff: The Case of France

In fact, Rachmaninoff did not frequently give concert tours in France. His European tour during the years of emigration (after moving to the USA) began in 1924 with a performance in England (in Bournemouth on 2 October 1924). He was clearly in no hurry to play in Paris: his first solo concert there took place on 2nd December 1928. According to the author of the article, from 1928 to 1939 he gave 17 concerts in the country, 13 of which were in Paris (including 11 solo and two with an orchestra) and four in other cities: in Strasbourg (13 February 1936), in Nice (22 February 1938), in Cannes (20 and 22 February 1938).

These figures, of course, are not comparable with the number of performances in the USA, where he gave dozens of concerts a year. However, even compared with his European schedule, Rachmaninoff was apparently more willing to perform in other countries than France. From 1924 to 1938, he toured most frequently in England: during this period, he gave 88 performances, of which 22 were in London. To begin with, Germany and Austria occupy a prominent place in the musician's touring "geography." However, after the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933 and their influence in Austria increased, Rachmaninoff avoided visiting these countries.

Rachmaninoff the pianist was invariably warmly received by the Parisian public, the overwhelming majority of whom were Russian émigrés. Their attitude towards Rachmaninoff was determined not only by the powerful influence of his art, but also by the generous assistance he provided to his compatriots. His charitable activities in France in our time have been adequately reflected in special studies.¹ It was in France that the composer's 60th birthday was celebrated in 1933 with particular scope and emotional intensity. Congratulatory letters were published in Russian Parisian newspapers (such as *Rossiia i slavyanstvo* [*Russia and Slavdom*], *Poslednie Novosti* [*Les Dernières Nouvelles*]), and on 7 May 1933, a celebration of the anniversary took place in the hall of the "Hearth of Russian Music."²

¹ Zvereva, S. G. (2008). Blagotvoritel'naya deyatel'nost' Sergeya Rakhmaninova v otnoshenii Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Tserkvi [Sergei Rachmaninoff's Charitable Activity for the Russian Orthodox Church]. In S. V. Rakhmaninov — natsional'naya pamyat' Rossii [Sergei Rachmaninoff: The National Memory of Russia]: Proceedings of the Fourth International Scientific-Practical Conference. May 26–28, 2008 (pp. 23–33). Museum-estate of Sergei Rachmaninoff "Ivanovka," Publishing House "Rachmaninov Tambov State Musical Pedagogical Institute." (In Russ.); Kuznetsova, E. M. (2014). S. Rachmaninoff's Charity in Exile: Touches to the Portrait of the Composer. *Journal of Moscow Conservatory*, 5(2), 203–214. (In Russ.); Reesor, K. A. (2023). Rakhmaninov kak russkij emigrant: chelovek, muzyka, retseptsiya, 1918–1940 [Rachmaninoff as Russian Émigré: Man, Music, and Reception, 1918–1943]. In V. B. Val'kova (Ed.), *Prinoshenie S. V. Rakhmaninovu. K 150-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya. Issledovaniya raznykh let* [Tribute to Sergei Rachmaninoff. To the 150th Anniversary of His Birth. Studies of Different Years] (pp. 355–364). Publishing House "Gnesin Russian Academy of Music." (In Russ.).

² The music club *Ochag russkoj muzyki* (*The Hearth of Russian Music*) was established in 1933 to support the daily needs of Russian musical figures located in Paris. *The Russian*

The celebration was preceded by a hugely successful charity concert on 5 March in the Salle Pleyel, the entire proceeds from which, according to newspaper advertisements, were donated “to help and support Russian emigrants in need, including young emigrant students.”³

As a private individual, Rachmaninoff often visited Paris, with which he had many connections. For one thing, both of his daughters settled there; for another, it was convenient for him to maintain business relations with the *Éditions Russes de Musique*. In Paris he opened, by his own definition, a “publishing business” under the name *TAIR*, combining the names of his daughters Tatyana and Irina. From 1925 to 1932, the Rachmaninoffs spent every summer in France — in Nice, in Cannes, in Villers-sur-Mer, as well as in the picturesque outskirts of Paris in rented country houses in Corbeville and Clairefontaine, where numerous relatives from Paris and Dresden gathered. From these suburbs it was convenient to visit Paris for business meetings, as well as to attend the various artistic events for which the French capital was famous. However, judging by the composer’s letters, life near Paris had less attractive aspects for him. He was rarely delighted with visiting theatres and concerts and often complained about the “dissipated way of life” of his daughters, into which he was involuntarily drawn, as well as the noise and bustle of Paris, where he had to go often:

My life in Paris, where I have been for a week now, is very tiring, as usual. I spend a lot of time “sitting in public.” I talk a lot, don’t get enough sleep, and played a lot before the concert — as a result, I feel more tired and weak. [...]

Musical Society and the Conservatory also operated within the auspices of the club, sharing the costs of renting the premises with *Ochag* (announcement of the opening of *Ochag* was published in the Russian language newspaper *Vozrozhdenie (Renaissance)* on 25 April 1933, issue 8, No. 2884).

