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# Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata, Op. 36: Large Scale Narrative Consequences of Revision

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# Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata, Op. 36
## Large Scale Narrative Consequences of Revision

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Abstract

A staple of the solo piano recital, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata, op. 36, stands as one of the final romantic submissions to the art of the piano sonata. Rachmaninoff first published the sonata in 1913, and he returned to the piece in 1931 to revise it substantially, removing about five minutes from its performance time. Despite its compositional, emotional, and physical virtuosity, the work has received little analytic attention regarding the relationship between the two versions. This paper investigates the consequences of Rachmaninoff's revisions by constructing a musical narrative for the sonata. The process illuminates structures within the piece that are central to its dramatic progression, and how revisions within certain sections can fundamentally transform the expressive relation between conflicting musical ideas.

Agony and ecstasy equally define Sergei Rachmaninoff's music. Transformational arcs of redemption can be found within his smallest preludes and titanic concerti, it is difficult to ignore an inherent narrative quality present in many of his works. Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata, op. 36, encompasses this transcendental design. Though it may not be an emblem of modernism from its time, the sonata stands as a monument to the greatest heights of romanticism and the rich art of the piano sonata.

Originally published in 1913, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata, op. 36, was a part of his concert repertoire until he was forced to flee Russia in 1917 during the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1930, Rachmaninoff returned to the work to revise it, removing large chunks of material and reworking certain textural elements before republishing it the following year.[1] Despite its widespread popularity, Sonata op. 36 lacks significant analytical study. Most scholarship centers on the compositional differences between the two versions or the biographical circumstances under which the piece was written.[2] Scholars debate about which version of the sonata is the definitive version, and pianists often choose to incorporate passages from both versions into their performances.[3]

The intent of this study is not only to compare the two versions of the work, but also to raise questions about how revision can alter the experience or nature of a musical work. Considering the major discrepancies between the versions, an important question must be asked: how do the revision's temporal and sequential changes affect the sonata's overarching musical experience?

The goal in constructing a musical narrative to analyze Rachmaninoff's two versions of Sonata op. 36 is not to argue for any definitive interpretation of the sonata, nor to suggest that the narrative is in some way absolute. In the case of Sonata op. 36, Rachmaninoff did not leave any sort of indication that the work was to be understood within such a limited scope. As such, it would be a heinous offense to argue that the following narrative uncovers a program that comes from the composer himself. Why, one might ask, would narrative be a useful analytical tool for a work with no prescribed message? Instead of condensing the artistic breadth and variety of this sonata into a single extramusical experience, this analysis aims to provide a generalized framework that could offer footholds for the listener or performer. Such a guide seeks to facilitate deeper musical understanding by providing an accessible context to the rhetorical structures and relationships within the piece.

The basis of the narrative is found in a church topic present within Sonata op. 36. This is not the only possible topic that could be selected to construct a narrative around the work; the context of the work's composition and Rachmaninoff's exile from Russia in 1917 could make for a very insightful perspective on the work.[4] The church topic was selected for its fairly simple interplay of dramatic elements: damnation versus redemption, pain versus healing, and so forth. These elements facilitate the construction of a musical narrative and consequently allow for Rachmaninoff's intricate work to be framed approachably. As the narrative unfolds, the manner in which its respective elements transform in temperament and quality inform the plot's development. The two most prominent figures of the church topic are the use of Russian Orthodox church bells and chant.[5] The bells are defined by a ringing sonority: often, lower pitches provide a foundational tapestry over which higher pitches create a sound of sweet bursts and embellishments. Chant, on the other hand, is defined by a full-bodied, unified sound, with a generally limited range and often descending in melodic trajectory. The bells are typically used as a call to worship for services, and chant facilitates both prayer and praise.[6]

A bell gesture in Sonata op. 36 will be defined generally as a harmonic and motivic event marked by sonorous, ringing chords. As a motive, this gesture can be used as the seed of larger musical ideas to generate melodies and create relationships between musical sections, or be manipulated on its own to create drama. These gestures appear in both climactic and intimate moments and are often marked by either tenutos or accents that cause these notes to ring above an underlying sonority. Often, the bell texture is reinforced post-impact with a vibrating, metallic sound, depicting the manner in which large bells continue to buzz after being hit, as it sustains the pitch and the overtones become excited. This gesture can be found in abundance throughout the sonata, but many of its elements can be seen clearly in Figure 1. In Sonata op. 36, bells act as an iconic symbol

1 Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36, Original and Revised Editions, Complete*, edited by Peter Donohoe, (London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1993), 2.

2 Renee MacKenzie, "Rachmaninoff's Piano Works and Diasporic Identity 1890-1945: Compositional Revision and Discourse," DMA diss, University of Western Ontario, 2018.

