



The Power of Russian Music Spirit: Keys as Color in Rachmaninov's Piano *Etudes-Tableaux* Op.33

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Abstract

The intention of this study is to explore the collection of *Etudes-Tableaux* for piano solo by Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) for the composer's unique manipulation of tonal areas as the basis of the Romantic concept of musical color. What is the harmonic linkage that binds these etudes together internally as a set? In order to understand how Rachmaninov uses tonal areas and keys to invoke a special quality, let us first define what we mean by "color." Traditionally, the term "color" refers to the texture and density of sonority, hence sonic color. In this case, the notion of "color" is related to the way tonal areas and keys play a significant role in the musical context by creating a desired atmosphere and an emotional quality. Intrinsic harmonic qualities of tonal regions are essential to Rachmaninov's musical expression, according to which color areas may be seen as tableaux or sonic pictures. The term *Tableau* in Rachmaninov's double title to signify a "picture" or "painting" also strongly reflects the composer's use of musical color to suggest some kind of pictorial connotation.

Key words: Rachmaninov; Piano music; Piano performance; Etudes

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INTRODUCTION

Sergei Rachmaninov, a brilliant Russian pianist and composer of the "Post-Romantic" era, wrote two sets

of *Etudes-Tableaux* which play a significant role in the piano literature. The first set of *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op.33, was written at the composer's family estate of Ivanovka in August and September of 1911, one year after finishing the second set of piano preludes, Op.32. They are exemplary of the composer's personal musical expression, virtuosic technical display, idiomatic approach to piano writing, and use of tonal areas and keys for invoking emotional quality. They are Rachmaninov's landmark compositions as well as the last major piano etudes written in the Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century. As conventionally seen in the Classical and Romantic tradition, harmonic progression is understood as motion from one key area to another in the unfolding and integration of the large structure. However, the primary emphasis of this study is to explore harmonic motion and integration mainly in terms of color, that is to say, as a means toward a different end from that of functionality. In contrast to J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, organized in parallel major and minor keys in ascending chromatic order, or Chopin's *Preludes*, arranged in relative major and minor keys according to the circle of fifths, Rachmaninov's *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op.33, seems to have no systematic logic in the key succession. Instead, these etudes are internally connected through a deeper level of contextual harmonic organization, which may be attributed to the composer's highly individual and characteristically Russian harmonic language. Rather than the pre-compositional assumption in which the logic of tonality existed before the pieces were written, e.g. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Chopin's *Preludes*, Rachmaninov's design and arrangement of keys in the first set of *Etudes-Tableaux* is defined largely by the harmonic contextuality associated with his own musical language and artistic aesthetics.

These nine short virtuosic pieces for piano solo are in essence a combination of etudes, tone pictures, and character pieces. They cannot be considered as ordinary program music, since they contain no extra-musical descriptive meanings. They are in fact absolute musical

pieces that happen to bear a programmatic title collectively. These refined etudes truly achieve the effect of arousing and crystallizing a certain kind of mood within a miniature structure, presenting some of the most extraordinary technical demands of piano playing, and exploring the full range of the instrument's potential resources. Every etude is designed in a unique way, presenting a distinctive abstract tableau associated with a particular mood. Rachmaninov has successfully demonstrated his capacity as an ingenious "tone-painter" through imaginative tonal treatment and widely-diverse coloring in harmony.

Rachmaninov's etude style draws inspiration from the prototypes established by his two non-Russian Romantic forebears, Chopin and Liszt. Like their etudes, the *Etudes-Tableaux* are intended to be performed in concert setting. They also share the same kind of miniature style, luxurious lyricism, artistic integrity, and technical virtuosity. Paying homage to Chopin, Rachmaninov occasionally uses ideas that recall Chopin's works. For instance, the seventh etude in G minor (published as No.4) not only shares the same key as Chopin's First Piano Ballade, but has the identical ending that recalls its figurations. Rachmaninov also inherited Lisztian orchestral keyboard writing centered on the presentation of coloristic sonorities and extreme exploration of the potential of both instrument and performer. The hidden programmatic tendencies of *Etudes-Tableaux* can be attributed to Liszt's influence as well.

In regard to the specific visual imagery associated with each piece, Rachmaninov has remained secretive, saying "I don't believe in the artist that discloses too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what it most suggests" (Bertensson & Leyda, 2002, p.218). However, some evidence that Rachmaninov clearly had programmatic content in mind when he wrote these etudes is suggested in his letter to Ottorino Respighi, who orchestrated five of the *Etudes-Tableaux* in 1930. The unusual double title coined by Rachmaninov further points to the development of poetry and pictures in his music (Aranovskii, 1963, p.21). Therefore, the *Etudes-Tableaux* are essentially "musical evocations of external visual stimuli" (Norris, 1993, p.84). All these statements

demonstrate the latent association with inspired imagery and color in these etudes.