³ (1933, May 2). *Poslednie Novosti [Les Dernières Nouvelles]*, 4423. From here on all quotes from the Parisian press are given from newspaper clippings collected by Sofia Alexandrovna Satina and donated by her to the Library of Congress of the USA. Photocopies of some of them were given by Satina to the Russian National Museum of Music in Moscow, where they are now kept (*RNMM [Russian National Museum of Music]*. F. 18. Nos. 624, 1566–1571 and others). Some of the newspaper articles used in this article were provided to the author by Keenan Reesor from his personal collection. All translations from French are done by the author of the article.

In the morning and afternoon by car in search of a dacha (*Pavillon* sold) or even the purchase of a dacha; then breakfast, lunch, mostly in restaurants, some theatre and finally a night cabaret, which I refuse, but the children are present.⁴

It would seem that the sincere and ardent love of Russian Paris for Rachmaninoff was enough for him to perform more often and more willingly in the French capital. As Campbell rightly notes, “until the German occupation of the city in 1940, Paris’s status as the capital of *Russia Abroad* was beyond competition” [3, p. 76]. It is also certain that Paris remained one of the largest centres of artistic and musical life in Europe during the interwar decade, and as such was very attractive to touring virtuosos.

By the time Rachmaninoff began to visit Paris regularly (since 1925), musical life there was largely determined by the initiatives of people from Russia — Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky, Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev, Pyotr Petrovich Souvchinsky and others. The same circle also included the French, members of the *Les Six* that had disintegrated by that time (Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Germain Tailleferre), and creative contacts with artists from Soviet Russia were also a constant throughout the 1920s. Although many more famous names and bright events could be adduced, this would take up too much space. It is important to note that the attitude of emigrants towards guests from the USSR was sometimes contradictory, but also very curious. It is significant that one of the most influential Parisian figures, Diaghilev, “who kept his finger on the pulse of Soviet cultural life...” [4, p. 149], paid attention to their work.

Although this diversity of the new Russian Paris could not help but touch and excite Rachmaninoff, he clearly kept it at the periphery of his attention. His preference for keeping a comfortable distance from it can be seen in his very reserved responses to the artistic events of the *City of Lights*. However, this restraint, to varying degrees, also distinguished the positions of the older generation of emigrants — Konstantin Balmont, Ivan Bunin, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Nikolai Medtner and many others.

⁴ Pis'mo k E. K. i E. I. Somovym ot 20 marta 1932 [Letter to E. K. and E. I. Somov dated 20th March 1932]. (2023). In Z. A. Apetyan (Ed.), *S. V. Rakhmaninov. Literaturnoe nasledie* [S. V. Rachmaninoff. Literary Heritage]. (2nd ed.). (3 Vols., Vol. 2). Muzyka, pp. 297–298.

Rachmaninoff's isolation from the circle of arbiters of Parisian musical fashion is especially noticeable in comparison with the jealous interest in it of the young Prokofiev (see [4, pp. 146–163]), whose emigrant routes in the 1920s often intersected with Rachmaninoff's.

Parisian Disappointments

Although, contrary to Campbell's assertion, the French-language press did not create a "vacuum" around Rachmaninoff's performances, it must be acknowledged that his personality and activities received incomparably less attention than in Russian-language émigré publications. The different tone of the articles by French journalists is also very noticeable. Their judgments seem to have largely been determined by the taste preferences that had developed among the Parisians by that time, in which the music for which Rachmaninoff was famous already did not occupy a prominent place.

The markedly selective attitude towards Russian music was already evident during Rachmaninoff's first performance in Paris in 1907. Then, in the final concerts of Diaghilev's Russian season on the 13 and 26 of May, Rachmaninoff performed his *Second Piano Concerto* and conducted the *Spring cantata* (the soloist was Chaliapin). Although the performance was a success with the public, it could not compete with the enthusiasm with which Parisians received the works of composers of the St. Petersburg school — first and foremost Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov and Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky. The Parisian musicians also showed a complex attitude towards the music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, whose overture-fantasy *Francesca da Rimini* was performed at the same time. In his report on these events Nikolai Dmitrievich Kashkin quotes Rachmaninoff himself:

What is perhaps most interesting to us is the relative hostility, or at least dislike, with which Parisians treat Tchaikovsky's works. [...] However, *Francesca da Rimini*, which was performed under the direction of Mr. Nikisch, had a very great success, but rather among the public than among Parisian musicians, for even the orchestra performers at the rehearsal simply laughed at this composition [...]

A scene from the third act of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* had a great success [...] The greatest honours fell to the lot of Rimsky-Korsakov...⁵

Rachmaninoff, as Kashkin reports, spoke of his performance with disappointment, admitting that he was “not particularly pleased with the orchestra of the *Lamoureux Concert Society*, which had the main task of performing.”⁶ It is obvious that at that time the work of the “Moscow lyricists,” as Boris Vladimirovich Asafyev called them, did not find the proper response. Later, these principles were reinforced and strengthened by the success of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, which presented Paris with a different, exotically colourful wing of Russian music.