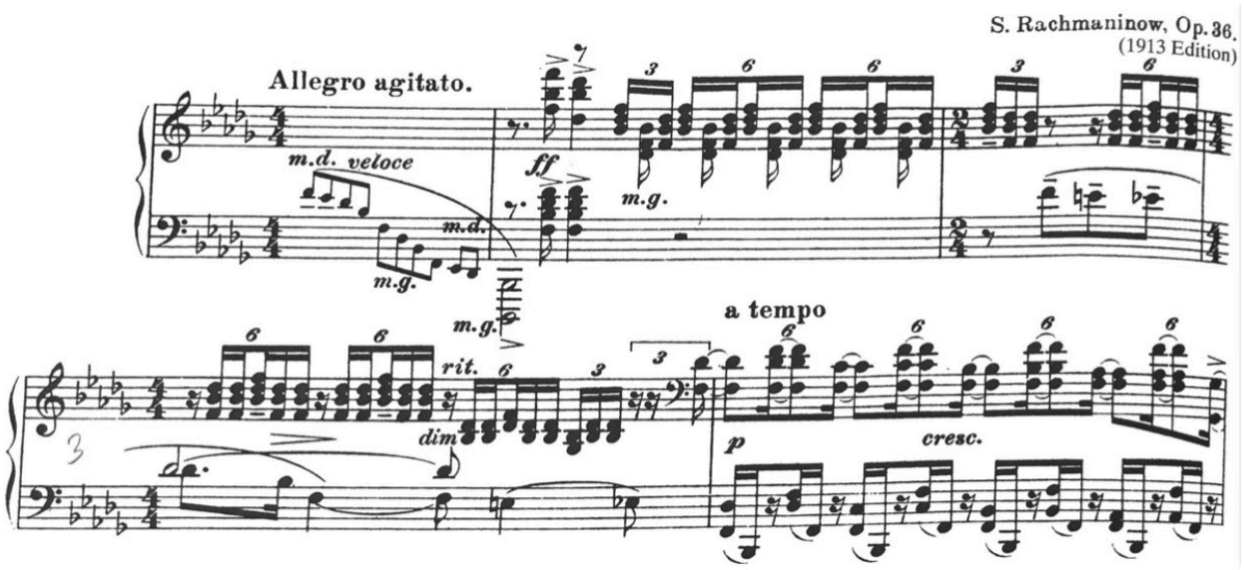
3 Maritz, Gerhardus. "Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, and the Discursive Arena between Composition and Performance," Master's diss, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 2014; Lee-Ann Nelson, "Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata Op. 36: Towards the Creation of an Alternative Performance Version," Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2006.

4 MacKenzie, "Rachmaninoff's Piano Works and Diasporic Identity."

5 Petyaluk, "Russian Orthodox Bell Ringing in New Jersey," YouTube video, March 26, 2017, https://youtu.be/qbn_Fzcxw30; Valentin Malanetski, "Rachmaninoff – All-Night Vigil (Vespers), op. 37, Divine choral music. [Valery Polyansky]," YouTube video, December 22, 2015, https://youtu.be/U2NSfTXjEPI?t=2170.

6 "On Bells and Their Ringing." Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://holy-trinity.org/cathedral-bells/on-bells-and-their-ringing.

Figure 1. Primary theme of the first movement, mm. 1-4.[7]




of the church signaling both a sort of conviction by a holy deity and an afflicted emotional state. Complementing these bell gestures are a few important passages that exemplify qualities of chant. The narrative proposed in this paper will be structured around the development of these bells and their transformation from a signifier of imminent damnation to one of redemption. Further discussion will consider how the prayerful, chant-like phrases interact with the work's expressive arc.

In the following analysis, I will construct a musical narrative of the original version of Sonata op. 36, highlighting key thematic, sequential, and tonal developments throughout the form. This narrative will supply us with a foundation to understand how revisions to the form may affect the work's underlying rhetorical structure. We will encounter a protagonist who begins at their lowest and is entrenched in shame, guilt, and agony. Throughout the course of the sonata, this individual is convicted by the church and continually seeks resolution from their ever-present affliction. In the third movement, they are revitalized by the resolution suggested by the church and pursue redemption. Faced with the same conflicts present at the beginning of the sonata, the protagonist struggles to come out victorious in battle, clawing their way to the finish line and finally earning a new life. Considering Rachmaninoff's revisions, we will see that the later version tells a different story. A reorganization in the use of the secondary theme from the first version's first movement invigorates the revision with a heightened energy that effectively redefines the theme as the true expressive impetus of the work.

The sonata immediately plunges into the depths of our protagonist's agony as they wrestle to understand and cope with a persistent torment. Here, we are presented with a fall from grace into the primary thematic area (P) with a violent act accompanied by three thunderous church bells.[8] P is defined by two elements: first, the initial impact of the B-flat in the bass that is complemented by the falling third gesture of F to D-flat in the top voice, and second, the descending melodic material in mm. 2-3, which outlines the tonic triad, B-flat minor, highlighting in particular the descent of F to D-flat. This thematic area is rife with conflict: our protagonist grows weak while wrestling with their consuming plight, ultimately retreating to a meditative state in search of solace.

The second thematic area (S) is the opposite of P, seen in Figure 2, offering a sense of peace and beauty. However, this prayer is composed of the same motivic material as P: a falling third emphasizing F and D-flat. With this prayer, our protagonist aspires to be relieved of shame and pain. However, an underlying tension begins to fester, and the protagonist is again confronted by bells that return them to their previous violent state. The development then begins in mm. 66 with an exclusive focus on material from P. The canonic construction of the beginning of the development signals the obsession that plagues the mind of the protagonist as they ruminate over their troubles and the power of their looming conviction. In this huge wash of bells, the protagonist's shame and anxiety consume them entirely, hurling into the recapitulation in m. 121. The grief and torment of P has become the forefront of the protagonist's existence.

7 Sergei Rachmaninoff. *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, Edited by Peter Donohoe, 4.

8 Ashish Xiangyi Kumar, "Rachmaninoff: Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36 (Lugansky, Kocsis)," YouTube video, January 8th, 2017, https://youtu.be/C_lOOYSzoBc.