For Alexander Scriabin, who was Rachmaninov's classmate and friend at the Moscow Conservatory from 1884-88, the notion of "color" has been extended even further. From Scriabin's point of view, harmony is the equivalent of musical color beyond its functional role in pitch organization. This notion was extended to the principle of synesthesia, wherein musical keys and harmonies are associated with visual colors based on human sensation and intuition. Although Rachmaninov has remained skeptical about the use of synesthesia in music, Scriabin's perception of harmony may have had some connection with Rachmaninov's coloring potential of harmony, since they both matured within the same educational environment. Rachmaninov's musical color, so relevant to his masterful manipulation of keys, goes beyond harmonic functions and is intended as a means to explore unknown sonorities and to express a wide range of profound human emotions. Alexander Ossovsky, Russian critic and friend of Rachmaninov, offered such a description that "the greatest power in his creative hands and his favorite is harmony—which is full of color, lush, often bold and sometimes even rather tough" (Campbell, 2003, p.176). Rachmaninov's late nineteenth-century harmonic language is also widely known to be exceptionally complicated due to its ingenious amalgamation of Western tonal traditions and Russian musical idioms, and the complexity of his variegated harmonic language has generated considerable analytical challenges.

1. AN OVERLOOK OF THE NINE ETUDES

Before drilling into the theoretical examination of these revolutionary etudes, some historical facts are particularly noteworthy. Although only six *Etudes-Tableaux* were first published as Op. 33, Rachmaninov originally wrote nine in 1911 for the set (listed in Table 1), but decided to withdraw the third, fourth, and fifth etudes shortly before the advertised publication under this opus number by Gutheil and Breitkopf & Härtel in 1914.

Table 1
Rachmaniov *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op.33, Original Version of Nine Etudes

With key outline and date of composition				
No. 1	Allegro non troppo (published as No.1)	F Minor	08/11/1911	
No. 2	Allegro	(published as No.2)	C Major	08/16/1911*
No. 3	Grave-Meno mosso (withdrawn)	C Minor	08/18/1911	
No. 4	Allegro (published as Op. 39 No. 6)		A Minor	09/08/1911
No. 5	Moderato (withdrawn)	D Minor	09/11/1911	
No. 6	Non allegro-Presto (published as No.3)	E-flat Minor	08/23/1911	
No. 7	Allegro con fuoco (published as No.4)	E-flat Major	08/17/1911	
No. 8	Moderato (published as No.5)	G Minor	08/15/1911	
No. 9	Grave (published as No. 6)	C-sharp Minor	08/13/1911	

Of the three withdrawn etudes, No.4 in A minor was subsequently revised and transferred into the second set, Op.39, as No.6. The manuscripts of the other two withdrawn etudes, No.3 in C minor and no. 5 in D minor, were discovered in Moscow posthumously in 1947 and published thereafter by Muzgiz. Rachmaninov took these two etudes out of the *Etudes-Tableaux* collection and never intended them to be published in his lifetime. However, the rhythmic and melodic fragments of these two etudes were inserted into his other works: the closing materials of no. 3 were used fifteen years later in the second movement of the lesser-known Fourth Piano Concerto (1926); in No.5 he made some reference to his First Piano Sonata (1908). The inclusion of the same or identical musical materials in other works could be a reasonable explanation for Rachmaninov's withdrawal of the two etudes, but no record provides a definite answer for why he made such a change to the opus. Furthermore, the very first publication of Op.33 in 1914 included only the six standard etudes. The complete edition that includes the withdrawn third and fifth etudes did not exist until 1950, published by Leeds Music Corporation of New York. In order to trace the composer's most original thoughts in his very first attempt to compose these etudes as a collection, thereby realizing his "logical" arrangement

of key sequence, this study will concern itself with all nine etudes.

Since no logic can be found on the surface, an overview of the keys of the nine etudes evokes a number of questions. Why is it not consistently based on the circle of fifths or relative keys as in the J. S. Bach and Chopin? Is there a so-called "logic" in the tonal plan which renders cyclic coherence to the set? If the answer is positive, is the perceived logic disrupted to a certain extent after the composer made revisions to the collection? The intriguing organization of keys should lead us to discover how the composer's use of tonal areas interplays with his strong interest in color.

2. HOW DOES THE MUSIC KEY PLAY AS "COLOR" TO EXPRESS EMOTION?

2.1 Etude Op.33 No.1

It is known that Rachmaninov has an affinity with minor keys, which accounts for the sorrowful, dark, melancholic, and even desperate sentiments often expressed in his music. Among all the *Etudes-Tableaux* first intended as Op.33, seven of the nine are in a minor key. The collection opens with a march-like etude in F minor featured by alternating hands and variable time signature throughout.

Example 1: Etude-Tableaux in F Minor, Op. 33, No. 1 (mm. -7)

The image shows the first seven measures of the etude. The top system (measures 1-4) is marked 'Allegro non troppo molto marcato' and 'Piano'. The right hand has a melody with a fermata over the final note, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment. Annotations below the staff indicate 'F polymodality' and 'i V/iv iv vii V/iv'. The bottom system (measures 5-7) shows the continuation of the piece, with a red box highlighting the key signature change to 'B flat minor' and the mode 'F phrygian'.