The rebellious statements of the *Les Six* composers, who protested in the early 1920s not only against “German profundity” and impressionist “fogginess,” but also against “Russian influences,” also left their mark on French culture. Jean-Marie Charton, a researcher of Rachmaninoff's work, explained these features of artistic mentality with reference to the book of the French historian of Russian music Michel-Rostislav Hofmann: “La musique russe, c'est pour nous trop souvent des décors éclatants, des costumes féériques, des danseurs bondissants, une orgie de lumières... L'attrait de l'exotique!.. Nous faisons à cette musique une fausse place dans nos émotions”⁷ (Cit. ex: [5, p. 60]).

Thus, the characteristics of national artistic taste, which had by the end of the 1920s been fully defined and were to persist for a long time, included attention to bright colours, external characteristic images, and sensitivity to visual associations in music.

The Parisians' dislike of a certain branch of Russian music had apparently become a kind of ingrained stereotype. It is no coincidence that Prokofiev, always sensitive to musical rumours, wrote in his diary on 27th July 1925:

⁵ Kashkin, N. D. (1907, May 24). Russkie kontserty v Parizhe. (Beseda s S. V. Rakhmaninovym) [Russian concerts in Paris. (Conversation with S. V. Rachmaninoff)]. *Russkoe slovo* [Russian Word], 118, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hofmann, M.-R. (1946). *Un siècle d'opéra russe: (de Glinka à Stravinsky)*. Corrêa, p. 9.

“...Rachmaninoff gave his daughter in marriage to the Most Serene Prince Volkonsky, and since the prince is studying painting in Paris, he decided to spend the summer in hated France, hated because they laugh at his music here.”⁸ Let us note, by the way, that the caustic tone in this case does not contradict the sincere respect and even tender affection in Prokofiev towards his peer. He left another testimony in his diary:

1926. [...] 28 January. [...] Today Koussevitzky rehearsed Scriabin's 3rd Symphony. I do not understand why modern Paris, led by Stravinsky and Diaghilev, scolds Scriabin, considering the passion for him to be a marker of bad taste.⁹

To this observation we can add the obvious indifference with which Parisian musicians treated Medtner's performance — he gave two concerts of his own compositions in Meudon (3 November 1927) and in Paris (19 November of the same year in the Salle Érard). The composer's wife, Anna Mikhailovna Medtner, wrote about her disappointment with these concerts in a letter to Sergei Vasilyevich and Natalia Alexandrovna Rachmaninoff on 26 November 1927:

Despite the fact that both evenings were very successful and there were many conversations with compliments, Kolya was left with the feeling that it was not worth wasting so much time on this [...] Kolya's mood became very sad.¹⁰

The cool attitude of the Parisians towards Medtner's art is offset by the enthusiastic reception he received during his tour in England in February and November 1928,¹¹ not to mention the solemn celebration in Moscow in 1927.¹²

⁸ Prokofiev, S. S. (2002). *Diary. 1907–1933*. (3 Vols., Vol. 2). sprkfv, p. 345.

⁹ Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁰ Apetyan, Z. A. (Ed.). (1973). *Medtner N. K. Letters*. Sovetskij kompozitor, pp. 366–367.

¹¹ After the performance in London on February 6, 1928, Medtner wrote to his brother: “The concert was brilliant in all respects. Such a reception and success generally only happens in Russia”. Ibid., p. 373–374.

¹² Anna Medtner reported about the concert on 18th February in Moscow in a letter to Rachmaninoff: “There was a lot of noise. <...> they arranged a ‘celebration’ for him and read a greeting, very touching...” [Ibid., p. 361].

As we can see, Russian music by composers of the Moscow school did not take up a central position in terms of the interests of the Parisian public, at least not its most authoritative and “advanced” part, which Prokofiev defined as “modern Paris, headed by Stravinsky and Diaghilev.” There is reason to believe that this state of affairs, which had developed by the end of the 1920s, remained relevant in the following decade.

Rachmaninoff was also familiar with the disappointment after his Parisian performances. On 16 March 1932, he wrote to Elena Konstantinovna and Yevgeny Ivanovich Somov:

Overall, my concert was a success. Takings — 93 thousand (short of ten). [...] Only the most important thing is missing. I played *badly* and suffered greatly for the first two days after the concert. Now the sharpness has passed. [...] I can also add to my concert that I have not had such a cold audience as this time in Paris for a long time, and they coughed so much and loudly. It was a torment to play.¹³

Here, it is difficult to determine what was the cause and what was the effect — the coldness of the audience or the artist’s own state of health during the concert. However, Rachmaninoff was not the only one who was dissatisfied with his performances. After an earlier concert on 1 December 1929, Prokofiev wrote in his diary:

In the evening of the same day — [there was] Rachmaninoff’s concert, very grand, we paid three hundred francs for two tickets. A few days earlier, I met Rachmaninoff at the publishing house. He came in with his younger daughter, hunched over: his back was out. Old, lethargic. I tried to be friendlier. He was quite willing to converse... During the concert he wasn’t in good shape either, played worse than last year. I still wanted to go backstage to shake his hand, but when he ended with his new paraphrase of some vulgarity by Kreisler (and the paraphrase itself was mediocre), I became so furious that I didn’t go backstage. How can a man who makes such an impression on the audience dare to present such rubbish?¹⁴

¹³ Pis'mo k E. K. i E. I. Somovym ot 20 marta 1932 [Letter to E. K. and E. I. Somov dated 20 March 1932]. (2023). In Z. A. Apetyan (Ed.), *S. V. Rakhmaninov. Literaturnoe nasledie* [*S. V. Rachmaninoff. Literary Heritage*]. (2nd ed.). (3 Vols., Vol. 2). Muzyka, pp. 197–198.