Figure 2. Secondary theme of the first movement, mm. 37-38.[9]

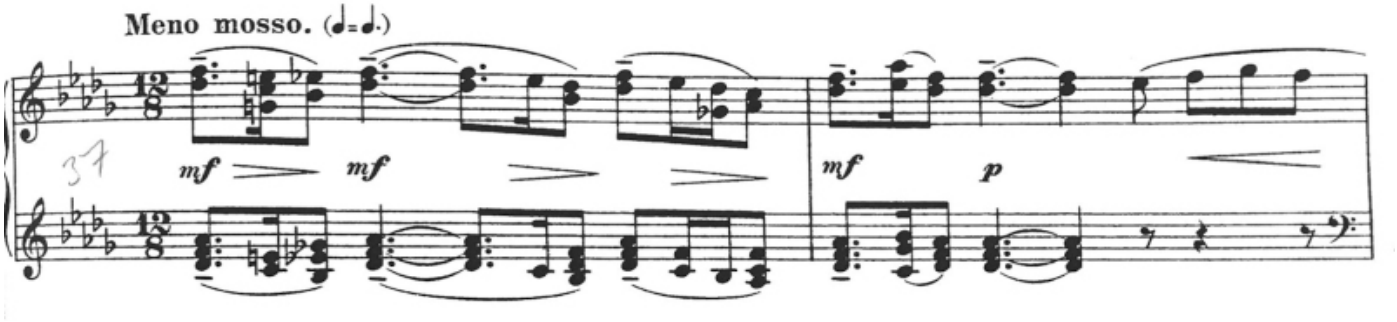
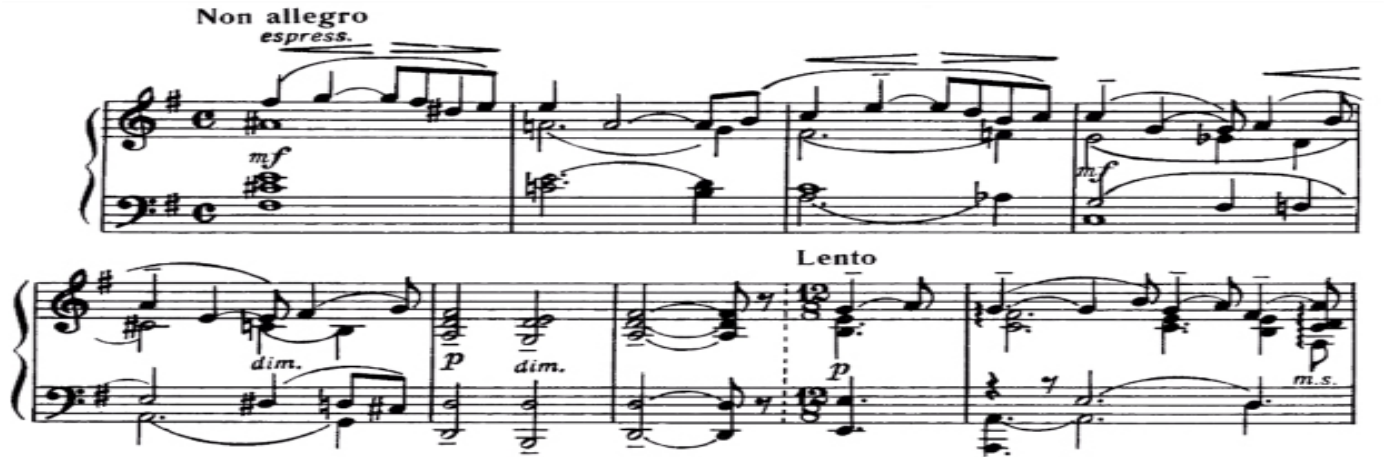



Figure 3. Introduction to the second movement, mm. 1-7.[10]




Again, S arrives in m. 140 and serves as a source of solace, at first seeming to suggest a solution. However, G-flat fails to offer structural resolution, as S does not appear in the expected key of B-flat minor or major. While both prayers in these keys grant our protagonist temporary peace, they have not yet resolved the core drama of the work, that being the minor mode of the primary key. The second prayer in G-flat major, like the first, gives way to a festering frustration which arrives on B-flat minor with bells in mm. 159-168. The protagonist seems to return now to their original pained, agitated state with a sense of desperation. Following this final outburst, the movement slowly fades away with whisperings of guilt.

The second movement reaches out in search of solitude. Shown in Figure 3, the movement begins on an F-sharp dominant chord, which, understood enharmonically as G-flat, reaches back to the last moment of peace in the first movement. The protagonist is wandering about this dominant chord by third progressions that highlight a minor third relation between F-sharp and A, in search for resolution, before suddenly pausing on D major, which is a major third down from the initial F-sharp. The starkness of this major third relationship is emboldened by the voicing of the D major chord: the F-sharp in the top voice reaches back to the beginning of the movement, clarifying the importance of the tonal relationship. Modulating to E minor, the protagonist mourns their present state, accompanied by a lamentive, descending bass line, beginning in m. 8. Intervallically, E is the furthest possible note from B-flat (a tritone apart), and the protagonist has separated themself as far from the guilt and shame previously experienced in B-flat minor. The melody is varied, in typical lament style, and the second movement's A section ultimately develops into a huge climax of bells in mm. 28-35, shown in Figure 4.

Convicted again by these persistent bells, the protagonist is transported back to the P of the first movement, refocusing explicitly on their pain (mm. 36-62). Just as the protagonist's anxious obsession grows in the development of the first movement, thoughts overlap one another, becoming darkly chromatic and thematically complex. Variations of the first movement's P theme combat one another in a variety of augmentations, diminutions, and displacements before retreating to a brooding E minor ostinato on m. 63. Here, the protagonist generates

9 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 7.

10 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 22.

