

Musical Education

Research article

UDC 78, 78.01

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.3.141-147>

EDN ZBVUAY



About the Course “Arrangement and Harmonisation” in the Curriculum of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music for 2014–2017: Notes from a Teacher*

Vitaly V. Aleev

*Gnesin Russian Academy of Music,
Moscow, Russian Federation,*

v.aleev@gnesin-academy.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9104-9437>

Abstract. This article considers the course in Arrangement and Harmonisation, which was taught for a number of years at the piano department of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music. Particular attention is paid to the system of theoretical guidelines and practical tasks, as well as revealing the results and potential of this discipline. This course set out to deepen an understanding of the traditional discipline of Harmony and expand its practical development by introducing creative exercises while appealing to traditions of teaching harmony — in particular, those that developed in Russian conservatory education both in pre-revolutionary and Soviet times. The content of the article reveals how the consistent theoretical and practical immersion of students in the stylistic features of harmony began with the study of the elements of the style of a work through a consideration of the harmonic styles of outstanding composers and the styles of musical trends and eras. The analysis reveals the effectiveness of the approach taken in the course. Although the course ran for only four years, it produced tangible results. Students mastered such valuable skills as the basics of voice leading, harmonisation approaches and techniques, as well as melodic and textural development.

Keywords: music higher education system, arrangement and harmonisation, melodic-harmonic and textural development, harmonic styles of outstanding composers, stylisation

For citation: Aleev V.V. About the Course “Arrangement and Harmonisation” in the Curriculum of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music for 2014–2017: Notes from a Teacher. *Russian Musicology*. 2025. No. 3, pp. 141–147. <https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.3.141-147>

* The present article was originally prepared in Russian for a collection of articles based on the materials of the Third International scholarly and practical conference *Gnesin Pedagogical Schools: History and Modernity*, which was held on March 2–4, 2021 at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music. Moscow, 2022, pp. 120–127.

Translated by Thomas Alexander Beavitt, Laboratory for Scientific Translation (<https://nauka-perevod.ru/eng>).

© Vitaly V. Aleev, 2025

О курсе «Аранжировка и гармонизация» в учебном плане Российской академии музыки имени Гнесиных 2014–2017 годов: заметки педагога

Виталий Владимирович Алеев

*Российская академия музыки имени Гнесиных,
г. Москва, Российская Федерация,
v.aleyev@gnesin-academy.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9104-9437>*

Аннотация. Настоящая статья посвящена описанию курса «Аранжировка и гармонизация», в течение ряда лет преподаваемого на фортепианном факультете Российской академии музыки имени Гнесиных. Особое внимание уделяется системе теоретических установок и практических заданий, а также выявлению результатов и потенциала данной дисциплины. Среди предпосылок ее введения — потребность в углублении традиционной дисциплины «Гармония», расширении практического освоения курса за счет введения творческих упражнений, а также обращение к историческим традициям преподавания гармонии — в частности, к тем, что сложились в российском консерваторском образовании дореволюционного и советского времени. Содержание статьи раскрывает путь последовательного теоретико-практического погружения студентов в стилевые особенности гармонии, начиная с изучения элементов стиля произведения — через гармонические стили выдающихся композиторов — к стилям музыкальных направлений и эпох. Делается вывод, что курс имел достаточно высокую эффективность. Несмотря на то, что он длился всего четыре года, результаты оказались ощутимыми. Студенты овладели такими ценными навыками, как основы голосоведения, многообразные приемы гармонизации, мелодическое и фактурное развитие.

Ключевые слова: система образования в музыкальных вузах, аранжировка и гармонизация, мелодико-гармоническое и фактурное развитие, гармонические стили выдающихся композиторов, стилизация

Introduction

The course discussed in this article was part of the curriculum for pianists studying at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music for four years. Despite its relatively short period of existence, it demonstrated good results in training students in the basics of voice leading, various harmonisation techniques, as well as melodic and textural development. The course also influenced the quality of preparation in other disciplines — in particular, the diploma paper. A subsequent understanding of musical phenomena and facts in the format of research work was achieved through the high analytical

potential inherent in the complex of instructional and creative tasks. Thus, the course can be said to have achieved successes in inculcating the harmonisation abilities of its students.

In this paper, we will consider a number of aspects related to the features of Arrangement and Harmonisation both as a separate academic discipline and in terms of its role in the wider education system at a music university.