¹⁴ Prokofiev, S. S. (2002). *Diary. 1907–1933*. (Vol. 2). sprkfv, p. 738.

It is quite possible that the same representatives of “modern Paris” sometimes shared this opinion.

When considering evaluations of Rachmaninoff’s work as a composer during his French tours, the picture was also ambiguous, being shaped by the specifics of the concert life, in which Rachmaninoff’s own compositions occupied a rather modest place. It is significant that the composer did not often give the French public a reason to express their attitude towards his music. He performed his own major works in Paris only a few times. The Paris premieres of his new works were as follows: On 27 November 1930 he played the *Fourth Piano Concerto*; on 5 February 1936 *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (the poem *The Bells* was performed at the same concert); on 16 March 1932 *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*. And while individual pieces performed in solo concerts invariably received positive reviews, they were still overshadowed by more famous and popular pieces, including scherzos, nocturnes, ballads, sonatas by Chopin, works by Liszt and others.

Rachmaninoff’s *Second* and *Third Piano Concertos*, which had already become public favourites in various countries by that time, were also familiar to Parisians but not in the author’s performance. Thus, according to reports from Russian newspapers, in the 1932–1933 season, the *Second Concerto* was performed by Arthur Rubinstein and Marcel Gazelle with Charles Lamoureux’s orchestra; in the following season, it was performed twice — in symphonic concerts by Gaston Poulet, with Nikolai Andreevich Orlov and Marie Chassin as soloists.¹⁵ On 16 November 1932, Vladimir Horowitz performed the *Third Concerto* with the Paris Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Alfred Cortot.¹⁶ So far, it has not been possible to find any responses to these events in French-language newspapers. It can be inferred that the reaction to them in France was rather muted.

¹⁵ The name of the pianist Marie Chassin is mentioned in the article: Lolliy, L. (1934, March). Rachmaninoff. *Rossiya i slavyanstvo* [*Russia and Slavdom*]. However, no information could be found about her.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Charton gives a cursory review of newspaper reviews of the concerts (unfortunately, without references to sources) and notes that many critics, “en louant de virtuose, on égratigne le compositeur” [5, p. 83]. Their conclusion is: “Et si l’on condescend à accepter son classicisme, on n’oublie pas de sourire de ca ‘biensonance’, insinuant que le temps de la musique agréable à l’oreille fait terriblement démodé” [5, p. 83].

The Legendary Prelude

It is probably safe to say that Rachmaninoff’s reputation as a composer in France, more than anywhere else, was determined by the incredible popularity of his *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, which became a kind of obsession, even a morbid passion for many music lovers. The critics did not miss the opportunity to emphasise this with ironic comments. Emile Vuillermoz (a famous musicologist, author of books about Claude Debussy and Gabriel Fauré) wrote in a note about Rachmaninoff the pianist’s first performance in Paris:

C’est que ce Prélude tient dans la culture musicale européenne une place démesurée. Chez nous, le Français moyen l’entend chaque soir au cinéma dans les instants tragiques et, dès son réveil, ce sont ses graves accords qui traversent les murs de son appartement par le soins de tous les pianistes de son immeuble.¹⁷ (See *Illustration 1*)

Another critic, composer René Doire, began his newspaper report thus: “Le célèbre Rahmaninoff, l’auteur du fameux Prélude que les Jowers, à l’Empire, jouent aussi irrespectueusement que savoureusement sur l’accordéon, a mis en mouvement toute la Russie parisienne: donc salle comble et splendide.”¹⁸

It is possible that this is precisely the reaction to Rachmaninoff’s music that Prokofiev had in mind in the already cited statement from his diary.

¹⁷ Vuillermoz, E. (n. d.). Le Concert Rachmaninoff. [Unknown newspaper]. Copy from the private collection of Keenan A. Reesor. Here, we are talking about one of two Sunday concerts: either 2 December 1928 or 1 December 1929. (See *Illustration 1*).

¹⁸ Doire, R. (1930, November 29). [Rachmaninoff’s Concert of November 22, 1930]. *Record*.