Figure 4. Climax of the lament in the A section of the second movement, mm. 31-36.[11]

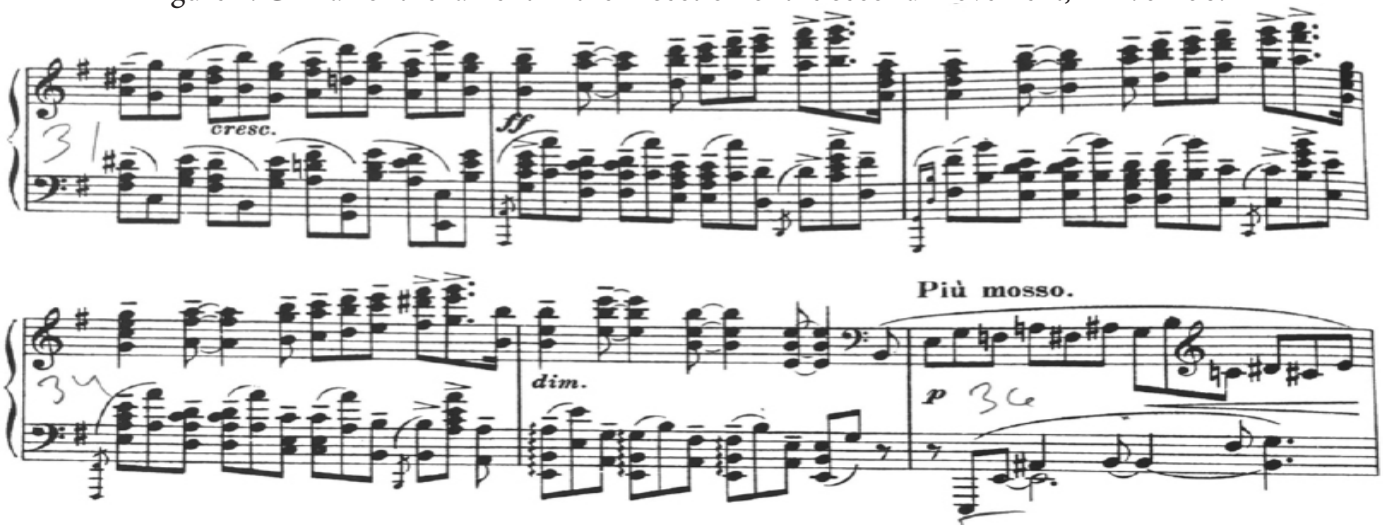
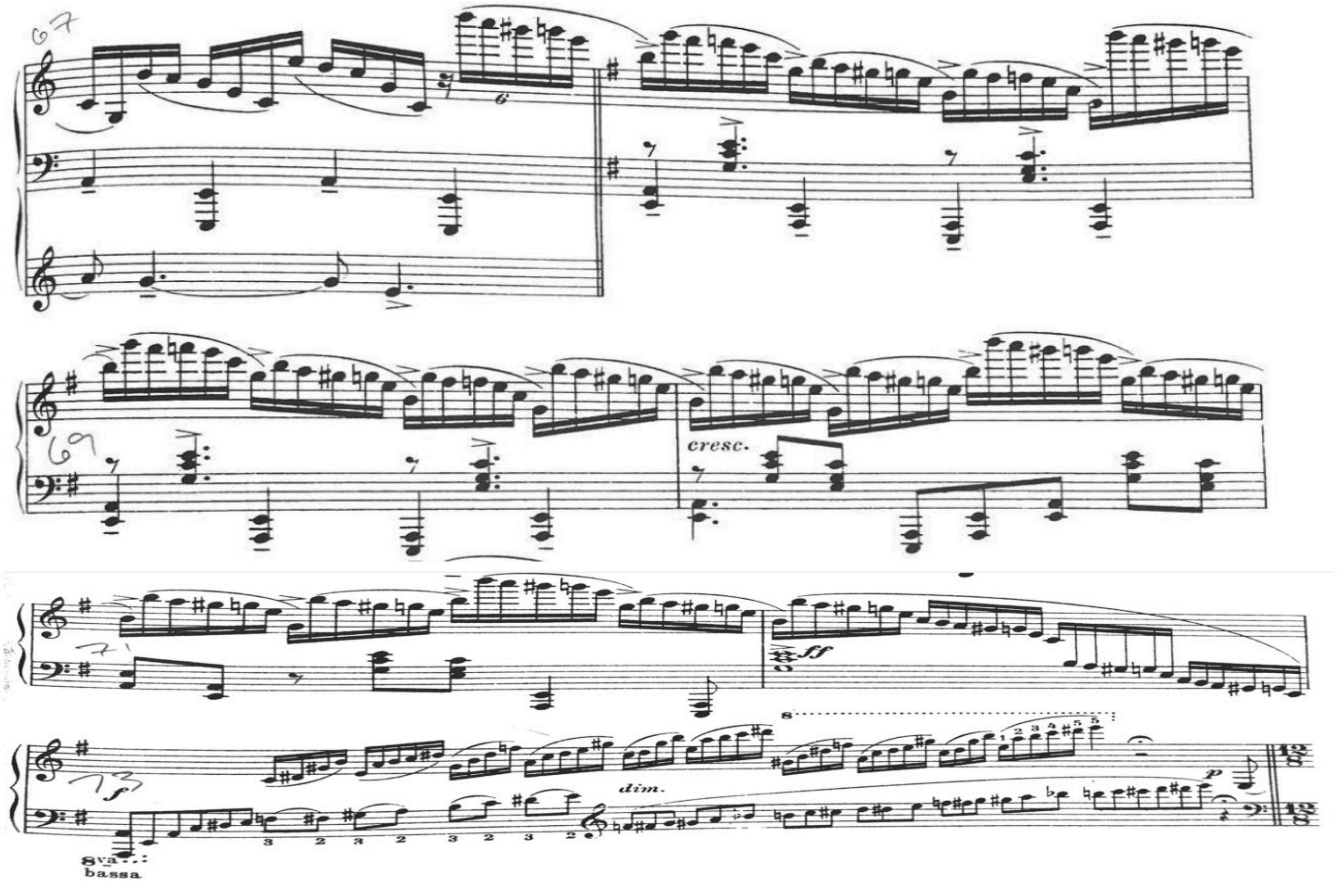



Figure 5. Second climax of bells in A minor in the second movement, mm. 67-73.[12]




the energy to confront the internal conflict again, contrasting greatly with mm. 36-62.

