A Performer's Perspective on the Technical Challenges and Interpretive Aspects of Sergei Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux Opus 39

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A PERFORMER’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES AND INTERPRETIVE ASPECTS OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF’S ETUDES-TABLEAUX OPUS 39

By
Marina Radiushina

A LECTURE RECITAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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A PERFORMER’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES AND INTERPRETIVE ASPECTS OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF’S ETUDES-TABLEAUX OPUS 39

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The focus of this project is the performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39. The purpose is to provide interested performers with a clear understanding of the inner workings of these compositions and to address many problems of interpretation and technical challenges of the *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39. The author’s goal is to offer creative interpretive explanations and technical solutions to the existing pianistic problems and to aid a performer in his/her approach to learning in order to create a credible and skillful performance.

The study makes use of the multi-faceted opportunities that are appropriate to the lecture-recital format. In addition to the research presented in the script, the author incorporated a Power Point™ slide presentation (copies included with this document), audio excerpts from CD performances, live demonstrations on the piano, and a live performance of selected *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39 (all included on the DVD which supplements this document).

The script includes a brief biographical sketch of Rachmaninoff, followed by the two research topics of performance practice, interpretive aspects and technical challenges. The Power Point™ presentation serves to enhance the content and to facilitate the explanations of some of the topics of the lecture. This is especially relevant when
incorporating excerpts from music scores and examples of paintings. The CD audio excerpts and live demonstrations are intended to illustrate the details of the compositional and stylistic features and performance practice. Finally, the live performance of the *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39, and its audio/video documentation on DVD, confirms the study’s research findings.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the endless contribution of my committee members who guided my work from its inception to completion. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Wilson, who tirelessly supervised every step of my progress; to Dr. Floyd, who gave me invaluable advice; to Dr. Cooper, who has been a true inspiration for this lecture; and to Professor Davis, who encouraged and supported me every step of the way.
# CONTENTS

**LIST OF EXAMPLES** ........................................................................................................ vi

**LECTURE DOCUMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening Remarks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic and Purpose of Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic Number 1: Stylistic Features and Performance Practice</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergei Rachmaninoff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachmaninoff – the Pianist</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude: Origins and Developments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Etudes-Tableaux</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmatic Elements of the Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic Number 2: Interpretive Aspects and Technical Challenges</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1 in C minor</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2 in A minor</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 3 in F-sharp minor</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 4 in B minor</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 5 in E-flat minor</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 7 in C minor</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 8 in D minor</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 9 in D major</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ............................................................................................................. 38
Appendix A: LECTURE RECITAL OUTLINE .................................................. 42
Appendix B: LIST OF POWER POINT SLIDES .......................................... 44
Appendix C: POWER POINT SLIDES .......................................................... 46
# LIST OF EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Number/Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Konstantin Somov <em>Portrait of Sergei Rachmaninoff</em> ...................................</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sergei Rachmaninoff performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra .......................</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Arkady Rylov <em>Thundering River</em> ......................................................................</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Isaak Levitan <em>Autumn Day in Sokolniki</em> .......................................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Isaak Levitan <em>Spring, High Waters</em> ..................................................................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Isaak Levitan <em>Over Eternal Peace</em> ...............................................................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Isaak Levitan <em>Golden Autumn</em> .......................................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Isaak Levitan <em>Silence</em> ..................................................................................</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 2, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Arkady Rylov <em>In the Blue Expanse</em> ...................................................................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 3, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 <em>Etude-Tableau</em> Op. 39 No. 4, Musical Excerpt ..............................................</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 4, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 22
27 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 5, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 26
28 Zuzanna Celej *the Little Red Riding Hood* ........................................... 27
29 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 28
30 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 29
31 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 30
34 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 8, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 33
35 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 8, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 34
36 Boris Kustodiev *Maslenitsa* ............................................................... 35
37 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 36
38 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 37
39 *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9, Musical Excerpt ........................................ 37
Opening Remarks

Welcome and thank you all very much for coming to my program.

Topic and Purpose of Study

The topic of today’s lecture recital is A Performer’s Perspective on the Technical Challenges and Interpretive Aspects of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39. This opus of etudes-tableaux consists of nine pieces that could be performed as a set or separately. It was written between 1916 and 1917 and was the last significant composition written by Rachmaninoff while still in Russia. It has been a staple of the concert repertoire and is favored by performers and audiences alike. Although a number of studies have been done on Rachmaninoff’s Etudes-Tableaux, none of them focused effectively on the many problems of interpretation and, most importantly, on the complex technical challenges the work poses and the approaches needed to overcome them. The purpose of this study is to offer creative technical solutions to the existing pianistic problems.
Sergei Rachmaninoff was one of the last champions of the Romantic style in European classical music. He was born on April 1, 1873 near the Russian city of Novgorod.

Rachmaninoff’s extraordinary musical talent was discovered early, and as a result he took first piano lessons with his mother. Later he moved to Saint Petersburg to study at the Conservatory and then to Moscow, where he studied piano with Nikolai Zverev and Alexander Siloti and composition with Anton Arensky and Alexander Taneyev. In 1896 as a result of the disastrous reception of his First Symphony Rachmaninoff went through a period of depression and writer’s block, overcoming it with the help of psychotherapy.