The left hand outlines the F natural-minor (Aeolian) from the start, the chordal accompaniment in the right hand first furnished with the complete tonic triad to reinforce the tonality. After three beats, however, the key slightly weakens the tonic of F by moving to a local V/iv to iv (F-A-C to B \flat -D \flat -F). The appearance of G \flat (m.4) implies a potential harmonic shift to the Phrygian mode on F. The A \natural in the bass, as leading tone to the subdominant, is a significant recurrence of the same harmonic function in m.1, beat 4. As suggested by the G \flat , F Phrygian

eventually takes over the Aeolian mode (m.5), the subdominant area of B \flat minor arising in importance. It colors the F polymodal mixture (F Phrygian/Aeolian) and further destabilizes the functional significance of the tonic F. Due to the combination of the polymodality and microscopic coloring of the subdominant region, the succession of tones used in the opening section (shown in Table 2) produces a chromatic orientation. Furthermore, the A \natural , as part of the voice leading together with F and G \flat , linearly implies the presence of the harmonic-minor

in B \flat (F G \flat A B \flat). Thus, Rachmaninov's marvelous amalgamation of modality and tonality creates an unusually complicated and fascinating harmonic syntax.

Table 2
Tonal Succession In First Four Measures of *Etude-Tableaux*, Op. 33, No. 1

F polymodality	F G \flat	G A \flat	(A) B \flat	/	C D \flat	E \flat F
F Aeolian	F	G A \flat B \flat	/	C D \flat	E \flat F	
F Phrygian	F G \flat A \flat B \flat	/	C D \flat	E \flat	F	

The dominant chord (m.8, beat 1) brings back the tonic priority of F. Instead of moving to F minor as in a

Example 2: *Etude-Tableaux* in F Minor, Op. 33, no. 1 (mm. 8-10)

V/Fm F phrygian V/Fm F phrygian

The recapitulation is followed by a new section (ex.3) which emotionally varies from the march-like quality of the rest of the piece. Rachmaninov creates this dramatic change in musical character partly by a moment

Example 3: *Etude-Tableaux* in F Minor, Op. 33, no. 1 (mm. 34-37)

The earlier C-dominant harmony is now transformed into an A \flat seventh chord with augmented fifth (A \flat -C-E-G) in the left hand. This chord can also be interpreted as a combination of two triads, one in F minor with the absence of the tonic note F ([]-A \flat -C), the other in C major (C-E-G). The omission of the tonic reduces the tonal gravity toward F, thereby stressing the implied bichordal combination in this tetrachord. This is a modal-like fusion, which reinforces the dominant major sonority embellished with tonic minor sparkles. The simultaneous juxtaposition of these two primary harmonies in the functional tonal system not only produces a unique harmonic color and modal sound, but enhances their inner connection within the tonal hierarchy. As illustrated in ex. 3, this juxtaposition still has to compete

with the compelling modal elements. Nevertheless, the strong impression of the C major chord is successfully created, anticipating and preparing for the tonality of the following etude. After undergoing constant harmonic alternations and metric shifts, the coda finally achieves harmonic stability and emotional serenity. The coda uses tonic prolongation extensively and pedal tone in the bass to enhance the establishment of the home tonality, while inserting chromatic colorings in the inner voices. This etude is finally concluded with a descending F natural-minor (Aeolian) scale in both hands, with a mischievous accented "wrong" note (B \natural) which exemplifies the composer's Russian sense of humor.

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By investigating the first etude in the opus, one realizes that Rachmaninov has demonstrated his unusual compound syntax of harmonies, which unite Western and Russian musical practices. This successfully establishes his individual means of achieving tonality which stands away from but next to tradition. It is his cultural background that greatly influenced his way of inheriting Romantic music idioms and encouraged him to create his own nationalistic musical identity. Although his music is tonal and diatonic, it very often projects unusual modal qualities, by means of the juxtaposition of associated tonal regions and purposeful weakening of primary skeletal harmonic tones. The recognized modal component also discloses the composer's interest in Russian liturgical traditions and folk music.

2.2 Etude Op.33 No.2

As can be observed in the entire opus, Rachmaninov often blends major and minor keys, either closely or remotely related, in his marvelously creative way to render cohesion to distinct tonal areas. This blending eventually contributes to the cyclic unity of the harmonic design. The

mixing of major and minor modes usually results in the modal quality of his music. The second etude, supposedly in C major, is a telling example. It contains this kind of modal spice that comes from constant fluctuation between tonic major and minor keys. Its ethereal beginning is unveiled with an open-fifth on C, intentionally omitting the third degree of the major or minor triad. This creates a fair amount of tonal ambivalence at the outset. Furthermore, the same sort of mysterious opening gesture that centers on repeated tonic fifth to produce ambiguity of tonal focus, can also be found in the withdrawn D minor etude, no. 5. After listening to the coda of the first etude, which persistently stresses the tonic harmony of F minor, the opening of the second etude truly sounds like a continuation in the dominant area. The following three measures (ex.4), instead of establishing the home tonality of C major, surprisingly outline the C natural-minor scale. This key is reinforced by the Italian augmented-sixth chord and obtrusively asserts its minor tendency. This kind of frequent hovering between major and minor modes is maintained throughout the work.