Yet again, the protagonist is confronted by the overwhelming clamor of bells, rising first from the bass in m. 63, as their confused, frustrated grief climbs to another climax. As seen in Figure 5, interjecting bell gestures alternate between multiple voices in each hand. In the left hand, one voice is firmly set on the downbeats, and the other on the upbeats. The right hand contributes to this clamoring with accents on the downbeat with gestures derived from P of the first movement. These gestures outline E minor, which clashes with the A minor sonority asserted in the bass. Each of these elements unite to create a frenzied, chaotic terror—a breaking point for the protagonist. The final bell strikes,

11 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 24.

12 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 27.

plunging into the furthest depths of the keyboard before dissipating into thin air. In the wake of this sonic outburst, the protagonist is left without energy to obsess over the guilt and shame that each previous arrival of bells has initiated.

Now in E major, the protagonist slowly rises to a state of contemplation, returning with a new perspective on their previous lament in m. 77. With the third arrival of a primary major key in this section (E major, preceded by D-flat major and G-flat major), the protagonist discovers the personal development required to achieve redemption: the transformation from minor to major. The distance of this key, however, is important: though the transformation is now known to the protagonist, it is a faint, distant, almost untouchable idea. In the final breath of the movement, shown in Figure 6, the motivic third appears within an inner voice and the bass, falling from B to G-sharp and G-sharp to E; a plan is made for a new life.

The third movement actualizes the self-transformation revealed in the second movement. Beginning with a similar introduction to the second movement, the third movement bursts forth in pursuit of redemption. In the first movement, S demonstrated how the major key symbolizes peace. The third movement is the final confrontation of the conflict presented by P, where the protagonist achieves redemption in the transformation from minor to major.

The primary thematic area of this movement (P2), shown in Figure 7, includes two distinct parts: a descending line of hammering bells (mm. 16-19) and an abridged variation of P (m. 20). The bells in P2 are in G-flat major, as they were in the second movement. This recalls the temporary resolution of G-flat in the recapitulation of the first movement. The bells now carry a new meaning, signaling understanding and a charge towards redemption. The secondary thematic area of this movement (S2) supports this resolution provided by the minor-major transformation, placing emphasis on G falling to E-flat throughout mm. 91-125. Our protagonist is building strength, preparing to face a final test.

Though it seems that total resolution has been achieved, the protagonist is again confronted by adversity when the section begins with a direct juxtaposition of C major and C minor (mm. 126-133), shown in Figure 8. A wild fury ensues. Violent bursts of energy and various thematic ideas overlap one another. At first, it is not clear what will come of this; the bells even seem to resort back to their old meaning, shifting to minor keys: A minor, B-flat minor, and B minor. For the first time in the sonata, the protagonist reins in the chaos, rather than becoming exhausted by it. The conflict has not yet been resolved, however, and the music finds itself in E-flat minor (m. 178). Doubt enters the mind of the protagonist, as E-flat minor is closely related to B-flat minor. At first, it seems that what had been previously gained was lost, perverted by the minor mode. Simultaneously, an inner

Figure 6. End of the second movement, mm. 86-89.[13]

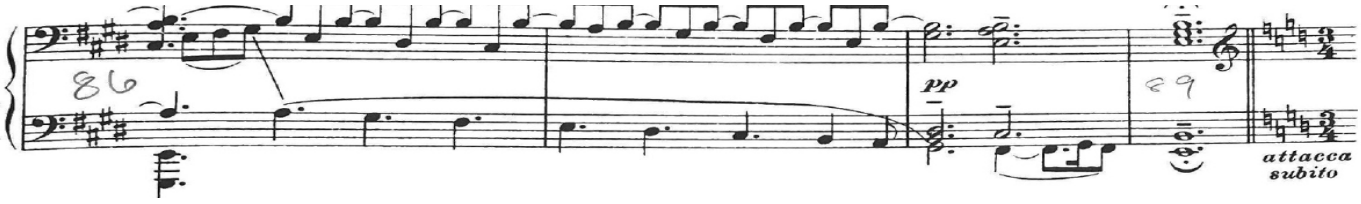
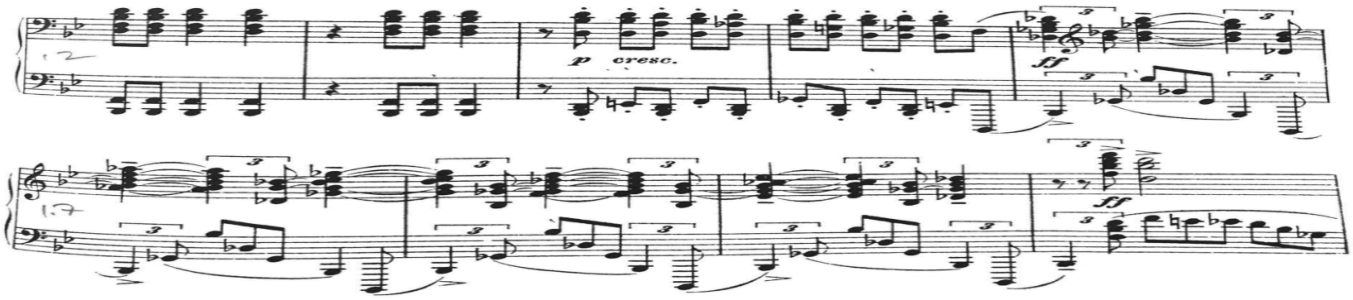



Figure 7. Primary theme of the third movement, mm. 12-20.[14]




13 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 29.
14 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 29.

