

Theory of Music

Science Article

UDC 781.41

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2024.1.105-113>

EDN: NGOMKI



The Multidimensionality of the Harmony in Sergei Rachmaninoff's Compositions Written in Large-Scale Forms: The Experience of Analysis of the *Third Piano Concerto**

Vitaly V. Aleev

*Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, Moscow, Russian Federation,
v.aleev@gnesin-academy.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9104-9437>*

Abstract. The piano concerto was one of the genres that accumulated important stylistic traits in Sergei Rachmaninoff's music. The significant compositional scale, the breadth and the multidimensionality of the musical content make it possible to observe within its limits the diverse phenomena of the harmonic language. The author of the article examines the peculiarities of the composer's thinking by the example of the *Third Piano Concerto*, laying emphasis on the specificity of the organization of the tonal plan, the harmonic functionality, the chordal structure, etc. The innovative features of the composer's harmonies discussed in the article are connected with the processes of differentiation within the large-scale sound model. Extended tonality appears through a multitude of local tonal states (a term coined by Yuri Kholopov) that make it possible to determine its inner dynamics. Along with the extended functional tonality of the major-minor mode, the other types of states of tonality marked out are the multivalent, the wavering, the dismantled, and a few additional types of states of tonality. These most important particular features make it possible to look anew at the style of Rachmaninoff's large-scale compositions.

Keywords: Rachmaninoff's style, piano concerto, tonal plan, extended tonality, tonal states

For citation: Aleev V. V. The Multidimensionality of the Harmony in Sergei Rachmaninoff's Compositions Written in Large-Scale Forms: The Experience of Analysis of the *Third Piano Concerto*. *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2024. No. 1, pp. 105–113.
<https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2024.1.105-113>

* The article was prepared in Russian for the journal *Scholarly Notes of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music*, 2019, No. 4, pp. 39–44.

Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

© Vitaly V. Aleev, 2024

Теория музыки

Научная статья

Многомерность гармонии в произведениях крупной формы С. В. Рахманинова: опыт анализа Третьего фортепианного концерта**

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. Одним из жанров, аккумулирующих важные стилевые приметы творчества Сергея Рахманинова, стал фортепианный концерт. Значительный композиционный масштаб, широта и многомерность музыкального содержания позволяют наблюдать в его пределах разнообразные явления гармонического языка. Автор статьи рассматривает особенности мышления композитора на примере Третьего фортепианного концерта, выделяя специфику организации тонального плана, гармонической функциональности, аккордового строения и др. Новаторские черты гармонии композитора в статье связываются с процессами дифференциации внутри крупной звуковой модели. Расширенная тональность предстаёт сквозь множество частных тональных состояний (Ю. Холопов), позволяющих определить её внутреннюю динамику. Наряду с расширенной функциональной тональностью мажорно-минорного лада выделены многозначная, колеблющаяся, снятая и другие виды состояний тональности. Эти важнейшие особенности помогают по-новому взглянуть на стиль крупных рахманиновских произведений.

Ключевые слова: стиль Рахманинова, фортепианный концерт, тональный план, расширенная тональность, тональные состояния

Для цитирования: Алеев В. В. Многомерность гармонии в произведениях крупной формы С. В. Рахманинова: опыт анализа Третьего фортепианного концерта // Проблемы музыкальной науки / Music Scholarship. 2024. № 1. С. 105–113. (На англ. яз.)

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2024.1.105-113>

Relatively little has been written about the harmony of Sergei Rachmaninoff's music, notwithstanding the significant amount of research made of his life, his music, and the performance aspects of his works. [1] When discussing the harmony in the great Russian composer's style, musicologists most frequently touch upon the questions connected with the modal organization of

** Статья подготовлена на русском языке для журнала «Учёные записки Российской академии музыки имени Гнесиных», 2019, № 4, с. 39–44.

his music, the application of his “signature” chord — Rachmaninoff’s subdominant, the complexification of the chords as a result of the characteristic particular features of voice-leading transformed in the poly-melodic texture. [2]

Undoubtedly, these integral attributes of the harmonic style are present in the composer’s works throughout his entire musical legacy. [3] At the same time, it must be mentioned: their individualizing role pertains to Rachmaninoff’s chamber works — his instrumental and vocal miniatures. [4] The compositions written in large-scale forms, in our view, reveal, along with the aforementioned traits, significantly more substantial “indicators” of the composer’s harmonic thinking. Such categories as *tonality* and *tonal plans*, *melodic modulations* and *linear-chromatic voice-leading*, which in Rachmaninoff’s large-scale forms have a special individual-authorial meaning, have almost never been elaborated on in scholarly literature.