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which roughly coincided with his long-awaited marriage to his cousin Natalia Satina in 1902. Subsequently Rachmaninoff established himself as a composer, pianist and conductor and was most prolific in the years before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. At that time he wrote his greatest masterpieces for piano – the Second and Third Piano Concertos, Second Piano Sonata, both sets of Preludes and Etudes-Tableaux.

The year 1917 marked a juncture in Rachmaninoff’s life. He decided to leave Russia and moved his family to the West, eventually settling in the United States. Here his compositional productivity slowed, partly because he was obliged to spend much of his time performing to support his family. However, it seems that the main reason for this lack of compositional productivity was his homesickness; it was as if when he left Russia, he left a great part of his inspiration. His two most famous works written after the departure from Russia are the Variations on a theme of Corelli and the Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini for piano and orchestra.

Rachmaninoff died on March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California, just four days before his seventieth birthday.

Rachmaninoff – the Pianist

As a pianist Rachmaninoff embodied one of the last connections to nineteenth-century Romanticism and is regarded as one of the finest pianists of the twentieth century. Rachmaninoff had effortless technical facility and musical memory, legendary rhythmic drive and great interpretive freedom in phrasing and dynamics. His playing was poetic, yet never sentimental, passionate, and yet always carefully planned. According to a well-known musical anecdote Rachmaninoff once was tremendously upset after a
hugely successful recital for having missed what he called “the point”. His friend Marietta Shaginian remembered that this point “could be at the end of the piece or in the middle, it could come as thunder or very quietly.”

Example 2. Sergei Rachmaninoff performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra. (Circa 1930)

At the piano Rachmaninoff looked absolutely uninvolved - his body motionless, with everything done with forearms and fingers. He paid great attention to the shape of the melodic line, which he approached with a sense of unmanered freedom. His tone had an enormous range, from beautifully singing to thunderous and piercing. Interestingly, he had very large hands and was able to cover the interval of a thirteenth on the keyboard. Rachmaninoff never taught, but nevertheless had an enormous influence on many pianists of his and succeeding generations, Vladimir Horowitz being one of the most celebrated.

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3 Rachmaninoff Performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra; available from http://web.media.mit.edu/~mike/music/VanCliburn2000; Internet (accessed on September 7, 2008)
examples. Luckily for us Rachmaninoff lived in an age of great technological advances, and as a result there survive a fairly large number of his recordings performing his own music, as well as works from the standard repertoire.

**Etude: Origins and Developments**

The etude is a musical composition usually intended to provide practice material for perfecting a particular technical skill. The term is derived from a French word meaning “study.” The practice of writing etudes emerged in the early nineteenth century with the increasing popularity of the piano. They were mostly purely instructional pieces, devoid of significant musical value. Of the large number of etudes from that period some are used as teaching material to this day (predominantly those by Carl Czerny and Muzio Clementi). Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt reinvented the genre by achieving an unprecedented level of artistry, creative imagery and a unique balance between exceptional technical and creative goals. Additionally, Liszt was the first major composer to write purely programmatic etudes. The distinctive Russian tradition of writing etudes took its beginning from the nineteenth-century romantic tradition represented by Chopin, Liszt and Charles-Valentin Alkan and developed a style which strongly reflected their culture, beliefs and individuality. Some significant Russian composers who wrote in this genre besides Rachmaninoff are Sergei Lyapunov, Anton Rubinstein, Anton Arensky and Alexander Scriabin.

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The *Etudes-Tableaux*

Rachmaninoff’s *Etudes-Tableaux* seem to integrate some of the best qualities of both European and Russian schools. His fine skill in depicting subtle human emotions could be traced back to Chopin, the large-scale orchestral pianism and programmatic tendencies to Liszt, and purely nationalistic qualities to Balakirev, Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky.

It seems that Rachmaninoff hesitated before finally deciding on the name “*Etudes-Tableaux.*” It does not appear in the autograph and the first reviews referred to the pieces as “*Preludes-Tableaux.*” It seems that such genre definitions as “moment musical”, “prelude” and “etude” were used by Rachmaninoff interchangeably, at times as a formality. The term “etude” is infused with deeper meaning than the word “study” suggests, and the word “tableau” (which means “painting” in French) is not associated with a mere musical illustration, but rather is a collective designation that could suggest the expression of profound human emotions. Each tableau, each landscape is connected to a particular mood or emotion. The *Etudes-Tableaux* represent the summit of the development of the romantic tradition of the genre. Popular among concert pianists, they play an important role in the development of any aspiring pianist. Considering the nature of these pieces and following the great Russian tradition and philosophy of comprehensive art education for musicians, it seems necessary to study the work of some Russian painters, especially those active in the genre of landscape painting. Recognizing that love of the Russian land was at the core of Rachmaninoff’s art could greatly enrich one’s interpretation of his works.

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5 Igor Suhomlinov, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Problems of Interpretation* (Muzykalnoe Izdatelstvo, 1992), 9
Programmatic Elements of the
*Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39

The integrity of Rachmaninoff’s musical thought, deep content and inspired imagery embedded within the *Etudes-Tableaux* suggest a hidden program. According to the oral tradition that exists among pianists there are three *Etudes-Tableaux* op. 39 that have programmatic names: no. 1 in C minor – “The Sea,” no. 6 in A minor – “Little Red Riding Hood,” and no. 8 in C minor – “Requiem.”