Figure 8. Beginning of the development of the third movement, mm. 126-133.[15]

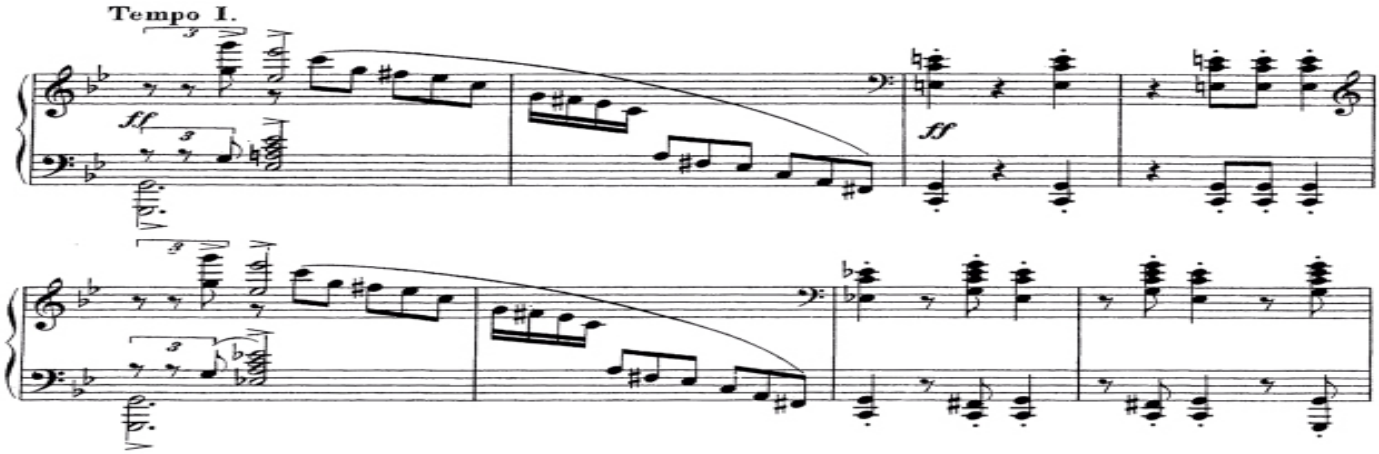
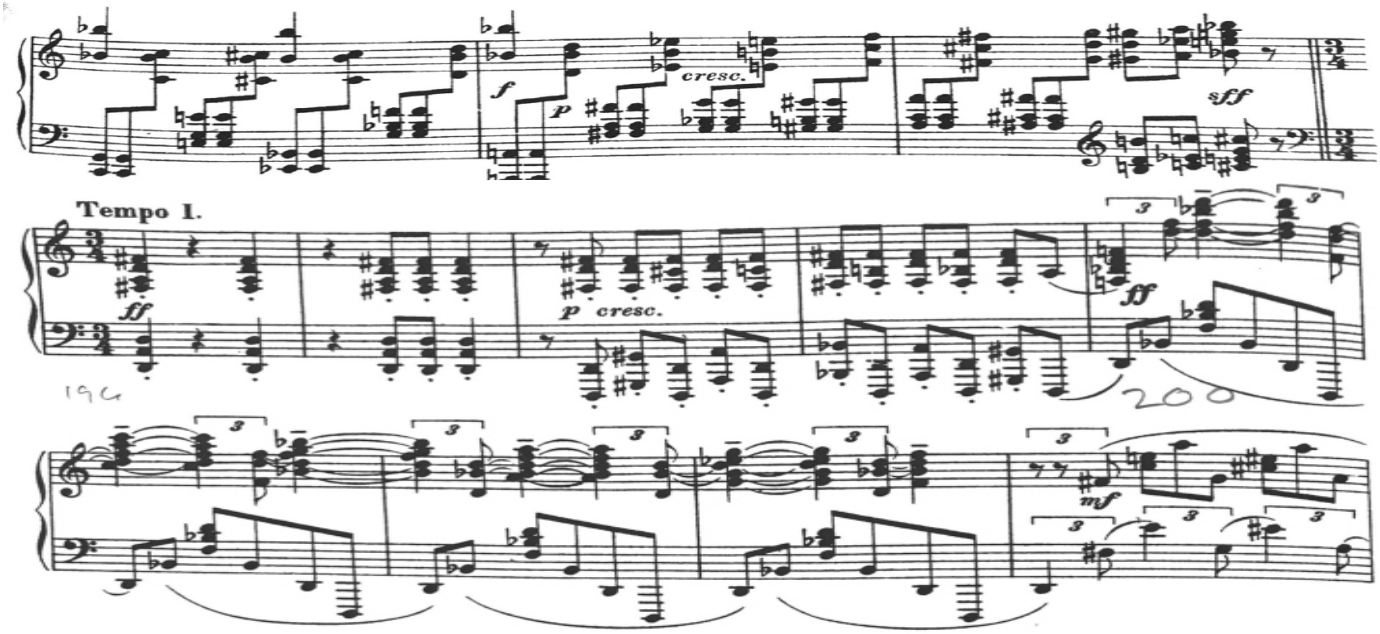



Figure 9. End of the development driving into the recapitulation in the third movement, mm. 193-204.[16]




voice ruminates on the structural tension between D-flat and D, rotating back and forth between E-flat, D, and D-flat.

This moment of doubt builds into a thundering climax, seen in Figure 9, taken from the beginning of the first movement—the protagonist is facing the final test for redemption. Rather unexpectedly, it does not arrive in B-flat major or minor, but D major in m. 196. This section demonstrates the structural importance of D major and highlights the core component of the protagonist's transformation, the underlying motion of D-flat to D.5. Finally, the bells of P2 arrive in B-flat major at the start of the recapitulation. At this moment, the protagonist has achieved redemption and B-flat major has become the prevailing mode.