One of the genres that accumulated the composer’s important stylistic traits turned out to be the piano concerto. [5] The significant compositional scale, the breadth and the multidimensionality of the musical content make it possible to include within its limits a significant amount of various harmonic “phenomena” and “facts.” Towards the moment of the creation of the *Second Piano Concerto* (1901) and especially the *Third Piano Concerto* (1909), we may pronounce the final confirmation of Rachmaninoff’s harmonic style, which remained unchanged during the subsequent years, as well. It reveals itself with a profound reliance on the traditions of late romantic harmony (following both the Russian tradition and those from other countries) in the use of a number of innovations characteristic of the music of 20th century tonal composers,

as well as in the broad incorporation of Rachmaninoff’s own original harmonic techniques and means.

Let us examine certain harmonic peculiarities intrinsic to Rachmaninoff, by the example of the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 3*.

The tonal plans of the different movements of the concerto vividly manifest the features intrinsic to the extended tonality of composers of the Romanticist era. This is discovered on the macro- and the microstructural levels. Thus, the correlation of the chief tonalities between the movements of the cycle is realized according to the scheme of *D minor* (first movement) — *D minor* — *D-flat major* — *F-sharp minor* (second movement) — *D minor* (third movement), which confirms the obvious interaction of the major-minor systems. Within the first movement we observe “free” mediant harmony connections between the primary and the subsidiary theme groups in the exposition (*D minor* — *B-flat major*); in the recapitulation there are connections of the minor second between these two sections: the subsidiary theme group sounds in the relation of the tonality of the “Neapolitan” degree to that of the primary theme group (*D minor* — *E-flat major*).

The second movement — the Intermezzo — brings in numerous tonal-harmonic innovations and intrigues. Thus, its beginning, in which the theme of the subsequent variations is expounded, is marked by three sharps in the key signature. At the same time, we observe the real exposition of the thematic material in the key of *D minor*.

In light of this, the beginning statement of the theme in the key of the first movement, on the one hand, must be perceived as a conscientious device on the part of the composer. Apparently, the tonal

unity of both of the movements on the level of the ending of the previous movement and the beginning of the subsequent movement emphasizes to the greatest degree their undoubted artistic-figurative and dramaturgical integrity. Simultaneously with this, let us note that the prolongation of the *D minor* key on the level of the beginning of the second movement is very brief; its purposes is seen in the transition to the new tonal content. The central continuous section of the movement, presenting an active variational development of the theme, is marked by five flats in the key signature with the predominance of the key of *D-flat major* (a similar method of interaction between two remote tonalities can also be marked in the *Second Piano Concerto* between the first and the second movements.)

On the other hand, the presence of the three sharps in the beginning of the Intermezzo receives a definite explanation closer to the end of the second movement. What is meant here is the transition of the variations sounding in the flat tonalities to those endowed with sharps. (In this music this transition is confirmed by the change of the key signature: the five flats are replaced by three sharps.)

The previously sounding *D-flat major* (which is enharmonically the same as *C-sharp major*) takes upon itself the function of the dominant of the subsequent key of *F-sharp minor*. Moreover, after the further brief sound of the variations, most perceptible is the return of the initial theme in the harmonically changed and diminished version in the tonality of *F-sharp minor*. Its sound creates a thematic stability in

regards to the beginning of the movement (two thematic foundations are obvious here). In this light, the initial exposition in *D minor* is perceived on the level of the tonality of the VI minor (“Schubertian”) degree, so frequently encountered in Rachmaninoff’s compositions.

Other tonal interactions of this kind also testify in favor of this kind of interpretation. This can be seen, for example, in the culminating fragment from the first movement based on the sequencing of the enharmonic links. The augmented triad lying at the basis of the complex enharmonic connections makes it possible to input tonalities contained in such a correlation in each link of the sequence. These are *E-flat minor* and *B minor*; *F-sharp minor* and *D minor* (Example No. 1 shows the interaction between the keys of *F-sharp minor* and *D minor* in the relationship of the VI “Schubertian” step). Thereby, the correlation of the minor tonalities in the relationship of the VI “Schubertian” step must rather be perceived as a tendency.

Example No. 1

Sergei Rachmaninoff.
Third Piano Concerto.
First movement, development section

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked 'Grit' and the second system is marked '(Grit)'. Both systems feature complex chordal textures with triplets and sixteenth-note patterns in the right hand, and sustained chords in the left hand. The notation includes various accidentals and dynamic markings, illustrating the tonal interactions discussed in the text.