More than a decade after the creation of the set Rachmaninoff wrote a letter to Ottorino Respighi - a wonderful Italian composer, conductor and musicologist. Respighi was working on the orchestration of a few of the *Etudes-Tableaux* and asked Rachmaninoff to disclose the programmatic connections that the composer might have had in mind. Rachmaninoff wrote that *Etude-Tableau* no. 2 in A minor “depicts the sea and the seagulls,” no. 6 “was inspired by the fairytale about the Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf,” no. 9 in D major “has a character that reminds us of an oriental march” and no. 8 in C minor “is a funeral procession.”

However, it seems that, as valuable as Rachmaninoff’s depictions are, they should only be taken as the starting point for a performer’s search for personal and meaningful interpretation.

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6 Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings.* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 279
Research Topic Number 2: Interpretative Aspects and Technical Challenges

*Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor

The opening *Etude-Tableau* is remarkable in its powerful rhythmic motion and ominous character. It makes an immediate impact on the listener and defines the emotional direction and conceptual overtones of the entire opus. The descriptive, almost landscape-like, nature of Rachmaninoff’s writing of this piece is reminiscent of a painting by Arkady Rylov entitled *Thundering River.*


The painting depicts the dark, overflowing waters of a river, nature is stern and hostile, but the snow is receding and we can foresee that the once threatening waters will subside and the spring will come. All these elements could be interpreted in a symbolic way.

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It seems that the nickname “The Sea” given to this work by pianists is not accidental. From the very first measure one can feel that Rachmaninoff’s sea suggests trouble, danger and possibly inescapable fate. This is felt through the sinister movement of the bass line, austere harmonies and powerful ups and downs of dynamics.


![Example music notation]

It is possible to identify a hidden melodic line in the progression of the first few notes of the triplets of the right hand. The inclusion of the chromatic D-flat that does not belong to C minor and the closing romantic intonation creates tension. The technical difficulty of the right-hand part is contained in a performer’s ability to bring out the hidden melodic line and at the same time to master the unequal intervalllic distances of the triplet figuration. For practice purpose it would be worthwhile to modify the right-hand part into chords built upon the main notes of this figuration. Another good exercise is to start the triplet figuration from different notes. The sixteenth-note rests in measures 3 and 4 add to the restless atmosphere of the etude.

Climactic tremolos in measures 12-13 and further in measures 67-68 increase tension and anxiety. One can delay the resolution of the third F-A in the right hand and thus
create an impression of a painful sigh. This intonation is amplified by a similar ascending intonation of the left hand.

Example 5. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableaux* Op. 39 no. 1. (mm 12-13)

Starting in measure 25 flowing figurations in the right-hand part, even accompaniment and soft, cello-like melody in the middle voice bring a certain peacefulness to the mood. Technically, the notes marked *staccato* in the right- and left-hand parts should stand out against the expressive melody given to the thumbs.

In the episode marked *scherzando* one can imagine gusts of wind that gradually bring back the initial tempestuousness of the piece. The accents here should be biting and short.

Example 7. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableaux* Op. 39 no. 1 (mm. 33-34)

In the recapitulation the bass-line octaves are enriched with chromaticisms and nervous accentuation. In measure 52 it is desirable to perform the second alternative version given by the composer as it seems to emphasize the increased dynamism of the piece.

Example 8. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableaux* Op. 39 no. 1. (mm. 51-52)

It is vital in a piece with this kind of dense and technically demanding texture to take advantage of the rests and descending passages for the purpose of arm relaxation.
According to Rachmaninoff himself this composition depicts “the sea and the seagulls.” However, without diminishing the importance of this indication, one can suggest a different interpretation of the imagery of this etude-tableau. The basis and justification for this is the complexity of the content and associative connections of this piece. Interesting is the name given to this etude-tableau by Heinrich Neuhaus – “Levitan.” Isaac Levitan was an outstanding Russian landscape painter whose greatest achievements were in the genre of mood landscape. 

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8 Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Muzykalnoe Izdatelstvo, 1982), 152


Example 10. Isaak Levitan *Spring; High Waters*.\textsuperscript{11}

Example 11. Isaak Levitan *Over Eternal Peace*.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Isaak Levitan, *Spring; High Waters*; available from http://isaak-levitan.ru; Internet (accessed November 2, 2008)

\textsuperscript{12} Isaak Levitan, *Over Eternal Peace*; available from http://isaak-levitan.ru; Internet (accessed November 2, 2008)
Example 12. Isaak Levitan *Golden Autumn*[^13]

Rachmaninoff’s landscapes, similar to the paintings of Levitan and novels of Chekhov, are oftentimes enveloped in an atmosphere of melancholy, which, during the years of the creation of the *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39, often reached the level of deep sorrow and prophetic anticipation of the troubles to come.

Endless sorrow is felt in the beginning of the piece. The opening element, on which the entire *etude-tableau* is based, could be interpreted as either the Dies Irae motif or ancient Russian rite chants. It seems that the composer depicts thoughts and emotions of someone who is trying to find a response to his feelings in nature.

Example 13. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableaux* Op. 39 no. 2 (mm. 1-12)

[Musical notation image]

Considering the vocal nature of Rachmaninoff’s linear developments, it is interesting to make a study of Rachmaninoff’s own vocal works. For example, a similar atmosphere is found in his romance *Night is sorrowful*.¹⁴

Example 14. Isaak Levitan *Silence*¹⁵

¹⁴ Sergei Rachmaninoff, “Night is sorrowful,” Romance Op. 26, No. 12, Joan Rodgers, Howard Shelley; Chandos Label CHAN 9451, 1996, CD recording

This *Etude-Tableau* is not a physically demanding piece, but it is a difficult study in touch. The pianist needs much skill to project its multilayered texture and keep the performance from being monotonous. In the beginning the right hand should stay very close to the keyboard as if gliding over the keys, with the fingertips doing all the work in dynamics and articulation. In climactic sections the approach should be different, with more involvement of the arm and body.