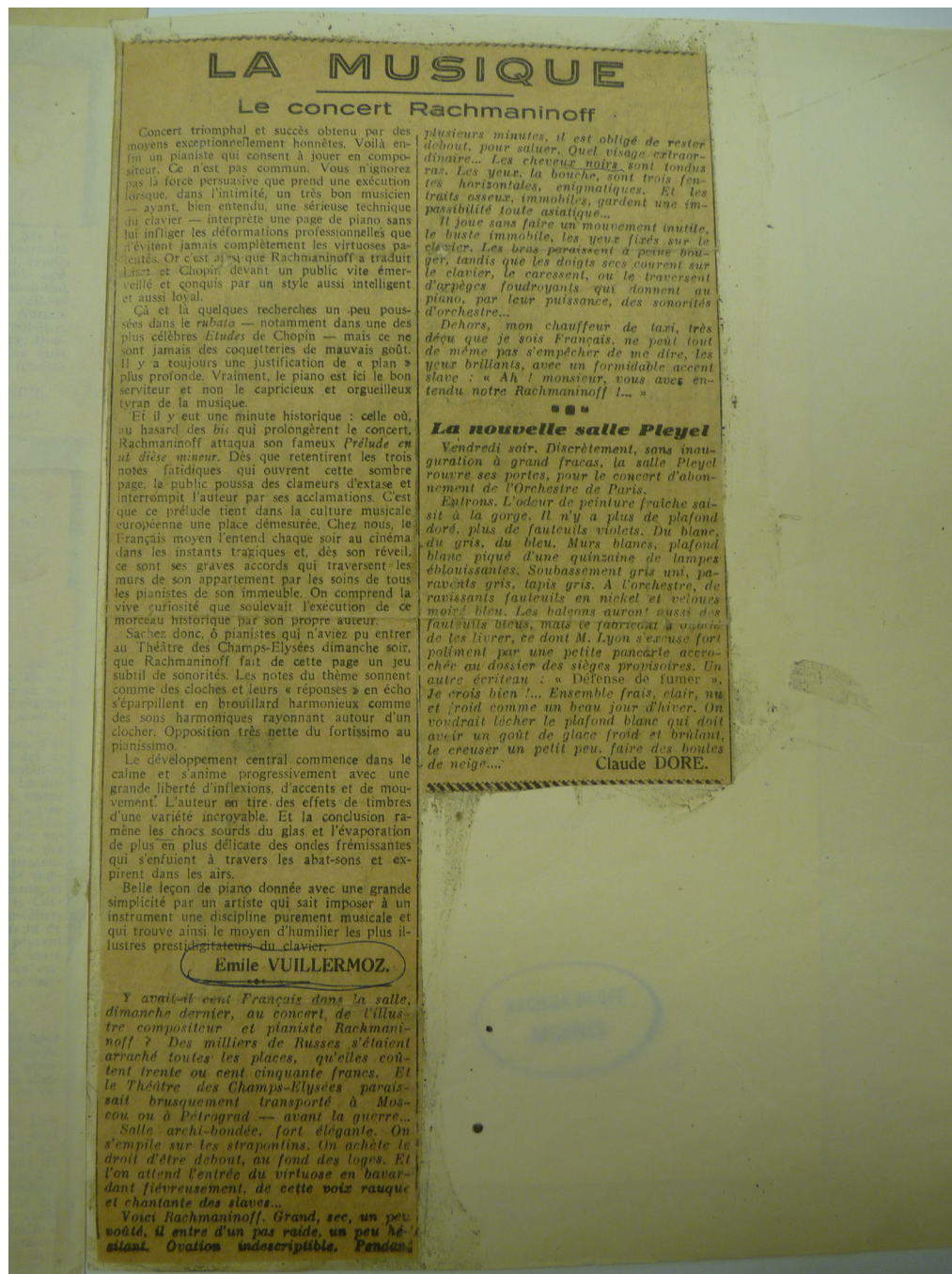


Illustration 1. Vuillermoz, E. (n. d.). Le Concert Rachmaninoff.
[Unknown Newspaper]. Copy from the private collection of Keenan A. Reesor

Nevertheless, one cannot help but notice that the tastes of music lovers often diverged from the assessments of the Parisian musical elite; indeed, the success of the *Prelude* calls into question the established opinion that the French do not like open emotional expressions in art. Of course, no one seriously disputed the merits of the work that had become fashionable. As one critic claimed, “le célèbre *Prélude en do dièze mineur*, qui, présenté par l’auteur, revêt une grandeur impressionnante que d’innombrables exécutions n’ont pas réussi à amoindrir.”¹⁹

About Rachmaninoff in French

Naturally, Rachmaninoff’s performances were significant events, first and foremost, for the Russian diaspora in Paris. It is equally natural that the characteristic “Russianness” of the atmosphere in which these concerts took place became the subject of special attention in the French press.

One of the commentators exclaimed: “Y avait-il cent Français dans la salle, dimanche dernière, au concert d’illustre compositeur et pianiste Rachmaninoff?”²⁰ And continued: “Des milliers de Russes s’étaient arraché toutes les places, qu’elles coûtent trente ou cent cinquante francs. Et le Théâtre des Champs-Élysées paraissait brusquement transporté à Moscou ou à Petrograd — avant la guerre...”²¹ At the end of his note, as evidence of the complete “appropriation” of Rachmaninoff by the Russian public, the critic cites a characteristic episode: “Dehors, mon chauffeur de taxi très déçu que je suis Français, ne peut tout de même pas s’empêcher de me dire, les yeux brillants, avec un formidable accent slave: ‘Ah, monsieur, vous avez entendu notre Rachmaninoff’.”²²

¹⁹ [Concert of 22 November 1930, Salle Pleyel]. (1930, November 26). *L’Excelsior*.