The third movement, similar to the first, demonstrates a free correlation of the tonalities between the primary and the subsidiary theme groups. Both in the exposition and in the recapitulation, their interaction is built according to the plagal principle (*D minor — G major; C minor — F major*). Such is the strategy in lining up the tonal plan between the movements of the cycle and inside each one of them.

As for the tonal development within the limits of the specific, local fragments of the concerto, we must note its definitive abundance, diversity, and, what is quite characteristic, frequent unpredictability, stipulated by a number of factors. Among them, of paramount importance are the numerous enharmonic deviations and modulations, the entire set of major-minor systems, the broad modal changeability, as well as the linear-chromatic voice-leading, influencing the peculiarities of the tonal plan. Each of the factors enumerated earlier receives an individual authorial application in the *Third Concerto*, as well as in all of Rachmaninoff's music, in general. Together they confirm in all of their apparentness the meaning of the concept of *extended tonality*, formulated by Arnold Schoenberg in a scholarly fashion and expounded by Ernst Kurth in a literary, figurative way. As the latter noted "...for Romanticism (even with the preservation of the tonal completeness), the main element lies in the fluctuating, mobile forces, in the endless *possibilities of the deviations*. Its luxuriating fantasy abounds in the riches of tonal development. For this reason, even in the completed forms, leading

to the return to the main tonality, the latter presents merely the background removed to the very depth, concealed by the impetuously proliferating with the offshoots of numerous deviations [the author's italics. — *V. A.*]."¹

Along with this, it is important to note that, just like in most musical compositions of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as those created during the subsequent decades of the 20th century, the peculiarities of tonality in the *Third Piano Concerto* are not exhausted by merely by a generalized stable word combination — extended tonality. The actualization of the "Rachmaninoff tonality," in our opinion, takes place not in a straightforward manner and, in a number of cases, hardly in a definitive manner. The explanation of the process of tonal development cannot be presented solely according to the principle of "here one chord passes onto another, and here a certain deviation takes place." We presume that without the consideration of specific characterizations reflecting the local, concrete displays of the tonal manifestations, any analysis of Rachmaninoff's many-sided and ambiguous tonal system turns out to be absolutely ineffective. Particularly the minor effects, specific features and details, each time forming new formulas of tonal expressions, allow in many ways to reveal and establish those "current, mobile forces creating extremely saturating effects" about which Kurth wrote.

In connection with this, let us turn to Yuri Kholopov's teaching about harmony,² which expounds the criteria of special *tonal states*, broadly applied by 20th century composers.

¹ Kurth E. *Romanticheskaya garmoniya i ee krizis v "Tristane" Vagnera* [*Romantic Harmony and its Crisis in Wagner's "Tristan"*]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1975, pp. 307–308.

² Kholopov Yu. N. *Garmoniya. Teoreticheskii kurs* [*Harmony. Theoretical Course*]. St. Petersburg: Lan, 2003. 544 p.

The list of the states suggested by the scholar includes, in addition to the traditional type, associated with *functional* tonality (in our case, the *extended functional tonality of the major-minor mode*), nine various types, in a number of cases containing associative-metaphorical names. The latter include *loose* tonality, *dissonant* tonality, *floating* tonality, *inversional* tonality, *variable* tonality, *swaying* tonality, *multivalent* tonality, *withdrawn* tonality, and *polytonality*. All these enumerated types reflect the various interactions of the stable criteria — the four tonal indices — the Center, the Tonic, Sonata features, and Functions.

A number of tonal states can be found by us in the music of the *Third Piano Concerto*. Thus, the application of *functional tonality* is characteristic for all the movements of the cycle; especially apparent is its presence in the “stable” sections of the outer movements — the primary and the secondary theme groups.

Quite frequent are the cases of applying *multivalent tonality*. (In such examples we interpret harmony in two keys at once.) As a rule, this is connected with the phenomenon of polymodality, in the condition of which the major and minor modes sound simultaneously in different strata of the texture. A typical expression of the present phenomenon turns out to be the so-called modal mixtures, which in Rachmaninoff’s case unify the closely related tonality with the indispensable combination in the vertical dimension of two harmonic “tiers” — the major and the minor.