Certain folk-song-like elements are clearly heard in measures 7-8. It is imperative to point out the importance of descending intervals in both key motifs.

Starting in measures 9-10 the texture becomes increasingly multilayered, orchestral, with an added bell-like sonority that is so characteristic of Rachmaninoff’s piano writing.\(^{16}\) The latter seems to have a special meaning for the composer and will appear in different registers and with different connotations.

Example 15. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 2. (mm. 53-60)

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\(^{16}\) Igor Belza, *Rachmaninoff i Russkaya Muzykalnaya Kultura*, from *C.V. Rachmaninoff Sbornik Starei i Materialov*, Moscow/Leningrad: Muzykalnoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo, 1947
Gradually the opening motif is transferred to the right-hand part and is intertwined with the folk-song-like element, which leads to the main climactic.


In the episode marked *Meno mosso* the descending elements may symbolize human suffering. Other technical difficulties of this piece are in the large span of the arpeggiated chords in the left-hand part, hand-crossings and the two-over-three meter.

*Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor

This is an engaging piece written in the grand concert style, with brilliant, colorful piano sonorities and unrelenting rhythmic energy. The programmatic elements of this work are not very clear and have not been revealed by the composer. Perhaps one can think of the mood portrayed in the painting of Rylov entitled “*In the Blue Expanse.*”

Example 17. Arkady Rylov *In the Blue Expanse*.

Here the artist depicted a flock of migrating birds, distant contours of the shoreline, sun-filled air and the infinite vastness of the sea.

Persistently accented F-sharp in the upper voice is the center of the thematic foundation of the piece. Each repetition is enriched by more and more neighboring sounds. The theme with its relentless return to the same note embodies the will and power of the human spirit.

Example 18. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 3 (mm. 1-4)
The main difficulty of this piece is in the fast-changing configurations of the double notes. This requires superb agility and flexibility of the right hand. The performer has to be able to constantly adjust his hand position, which requires playing with supple wrist while maintaining very strong fingers.

The phrasing of this piece is very unusual. The difficulty lies in the constantly changing phrases that are different in their length, rhythm and meaning.

Example 19. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 3. (mm. 49-60)

A powerful climax of this composition appears in the middle section. The writing in large, sweeping strokes implies the use of pedal as a coloring tool. The performer should apply pedal based on the harmonic movement of the left hand. For example, in measure 52 one should catch the lower C-sharp with the pedal and hold it for almost five measures until the two rests before the recapitulation.
Example 20. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 3. (mm.150-152)

A splash of the F-sharp minor chord with the addition of D brings this *Etude-Tableau* to its end. This short epilogue summarizes the dynamic unfoldings of the piece, perhaps suggesting that after the turbulences of life there is often a moment of sadness, a moment of recollection.

*Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 4 in B minor

This *Etude-Tableau* is characterized by its lightness, variety of textures and rhythms. Abundance of syncopation, frequent change of registers and timbres implies a *scherzo* or *humoresque*. In this piece the rhythm serves an important role of a unifying building block. The piece is written in an A-B-A form, with a clear indication for sections A and B to be repeated. This is an unusual indication for Rachmaninoff and should be strictly adhered to by the performer. Folk elements are strongly felt due to the frequent use of natural minor (A-natural), numerous changes of meter (which is not indicated in the beginning of the piece), asymmetric measure structure, as well as voice leading that is close to polyphonic singing.
Example 21. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 4. (mm 1-6)

In the main theme one can recognize the sound of sleigh bells. It is difficult not to think of Tchaikovsky’s *Na troike* from *The Seasons* and especially Rachmaninoff’s own cantata *Kolokola (The Bells)*.

One of the main difficulties of this *Etude-Tableau* is in the equal distribution of technical difficulties between the hands. The leitmotif should be performed with a slight crescendo, but the difficulty is in a clear and precise execution of the repeated notes that follow.

The frequency of the change of articulation requires very fast reaction and different approach to touché: sharp, on the tip of the finger staccato and close to the key, caressing touch in legato playing.

The composer did not leave a recording of this *Etude-Tableau*, but in his *Notes on Etudes-Tableaux* G. Kogan describes how Rachmaninoff used *rubato* in his own interpretation. Kogan says that the composer would speed up, “race” to the F-sharp7 chord in measure 12, and then abruptly delay both tonic chords that follow.\(^\text{18}\)

\[^{18}\text{G. Kogan, *Voprosy Pianisma. Izbrannye Stat’i* (Moscow, 1968), 67}\]
Example 22. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 4. (mm. 11-15)

In the middle section one can alternate sonorities by playing some episodes with and some without the damper pedal; the use of the left, *una corda*, pedal is also possible.

At the end of the *Etude-Tableau* the mood of the leitmotif changes, acquiring energetic, even threatening overtones. The last time the leitmotif is presented in the bass in octaves, the octaves have to be played from the wrist with very fast, supple movements.

*Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

This *Etude-Tableau* occupies a special place in the set. It is remarkable in the fierceness of its emotion and the epic depth of its imagery. The piece is attractive not only for its obvious pathos, but also and perhaps more so for its deep lyricism and a sense of a unique inner majesty it creates. It is very popular in concert performance and is often used for pedagogical reasons.
The writing of this *Etude-Tableau* is multilayered, at times polyphonic. The main technical challenge is the ability to project the melody, while sharing dense, relentless chordal accompaniment between the hands. In order to achieve a successful interpretation the performer needs to possess great physical stamina and be able to intelligently plan out moments of relaxation.

The main theme is a fusion of two elements: declamatory on one hand and songlike, lyrical on the other. The declamatory character is emphasized by Rachmaninoff’s tempo marking *Appassionato, molto marcato*.

The contour of the melody is developed in small, mostly upward, increments that are counterbalanced by downward returns and stops. To defy the quickly fading tone of the piano and to avoid the sharp angles of the melody one needs to apply thought through phrasing and avoid emphasizing all the strong beats, focusing on the carefully selected few. This is a very difficult task and it would be helpful to bear in mind the vocal nature of the melodic lines of this *Etude-Tableau* and to find the moments when one needs to “take a breath.”
It is also important to identify and, if necessary, emphasize all the lines of the development of the left-hand part. For example, in measures 8-11 one can bring out the descending chromatic octave line.

Example 24. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 5 (mm. 7-12)

![Example 24](image)

A new contrasting melody is introduced in the middle section of this piece. Here one needs to be aware of the large span of the left-hand accompaniment, moving the hand sideways in flexible, “rocking” movements.

As the emotional temperature of this episode rises, the texture becomes increasingly dense and polyphonic.
Example 25. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 5 (mm. 33-36)

It is very important to determine which voices are more important and should be brought out and which are secondary. Here a performer should carefully follow Rachmaninoff’s detailed indication of phrasing.

In the Recapitulation, the main theme is given to the left hand and the expressive chordal accompaniment to the right. One has to lighten the thick texture of the right hand by phrasing and bringing out the top voice. This gives the theme even greater restlessness and leads to the fourth and last climax of the piece, which coincides with the climax of the theme.

Example 26. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 5 (mm. 53-56)
This gives the theme even greater weight and contributes to the affirmation of the main idea of the Etude-Tableau: declaration of the magnitude of the human spirit and its protest against the obstruction of its happiness.

It would be useful to remember one of the characteristics of Rachmaninoff’s pianism, his constant search for and desire to reach the “point” in each composition he performed. In this Etude-Tableau it is very important not only to define the main climax, but also to apply varied degrees of dynamics to other climaxes in order to avoid sounding monotonous.

Example 27. Sergei Rachmaninoff Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 (mm. 73-75)

In measure 73 the second theme comes back evoking a sense of consolation attained after the turbulences and conflicts of life.
This Etude-Tableau is one of the most tragic pieces of the cycle. Rachmaninoff conceived it as a musical expression of the fairytale about the Little Red Riding Hood and the Grey Wolf. The music itself, however, goes far beyond the simple outlines of the fairytale, it is much more meaningful and seems to epitomize the dark atmosphere of the time during which it was written.

Example 28. Zuzanna Celej Little Red Riding Hood

The fairytale seemed to have served as a vehicle for the expression of Rachmaninoff’s thoughts regarding fate and the inevitability of death.

The first section of this composition is based upon the juxtaposition of two contrasting elements. The first – an aggressive, ascending chromatic run, is supposed to

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19 Zuzanna Celej, Little Red Riding Hood; available from: http://artlimited.net; Internet (accessed October 14, 2008)
imitate the threatening growling of the wolf. The second - agitated, reflects the state of a person in the presence of imminent danger.

Example 29. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 6 (mm. 1-8)

Technically the second theme, with its quick, repeated notes, presents a great pianistic difficulty. The repeated notes have to be played *pp* to allow for the top *staccato* notes to be projected. In the left hand part a distinction should be made between the notes marked *staccato* and *tenuto*. Pedal decisions should be made based primarily on these differences in articulation in the left hand.

Another technical characteristic of this piece is its frequent dynamic changes, sharp accents and *sforzandos*. According to Rachmaninoff’s contemporary Boris Asafiev the composer played this etude with “exceptional power and relentless energy, his fingers piercing the keys, especially in the fast rhythmic and dynamic interruptions.”

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In order to enrich one’s understanding of this *Etude-Tableau* it is very helpful to refer to Respighi’s orchestration of the piece.\footnote{Sergei Rachmaninoff, “Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor,” arranged by Ottorino Respighi, Gianandrea Noseda, BBC Philharmonic; Chandos Label CHAN 10388, 2007, CD recording}

In the middle section marked *Poco meno mosso*, the interplay of the two conflicting elements of the first section is replaced by the expansion of one central idea.\footnote{Sergei Rachmaninoff, “Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor,” Sergei Rachmaninoff; RCA Victor Gold Seal Label 09026-61265-2, 1992, CD recording}


Precise rhythm, threatening and later openly evil and angry accents, desperate, gasping exclamations of the right hand all depict a wild and relentless chase. Interesting is Rachmaninoff’s own interpretation of this episode.\footnote{Sergei Rachmaninoff, “Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor,” Sergei Rachmaninoff; RCA Victor Gold Seal Label 09026-61265-2, 1992, CD recording}

It is very important to clearly define the sections where tempo acceleration is indicated. A true *accelerando* only applies to measures 46 through 52, and after that only terrace-like tempo acceleration should take place: *Piu mosso* in measure 53 and *Presto* in measure 59. The gasping octave intonations that start in this section present a great pianistic challenge. They should be played with short wrist movements that would release the tension in the right hand. Special attention should be paid to the constant interplay of the strong beats. It is crucial to locate places for hand and arm relaxation. Such places
could be found at the ends of phrases or immediately after the accents. Hands should remain supple when possible.