Example 4: *Etude-Tableaux* in C Major, Op. 33, no. 2 (mm.1-4)

As in the first etude, the beginning theme returns immediately before introducing new materials that center on sequential development and continue to lean toward the minor side in the tonal sounding. The new melodic figure, an ascending scalar pattern, converses with thematic fragments introduced at the beginning. This series of sequential motion eventually arrives at a complete C major chord (ex. 5-a, m.18). Instead of confirming the key of C major, however, the tonal focus immediately turns to a climatic tonal juxtaposition, which evokes harmonic piquancy of exotic colors. The music is momentarily static in harmonic movement, preparing for the subsequent dramatic climax intensified by sequential and chromatic motions.

As shown in ex. 5, the modal synthesis (C D E F G A \flat B \flat C), which combine the tetrachords (C D E F and G A \flat B \flat C) of both tonic major and minor keys, generates this non-diatonic folk mode. This mode (ex. 5-b) is one of the seven rotations of a scale family found in Eastern European folk music. We are presenting the Rotation on B \flat as Rotation 1 because of the importance of this modal form in folk sources, and Rachmaninov's excerpt in this example unfolds the second Rotation on C. Bartók lists this mode as Table 2 in his study of Romanian folk music (Bartók, 20). The seven tables are systematically outlined by Elliott Antokoletz (27).

The B \natural (ex. 5-a, mm.18-19, left hand) can be interpreted as a by-product of this modal mixture.

Consequently, this hybrid form considerably obscures the tonality of the tonic major because of its constant borrowings of the parallel minor. Moreover, further investigation unveils the fact that this non-diatonic folk mode corresponds with the common diatonic scale in that it contains the same number of whole tones and half tones

of the diatonic scale (2 2 1 2 2 2 1), with a rearranged intervallic sequence (2 2 2 1 2 1 2). In addition, the eighth etude in G minor, published as no. 5, is another telling example that demonstrates the composer's inclination toward using non-diatonic folk modes (as discussed later).

Example 5: Etude-Tableaux in C Major, Op. 33, no. 2 (mm.17-20)

a.

b. Non-Diatonic (N.D.) Folk Mode:

Intervals:	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	1
Rotation 1:	B ♭	C	D	E	F	G	A ♭	(B ♭)					
Rotation 2:		C	D	E	F	G	A ♭	B ♭	(C)				
Rotation 3:			D	E	F	G	A ♭	B ♭	C	(D)			
Rotation 4:				E	F	G	A ♭	B ♭	C	D	(E)		
Rotation 5:					F	G	A ♭	B ♭	C	D	E	(F)	
Rotation 6:						G	A ♭	B ♭	C	D	E	F	(G)
Rotation 7:							A ♭	B ♭	C	D	E	F	G (A ♭)

A brief cadenza in the coda (mm.35-38), marked *veloce*, releases the emotional tension accumulated in the climax by support of dynamics. It contains a sixteenth-note cascade that prominently features the arpeggiated tonic fifth (C G). This interval harmonically recalls the initial gesture. However, the open-fifth sonority is now colored by two harmonies particularly favored by the composer—augmented-sixth and Neapolitan chords. Rachmaninov's imaginative exploitation of the tonal area of these two chords can be seen frequently in other etudes as well.

The final measures of the work (ex. 6) remain tonally ambiguous. The Neapolitan sixth chord, suggested in the cadenza, is presented in a more chordal texture. A prominent cadential placement of the B ♭ dominant harmony (m. 40, beat 1), dominant-seventh of E ♭ major, implies that the basic key of C is in the minor mode, i.e., in terms of the relative major/minor key concept. Chromatic voice leading from the B ♭ dominant-seventh chord to the dominant-seventh of C finally leads to a full-fledged C major chord to produce a long-awaited authentic cadence in the home key.

Example 6: Etude-Tableaux in C Major, Op. 33, no. 2 (mm.39-42)

In this etude, the complete tonic harmony that can be identified with certainty as C major makes only brief appearances at two cadential closures (mm.18 and 29) in addition to the final cadence. It is noticeable that Rachmaninov attempts to place the minor sonority in the foreground throughout the work for the purpose of tone painting. His witty use of the tonic fifth (C G), which omits the key-defining third degree of the triad, smooth out the otherwise jagged shift between the tonic major and minor keys. Because of the irresistible minor tendency, this etude by no means sounds bright or joyful, a mood often associated with a composition written in a major key. It is rather melancholic and yearning, as if continuously searching for a solution that can escape from haunting gloominess. This solution is not given until the very end, where the tonic major harmony is finally confirmed and established in its entirety and clears out all the struggled uneasiness. By looking into this etude, one can make a conclusion that Rachmaninov has created his modernistic harmonic imprint by blurring the boundary between diatonic tonality and non-diatonic modality spiced by oriental flavor, availing himself extensively of the elements derived from Eastern European folk-music idioms. The seamless integration of Romantic tonal practice with modal influences also highlights the composer's nationalistic musical identity and makes his music sound distinctively Russian. The constant tonal ambiguity in this etude also harmonically prepares for

the next etude written in the parallel minor, which further continues and extends this major-minor blending. The tonal linkage between these two successive etudes is thus ingeniously created by the composer's strong interest in mixing parallel major and minor tonal areas.