²⁰ Vuillermoz, E. (n. d.). Le Concert Rachmaninoff. See footnote 17.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. A hint of an attempt to “appropriate” Rachmaninov on the part of French musical figures can be found in the recently published book by Erwan Barillo and Arnaud Friele entitled *Russian Destinies in Paris. One hundred years of the Rachmaninoff Conservatory, 1924–2024*. The authors call the Variations on a Theme of Corelli Rachmaninoff’s “only French work”, referring to the fact that the Variations were written during the composer’s summer stay at the Pavillon summer house in Clairefontaine in 1931 [6, p. 83].

René Bizet, a renowned writer and publicist, who was on friendly terms with Maxim Gorky and clearly took the fate of the Russian emigration to heart, emphasises the same theme in the very title of his article: *Chants d'Exilés. Quand les Russes écoutent Rachmaninoff* [*Songs of Exiles. When Russians listen to Rachmaninoff*]. The atmosphere of the concert is described here very expressively:

Entr'acte. Le public est étonnant. Toute l'immigration russe est là. Depuis les loges où des hermines voisinent avec des chinchillas jusqu'aux dernières places où les gens ont des vêtements de pauvreté travailleuse, ce ne sont que visages de romans russes. Voici, avec ses bandeaux noirs plaqués sur ses joues pâles, la romantique héroïne de Pouchkine ou de Lermontoff; avec sa large face aux pommettes saillantes, rougies par le fard, c'est là, malgré la robe remise à la mode une paysanne de Konolenko. Quelques barbes de Tourgueneff, quelques visages exaltés, cheveux longs d'étudiants de jadis entr'aperçus dans les livres d'Arzibachev; peu de jeunes femmes modernes comme nous les voyons dans nos journaux de mode. Les chevelures d'ont pas été sacrifiées. Une atmosphère d'ailleurs et d'autrefois, émouvante par la fidélité qu'on devine, la misère qu'on suppose malgré le soin qu'on a mis ce soir à la cacher. Contrairement à l'habitude, dans les récitals, l'entr'acte se prolonge, pour que cette fête du piano soit aussi une fête de l'amitié. On se retrouve dans ce hall, on forme des groupes, on bavarde, on baise des mains, on revit dans l'illusion et dans la féerie d'un instant...²³

And in addition, one more observation from the Parisian press: "Le soir du concert de Rachmaninoff, un peuple slave déferte salle Pleyel et envahit toutes les places. On voit entrer des Russes agitées et barardes, couvertes d'hermine, de diamants, d'autres vêtues de fourrures rapées, des hommes en habit, des hommes en veston de couleur."²⁴

Stereotypes in the French perception of Russian music and Russian artists during the 1930s were clearly evident in descriptions of Rachmaninoff's appearance and playing. In his appearance they caught the features of a mysterious eastern sage, a steppe horseman, a dashing Cossack — in a word, all those characters that Parisians loved after Diaghilev's performances

²³ Bizet, R. (1928, December 2). *Chants d'Exilés. Quand les Russes écoutent Rachmaninoff. Intransigent*. The newspaper title translates as "intransigent."

²⁴ Le gala Rachmaninoff. (1930, November 27). *Candide*.

of *Les Danses polovtsiennes*, *Petrouchka*, *Le Sacre du printemps* and other plays with exotic plots. Here, the vividness of the critics' imagination is striking in terms of their unique — one would like to say, purely French — sensitivity to the external appearances produced by the event. These reports are notable for their lack of attention to the music.

Vuillermoz, in the article already cited, gives a very expressive description of the artist's appearance: "Quel visage extraordinaire... Les cheveux noirs sont tondus ras. Les yeux, la bouche, sont trois fentes horizontales, énigmatiques. Et les traits osseux, immobiles, gardent une impassibilité tout asiatique..."²⁵ Bizet constructs his impressions of the concert into a gripping plot, quite in the spirit of the colourful productions of the *Saisons Russes*:

Trois mille personnes applaudissent, crient rugissent. Le virtuose se plie en deux à droite puis à gauche, puis devant soi. Les politesses raides, militaires et respectueuses sont finies, Serge Rachmaninoff s'installe devant le clavier.

Ce n'est pas seulement pour lui un mouvement nécessaire. C'est une prise de possession. Ce tabouret large devient pour ce cavalier une sorte de selle sur quoi il s'installe commodément, essayant le jeu de ses jambes, s'assurant d'une position parfaitement stable. Il est certain de n'être pas désarçonné; il prélude par quelques notes, regarde autour de lui audessus de lui, contemple la salle puis brusquement, il joue.

Les doigts sont d'acier. Les bras font des courbes rapides. Ce Russe est à l'aise sur sa monture, mais il faut que la course soit nerveuse. Elle est niennée bon train d'abord avec Schubert, elle s'accélère avec Schumann, elle s'excite avec Chopin.

