

CHAPTER TWO

MOMENTS MUSICAUX OP. 16

Date of composition: October-December 1896

Dedication: A Monsieur A. Zatayévitsh

Moments Musicaux is a set of six pieces that revisits forms used by earlier composers. These forms include the nocturne, song without words, barcarolle, virtuoso etude, and theme and variations. The set was inspired by Franz Schubert's piano cycle, *Moments Musicaux*, a work that also contains six character pieces. Even though Schubert used an incorrect French spelling (Apel 537), he was the only significant composer prior to Rachmaninoff to use this title to designate a set of pieces (Hancock 1, 4).

Moments Musicaux was dedicated to Alexander Viktorovich Zataevich, a folk song collector and composer Rachmaninoff had met before he composed the work (Norris 65). Even though it was written quickly to replenish money that had been stolen from Rachmaninoff while he had been on a train trip, it is a work of the highest quality (Matthew-Walker). It was composed at the mid-point of his mature compositional piano style and possibly served as a preliminary study for the Preludes op. 23 (Anderson).

Moments Musicaux is longer, possesses thicker textures, and displays more virtuosic writing than Rachmaninoff's earlier works. In addition to being more difficult than *Morceaux de Fantaisie* and *Morceaux de Salon*, it contains an unique and individual style. Within the set are pieces that are accessible to both amateur and concert pianists.

In the dissertation "Rachmaninoff's Six Moments Musicaux, Op. 16, Tradition of the Nineteenth-Century Miniature," Robin Hancock states:

It is clear that Rachmaninoff intended to present each of these pieces as "musical moments" from the nineteenth-century piano repertoire [. . .] He may have recognized that these genres were rapidly disappearing in the face of oncoming trends in modern music, trends he could not or would not personally accommodate. (2)

Andantino in B-flat Minor

Date of composition: 1896

Number of measures: 113

Approximate performance time: 8:30

Andantino (♩ = 72)

This song-like opening piece is the longest of the set. It contains a form that is a “generic hybrid,” combining the nocturne with the theme and variations (Hancock 11). Matthew-Walker suggests that the theme of this work, based on the minor sixth, becomes a motive for the entire set. This theme is chromatic, gently syncopated, and contains the characteristically long melodic line of Rachmaninoff.

This work has been called an extension of the Nocturne op. 10 due to its improvisatory effect (Matthew-Walker). The Andantino is written in three-part form and contains recitative-like sections and a small cadenza. A pause is placed strategically in the piece that is analogous to the pause in the first piece of Schubert’s *Moments Musical*, showing a strong link between the two works (Hancock 12).

The many tempo and meter changes contained in the work require careful consideration to present a cohesive performance. The long melodic lines that appear in cross rhythms with the accompaniment need to be maintained, properly phrased and rhythmically controlled. The accompaniment frequently utilizes double notes that require proper voicing and a true legato sound. Prior to the cadenza a $7/4$ section marked *Con moto* contains a melody that is frequently divided between the hands. Careful manipulation and voicing is necessary to project this melody. The cadenza and the section that follows require a delicate, fast-finger technique.

Allegretto in E-flat Minor

Date of composition: 1896, revised 1940

Number of measures: 131

Approximate performance time: 3:15



This “glittering showpiece” presents an abrupt contrast to the “atmospheric” mood of the first piece of this set (Darrell). In ternary form with a coda, it is a highly chromatic work that contains cascading broken chord figures. Possibly the best known of the set, it contains a long melodic line presented in octaves. This melody is made up of rising and falling two note motives that move primarily in half steps. Along with the melody a thick sextuplet figure is doubled in both clefs, creating a perpetual motion effect.