2.3 Etude Op.33 No.3

The posthumously-published etude no. 3, in C minor, is a mournful elegy which features an unusual tonal scheme resulting from the major-minor juxtaposition. The ominous initial theme, full of darkness and lamentation, starts off in the home key of C minor but never gets a chance to be recapitulated. The figuration of tonic fifth (C-G) appears in nearly every bar, recalling the distant bell sound and meanwhile highlighting the tonal gravity toward C. Furthermore, the composer's lifelong attraction to the sound of Russian church bells, which he often heard in Moscow during his childhood days, is clearly perceptible in many of his works. A four-measure transitional passage (mm.14-17), which outlines a descending C minor scale from the dominant to the tonic in the bass, leads to an unexpected arrival at the tonic major. The subsequent musical event (ex.7) presents a drastically contrasting character of overflowing Romantic lyricism with a broader tempo, subdued dynamic expression, and arpeggiated texture. This change in both tonality and musical presentation is absolutely dramatic and breathtaking.

Example 7: *Etude-Tableaux* in C Minor, Op. 33, no. 3 (mm.18-21)

Because of this sudden key change to the parallel major, the warmth of the second theme emotionally expels the funereal atmosphere and demonic character of the opening. Nevertheless, the bell tone which first appears as tonic fifth in the high register continues as tonic octaves in the bass throughout the remainder of the etude. It also illustrates Rachmaninov's favorite device of the pedal tone, which is a characteristically idiomatic feature in his

music. Motivated by his fanatic interest in tonal coloring, Rachmaninov not only plays around tonic major and minor keys, but also uses the relative minor keys to enrich the fabric of major sonority. For instance, after arriving at C major and confirming its tonality for a moment, the harmonic progression deviates to a tonal superimposition (ex.8), which juxtaposes the tonic and the supertonic harmonies, undermining the tonal stability and producing

unusually colorful dissonant clashes. The supertonic area is therefore superimposed over the tonic bass pedal and gets micro-tonicized on top of a solid tonal foundation. The B \flat and C \sharp are clearly borrowings from D

harmonic-minor, which significantly enhances the minor quality in this hybrid harmonic form. The sustained bell-tone octave in the bass continues to hold the tonal focus toward C.

Example 8: Etude-Tableaux in C Minor, Op. 33, no. 3 (mm. 27-29)



2.4 Etude Op.33 No.6

The superimposition of major and minor, the tonal-modal mixture, and the micro-tonicizing of various scale degrees within a given diatonic scale all lead to complex and advanced chromaticism in Rachmaninov's music, which becomes a significant part of his most powerful expressive resources and an idiomatic feature of his style. As can be recognized, the voice leading and tonal materials in all the *Etudes-Tableaux* are invariably elaborated by chromatic procedures. The fourth etude in A minor, revised and transferred into the second set of *Etudes-Tableaux* as Op.39, No.6, is a perfect example which illustrates Rachmaninov's extensive use of chromatic scales and harmonic motion. In his letter to Respighi, who later orchestrated this etude, Rachmaninov divulged the fact that his inspirational source of this work was the fairy tale about *Little Red Riding Hood and the Grey Wolf*. The

music dramatically reflects the scenes associated with the story, such as the hectic chase and the threatening growling of the wolf. The composer's considerable interest in chromaticism is revealed in the very opening, where the introduction consists of repeated chromatic scalar figures and tonic chords. Although the texture is imbued with intense and dramatic chromatic events throughout, the tonal context is still clearly presented and maintained by means of outlining the skeletal harmonic tones in the bass. For instance, at the beginning of the *Presto* section (ex.9), the upper voice undergoes extreme harmonic undulation by half steps, while the left hand firmly dwells on the C \sharp minor chord. Furthermore, the tonic prolongation, so characteristic of Rachmaninov's musical language, can also be found consistently in this highly chromatic etude and contributes to the presentation of tonal structure.

Example 9: Etude-Tableaux in A Minor, Op. 39, no. 6 (mm.59-61)



Ultimately, it is recognizable that Rachmaninov's chromaticism is still subsumed under the post-romantic tonal procedure and distinguished from the more modernistic approach of Scriabin. As Blair Johnston claims in his dissertation, Rachmaninov always absorbs his complicated chromatic events into the tonal system in order to prolong tonal functions (29). In other words, chromaticism has been employed by him as a means of enriching and elaborating the common tonal palette, and all the chromatic threads are invariably interwoven

within the tonal fabric in an organic way. The resultant dissonances create a coloristic layering of sound on top of the progressive harmonic base. The introductory materials (mm. 1-5) are fully recycled to close the work, echoing with the opening gesture and further reinforcing the tonic sonority in A minor.