On Higher Musical Education: "Before" and "Now"

In all eras, the educational process tends to reflect the most important phenomena

occurring in society, science, and practice. The contemporary stage of education, which can be said to have begun in Russia during the 1990s, is no exception. This stage brought about significant changes and adjustments to teaching content, methods and forms. For example, a number of former compulsory disciplines related to Soviet ideological principles, such as History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Scientific Communism and Music of the Peoples of the USSR, instantly became a thing of the past, while others, such as Fundamentals of Scientific Research, Sociology and Management in the Field of Musical Culture began to be actively introduced into the curriculum. The forms of teaching have also changed significantly: universal computerisation, digitalisation and interactivity have gradually begun to be used as everyday attributes and forms in the learning process.

The statement of these well-known facts can be clarified by one significant addition: both then and now, studying at a music university represents the students' comprehension of a voluminous, multi-component complex of disciplines aimed at the successful formation of a highly qualified specialist. At the same time, despite their immersion in a large-scale educational environment, musicians often note with sadness that the musical-professional component itself has not increased qualitatively over the past decades; and that numerous high achievements at expanded international competitions and contests do not always translate into professional recognition.

Reflections on these questions prompt us to briefly turn to the past times in Russian musical education, which often becomes a subject of interest for contemporary musicologists and educators. [1] Here we primarily refer to teaching practices in Russian conservatories of the pre-revolutionary period. It is undeniable that its results led to the emergence of a brilliant

galaxy of musicians who glorified Russian musical culture and earned it considerable respect throughout the world.

What were musicians taught at the Moscow Conservatory in the distant pre-revolutionary times? What subjects formed the basis of the curricula at that time?

Even in my student years, when getting acquainted with the work of Russian composers, I noticed one curious fact. In the famous two-volume work *Memories of Rachmaninoff*, [2] there is a black-and-white insert featuring a photograph of the composer's diploma of graduation from the Moscow Conservatory. The document showed that the number of disciplines studied at the conservatory in previous years was a tiny fraction of the number of topics that young musicians are expected to master today. But what disciplines they were! The main subjects included free composition, harmony, counterpoint, fugue, piano playing (note, not a special piano, just piano), while the "secondary compulsory subjects" included the history of music, the history of church singing, aesthetics, and various scientific subjects. And that's it! However, even this modest list turned out to be quite sufficient for Sergei Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin, Alexander Goldenweiser, Leonid Nikolaev, Antonina Nezhdanova and many others to appear in the field of Russian musical culture, whose achievements, as Natalia Gulyanitskaya rightly notes, "are not yet subject to the standards through the prism of which it is customary to view outstanding art figures." [3, p. 37]

Is it possible to achieve significant results by simultaneously studying two specialities (in my own case, music theory and piano), along with the obligatory parallel study of several histories of music (foreign, Russian, the peoples of the USSR, the countries of Asia and Africa), folklore and palaeography, not to mention the insane number of methods and social disciplines?

In this context, the black and white insert took on a special significance. As a teacher — and, first of all, as a musician — I have always wanted to try to implement this “old” professional idea in my own practical work. In order to try to realise this, it was necessary to expand the scope of the one-year harmony course, which was rather short and limited in scope. Thus, the course in Arrangement and Harmonisation came into being.

New Musical Theoretical Courses

At Gnesin Academy, the proposed new curriculum for 2014–2017 envisaged the possibility of expanding professional music disciplines by strengthening its elective courses. Until this point, I taught harmony and solfeggio at the piano department in several groups at the same time. The students who came to me were exceptionally talented, brightly gifted both in auditory and intellectual terms. The then leadership of the piano faculty decided to expand the main subjects, which included Harmonic Voice Leading and History of Harmonic Styles and Arrangement and Harmonisation.

The first of these, which was lecture-oriented and taught during the second year of study, naturally continued and developed into the course in Harmony. Its in-depth content was aimed at the theoretical and practical development of the harmonic styles of outstanding composers with a special emphasis on issues of voice leading. The artistic results were embodied by the students in short musical compositions, which were supposed to reflect the most characteristic melodic-harmonic techniques of a particular composer.

