

## Compared interpretations of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances for Two Pianos op. 45*

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**Abstract:** Seeing that until recently the research devoted to various musical compositions focused mainly on their formal-structural features, lately, compared interpretations have become both a necessity and a goal for instrument players, singers, and conductors alike. In this paper I chose to consider contrastively two exceptional interpretations of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances for Two Pianos Op. 45*, i.e. the performances by the pianist duos made up by, on the one hand, Vladimir Ashkenazy and André Previn, and, on the other, Martha Argerich and Alexandre Rabinovich.

**Keywords:** *Rachmaninoff, Symphonic Dances, compared interpretations, Vladimir Ashkenazy - Andre Previn; Martha Argerich - Alexandre Rabinovich*

### 1. Introduction

Seeing that, in the past, most of the research devoted to various musical compositions focused mainly on their formal-structural features, in recent years, compared interpretations have become both a necessity and a goal for instrument players, singers, and conductors alike.

In spite of this trend centred mainly on a musicological approach, several studies have highlighted the rise of various *Interpretive Schools*. But as performers have their own individuality and professional backgrounds, being able nowadays to perfect their art in various musical centres and with diverse well-reputed players, each reinterpretation of a musical work brings to the fore its own characteristics, which make it unique and unrepeatable. Moreover, the performer's contact with various cultures will also influence the development of his or her creative personality. It is our mission to shed light on these features so as to arrive to a better understanding of the (re)interpretive art in general and to an optimal reception of the message intended by the composer of that work in particular.

For this study I chose to contrast two exceptional interpretations of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances for Two Pianos Op. 45*, i.e. the performances by the pianist duos made up by, on the one hand, Vladimir Ashkenazy and André

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Previn, and, on the other, Martha Argerich and Alexandre Rabinovich. As in my doctoral thesis<sup>2</sup> I also accomplished a compared analysis of the interpretations offered by the same pianists, but of the *Suite no. 1 (Fantaisie-tableaux) op. 5 for two pianos* by Rachmaninoff, the contrastive considerations discussed herein will be similar, seeing that the pianists present the same characteristics and principles in the execution of these works.

## 2. A brief presentation of the *Symphonic Dances op. 45*

With a pronounced dancing nature, which is highlighted right from the title, the *Symphonic Dances op. 45* for two pianos were composed in the autumn of 1940 in the United States. The piano version was written before the orchestral one (which, as a matter of fact, is also better known), but is just as eloquent, intense, and grandiose in all of its three constituent sections.

*Grosso modo*, the structure of the work is divided as follows: the first dance “resembles a march (in its extreme sections); the second is a fantasy-waltz,..., and the last dance, quite energetic and with a very complex rhythm”<sup>3</sup> presents “two musical ideas, both with sacred origins: the Gregorian theme *Dies Irae* and a motif from the Russian orthodox chant *Blessed be the Lord*.”<sup>4</sup>

“The first dance – *Non allegro* – has a free form created by the juxtaposition of several segments arranged according to the pattern: *Introduction, A, B, C, A<sub>v</sub>* and *Coda*.... The *Introduction* encompasses three generative cells – *x, y, z* – the elements which underlie the construction of this energetic dance.”<sup>5</sup>

The following dance – *Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)* – displays a free form, “rhapsodic in nature, resulting from the combination of juxtaposition and alternation procedures”; it is a “chain of ornamental virtuosity variations with contrasting thematic interpolations.”<sup>6</sup> Its scheme is: *Introduction, A, A<sub>v1</sub>, B, A<sub>v2</sub>, C, I<sub>v</sub>, A<sub>v3</sub>, Coda*.

<sup>2</sup> The chapter is also present in the book published after the defence of our thesis: *Ipostaze stilistice în muzica de cameră cu pian a lui Serghei Rahmaninov – Analize structurale și perspective interpretative* [Stylistic versions in Sergei Rachmaninoff's piano chamber music - Structural analyses and interpretive perspectives] ARTES, Iași, 2017, ISBN 978-606-547-312-6.