Impression étrange, du fond de cette foule passionnée et silencieuse, de ce piano net et brillant comme un cheval noir, et de ce cosaque qui le mène de ses mains puissantes qui frappent des coups secs et retombent, le coup donné, comme si elles laissaient flotter les rênes...²⁶

The critic then describes the marvellous wanderings and transformations of his hero:

Et, de nouveau Je cavalier reprend sa course. Rachmaninoff laisse souffler sa monture. Il joue ses Etudes, graves et colorée à la fois. Mais quand ils ont repris haleine et que les vastes plaines de Liszt se trouvent devant eux, alors, c'est l'irrésistible galop. Qui n'a pas entendu Rachmaninoff dans le Carnaval de Pesth

²⁵ Vuillermoz E. (n. d.). Le Concert Rachmaninoff. See footnote 17.

²⁶ Bizet, R. (1928, December 2). Chants d'Exilés. Quand les Russes écoutent Rachmaninoff. *Intransigeant*.

ne sait pas ce que sont le rythme, la vie des notes, la danse, la frénésie, l'ivresse, tout ce qui peut caractériser le tzigane délirant. On me sait plus où ça course le mène, la vitesse cadencée s'accroît de seconde en seconde, tout tourbillonne dans le vent, dans la lumière, dans un sorte de joie de sauvage qui vous laisse anéanti...²⁷

In connection with the ineluctable *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, a new plot twist arises at the end of the concert:

Alors, dans ces notes graves au milieu du requillement qui s'exalte en acclamations dès que résonent les premiers accords, passe toute la chanson des cloches de Kiev ou de Moscou. Ce n'est pas un cavalier qui est devant nous, c'est le sonneur de bronze. Tout tremble. Le piano est un bourdon géant...²⁸

In exactly the same spirit is the description of Rachmaninoff's appearance from another article:

Crâne tondu, jambes arquées comme celles d'un ancien cavalier, visage fermée et sévère, Rachmaninoff a un peu l'air d'un général de cosaques qui ne plaisante pas avec la discipline. Sûrement, il médite un châtiment terrible pour l'auditeur qui a eu le malheur de tousser, ou de tourner bruyamment une page de son prigramme!²⁹

The fancies of French journalists are quite comparable to the "action-packed" descriptions of Rachmaninoff's concerts in the USA [1]. Such a style, however, is difficult to imagine in serious, non-satirical articles in the Russian press.

Of course, critics did also pay some attention to purely musical considerations. For all those who wrote about the Russian pianist's concerts, his phenomenal mastery and powerful artistic personality remained beyond doubt. "Rachmaninoff est un des plus grands pianists contemporains," stated one of the commentators of the newspaper *Paris Soire*, continuing: "Et ce n'est certes pas le récital qu'il a donné l'autre soir chez Pleyel qui pourrait altérer cette opinion. Sa sonorité tient du prodige. Il y a en cet homme, la force, la finesse, l'intelligence et l'esprit: on est étonné et pris."³⁰

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Le gala Rachmaninoff. (1930, November 27). *Candide*.

³⁰ Le Récital Rachmaninoff. (1930, November 26). *Paris-soir*.

Rachmaninoff, the “Modernist”

Rachmaninoff’s interpretations of famous and beloved works sometimes provoked strong protests. One of the articles gives a precise formulation of this perception: “Certains discutent non la qualité de ses exécutions, que sont au-dessus de toute critique, mais la valeur de ses interprétations. On objecte qu’elles bousculent, en bien des cas, l’idée qu’on se fait communément de pièces. On invoque la Tradition.”³¹ The review of the already mentioned René Doire is typical:

Je ne voudrais faire aucune peine, pas plus aux aimables organisateurs de ce concert qu’aux amis de ce grand musicien et encore moins à lui-même, mais ma franchise doit dominer mon sentiment: Rachmaninoff a fait de Chopin une machine à sécher, comme on en voit tant de nos jours chez les blanchisseurs ou les coiffeurs. Ici elle aspire en quelques secondes toutes les larmes qui, depuis un siècle, se sont répandues à chaque audition des *Ballades* ou des *Nocturnes*. L’ataraxie (ne pas confondre avec ataxie) nous paraît avoir envahi les conceptions de Rachmaninoff dont les réalisations digitales obtiennent cependant certaines nuances, en antagonisme d’ailleurs avec la ligne et le fond de son interprétation. [...] Reconnaissons que le piano Pleyel, fidèle à Shopin, — ceci n’est pas une réclame — ne permet pas d’aller trop loin dans cette modernisation assez inattendue, chaque touche de l’instrument étant à un tel point imprégnée du romantisme proscrit que Rachmaninoff dut quelquefois céder devant la pieuse incrustation.³²

It seems that, contrary to the established image of a “belated romantic,” many Parisians perceived Rachmaninoff’s creative personality not as a phenomenon of romantic aesthetics or the refinements of *Art Nouveau* of the early 20th century, but as a phenomenon of hard modernism. An entry in Prokofiev’s diary from 2 December 1928 is quite consonant with all the reviews cited. While admitting that the concert had made a strong impression, he finds reasons for criticism:

In the evening, Rachmaninoff’s concert, the first in Paris in his entire life³³. Paris does not favour Rachmaninoff’s music, and Rachmaninoff has avoided it until now.