Moreover, a multivalent type of tonality evidently manifests itself in the situation

of the variability of functions. During the process of harmonic development, the previous tonic begins to accept on itself a different function of a new tonality, for example, the dominant. As a result of this, the subsequent motion of the harmony is carried out insufficiently precisely from the tonal point of view: the multivalence is stipulated by its simultaneous interpretation — both as the tonic and the dominant. The most brilliant example of this is the significant fragment of the second movement in its length — the variation in *F minor*, within which the keys of its parallel major tonic and its subdominant (*F major* and *B-flat minor*). Similar manifestations of multivalent tonality are a characteristic sign not only of the *Third Concerto*, but also of a number of other works by Rachmaninoff.

A broad application in the music of the *Third Concerto* may be found in the *swaying tonality*, presenting for Rachmaninoff its typical means of artistic-figurative thinking, a sort of visiting card of modal-tonal expression. In many ways, it is connected with the phenomenon of modal variability,³ inherited by the composer from his predecessors, the representatives of the “Mighty Handful.” Each new statement of the theme (motive) is frequently accompanied by a modal-harmonic renewal. In such cases, it is possible to observe the obvious swaying state of changing tonics (Example No. 2 demonstrates a *swaying* tonality in the states of modal variability).

A manifestation of swaying could also be seen in the numerous cases of the D_7 harmony resolving into tonalities that “substitute”

³ This is also stated by Liudmila Dyachkova. See: Dyachkova L. S. *Garmoniya v muzyke XX veka: uchebnoe posobie* [*Harmony in 20th Century Music: Tutorial Manual*]. Moscow: Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, 2003. P. 62.

Example No. 2

Sergei Rachmaninoff. *Third Piano Concerto*.
First movement, conclusive theme

Tempo precedente, ma un poco piu mosso

the tonic possessing local characters. These are predominantly represented by the harmonies of the II, III, and IV degrees in major. The meaning of the application of such innovations is in the directedness towards the veiling of the sound of the tonic, in the extension of the developing character of the action.

By analogy with this, we must also note the heightened role of the tonal-harmonic connections formed due to the interaction of the tonalities in the states of a relative major–minor. Such interactions are marked by the usage of specific harmonies, among which there is the major III^5_3 in major (similar to the D^5_3 of the relative minor), the D_2 of the minor tonality, resolving into the T^5_3 of the relative major, and especially the VII^4_3 with the interval of a fourth (the “Rachmaninoff subdominant”), endowed with three variants of solution, in addition to the main version. Through frequent usage of the indicated harmonies, there appears

the feeling of tonal unpredictability, a constant tonal renewal, and sometimes — the effect of a deceived expectation. Frequently, the resolution of the D_2 in a minor tonality into a T^5_3 of the relative major is presented in the conditions of lengthy sequencing, which strengthens the character of the tonal swaying.

The described cases of the special states of tonality are the most demonstrative for the *Third Concerto*. Our attention is drawn to the repeated cases of their recurrence. Moreover, the various types of tonal states change frequently, as if passing (flowing) into each other. Such successive combinations constantly renew the tonal image, making it multifaceted, colorful, and ornate.

The most complex cases of the special states are connected in Rachmaninoff’s music with their simultaneous “vertical” application. In other words, not four, but eight combinations of tonal indices mentioned earlier work simultaneously. Their frequent non-concurrence stipulates the augmentation of chromaticization and even the elements of disharmony, which in their turn provide for the enhancement of emotional tension.

The indicated case of the simultaneous presence of *multivalent* and *dismounted tonality* is the “chromatic” transition in the second movement between the initial section in *D minor* and the subsequent *D-flat major*. The short passage (*piu mosso*), consisting of six measures, distinct for its instability and uncertainty of sound, accumulates a set of interesting tonal-harmonic peculiarities.

First of all, its application is stipulated of a bright ellipse formed upon the combination of the D_2 of the previous *D minor* section (which in the states of the multivalent

tonality are interpreted, rather, in the vein of *A major*⁴ as $D_2 \rightarrow S$) with the subsequent half-diminished VII_5^6 . It is noteworthy that it would be logical to perceive the function of two harmonies in the state of the ellipse, particularly stemming from the key of *A major*. (The half-diminished VII_5^6 has no direct connection to the preceding *D minor* and may be interpreted only by analogy with the subsidiary *D*; in the states of *A major*, it is an elliptically taken half-diminished $DD VII_5^6$.) Its stable prolongation in the low registers of the orchestra and the soloist's part naturally leads to the key of *D-flat major*, in which it becomes considered equivalent to a II_5^6 with a diminished fifth.