<sup>3</sup> Pavel, Gina M. – *Duo-ul pianistic în creația compozitorului Serghei Rahmaninov* [The Piano Duo in Sergei Rachmaninoff's Works], Axis Libris Journal, year VI, no. 21, Galați, December 2013, pp. 42-43, ISSN 1844-9603; I chose to republish here some lines from the article and book mentioned above for a better understanding of the explanations presented in the tables below. Detailed structural analyses may be found in the book quoted above.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 42-43

<sup>5</sup> *Idem* – *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup> Vasiliu, L. – *Articularea și dramaturgia formei muzicale în epoca modernă* [The Articulation and Dramaturgy of the Musical Form in the Modern Age] (1900 - 1920), Editura Artes, Iași, 2002, p. 195.

The last dance – *Lento assai* – *Allegro vivace* – made up of three main sections (A B A<sub>v</sub>), is based on the two sacred motifs mentioned above, noted with  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ .

<i>Ashkenazy - Previn</i>	<i>Argerich - Rabinovich</i>
- the interpretive version chosen is balanced, even; accordingly, the chosen tempo is calm and constant (♩ = 120);	- the performers opt for a more daring, enthusiastic mood; the tempo is more rapid and with obvious fluctuations (♩ = approx. 132);
<b>- the Introduction is rendered:</b>	
- in a constant tempo, over a dynamic arch which is more restrained and balanced in nature, but also very suggestive;	- initially hesitant (by <i>accelerando</i> ), it is only on the third bar that the tempo stabilizes; the phrasing stretches over a dynamic arch which is more daring and ardent, in an obviously foreshadowing mood;
- the interpretive style is <i>Classical</i> in nature, more dignified and disciplined; the <i>dynamics</i> and <i>agogics</i> are simpler, more rigorous and excess-free; accents are clear, but not very <i>sharp</i> ;	- the interpretive style is <i>Romantic</i> in nature, more enthusiastic and daring; the <i>dynamics</i> and <i>agogics</i> chosen are more varied; accents are often shocking, incisive;
<b>- section B:</b>	
- the pianists keep a balanced, sensible tempo, with few liberties;	- the tempo is very free, casual; the pianists choose to <i>settle down</i> at times, even if the score does not mention these moments;
- when <i>Iv</i> (m. 154 – <i>A tempo piu mosso</i> ) enters the scene, preparing the comeback of the main theme - phrase <i>a</i> :	
- a more tempered musical discourse is chosen (all in all, the first dance has 11'20");	- the motion is more alert, passionate; the <i>accelerando</i> more pronounced (overall, the first dance has 10'45");
- in bar 205 Previn opts for the second variant shown in the score (the octave-based theme);	- in bar 205 Rabinovich prefers the first variant (left-hand chords);
<b>- when moving to C major (bar 239):</b>	
- the <i>staccato</i> indication is observed, and the second piano adopts a delicate, discrete attack;	- the <i>staccato</i> attack indicated in the second piano sheet is omitted; comments are made in <i>legato</i> or even in <i>tempo rubato</i> .

Table 1. I – *Non Allegro*

<i>Ashkenazy - Previn</i>	<i>Argerich - Rabinovich</i>
<b>- the waltz-specific accompaniment is rendered:</b>	
- evenly and with a softer, longer attack; the waltz tempo is more settled;	- with fluctuations, strong accents on the first quaver, a very brief <i>staccato</i> ; the waltz tempo is very fluent;
- overall, a balanced progression, with no sudden, but step-by-step changes of tempo;	- the entire musical discourse is very fluent, temperamental, with <i>rallentando</i> and <i>accelerando</i> portions, which makes the music varied and diverse in all of its discourse elements;
<b>- in the sections noted with B (bar 60) and C (bar 102):</b>	
- the pianists prefer the same tempered tempo which allows them to execute the sections based on thirds, fourths and sixths in a distinct and well-articulated manner; the way in which each piano takes over the theme from the other is also very easy to identify;	- many musical comments are carried out rapidly, being barely articulated, creating a feeling of permanent tension.