The development of the necessary skills occurred quite quickly: if at the first showing of miniatures in the style of Johann Sebastian Bach the results were not very convincing, then later, with the mastering of the harmonic style of Mozart and Beethoven, the situation levelled out significantly. The group quietly

transformed into a small creative collective similar to the piano section of the Union of Composers. The most successful works were treated to applause, while the less successful ones were subjected to creative analysis. In the middle of the second year of study, by which time the students had already mastered the basics of stylisation, the subject was supplemented with a new discipline — Arrangement and Harmonisation. This lasted for two semesters and was taught individually. The complete teaching and methodological complex, including the subject matter, criteria and expected results, was developed by the teachers of the Department of Music Theory with great enthusiasm. The exam at the end of the course required the genre of variations along with the performance of a number of pieces of the students' choice.

Quite often, students who had been studying with me since their first year ended up in my class. Since their level of knowledge was extremely advanced, we studied harmony and solfeggio to the highest level. After mastering harmonic voice-leading, arrangement and harmonisation, they completed their fourth-year studies by creating a diploma essay. That is to say, communication with my students continued throughout the entire period of their training (as is the case with a speciality).

Considering the fact that almost all the students had high scores in music-theoretical disciplines, an average approach to creative work was impossible. Each of them had a bright musical and professional personality, as well as unique character traits and temperament. In light of this, I tried to take into account the distinctive character of each student so as to create a win-win situation in terms of creative communication strategy and tactics. Thus, students were given significant freedom in the creative interpretation of genres and forms of future works.

From Simple to Complex

However, no less important was everything that concerned the preliminary stage of work when engaging in the subject of Arrangement and Harmonisation. Here it was necessary for the student to remember that, when actualising harmonic development as one of the most important factors in the ongoing creative process, serious thought should also be given to other formal-linguistic parameters associated with form-building and thematics, texture and rhythm. In this regard, it was necessary to instil in students an understanding of how to construct a holistic musical statement in the shortest possible time given that the course lasted only one year.

In practice, this happened as follows. At first, I composed a melody for harmonisation, which involved the implementation of a number of practical tasks. Its condition contained the prerequisites for further actions based on a two-part form, on the use of enharmonics and elements of major-minor systems, ellipses, alterations, re-harmonisation of ligated (repeating) sounds in different voices (the methods of re-harmonising sounds are described in detail in the previously published article *About Claude Debussy's Harmony. Some Aspects of Tonality*: “The peculiarity of such sounds is multifaceted: this is the creation of the effect of harmonic uncertainty, an increase and decrease in the degree of functional tension; multi-vector functionality, leading in a number of cases to the loss of functional connections.” [4, p. 72])

Broad phrases using melodic figuration complemented the stock-in-trade that clearly indicated its romantic direction. As an example, I will give the condition of the task *A-flat major*, which all my students “went through” (Example No. 1). [5]

The harmonious solution of the problem represented the first stage of achieving the goal (one week was allocated for this). What the students did not expect was that, following the correct completion of the task, which they considered a successful result of the work, I announced the next stage. Now it was necessary to bring the student's solution closer to the level of the composer's understanding. A new goal was set concerning the connection between harmony and form, along with dramaturgy and rhythmic pulsation directly related to the rhythm of harmonic changes, while maintaining its textural diversity. At this stage, for the first time, I removed the restrictions associated with the use of strict four-part music and explained where it was possible — and sometimes necessary — to expand or narrow the textural space. [6] This very valuable experience led to an expansion of the framework of harmonic ideas to permit the realisation of a whole range of artistic tasks in a small musical structure.

Discussion of the process of musical development and transformation of the material with the students took place over the following two weeks. That turned out to be quite sufficient. As a teacher, it was a great pleasure to watch how the students overcame their school

Example No. 1

Problem (*A-flat major*)



understanding of harmony to become more and more free in their creative decisions.

Despite the obligatory genre of variations, each of the students embodied it in his or her own individual way. For example, one student, having chosen the theme of a Russian folk song, worked with it according to the laws of the usual classical arrangement, enriching it with harmony, introducing modal updates, varying the texture and rhythm within the work. Another tried to give each fragment of variations a certain stylistic appearance. Thus, one of the students, having chosen a Slavic song as a melodic basis, created a unique version of a “stylistic kaleidoscope.” Each new variation acquired an increasingly “Western” national flavour, eventually traveling from Eastern Europe to America. The first variation was a Russian version of the theme, then a Polish one, coloured with Chopinesque intonations, then a French one with an orientation toward the style of Ravel, then a Russian-American one with the inclusion of melodic-harmonic turns from the early and late periods of Rachmaninoff’s work. The whole concept ended with a fugue, in the theme of which, while maintaining its previous melodic contours, the rhythmic organisation was transformed from calm monotony to heightened dynamism in the spirit of Barber’s fugue.