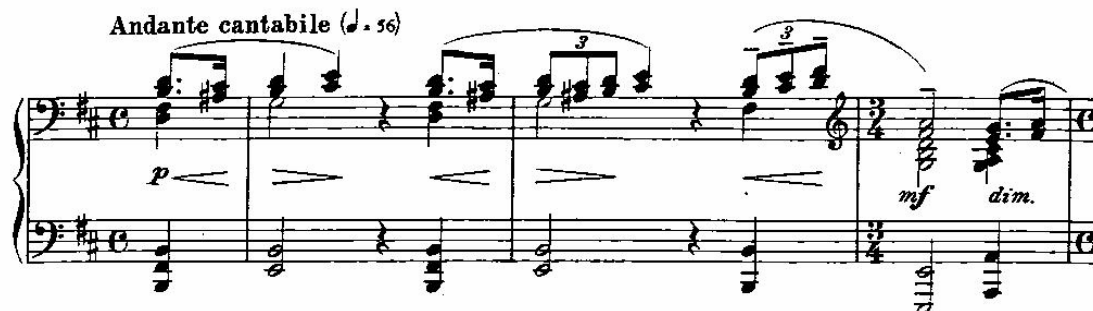
This piece represents a typical nineteenth-century etude. The first section contains the octave motive interspersed with the sextuplet figure in the right hand. The left hand also contains the sextuplet figure, which is continuous and involves large spans and the occasional use of double notes. Even though these passages are idiomatic, they require careful fingering and articulation. The appearance of the octave motive and sextuplets in the right hand creates the need for strong voicing. A supple wrist with sufficient transfer of arm weight, to project the melody, will be helpful in keeping the hand relaxed to avoid tension. The thick texture created by the appearance of the sextuplet figure in both hands requires clear articulation and clean pedaling. The piece employs a wide range of dynamics, from the *pianissimo* at the beginning to the culminating *fortississimo* in the middle section. These dynamics need proper attention to maintain variety within the work. Finally, the endurance that the piece requires demands adequate pacing and a technical approach that stresses relaxation and flexible wrists and arms.

Andante Cantabile in B Minor

Date of composition: 1896

Number of measures: 55

Approximate performance time: 7:00



The “moto perpetuo” character of the second piece is dramatically relieved by this “introspective reverie” (Matthew-Walker). The piece is a lament that combines the forms of a song without words and a funeral march (Hancock 33).

Possibly the most Russian of the set, it utilizes a three-part form. The entire melody of the first section is presented in consecutive thirds, supported by an accompaniment made up of open fifths and octaves. The middle section presents the melody in sixths along with a staccato octave bass, creating the funeral march-like effect (Hancock 40).

The piece is written in the lower register of the piano and possesses a rich, chordal texture. This creates the need for proper voicing and projection while maintaining the dark mood of the piece. Strict adherence to Rachmaninoff's use of rests at the ends of phrases will aid in the pacing of the work. The mood of the piece should be sustained by the use of color, dynamic contrasts, and most importantly a covered sound, that later contrasts with the large resonant sound needed in *forte* and *fortissimo* sections.

Presto in E Minor

Date of composition: 1896

Number of measures: 67

Approximate performance time: 3:00

The image shows the first two systems of the musical score for the Presto in E Minor. The first system is marked 'Presto (♩ = 104)' and 'ff'. It features a chromatic sextuplet in the left hand and a rising quasi-military melody in the right hand. The second system continues the piece with similar textures and dynamics.

This piece is a dramatic work, written in the form of an etude. It is similar to Chopin's "Revolutionary Etude" in its heroic style and extremely taxing, left hand passagework.

The piece is in ternary form with a coda. Its *fortissimo* beginning contains a thick texture consisting of a chromatic, sextuplet figure in the left hand and a "rising quasi-military" idea in the right hand (Matthew-Walker). The dotted note figure in the right hand appears in thirds and contains an opening interval of a sixth. The middle section that contains *pianissimo* dynamics and a thinner texture contrasts with the opening. The return of the opening section is marked by the unison presentation of the sextuplet figure. By utilizing "registral displacement" this restatement presents the figure in a more dramatic form that increases the intensity of the ending (Hancock 47).

Endurance and accuracy are the primary technical problems encountered in this work. The opening three notes of the left hand sextuplet figure contain the span of a tenth that creates a problem with accuracy as well as tension. The pianist should consciously maintain a relaxed, flexible wrist to avoid any problems with tension. A frequent compositional device of Rachmaninoff's, doubling passages to "keep both hands

occupied”, appears in this work and creates difficulties for the right hand in projecting the melody while maintaining even sextuplet passages (Hancock 46). Once again, the pianist must utilize flexible wrists and arms to avoid creating tension in these sections. Close key finger technique to maintain delicacy and evenness in the *pianissimo* middle section will aid in its execution. Other technical problems encountered in the work are sextuplet figures presented in cross rhythms with sixteenth-notes and maintaining accuracy within the “registral displacement” of the sextuplet figure at the end of the piece. Large, sweeping sonorities require a colorful and clean pedal.