³¹ Imbert, M. M. (1936, March 9). Serge Rachmaninoff. *Le Journal de Debats*.

³² Doire, R. (1930, November 29). [Concert 22 November 1930, Salle Pleyel]. *Record*.

³³ Rachmaninoff performed in Paris for the first time in 1908 as part of Russian concerts organized by Sergei Diaghilev.

Today is a brilliant congress, crowds of dressed-up people. [...] It's a pity that Beethoven is not on the programme — this is the best that Rachmaninoff can do. He plays Bach well, but his Chopin is uneven: his technique is stunning, but his lyricism is mannered and hammer-like. When he plays his own music, it is bad: he destroys his poetry, which he forgot in his old age, replacing it with virtuosity. [...] He takes to the stage in a completely astonishing way: with a kind of awkward, unsteady gait, so much so that you don't believe he'll make it to the piano. But then the impression will be even greater when he starts playing. The audience roared with delight.³⁴

Boris de Schloezer responded to accusations of “violating traditions”: they say “that Rachmaninoff lyrical phrases are ‘not touching’.” Indeed, there is no sweetness in his playing, not a drop of sentimentality; it does not encourage dreaminess. But it takes over completely and conquers with its enormous spiritual tension, inexhaustible emotional wealth and diversity, a force that I would call elemental if there were not such a clear thought and power over itself behind it.³⁵

The “strangeness” and “dryness” of Rachmaninoff's interpretations were noted in those same years (the late 1920s and 1930s) not only by Parisian listeners. American journalists noticed a similar thing. We will cite just one, but very indicative review (for the concert on 27 March 1931):

His emotional detachment then is translated into terms of indifference, and one feels that Mr. Rachmaninoff has neither head nor heart for this task; nothing is expressed in his playing but weariness and lassitude of spirit. He is sufficiently the master of his instrument, sufficiently the musician always to play brilliantly, in a sense effectively; neither his technique nor his sense of values, of proportion, of style deserts him, but his pianism becomes spiritually, emotionally barren, conveys to us little or nothing of the meaning of the music, seem to us a mere repetition of interpretative formulae, devoid of conviction on Mr. Rachmaninoff's part.³⁶

³⁴ Prokofiev, S. S. (2002). *Diary. 1907–1933*. (Vol. 2). sprkfv, p. 653.

³⁵ Schlözer, B. (1928, December 2). Rachmaninoff's Concerto. *Latest News*.

³⁶ Review by Edward Cushing in the newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*, cit. ex: [7, p. 274].

Apparently, these assessments reflect not only the taste preferences of his contemporaries, but also a certain objective reality: Rachmaninoff's pianism carried new important qualities that, until now, perhaps, have not been fully aesthetically understood. An interesting attempt to do this was made by Vladimir Petrovich Chinaev. He asserts: "...Rachmaninoff's interpretations can still be perceived today as 'voluntaristic provocations,' and the ascetic image of Rachmaninoff the pianist somehow hardly fits the notorious performance characteristics of 'romanticism'" [8, p. 466]. According to Chinaev, "Rachmaninoff's existence in music is the expulsion of the sensual, the elimination of everything that can provoke the listener's empathy. Rachmaninoff takes us away from the pathos of passions — his world is hermetically sealed against the invasion of sentimental sincerity and fiery openness" [8, p. 470]. And yet, this is a direct response to Prokofiev's protest regarding transcriptions of popular music: "The artist-aesthete shows himself in the detached irony, as well as in the exaggerated — perhaps somewhat arrogant — swagger of the mastery with which Rachmaninoff performs salon trifles, in the way he knows how to present the cheapest clichés of old-world pianism" [8, p. 469]. "But behind such a stylised life," the researcher adds, "behind this 'system of happiness' there is another meaning hidden — the experience of life's existential abyss" [8, p. 474].

Similar characteristics are also quite applicable to the late compositional work of Rachmaninoff,³⁷ but this is too special a problem to delve into here.

Conclusion: Returning to the Case of Rachmaninoff

Let us return now to the question posed at the beginning: why did Rachmaninoff, whose performances in Paris attracted a huge and devoted audience, so rarely perform there, preferring other routes for his tours? It is possible that the reasons were purely external, related to the specifics of the work of the concert agents with whom he collaborated.

³⁷ This problem is touched upon in the article: [9].

Perhaps the specific nature of the Parisian émigré environment, which was largely made up of the same annoying visitors as in Russia, from whom he tried to escape during his sojourn in Dresden from 1906–1909, played a role. However, something else is more likely: Rachmaninoff was alienated by the atmosphere of quasi-musical or even extra-musical reasons for evaluating and perceiving his work, as reflected in the press reviews cited. While generously responding to all requests for help from his compatriots, Rachmaninoff nevertheless avoided excessively close creative contacts with “busy” Paris.

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