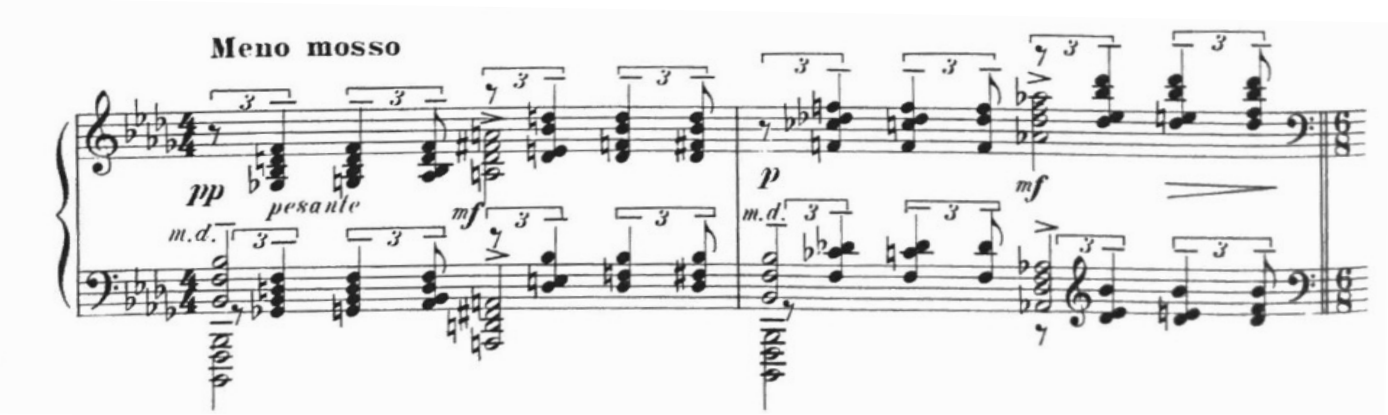
The formal pace of the recapitulation accelerates as excitement builds, shortening the return of P2 and driving through transitional material. The arrival of S2 (m. 240) in B-flat major confirms the resolution achieved in the third movement, placing a strong emphasis on D major. This resolution drives into the coda, which celebrates a newfound liberty, building towards a final explosive declaration of joy.

To summarize, our narrative follows a protagonist violently stricken with grief and tragedy in the first movement. They desperately search for solutions and relief, but to no avail; even their prayers in S and an encounter with ethereal, sublime beauty cannot cure the hardship.

15 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 36.

16 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 39-40.

Figure 10. The transition into the coda, revised edition, mm. 123-124.[17]




Each time they succumb to the same agitated, troubled state of mind. Frustrated and tired, the protagonist mourns their dismal state in the second movement, trying again in vain to confront this persistent calamity. Broken and dejected, the protagonist suddenly finds themself in an unlikely place.

This is showcased through a key that makes it appear that the protagonist is far away from home where they become contemplative and discover a possible solution in the major mode. However, the battle is not yet won. In the final movement, the protagonist jumps back into the fight with a newfound energy. Here, they face many trials. Suspense grows as they nearly fall back into the same state as they were in during the first movement. It is not until the very end of the work that the conflict is resolved and a thunderous celebration ensues.

With this narrative constructed, it is now possible to consider the consequences some of the major structural revisions have on the musical experience of the work. The general trajectory of the narrative is consistent between both versions: a protagonist wrestles with conviction and eventually achieves redemption. Many of Rachmaninoff's 1931 edits were simply simply textural, and it is not within the scope of this study to examine the consequences of every individual revision. However, in each movement, Rachmaninoff made a few substantial changes large enough to have a significant impact on the functioning elements of this narrative.

The most significant changes in the first movement are the transitions out of S. In the original recapitulation, as the protagonist finishes their second prayer, they seem to fall into another violent outburst. It is an act of desperation that grasps for some sort of exoneration. In the revision, however, Rachmaninoff altered the transition greatly, suggesting a tempered, introspective character.

The transition winds down slowly, arriving at a statement of bells, but this time quietly, as shown in Figure 10.[18] These redacted transitions out of S have a significant impact on the development of the narrative in the first movement. Previously, the protagonist exits their contemplative, prayerful state to mourn their pain and express their unhappiness. In the revision, the protagonist never leaves this state. Here, the arrival of the bells signifies an internalization by the protagonist: they no longer fight against the conviction. In this prayer, the protagonist ruminates what must be done to receive liberation. In the first measure of Figure 10, a B-flat major chord is directly opposed to a D major chord, which is followed by its darker alternative, as a B-flat major chord is opposed by D-flat major. This implicates the core tonal conflict of the sonata (major vs. minor), and inverts the eventual transformation of D-flat to D (minor to major) in the third movement. Also, in this passage, the closely knit attachment between B-flat major and D major, alternatively B-flat minor and D-flat major, is demonstrated. These tonal pairings play an important role later in the third movement, which is a key moment of foreshadowing. Furthermore, the revision subtly modifies the function of the prayer in the sonata, setting a precedent that Rachmaninoff developed in the second movement's revisions.

In the second movement, Rachmaninoff replaced the return of the A section's lament with a quotation of S from the first movement in E major.[19] This revision does not

17 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 58.

18 Robert Carlson, "Sonata No. 2, Op. 36 (1931) I. Allegro agitato – S. Rachmaninov," YouTube video, November 11, 2019, https://youtu.be/4EpgFI8yQoU.

19 Robert Carlson, "Sonata No. 2, Op. 36 (1931) II. Lento – III. Allegro Molto – S. Rachmaninov," YouTube video, November 11th, 2019, https://youtu.be/T2-l_hfzHWg.

break from the aesthetic of the section, for the church topic is still clearly present, but it does change the narrative structure of the work. Rachmaninoff had already used cyclicism in his original version in the development of P and the motivic relationships between each movement. S did not receive this same treatment in the original. It is related to P due to its motivic make-up, and by that association it possesses a tangential relationship to the later movements. However, by inserting a direct quotation of S into the second movement, which interrupts the expected rotation of events, Rachmaninoff alters the inherent tension between P and S.