Second, the stable consistency of the half-diminished VII_5^6 in the low registers of the orchestra is considerably enriched by the superstructure in the high registers of the piano. It is particularly this chromatic stratification, saturated by the supplementary counterpoint of the middle voices sounding in the conditions of polyrhythmic relations is what creates the features of dismantled tonality. Its essence is in the functional decoupling of each of the chords (sonorities), defined merely in the various tonalities, but not subservient to any of them. In this regard, Kholopov uses a very forceful comparison: "Tonal darkness as a special means."⁵

The diversity of the tonal "images" has also significantly influenced the particular features of the functional relations between the chords. The overwhelming majority of the specific manifestations of functionality intrinsic to the tonality of the late 19th and early 20th century, found a brilliant reflection

in the music of the *Third Piano Concerto*. We have in mind such manifestations as the enhancement of the plagal and the mediant functional groups, the violation and the variability of the functions, the broad bifunctionality, the elliptic correlations between the dominant chords of tonalities of remote steps of relationship, and, finally, the use of melodic deviations and modulations localizing and even canceling the customary functional connections.

Thereby, the harmony in the *Third Concerto* reflects the features of tradition and innovation characteristic to the music of many composers of the first half of the 20th century. The traditional aspects are expressed in the reliance on extended functional tonality of the major-minor mode broadly applied by the Romanticist composers. The given type of pitch organization determines in many ways the specificity of the tonal plan of the composition, the peculiarities of the functionality of the chordal structure.

Along with this, a significant place is also taken by those new traits that came to music at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries. It is tied to the processes of apparent *differentiation* within a large-scale pitch model: extended tonality appears through a multitude of its local manifestations (states) making it possible to determine its inner dynamics in a more precise manner.

These most important tendencies emerging by means of numerous interactions of the elements comprising them make it possible to look at the phenomena lying at the basis of the harmonic style of Rachmaninoff's large-scale works, in particular, his *Third Concerto*.

⁴ The tight interaction between the keys of *D minor* and *A major* is clearly perceived, starting with the very beginning of the second movement.

⁵ Kholopov Yu. N. Op. cit. P. 421.

References

1. 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>
2. Sheludyakova O. E. Concerning the Issue of Interaction between the Melodic Element and Harmony in Sergei Rachmaninoff's Works. *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2019. No. 4, pp. 158–166. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.17674/1997-0854.2019.4.158-166>
3. Krivitskaya E. D. Searching for a Unified Style. Review on the book "Rachmaninoff's Style." *Muzykal'naya akademiya [Music Academy]*. 2023. No. 3, pp. 246–255. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.34690/336>
4. Skvortsova I. A., Smolkin K. V. New Stylistic Principles in the *Romances op. 38* by S. Rachmaninoff. *South-Russian Musical Anthology*. 2020. No. 3, pp. 50–56. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.24411/2076-4766-2020-13007>
5. Koryapina T. P. Transformation of the Finale in Three Editions of the *Fourth Piano Concerto* by S. V. Rachmaninoff. *The Journal of Russian Society for Theory of Music*. 2023. No. 2, pp. 56–66. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.26176/otmroo.2023.42.2.004>

Список источников

1. Гуляницкая Н. С. Высокая Культура «консерватизма» Рахманинова // Учёные записки Российской академии музыки имени Гнесиных. 2023. № 3. С. 35–39. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2227-9997-2023-3-35-39>
2. Шелудякова О. Е. К проблеме взаимодействия мелодического начала и гармонии в произведениях Сергея Рахманинова // Проблемы музыкальной науки / Music Scholarship. 2019. № 4. С. 158–166. <https://doi.org/10.17674/1997-0854.2019.4.158-166>
3. Кривицкая Е. Д. В поисках единого стиля. Рецензия на книгу «Стиль Рахманинова» // Музыкальная академия. 2023. № 3. С. 246–255. <https://doi.org/10.34690/336>
4. Скворцова И. А., Смолкин К. В. Новые стилевые закономерности в романсах оп. 38 С. В. Рахманинова // Южно-Российский музыкальный альманах. 2020. № 3. С. 50–56. <https://doi.org/10.24411/2076-4766-2020-13007>
5. Коряпина Т. П. Трансформация финала в трёх редакциях Четвёртого фортепианного концерта С. В. Рахманинова: новый взгляд на форму // Журнал Общества теории музыки. 2023. № 2. С. 56–66. <https://doi.org/10.26176/otmroo.2023.42.2.004>

Information about the author:

Vitaly V. Aleev — Cand.Sci. (Arts), Associate Professor, Head at the Department of Pedagogy and Methods.

Информация об авторе:

В. В. Алеев — кандидат искусствоведения, доцент, заведующий кафедрой педагогики и методики.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 19.02.2024

Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 04.03.2024

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 06.03.2024