

**THE ELIDED SECOND DEGREE AND HYBRID HARMONY IN
RACHMANINOFF**

by

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THE ELIDED $\hat{2}$ AND HYBRID HARMONY IN RACHMANINOFF

The advanced chromaticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has received increasing attention among theorists in recent years; in particular, Schenkerian or modified Schenkerian approaches have been applied to this repertoire by analysts such as James Baker, Matthew Brown, and Howard Cinnamon.¹ The music of Rachmaninoff, however, has heretofore received little serious theoretical investigation. Rachmaninoff's harmonies, particularly in his later works, are of theoretical interest because they realize advanced chromaticism within a clearly tonal context, thus illustrating the complex and subtle possibilities of tonal prolongation. Unlike much other music of the chromatic era, these compositions suggest not "transition" toward post-tonality but rather an elaboration of the tonal idiom; consequently, they are especially amenable to Schenker's method. The study on which this paper is based, examining ten works² from the period 1910-1931, is the first detailed application of that method to this composer's music.

Schenkerian analysis effectively elucidates idiomatic features of Rachmaninoff's style, particularly in his treatment of cadences. Quite typical is the final cadence of his Prelude in A Minor, for which the score and foreground are displayed in Figs. 1 and 2. The fifth scale degree in the bass supports an augmented triad, elaborately embellished in the foreground of mm. 48-50. Treble tone $\hat{2}$, which conventionally might provide a resolution for this dissonant sonority, is suppressed in Rachmaninoff's score. Although the spelling of this triad suggests mediant harmony (III^{+6}), it is identified as V in the Roman-numeral analysis beneath the graph because of its role as the dominant within a clearly authentic progression, illustrated from a broader perspective in Fig. 3. These graphs indicate the suppressed $\hat{2}$ of the descending $\hat{5}$ -line as an implied tone, enclosed in parentheses, thereby facilitating comparison with

works that present a more orthodox Umlinie and highlighting Rachmaninoff's stylistic departure from such convention. The elided $\hat{2}$ in Fig. 2 corresponds to a quarter rest in the score; in most comparable cadences in Rachmaninoff's music, however, $\hat{1}$ follows $\hat{3}$ without pause.

In the A Minor Prelude this pattern of elision is replicated twice at lower structural levels, thus acquiring motivic significance. First, $\hat{2}$ is elided in a preliminary descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$ in mm. 23-26, as shown in Fig. 4. Because natural-minor $\hat{7}$ is substituted for the leading tone, the fifth scale degree in the bass supports a major triad (indicated by an asterisk in m. 25) rather than an augmented triad. An analogous descent exhibits the same pattern of elision in mm. 36-37, illustrated in Fig. 5. Elisions of $\hat{2}$ are by no means confined to this prelude, however, but appear in prominent structural descents within nine of the ten works considered in this study.

In order to appreciate the significance of the elided $\hat{2}$, it should be recalled that the $\hat{5}$ -line is traditionally understood as arising from a composing-out of the fifth-interval of the tonic triad. This underlying triad, as Fig. 6 (a) illustrates, is represented in the treble by the melodic interval of a fifth and in the bass by the i - V - i arpeggiation. In the upper line, the fifth is filled by conjunct motion; with respect to the fundamental tonic harmony, as Carl Schachter observes, "all of the notes between the first and the last are passing."³ When this linear motion is disrupted by suppression of $\hat{2}$, however, an alternative interpretation must be considered: the $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{1}$ pattern can be viewed in a more straightforward manner as an embellished tonic arpeggio. Tone $\hat{3}$ in such patterns no longer seems to belong to a passing linear motion but is more readily perceived as a component of a treble tonic arpeggiation, as shown in Fig. 6 (b). In the A Minor Prelude, interpretation of the $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{1}$ pattern as an embellished tonic arpeggio

is consistent with the strong prominence of the arpeggiated tonic triad at lower levels. Indeed, the descending tonic arpeggio with embellishing $\hat{4}$ is an important unifying motivic element, appearing frequently in the foreground as well as higher levels. The sixteenth-note figure in the final measure, for example, is interpreted in Fig. 2 as a slightly ornamented form of this pattern, encapsulating in miniature the melodic essence of the piece.

The harmony over V in the cadences just examined is an aggregate of dominant and tonic elements, reflecting different hierarchical levels. The third in an inner voice stands only in a secondary relationship to the tonic, as a member of the dominant triad built on the fifth of the tonic triad. The sixth in the upper voice ($\hat{3}$), however, has an immediate relationship to the tonic (as third of the tonic triad). Thus the harmony is no longer a “pure” dominant but is modified by a tonic arpeggiation projected from a more fundamental hierarchical level.