The stylistic dialogues were implemented in different ways. Another student, a great connoisseur of Shostakovich’s music, literally “fused” the theme of Russian folk songs into the system of artistic and expressive means inherent in the composer’s works. The principle of monostylistics, which was maintained from the beginning to the end of the variations, was enriched by an individual interpretation of the musical form, allowing for the techniques of radical transformation of themes, along with the introduction of allusions and direct quotation, which became normative during the 20th century.

There were also some rather unpredictable cases. For example, one student who was interested in jazz built her variation cycle on blues harmonies and rhythms. Following her, I also had to seriously immerse myself in the elements of this “very hot music”, as the heroine played by Marilyn Monroe in the famous film *Some Like It Hot* called it. Here, the main intonation source (both for the student and for me) was the second part — “Blues” — from Ravel’s Violin Sonata.

The students themselves determined the choice of works for the so-called second stage involving their genres and forms. All of them, as a rule, wanted to work on creating a large form. The main method of composition was stylistic modelling — from recreating the style of a specific composer to freely conveying the features of a stylistic direction. A successful result of immersion in the style of Brahms was a sonata by one of the students, the entire first part of which was sustained in the unhurried ballad spirit specific to the composer. The recognisable atmosphere of Brahms’s style was recreated by the choice of sometimes vividly contrasting imagery to reveal new facets of the main sections of the form in combination with characteristic harmonic sequences. Of course, it would be possible to adduce many more examples.

Looking back on this course, I can say with some slight nostalgia that my students never missed classes. Since they often wanted to listen to the compositions of their colleagues, it often happened that, after starting classes with one student, by the end of the working day there would be a whole creative group in the classroom. Together we discussed the creative process, commented, and expressed our wishes. Perhaps my article, contrary to the usual form, looks like a recollection of some experience from past years. Of course, that’s how it is. However, I consider this experience to be one of the most valuable in my teaching career.

To some extent, thanks to the disciplines from the circle of “main subjects,” it brought me closer to an understanding of how the professional education of a musician should take place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will say a few words about those of my students who went through the school of advanced harmony with that exit into artistic practice, which for many years was an organic part of the Russian conservatory education. Among them: Dmitry Belyak — head of the editorial and publishing department, associate professor of the department of

pedagogy and methodology of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music; Evgeny Smirnov — senior lecturer of the department of special piano of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music; Panagiotis Fountas — continued his studies in the master’s program at the Stenhardt School of the Arts, New York University; Anastasia Kolchugina — completed postgraduate studies at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music; Tatyana Tolstova — continued her studies at the Geneva Conservatory; Alexander Tykotsky — postgraduate student at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music; Victoria Yarovenko — a successful pianist who often performs abroad.

References

1. Naumenko T.I. Soviet musicology: pro et contra. Work on archival materials from the Soviet era. *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2022, no. 4, pp. 22–37. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2022.4.022-037>
2. Memories of Rachmaninoff: collection. In 2 vols. (*Воспоминания о Рахманинове: сб. В 2 т.*). 5th ed., ex. Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 1988. Vol. 1. 528 p.
3. Gulyanitskaya N.S. Rachmaninoff’s high culture of ‘conservatism’. *Scholarly Papers of Gnesin Russian Academy of Music*. 2023, no. 3, pp. 35–39. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.56620/2227-9997-2023-3-35-39>
4. Aleev V.V. About Claude Debussy’s harmony. Some aspects of tonality. *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2022, no. 4, pp. 66–75. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2022.4.066-075>
5. Aleev V.V. Harmony tasks: a study guide. (Алеев В.В. *Задачи по гармонии: учеб. пособие*). Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 2021. 88 p.
6. Pylaev M.E. On the question of harmonic four-voice texture and its role in the music of modern times. *Music in the System of Culture: Scientific Bulletin of the Urals Conservatory*. 2023, no. 33, pp. 35–46. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.24412/2658-7858-2023-33-35-46>

Information about the author:

Vitaly V. Aleev — Cand.Sci. (Arts), Associate Professor, Head at the Department of Pedagogy and Methodology, Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Информация об авторе:

В.В. Алеев — кандидат искусствоведения, доцент, заведующий кафедрой педагогики и методики, Российская академия музыки имени Гнесиных, г. Москва, Российская Федерация.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 15.05.2025

Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 13.06.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 16.06.2025