Example 31. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 6. (mm. 60-65)

In his recording in the third measure from the end of the *Etude-Tableau* Rachmaninoff drastically slows down the tempo, makes a *diminuendo*, disregarding his own indication, and plays the last chord *f*.

This kind of example gives us an intimate insight into Rachmaninoff’s artistic laboratory: his creative conception as a composer seems to be inseparable from his interpretative approach as a performer, both qualities serving one objective – to affect the perception of his audience.

*Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 7 in C minor

This is how Rachmaninoff described this composition in his letter to Respighi: “The opening theme is a march. The other one portrays singing of a choir. Beginning with the

sixteenth-note movement in C minor and a little further – in E-flat minor, one can imagine a drizzle, constant and hopeless. This movement develops and reaches a climax in C minor – church bells. The ending brings one back to the opening theme – the march.”

The imagery of this piece recalls a solemn procession. Quick alternation of moods and an abundance of rests pose a difficulty for a performer. Here it would be useful to bring to attention one of the characteristics of Rachmaninoff’s pianism – his ability to reveal the inner rhythm in his interpretation of pauses. Recollecting Rachmaninoff’s playing Asafiev wrote that “the rhythm of rests and barely noticeable silences was as meaningfully beautiful in Rachmaninoff’s playing as in Shalyapin’s singing.”

Example 32. Sergei Rachmaninoff Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7. (mm. 1-4)

This composition does not place many purely technical demands on the performer. Out of seven only one page is truly physically challenging. Mainly this is a study in touch and imaginative use of articulation. Articulation of this piece is closely related to dynamics, which is in turn interconnected with its polyphonic, orchestral texture. The performer has to recognize and execute all the nuances of articulation precisely. Most of

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24 Sergei Rachmaninoff, Literaturnoe Nasledie (Moscow, 1978), 128
the texture of this piece is chordal, at times polyphonic, which requires study and identification of the most important elements, careful phrasing and sensitivity to harmonic changes.

A new image appears in measure 25, marked legatissimo. Due to diatonic, parallel movement of the chords the music of this episode can be associated with Russian liturgical singing.

The development of the second part of the Etude-Tableau is slow, somewhat monotonous, with broad melodic gestures, always marked pp and ppp. Here one can picture a funeral procession, with soft lamentations and the sound of bells.

Example 33. Sergei Rachmaninoff Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7. (mm. 40-43)

The following increase in intensity leads to the only climax of the piece where the bell-like sonority dominates the texture. The main challenge here is to calculate the dynamics in a way that despite the thick, chordal texture the true ff comes when indicated and not earlier. The beauty and challenge of this Etude-Tableau lies in its episodic nature. It allows for great freedom in one’s search for color and expression and simultaneously challenges in attaining a cohesive interpretation.
Shalyapin remembered about Rachmaninoff’s life in the West: “How many times it happened that we would for hours reminisce about the nature of our Motherland. Birch-tree groves, infinite Russian forests, a pond at the edge of a village, lopsided wooden huts and rain, our autumn, drizzling, pure rain… I love our little gray days – used to say Sergei Vasilievich.” It is possible that one of those “gray days” is depicted in this Etude-Tableau.

This composition is characterized by a curvy melody written in double notes, soft changes of harmonies, diatonic and occasionally Dorian mode. A sense of sadness is emphasized by the unresolved endings of the phrases.

Example 34. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 8 (mm. 1-8)

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26 Igor Suhomlinov, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Problems of Interpretation* (Muzykalnoe Izdatelstvo, 1992), 28
Technically it is a study on double notes that due to their poetic nature require very flexible fingers and supple hand movements. The work is built upon combinations of shorter and longer phrases. The performer’s ability to unite them is dependent upon the use of tempo and dynamics. It is also important to achieve an utmost *legato* and a very clear execution of all the lines. The lines can be practiced separately, at first without pedal.

According to Boris Asafiev either Shalyapin to Rachmaninoff or Rachmaninoff to Shalyapin “passed a secret of how to bring every interval to life… there was not even one unknown to either of them path that wouldn’t lead them to emotionally and intellectually thoughtful ‘pronunciation’ of intervals.”\(^{27}\) Some of the examples of such “pronunciation” of intervals could be found at the peaks of phrases, and some closing melodic lines.

Example 35. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 8 (mm. 100-106)

In the closing measures of this piece the performer has to adhere to Rachmaninoff’s fingering written out in the left-hand part. The repetitive use of the thumb will enable one to achieve the evenness that Rachmaninoff wanted.

\(^{27}\) Igor Suhomlinov, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Problems of Interpretation* (Muzykalnoe Izdatelstvo, 1992), 28
In this Etude-Tableau Rachmaninoff continues to develop the tradition of folk-style works. It is characterized by the kaleidoscopic variety of imagery and is primarily monorhythmic. Full timbre palette, characteristics of its texture imply rich orchestral possibilities. Fast changes of mood, bell-like sonorities can be associated with a Russian folk festival.