2.5 Etude Op.33 No.5

The fifth etude in D minor, one of the two posthumous etudes that were removed completely from the collection,

starts ethereally with repeated tonic fifth in arpeggiated figuration, thereby making an audible association between notes D and A (ex.10-a). While the affirmative ending in A minor of the fourth etude is still haunting in the air, the transition between the two etudes sounds fairly spontaneous, since the opening emphasis on the tonic tones of A minor and D minor in the fifth etude audibly glues two works together. This latent tonal connection between the two keys is further extended at the beginning of the recapitulation (ex.10-b), reminiscent of the tonality of the previous etude. In this instance, the introductory tonic fifth (D A), first appearing as an incomplete D minor triad, is now restated down a fourth to A minor. It gradually weaves more voices into the texture to embrace

b. (mm. 13-17)



the tonic harmonies of both tonal regions. In addition, the noticeable recurrence of Neapolitan harmony in this work may provide some hints with regard to the key of the following etude.

**Example 10: Etude-Tableaux in A Minor, Op. 33, no. 5
a. (mm.1-3)**



2.6 Etude Op.33 No.6 (No.3)

The sixth etude (published as No.3) is written in the key of E ♭ minor, a half steps away from the key of the fifth etude. This intervallic movement in the key sequence could have some association with the linear chromaticism strikingly prevalent in this work. One can find that Rachmaninov's persistent fondness of chromaticism affects not only the vertical establishment of a harmonic base, but also the horizontal treatment of melodic materials (Cunningham 41). The latter can also be interpreted as embellishing chromaticism, which differs from the former functional chromaticism and often

does not affect the harmonic foundation. The sixth etude illustrates sufficient abundance of sweeping chromatic lines that usually lead from one tonal area to another. After a two-bar introduction which foreshadows the primary harmonic progression in the entire etude (ex.11), the cascading semi-quavers in the top voice are luxuriously treated with chromatic melodic embellishment, which revolves around the principle harmony of E ♭ minor. In this case, all the dissonant nonharmonic tones, used frequently by the composer, arise as decorative sonorities to explore colorful tone shadings and contribute crucial significance to the musical expressivity.

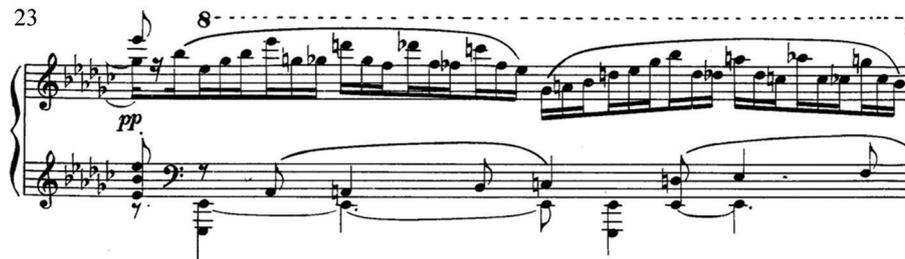
Example 11: Etude-Tableaux in E-flat Minor, Op. 33, no. 6 (mm.1-3)



These electrifying whirlwind figures of chromatic delineation roll up and down the piano registers. Meanwhile, the left hand plays an important role in delineating the tonal context beneath the sheer profusion of chromatic events in the right hand. The bell tone of tonic-note E ♭ often rings repeatedly in the bass

as pedal point. In the entire coda (starting from m.23, ex.12), the harmonic interest concentrates exclusively on the prolongation of the tonic harmony. The concurrent chromatic threads in the middle and upper voices continue to serve as musical embellishments which contain no harmonic function.

Example 12: Etude-Tableaux in E ♭ Minor, Op. 33, no. 6 (m. 23)



The conclusion of the sixth etude recalls the introductory ideas presented in the first two measures and finally settles on the tonic chord in the left hand, while the right hand chromatically elaborates the fifth degree (B ♭) with the boundary of the augmented-sixth chord (C ♭ A ♯). This conclusive statement, which closes peacefully in the tonic harmony of

E ♭ minor, leads to the seventh etude written in the parallel major.

2.7 Etude Op.33 No.7

It is known that the seventh etude is one of five chosen etudes later orchestrated by Respighi, and Rachmaninov's letter to Respighi discloses the fact that this work was composed under his inspiration of a scene at a fair (Brady 191). Rachmaninov's confession about the secretive programmatic source corresponds perfectly to the vibrant and festive atmosphere revealed in this etude. The key change from tonic minor of the previous etude to the major mode and the energetic dynamic expression in

the fanfare-like opening to create a stunning contrast in both musical character and tonal sounding from the start. This contrast is dramatized by the repeated harmonic emphasis on the bottom part of the tonic triad (E ♭ -G) in the opening, which affirmatively declares and confirms the major quality (ex.13). This incomplete tonic triad with the omission of the fifth alternates with the submediant and mediant harmonies, which are the other two chords that hold primary harmonic significance in this work. Since the incomplete tonic chord is repeated every beat in the opening measures and bears such an importance in both note value and dynamic level, it truly sounds like a standing on the tonic with some harmonic fill-in. In addition, one could recognize that this recurrent interval of major third is also part of the submediant chord (C-E ♭ -G). Therefore, it plays a double harmonic role simultaneously. The mediant harmony (G-B ♭ -D), which makes a brief appearance at the beginning (m.2, beat 2), anticipates the secondary key area in the subsequent recapitulation.