Table 2. II – *Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)*

<i>Ashkenazy - Previn</i>	<i>Argerich - Rabinovich</i>
- owing to the slower tempo (♩ = 110, although the difference is not significant), the musical text is clearer and easier to distinguish; dialogues are built in a more distinct manner;	- the more rapid tempo (♩ = 120) - typically instrumental, impetuous and ardent - makes the musical dramaturgy progress at a fast pace, creating a feeling of fleetingness;
- accents and <i>sff</i> nuances, although present, are softer and <i>dressed</i> in pedal;	- accents are stronger, louder, and also briefer; following the same idea, the use of the pedal is more concise and economical;
<b>- in the middle part, the lyrical section (<i>Lento assai</i>):</b>	
- the sensible, evenly-measured tempo remains the same as the themes are rendered in a simple and natural manner.	- greater dynamic contrasts which produce more intense effects;
<b>- Coda (guide mark 96, bar 347):</b>	
- the chords from the beginning are slightly elongated with the help of the pedal, and the accompaniment of the first piano will continue in the same fashion; the <i>Dies Irae</i> theme keeps a constant tempo; the final chord is pedal-sustained.	- the chords in the first piano sheet are executed in a brief, dry manner, releasing the pedal after each accent; the <i>Dies Irae</i> motif displays slight <i>settling down</i> moments, stresses on certain sounds and more pronounced accents; the final chord is brief, concise, releasing the pedal.

Table 3. III – *Lento assai – Allegro vivace*

As it may be easily seen, the *Ashkenazy-Previn* duo opts for a more dignified, sensible performance, one which is easily contained and able to render all the musical intentions and dialogues present in the work while highlighting, at the same time, the composer's wonderful contrapuntal writing. This option does not prevent them, however, from endowing the music with diversity and creativity. The couple *Argerich-Rabinovich*, with an exquisite technique and a temperamental, brilliant, discourse, prefers to let feelings run free and *push* the tempo to the extreme, without restraining their execution. Thus, the musical dramaturgy is also easier to follow. This diverging approach in the conception of the two interpretations is also due, in part, to the time frame of the two recording sessions, made 13 years apart (the first performance dates from 1978, the second from 1991), all the four pianists being, however, at the peak of their creative career.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Conclusions

Although the variants discussed in this study are sometimes very different in their approach, they both remain true standards in the interpretation of Rachmaninoff's music, representing two pertinent and noteworthy versions of the composer's universe<sup>8</sup>. Both performances also faced fairly harsh criticism; some voices denounced the first duo's extremely prudent approach that did not match the composer's style, which would have required a more fervent, impetuous execution; other critics did not appreciate the second duo's performance, considering it too aggressive and impulsive, and damaging to the text's musical expression and clarity.

With all this subjectivity specific to the musical art and to human nature, the uniqueness and value of these recordings survives today owing to the interpretive art of each ensemble and to its custom-way of deciphering the musical message, both executions highlighting various aesthetic and technical elements. Listeners and interpreters are free to choose their preferred version according to their own inner experiences while acknowledging and accepting – objectively – the existence of another valuable performance which presents a view that may be totally different from their own. We must also take into account the fact that each interpreter has their own *luggage*, a personal musical, cultural, educational, and emotional *background*, shaped by their own experiences, taste and talent. From all this mix, it is also the performer's duty to strike a balance between technique and emotion, a

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<sup>7</sup> Ashkenazy – 41 years old, Previn – 49, Argerich – 50, Rabinovich – 46.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Argerich has recorded several live performances of this work (with different partners), which may also be found on *Youtube*. It is very interesting to notice how these versions by the same pianist vary in time and in form. The version chosen for this study is mentioned in the bibliography section. At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that, commendably, Argerich is one of the contemporary interpreters who approaches and promotes very often the repertoire devoted to this piano-duo (or to the four-hand duo).

balance which will also help them create an empathic mood that is absolutely indispensable to any valuable interpretation.

On the other side, the assessor – the person drawing conclusions after an audition or making interpretive comparisons – should possess a certain level of musical education and experience as well as a vast musical culture so that his or her observations be honest and top-quality.

Finally, we should recognize that an in-depth analysis of an interpretation is virtually impossible, as it cannot be fully expressed in words when all stylistic parameters are taken into account. Moreover, comparative analyses and studies are not meant to classify interpretations into good and bad examples, but should be a part of the activity of each player or singer: they serve in the sketching of interpretive models and styles which, in turn, may and should guide each artist's personal style. Executing a work is never enough, and its interpretation is nevertheless a *sine qua non* condition. It is our duty to render it as beautifully and authentically as possible!

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