Adagio sostenuto in D-flat Major

Date of composition: Unknown date, 1896

Number of measures: 53

Approximate performance time: 4:45

The image displays the first four measures of the musical score for 'Adagio sostenuto in D-flat Major'. The score is written for piano in 3/4 time. The first system (measures 1-2) begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The bass line features triplet figures. The second system (measures 3-4) transitions to a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and includes a sextuplet figure in the bass line. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with chords and single notes.

Hancock’s dissertation includes a chapter on this piece that contains an epilogue referring to a quote from 1Kings 19:12, “and after the fire a still small voice.” The positioning of this contemplative work between the two pieces of “incredible pyrotechnics” that surround it inspired this reference (55).

The piece is similar in nature to a barcarolle, due to its rising and falling accompaniment. It is in ABA form with a chordal theme presented in the first section. This same texture continues in the B section, but the theme becomes more emphatic, with chromatic modulations that increase the drama of the work. The quiet opening mood is recreated with the return of the A section. With this restatement, a descant triplet figure appears in double notes above the melodic line creating a trio effect.

This work is an example of Rachmaninoff’s concern with musical ideas as opposed to virtuosic technical displays. The mood of the piece must be sustained by employing dynamically restrained, even triplet figures that appear in the accompaniment. The chordal texture of the melody requires a singing tone and careful voicing with special attention given to Rachmaninoff’s articulation marks. Short phrases must be projected as long melodic lines. Adherence to the detailed dynamic markings, along with the use of color, will help in projecting contrasts within the work.

Maestoso in C Major

Date of composition: Unknown date, 1896
Number of measures: 102
Approximate performance time: 4:30

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece. At the top, it is marked "Maestoso (♩ = 60)". The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a forte (ff) dynamic marking. The second system shows a section with a 7-measure rest in the right hand, followed by a return to the main theme. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

This finale is written in a form characteristic of a tradition that prevailed throughout the late nineteenth century. Hancock defines this tradition, an “apotheosis or completion of struggle,” and summarizes it:

The final piece or movement of a cycle that is virtuosic and brilliant, employing the entire range of dynamics and sonorities available to the piano, bringing a set of pieces to a glorious conclusion. (57)

This stormy, agitated work contains a “vehemently triple-dotted main theme and only some brief mid-section hazy sunshine [that lightens] the storm before *ffff* thunders return and finally dominate” (Darrell).

Written in the form of an etude, the work includes a thick chordal melody that is doubled in both hands and appears in counterpoint against impetuous thirty-second-note broken chord figures. An eighth-note motive that is double stemmed appears within the thirty-second figure, creating another motivic element. This gives the work three elements that create an extremely thick texture. The *ff* marking at the beginning is maintained throughout the opening section, with only an occasional decrescendo to *mf*. The middle section contrasts with softer dynamics and contains two “false starts” followed by dynamic contrasts that further increase the mounting tension and create an even greater “apotheosis effect” with the return of the opening section (Hancock 60). At this point, the theme is manipulated contrapuntally to present a canonic effect. This “triple counterpoint...is titanic both in size and impact, and in potential for disaster” (Hancock 61). Prior to the coda the thick texture and canon disappear quickly with a *piano* indication. The coda presents a *forte* theme that climaxes to a triumphant ending marked *fff*.

Technical difficulties abound throughout this work. Tremendous strength is required to sustain a full, resonant sound. The continuous thirty-second figure is taxing and requires a flexible wrist. Maintaining this flexibility while dropping the wrist on the

eighth-note motive will aid in reducing tension and in producing desired voicings. Transfer of weight must be employed to produce the sound indicated by the *f* to *ffff* markings. Large leaps that appear in the chordal melody must be carefully gauged and practiced so that the pulse is constant. The thick texture of the work requires clean and colorful pedaling. Maintaining accuracy while handling all of the above matters and presenting a musically cohesive performance remains the ultimate challenge of all (Hancock 61).