Example 36. Boris Kustodiev *Maslenitsa.*

The piece starts with broad, chordal ringing of the bells. In order to create full, but soft sound while playing *ff* and *marcato* a performer should use the weight of the entire arm, taking the chords from the key.

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The main theme is marked by a shade of oriental flavor, which probably was the reason for Rachmaninoff to describe this *Etude-Tableau* as an oriental march.

Example 37. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 9 (mm. 1-7)

The main technical difficulty here is the fast transitions from one type of technique to the other and short, powerful dynamic outbursts. In terms of orchestration one can imagine episodes *tutti* alternating with episodes given to different groups of instruments – winds or strings.

The middle section marked *Listesso tempo* with its accent and syncopations brings to mind a dance-like character, with some elements of choir singing. The syncopated chords could be played with a slight delay that should be followed by an immediate return to the original tempo.
Example 38. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 9 (mm. 41-43)

In the last part of this work the main and the dance-like theme are juxtaposed and developed together. The performer can look for places of dynamic diversity, work on gradual increases in dynamics and alternate episodes that use and not use pedal.

In the closing climactic measures Rachmaninoff uses the dance-like theme. It has a majestic feel to it, as if affirming the great power of human spirit.

Example 39. Sergei Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 no. 9 (mm. 91-96)

This is symbolic, as it also serves as the closing of the entire cycle of the *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39.

Following the performance of the selected *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39, I will be happy to answer any questions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

LECTURE-RECITAL

OUTLINE

Introduction (5 min.)

• Opening Remarks (Slide 1)
• Topic and Purpose of Study (Slides 2-5)

Research Topic Number 1: Stylistic Features and Performance Practice (20 min.)

• Sergei Rachmaninoff (Slides 6-8)
• Rachmaninoff – the Pianist (Slides 9-10)
• Etude: Origins and Developments (Slides 11-12)
• The Etudes-Tableaux (Slides 13-14)
• Programmatic Elements of the Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39 (Slides 15-17)

Research Topic Number 2: Interpretive Aspects and Technical Challenges (40 min.)

• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1 in C minor (Slides 18-25)
• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2 in A minor (Slides 26-35)
• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 3 in F-sharp minor (Slides 36-41)
• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 4 in B minor (Slides 42-46)
• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 5 in E-flat minor (Slides 47-53)
• Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor (Slides 54-60)
• *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 7 in C minor (Slides 61-65)

• *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 8 in D minor (Slides 66-68)

• *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9 in D major (Slides 69-73)

**Performance of Three *Etudes-Tableaux* Op. 39 (15 min.)** (Slide 74)

• No. 8 in D minor

• No. 2 in A minor

• No. 1 in C minor
## APPENDIX B

### LIST OF POWER POINT SLIDES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slide Number/Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Lecture Recital</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Topic</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Topic – Details</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Purpose of Study</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Purpose of Study – Details</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Research Topic Number 1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sergei Rachmaninoff</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Sergei Rachmaninoff – Biographical Sketch</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Rachmaninoff – the Pianist</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Rachmaninoff – the Pianist – Details</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Etude</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Etude – Details</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 The Etudes – Tableaux</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 The Etudes – Tableaux – Details</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Programmatic Elements</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Programmatic Titles</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Ottorino Respighi</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Research Topic Number 2</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Arkady Ryllov “Thundering River”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Isaak Levitan Autumn Day in Sokolniki</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Isaak Levitan Spring, High Waters</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Isaak Levitan Over Eternal Peace</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Isaak Levitan Golden Autumn</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Isaak Levitan Silence</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 2, Musical Excerpt</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
36  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 3 ............................................................................. 82
37  Arkady Rylov *In the Blue Expanse* ................................................................. 83
38  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 3, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 84
41  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 3, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 87
42  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 4 ............................................................................. 88
43  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 4, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 89
44  Nikolai Samokish *Troika* .................................................................................. 90
45  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 4, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 91
46  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 4, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 92
47  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 5 ............................................................................. 93
49  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 5, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 95
50  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 5, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 96
51  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 5, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 97
54  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6 ............................................................................. 100
55  Unknown *The little Red Riding Hood* ............................................................. 101
56  Zuzanna Celej *the Little Red Riding Hood* .................................................... 102
57  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 103
58  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 104
59  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 105
60  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 6, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 106
61  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 7 ............................................................................. 107
64  Audio File, *Russian Orthodox Chant* ............................................................ 110
66  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 8 ............................................................................. 112
67  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 8, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 113
69  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9 ............................................................................. 115
70  Boris Kustodiey *Maslenitsa* ........................................................................... 116
72  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 118
73  *Etude-Tableau* Op. 39 No. 9, Musical Excerpt ............................................. 119
74  Rachmaninoff Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39 Nos. 8, 2, 1 ....................................... 120
APENDIX C

POWER POINT SLIDES
Lecture Recital
by Marina Radiushina

University of Miami
Frost School of Music
November 20, 2008
A Performer’s Perspective on the Technical Challenges and Interpretive Aspects of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39
• *Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39* consists of nine pieces.

• Was written between 1916 and 1917.