In the original version, shown in Figure 11, S offered temporary solace, or even suggested suggested a solution to the protagonist's problems when it appeared. Each time, it proved to be useless. In the revised version, S acquires a progressive impact. Considering the revision in the first movement, each arrival of this theme creates some sort of change in the protagonist. The first arrival of S affords temporary solace, yet it ultimately degrades in light of their painful ordeal and multiplies into a roaring climax in the development. Returning to S at the end of the first movement, the protagonist remains in this contemplative, unsatisfied state and seems quietly tortured. With its third statement in the second movement, S enacts a solution where peace is found, and the protagonist has been changed. This revision greatly enhances the drama of the E major tonality, as the protagonist discovers that they had the answer before them from the very beginning. S then rises to a new rhetorical level effectively, becoming quite competitive with P. One might argue that this competition occurs in the original version in a very obscure manner through its use of major keys. While plausible, the refined function of S and cyclicism in the revision engrained this expressive action on a dramatic, thematic, and formal level, bringing it prominently to the surface.

The revisions of the third movement are the most extensive. In the development section, Rachmaninoff not only altered most of the textural elements, but deleted half of the development section, mm. 166-199, from the original.[22] This omission has a major impact on the narrative flow of the movement. It removes the suspense created by the protagonist's struggle, allowing them to come out victorious in the final battle for redemption with the appearance of material from the first movement in E-flat minor. In the revision, there is no transition between the original m. 165 and m. 200, such that the B-flat major bells arrive, suddenly, asserting full dominance.[23] Previously, the third movement continued to create suspense and doubt about the ultimate outcome of the protagonist's struggle until the very end. As shown in Figure 12, the revision almost entirely removes this doubt.

Figure 11. Cyclical statement of S in the second movement, revised edition, mm. 65-67.[20]

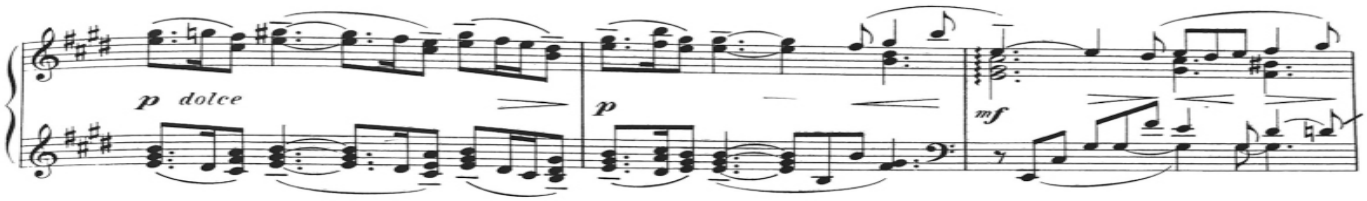
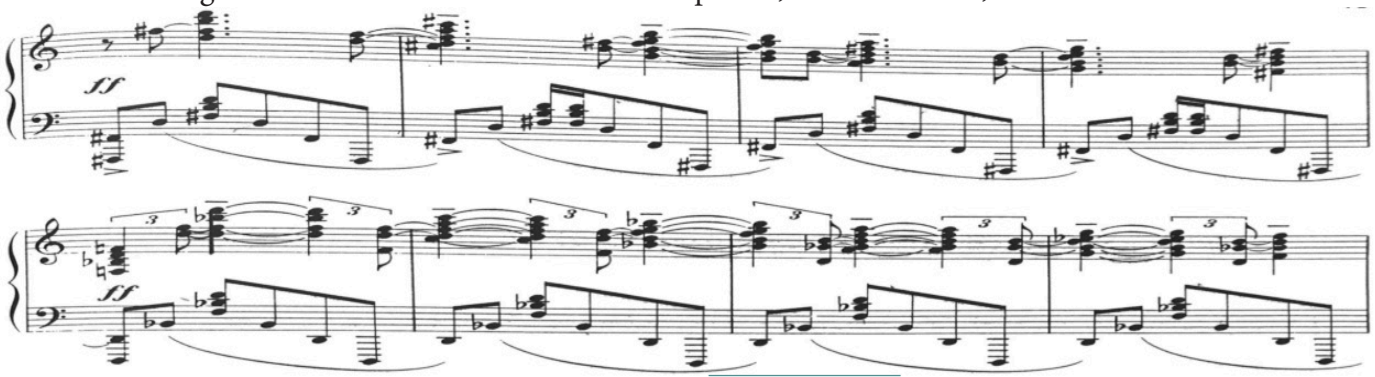



Figure 12. Direct transition out of development, revised edition, mm. 142-149.[21]




20 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, edited by Donohoe, 65.

21 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36,* edited by Donohoe, 73

22 Kumar, "Rachmaninoff: Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36."

23 Robert Carlson, "Sonata No. 2, Op. 36 (1931) II. Lento – III. Allegro Molto – S. Rachmaninov," YouTube video, November 11, 2019, https://youtu.be/T2-l_hfzHWg.

If the development of the third movement in the original creates suspense and doubt, then its omission in the revised version effectively removes this dramatic element from the narrative. In turn, the protagonist becomes powerful, mighty, and celebratory. In the revision, the protagonist has effectively achieved redemption at the end of the second movement, and the third movement simply celebrates.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the aim in analyzing the different narrative shapes available in Rachmaninoff's two versions of Sonata op. 36 is not to suggest a definitive narrative present in the sonata. Instead, this narrative analysis aims to provide a template on which we may consider the work and initiate a dialogue about the consequences of substantial revision. Future research in this topic would require an extensive analysis of the subjective act of narration in the sonata as it relates to the protagonist. Additionally, a more nuanced study of the topical elements in the sonata could greatly enhance a narrative understanding of this work.

## Author's Note

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Robert Brooks Carlson ('20), graduated Magna Cum Laude in Piano Performance, with minors in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies and Mathematics. At JMU, Robert studied with Paulo Steinberg and worked extensively as a collaborative pianist with numerous vocalists, instrumentalists, the Wind Symphony, and the Opera Theatre. Currently, Robert is working on his Master's in Piano Performance at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, where he studies with Soyeon Kate Lee.

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