Example 13: Etude-Tableaux in E ♭ Major, Op. 33, no. 7 (mm.1-3)



The cadential closure of the opening section (ex.14, m. 8) consists of a dominant pedal in the left hand and fast alternation of tonic chord and dominant seventh chords of both E ♭ minor and G major in the right hand. Therefore, the composer harmonically colors the sustained dominant octave with several embellishing chords. The subsequent tonic arrival (mm.9-10) is first furnished with a sonorous chordal texture, but gradually drops out the bottom voices until it retains only the two upper chord tones (G-B ♭). This interval of the minor third initiates the recapitulation (starting from m.11), in which the entire fanfare-like opening statement is shifted up a third to

emphasize the upper part of the tonic harmony. As with the initial major third (E ♭ -G) which is shared by both tonic and submediant harmonies, this interval of minor third (G-B ♭) also contains a dual functional meaning in the tonal structure, since it not only preserves its harmonic significance as part of the tonic triad, but also foreshadows the potential modulation to the mediant area of G minor. However, an unexpected G major chord (m.14) turns out to be the ultimate harmonic arrival of the recapitulated opening statement, and the remainder of the recapitulation remains in the key of G major.

Example 14: Etude-Tableaux in E ♭ Major, Op. 33, no. 7 (mm.8-14)

The exuberant coda further extends the opening harmonic progression of three chords (I iii vi), while the vibrant tonic bell-tones are heard consistently in the bass. The ending phrase (ex.15, mm.55-56) declares these three foreground chords in a straightforward

cadence, with the addition of a dominant seventh chord that helps to establish an authentic cadence. The mediant harmony, which now precedes the cadential dominant, prepares for the G minor tonality of the following etude.

Example 15: Etude-Tableaux in E ♭ Major, Op. 33, no. 7 (mm.53-56)

2.8 Etude Op.33 No.8

The eighth etude (published as no.5), a nocturne-like song without words, expresses an emotional quality of sorrowful lyricism, primarily due to the falling melodic figuration that can be heard throughout (ex.16). It produces a drastic contrast in musical character after the preceding festive etude in E ♭ major. In the first melodic presentation (m.3, right hand), the flatted second degree (A ♭) and the leading tone (F#), with the tonic-note (G) as a passing tone in between, creates a linear chromatic motion and

reveals the melancholic expression. It is recognizable that these two embellishing tones (A ♭ and F#) are derived from the augmented-sixth chord, and the composer harmonically elaborated them with the Neapolitan and dominant seventh chords respectively. Furthermore, the Neapolitan harmony, which makes recurrent appearances in this etude, suggests the tonal implication of Phrygian mode. This initial melodic motive is remarkably prevalent in the entire work and occasionally treated with some variants in both rhythm and pitch designation.

Example 16: Etude-Tableaux in G Minor, Op. 33, no. 8 (mm.3-5)

The beginning of the cadenza-like middle section (ex.17) is another telling example of Rachmaninov's use of the non-

diatonic folk mode influenced by Eastern European musical tradition. The modal scale family has been fully addressed

earlier in this study during the discussion of the second etude in C major (ex.5). According to that basic scale formula,

the melody of this passage presents the fourth rotation in a descending direction (see accents).

Example 17: Etude-Tableaux in G Minor, Op. 33, No. 8 (mm. 26-27)

a.



b. Non-Diatonic (N.D.) folk mode:

Intervals:	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	1
Rotation 1:	C	D	E	F#	G	A	B ♭	(C)					
Rotation 2:		D	E	F#	G	A	B ♭	C	(D)				
Rotation 3:			E	F#	G	A	B ♭	C	D	(E)			
Rotation 4:				F#	G	A	B ♭	C	D	E	(F#)		

This improvisatory modal passage, which features rapid hand alternations that require exquisite dexterity, surprisingly arrives at a C# minor chord with outgoing passion and rising emotional fervor (ex.18, m. 30). The way Rachmaninov gets to that remote harmonic region is astoundingly creative. The German augmented-sixth chord (A ♭ -C-E ♭ -F#), concealed linearly in the thirty-second-notes, is transformed into the dominant-seventh (G#-B#-D#-F#) of C# minor in enharmonic spelling. Therefore, its functional identity is redefined by the harmonic context, in order to prepare for the unexpected harmonic arrival that marks the climactic point. In

this respect, this arpeggiated chord plays the role of a pivot, which serves simultaneously as the functional component of a harmonic progression associated with two key areas (G minor and C# minor). Accordingly, a tonal bridge between these two distantly related keys is created in such a highly imaginative way, enhanced by a modal transitional passage between these two tonalities. This unexpected harmonic excursion is effective in making a tonal connection, an internal linkage for the last two etudes of the collection. The coda (mm.36-45) returns to the home key of G minor and recycles the nocturne-like materials introduced at the beginning.