Where descents with elided $\hat{2}$ are harmonized by an authentic bass progression in minor mode, the fifth scale degree in the bass may support either the augmented triad III^{+6} (if the leading tone is present, as in Fig. 2) or the major triad III^6 (if natural-minor $\hat{7}$ is used, as in Fig. 4). Both triads, serving as dominant substitutes within the cadence, may be regarded as hybrid harmonies, presenting a combination of dominant and tonic elements. When the leading tone is present, dominant function is more strongly emphasized. On the other hand, because $\hat{3}$, dissonant with respect to the leading tone, remains unresolved, it may be more readily perceived (this paper will contend) as a harmonic tone, representing superimposed tonic function, rather than as a passing tone or suspension. When natural-minor $\hat{7}$ replaces the leading tone, the sonority’s dominant component is attenuated. Nevertheless, the harmony will still be heard as a dominant substitute in a context such as Fig. 4, where the resolution of the

mediant (functioning as v) to the tonic is accompanied in the bass by a clearly cadential fifth-descent from E2 to A1. In non-cadential settings, on the other hand, the tonic aspect of III may take precedence, as in the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, where III serves as a tonic substitute in the theme and many of the variations.

A plagal bass pattern may accompany the descent with elided $\hat{2}$, generating a $i v^7$ chord whose seventh remains unresolved, as in m. 79 of Fig. 7. While the root, third, and fifth of this chord indicate subdominant harmony, its seventh ($\hat{3}$) suggests tonic function. Under ordinary circumstances, this tonic influence would be minimal. Here, however, the resolution of the seventh is elided, with perceptual consequences analogous to those encountered in the augmented triad discussed previously, where a similar unresolved dissonance arose from the corresponding elision over an authentic progression. This paper will examine the effects of such elisions on the perceived harmonic function of $\hat{3}$.

The omission of certain structural tones from Rachmaninoff's scores should not be ignored or attributed to artistic "imperfection"; rather, such elisions represent essential features of this music, embodying much of its unique character and producing perceptual effects and harmonic implications which merit careful assessment. As will be demonstrated through a variety of examples, examining both the Umlinie and other structural descents, the elision of $\hat{2}$ from the melodic $\hat{5}$ -line or $\hat{3}$ -line is a cardinal feature of the composer's style. The elided $\hat{2}$, it will be shown, is closely related to other techniques by which Rachmaninoff achieves hybrid harmonies, in which an embellishing dominant or subdominant is modified by the tonic (or occasionally a secondary tonicized harmony) projected from a deeper level. Finally, this paper will explore the effect of the elided $\hat{2}$ and kindred devices on the listener's perception of tonal cohesion.

Fig. 1. Op. 32/8: Score, mm. 48-51

Fig. 2. Op. 32/8: FG, mm. 48-51

mm. 20 21 22

FG

MG1

7 10 7

a: [v⁷] iv v⁷/III

mm. 23 24 25 26

FG

MG1

10 *

III ii^o₆ v⁶₄ 3 (5) i

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 20-22, and the second system covers measures 23-26. Each system has two staves: FG (First Grand Staff) and MG1 (Middle Grand Staff). The FG staves show complex melodic lines with many slurs and ties. The MG1 staves show harmonic accompaniment with some fingerings (7, 10, 7) and a '10' in measure 23. Below the MG1 staves, there are thick horizontal lines indicating harmonic changes. The first system has three such lines, with the third one labeled 'a:'. The second system has two such lines, with the second one labeled '*'. At the bottom, a harmonic analysis line shows the chords for each measure: III, ii^o₆, v⁶₄, 3, (5), and i.

Fig. 4. Op. 32/8: FG and MG1, mm. 19-26

mm. 35 36 37

FG

MG1

a: V_4^6 3 (5) i

Fig. 5. Op. 32/8: FG and MG1, mm. 35-37

(a)

5 4 3 2 1

a: i V i

(b)

5 4 3 (2) 1

a: i $V_3^{6-(5)}$ i

Fig. 6. Interpretation of the Urlinie with Elided $\hat{2}$ (Minor Mode)

mm. 1 7 14 25 40 48 52 62 68

MG3

d: i^8-7 v i^8-7 iv i III b7 (iii b7) ii 6_5 vii o7 vii o7 i 7 i 7
+ ii $^{\flat}6_5$
iv ped.-----|

mm. 79 80 85 87 88 89 90 91 101 104

MG3

III iv 7 ii $^{\flat}6_5$ i [iv 7] iv i iv 7 V $^9_6-(5)$ i iv 7 V $^9_6-(5)$ i-----iv i

Fig. 7. Op. 39/8: MG3

NOTES

1. See, for example: James M. Baker, "The Limits of Tonality in the Late Music of Franz Liszt," Journal of Music Theory 34:2 (Fall 1990): 145-173; Matthew Brown, "Tonality and Form in Debussy's Prélude à 'L'Après-midi d'un faune,'" Music Theory Spectrum 15:2 (1993): 127-143; Howard Cinnamon, "Tonic Arpeggiation and Successive Equal Third Relations as Elements of Tonal Evolution in the Music of Franz Liszt," Music Theory Spectrum 8 (1986): 1-24; Howard Cinnamon, "Third-Related Harmonies as Elements of Contrapuntal Prolongation in Some Works by Franz Liszt," In Theory Only 12:5-6 (1992): 1-30.
2. The works considered include three preludes (op. 32/8, op. 32/10, and op. 32/13), six études-tableaux (op. 39/1, op. 39/5, op. 39/6, op. 39/7, op. 39/8, and the Etude in E-Flat Minor from op. 33), and the Variations on a Theme of Corelli (op. 42).
3. Carl Schachter, "A Commentary on Schenker's Free Composition," Journal of Music Theory 25:1 (Spring 1981): 126.

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