• Last significant composition written by Rachmaninoff while still in Russia.
PURPOSE OF STUDY
• A number of studies have been done on Rachmaninoff’s *Etudes-Tableaux*.
• None of them focused effectively on:
  • Problems of interpretation
  • Complex technical challenges the work poses
  • Approaches needed to overcome them

The purpose of this study is to offer creative technical solutions to the existing pianistic problems.
RESEARCH TOPIC no. 1

Stylistic Features and Performance Practice
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
• Was born on April 1, 1873 near Novgorod in Russia.
• Studied piano with Nikolai Zverev and Alexander Siloti and composition with Anton Arensky and Alexander Taneyev.
• 1896: Failure of First Symphony.
• 1902: Marriage to Natalia Satina.
• 1917: Moved with his family to the West.
• Wrote most of his major piano works before 1917, including the Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39.
• After 1917 his composition productivity slowed due to many performing engagements and his nostalgia for Russia.
• Died on March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California, just four days before his seventieth birthday.
RACHMANINOFF THE PIANIST
• Embodied one of the last connections to the nineteenth-century Romanticism.

• Is regarded as one of the finest pianists of the twentieth century.

• Had effortless technical facility, legendary rhythmic drive, great musical memory and interpretive freedom.

• His playing was always carefully planned.

• The “point”.

• Never taught, but had an enormous influence on many pianists of his and succeeding generations.

• There survive a fairly large number of his recordings performing his own music, as well as works from the standard repertoire.
ETUDE: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS
• A musical composition usually intended to provide practice material for perfecting a particular technical skill.

• Terms derived from a French word meaning “study”.

• Emerged in the early nineteenth century with the increasing popularity of the piano.

• Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt reinvented the genre by achieving a unique balance between exceptional technical and creative goals.

• Liszt wrote the first purely programmatic etudes.

• The Russian tradition strongly reflected their culture, beliefs and individuality of its composers.

• Most significant composers who wrote in this genre besides Rachmaninoff are Sergei Lyapunov, Anton Rubinstein, Anton Arensky and Alexander Scriabin.
The **ETUDES-TABLEAUX**
• *Etudes-Tableaux* integrate some of the best qualities of both European and Russian schools.

• At first referred to the pieces as “Preludes-Tableaux”.

• “Tableau” means “painting” in French. The term is not associated with a mere musical illustration, but rather is a collective designation that could suggest the expression of profound human emotions.

• The *Etudes-Tableaux* represent the summit of the development of the romantic tradition of the genre.

• The Russian tradition and philosophy of comprehensive art education for musicians calls for the study of the work of some Russian painters.
PROGRAMMATIC ELEMENTS OF THE

ETUDES-TABLEAUX OP. 39
• The imagery and content of the *Etudes-Tableaux* suggest a hidden program.

• Oral tradition attributes programmatic names to three *Etudes-Tableaux*:
  
  no. 1 in C minor – “The Sea”
  no. 6 in A minor – “Little Red Riding Hood”
  no. 8 in C minor – “Requiem”

• According to Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableau*:
  - no. 2 in A minor “The sea and the seagulls”
  - no. 6 in A minor “was inspired by the fairytale about the Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf”
  - no. 8 in C minor “a funeral procession”
  - no. 9 in D major “has a character that reminds us of an oriental march”
• Ottorino Respighi, the Italian composer, conductor and musicologist, orchestrated some of the *Etudes-Tableaux in 1930* after receiving a letter from Rachmaninoff regarding the intended program.

• Rachmaninoff’s depictions should only be taken as the starting point for a performer’s search for personal and meaningful interpretation.
RESEARCH TOPIC no. 2
Interpretive Aspects and Technical Challenges
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor
Arkady Rylov
“Thundering River”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 1-4:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 12-13:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 25-27:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 33-34:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 1 in C minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 51-52:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 2 in A minor
Isaak Levitan

“Autumn in Sokolniki”
Isaak Levitan

“Spring, High Water”
Isaak Levitan
“Over Eternal Peace”
Isaak Levitan
“Golden Autumn”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 2 in A minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-12:
Isaak Levitan
“Silence”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 2 in A minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-12:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 2 in A minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 53-63:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 2 in A minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 88-98:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor
Arkady Rylov
“In the Blue Expanse”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-4:

Allegro molto
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 57-64:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 83-88:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 3 in F-sharp minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 150-152:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 4 in B minor
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 4 in B minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 1-6:
Nikolai Samokish
“Troika”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 4 in B minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 11-14:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 4 in B minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 58-61:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-4:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 7-12:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 26-28:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 33-36:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 53-56:

Tempo I

*pesante*

*molto marcato*
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 5 in E-flat minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 74-76:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 6 in A minor
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 6 in A minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-11:

Allegro

\[\text{\textit{leggiero}}\]
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 6 in A minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 36-40:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 6 in A minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 60-65:

Presto
leggera
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 6 in A minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 118-122:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7 in C minor
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7 in C minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-4:

Lento Lugubre
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7 in C minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 25-28:
The Joy of Those Who Mourn
Traditional Russian Orthodox Chant
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 7 in C minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 39-42:

poco meno mosso

semper ppp staccato
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 8 in D minor
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 8 in D minor

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-8:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 8 in D minor
Musical excerpt, mm. 100-106:
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 9 in D major
Boris Kustodiev
“Maslenitsa”
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 9 in D major

Musical excerpt, mm. 1-7:

Allegro moderato Tempo di marcia

senza Ped.
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 9 in D major
Musical excerpt, mm. 41-43:

L'istesso tempo

[Musical notation image]
Etude-Tableau Op. 39 no. 9 in D major
Musical excerpt, mm. 91-97:
Sergei Rachmaninoff

Three Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39:

No. 8 in D minor
No. 2 in A minor
No. 1 in C minor