Example 18: Etude-Tableaux in G minor, Op. 33, No. 8 (mm.29-31)



The dramatic ending (mm.43-45) consists of a G harmonic-minor scale in both hands that sweep over a three-octave range. As mentioned earlier, this cadence contains a noticeable reference to the coda of Chopin's First Piano Ballade in G minor.

The intervallic movement by tritone from G minor to C# minor, suggested in the key sequence of the last two etudes, is of particular importance in the ninth etude, which is also the last one in the collection. This work (published

as No.6), marked *Grave*, projects intense solemnity from the start (ex.19), partly by its minor mode and partly by the constant emphasis on tritone. The remainder of the etude continues to stress the harmonic inclination toward the tritone in the melody, along with chromatic threads in the inner voice. Beyond all of these widely diversified events in the figuration, a solid tonal bass is invariably maintained, tonic prolongation declaring its conspicuous presence.

Example 19: *Etude-Tableaux* in C# minor, Op. 33, No. 9 (mm.1-3)



After Rachmaninov's removal of the three etudes from the collection, the tonal unity of the set was inevitably altered. The second etude in C major is now directly followed by the sixth etude in E b minor, which creates a stunning contrast in both tonality and musical presentation. As a consequence, the fully established C major chord, which ends the second etude, leads to the incomplete tonic chord of the sixth etude in E b minor (E b -G b). The tritone relation of notes C and G b is harmonically implied in this transition between the two works—the C as key of the second etude, the G b as the third degree of E b minor of the sixth etude. This hidden tritone relationship foreshadows the intervallic movement in the key sequence of the last two etudes. In addition, the final version of the fourth etude in A minor, after some revisions, was transferred into Op.39. It does fit better in the second collection in terms of the more somber mode of expression, more substantial length, and increased interest in chromaticism.

CONCLUSION

A thoroughly insightful investigation into Rachmaninov's tonal language in the *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op.33, leads to the conclusion that the key sequence in these etudes is a revelation of the composer's musical personality and artistic esthetics. Each etude anticipates, recalls, or creates a certain connection to the tonal area of the surrounding etudes. The intervallic progression in the key sequence also provides some implication with regard to the composer's harmonic concerns, particularly a preference for the tritone.

The tonal-modal mixture, nonfunctional harmonies, and chromatic orientation all accounts for the striking

complexity of Rachmaninov's harmonic practice. This contributes to the crystallization of his thoroughly individual harmonic syntax, which ingeniously amalgamates European Romantic tonal tradition and Russian modal structure. As a composer, Rachmaninov developed and extended the traditional Western tonal practice established by his predecessors toward his own direction, and attempted to explore the coloristic potentials of different tonal regions to create a full-fledged and brilliant musical expression. His creative integration of the tonal and modal ingredients also establishes his nationalistic musical identity. Moreover, while extracting iridescent harmonic colorings through the use of modality, non-functional tones, and chromaticism which greatly obscures and even destructs the diatonic-tonal syntax, Rachmaninov always maintained a solid and coherent establishment of the tonal areas and preserved the primary laws of the traditional tonal procedure. Musicologist Joseph Yasser remarks that "He (Rachmaninov) succeeded...in enriching idiomatically the common harmonic language and, what is noteworthy, all this within the restrictive frame of an integrally preserved principle of tonality" (25). As one can observe in all of the nine etudes, the underlying reliance on the nineteenth-century common-practice tonal models is readily perceptible. The authentic harmonic formulas, such as Dominant-Tonic, continue to hold a prominent place. On the one hand, Rachmaninov travels freely between tonal and modal domains, undermining the stability of tonal organization and altering the conventional harmonic progression. On the other hand, in order to establish the underlying tonal base, he always prolongs a core harmony, usually in the bass. This is often associated with his love of bell-like

sonorities, the prolongation serving the tonal integrity of the piece.

In the collection of *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op.33, Rachmaninov united the musical genre of *Etude* and the artistic form of *Tableaux* for the first time, demonstrating his marvelously skillful integration of virtuosic piano techniques, musical expressivity, and compositional creativity. The harmonic web, which strides across both tonal and modal domains, lays a foundation for the musical pictures that Rachmaninov attempts to paint on the canvas of silence. This is facilitated by his imaginative design of rhythm, phrasing, dynamics, and formal structure. Instead of offering descriptive titles or musical narrative, in contrast to program music, Rachmaninov uses metaphoric compositional techniques to reflect his emotions of a broad expressive range, which allows the listener an even greater freedom of imagination. From a performer's point of view, these revolutionary works illustrate many leading features that characterize the composer's highly idiomatic writing for the instrument, and reinforce the inseparability between the virtuosic technical equipment and the ultimate goal of musical expressivity. Therefore, the genre of piano etude is given a new artistic significance, as its designation no longer refers to instructive exercises intended mainly for the acquisition of technical achievements. These *Etudes-Tableaux*, adored by performers and audiences, are among the most brilliant

and invaluable gemstones in the treasury of piano literature.

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