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Maturing through Criticism: Sergei Rachmaninoff's Operatic Development and His Unfinished Opera Monna Vanna

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MATURING THROUGH CRITICISM: SERGEI RACHMANINOFF'S OPERATIC DEVELOPMENT
AND HIS UNFINISHED OPERA *MONNA VANNA*

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Title: Maturing Through Criticism: Sergei Rachmaninoff's Operatic Development and His Unfinished Opera *Monna Vanna*

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Sergei Rachmaninoff's reputation as a composer has never caught up to his tremendous fame as a pianist. While his piano works have been standard piano repertoire for decades, his symphonic works and songs remain somewhat at the margins and his operatic works have been largely neglected. While some of the operas garnered positive critical reaction at their premieres, these operas have not remained in the repertory and are rarely heard today. This thesis will explore the critical reception of these operas both at their premieres and in subsequent performances, suggest the aspects that ultimately made them unsuccessful, and analyze the impact of their reception on the unfinished opera, *Monna Vanna*. Rachmaninoff highly valued the work, but did not finish it because he was unable to secure the operatic rights to the play. After careful study of the manuscript, I have found that with *Monna Vanna*, that there is significant evidence of Rachmaninoff's growth as an opera composer from his previous operas. After his first operatic project, *Aleko*, Rachmaninoff continually moved in the direction of operatic realism in his subsequent productions, following similar trends in Europe and Russia. Based on the criticism of *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini*, Rachmaninoff's operatic realism was not well received, and he continued to develop it. Deeply impressed by hearing Strauss's *Salome* in 1906, Rachmaninoff began

to compose *Monna Vanna*. I argue that of all his operas, *Monna Vanna* comes closest to achieving the operatic realism that Strauss, in Rachmaninoff's mind, perfected. Had Rachmaninoff finished *Monna Vanna*, it would likely have been a success that would have led to further productivity in the genre.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF STUDY

Sergei Rachmaninoff's¹ reputation as a composer has never caught up to his tremendous fame as a pianist. While his piano works have been standard piano repertoire for decades, his symphonic works and songs remain somewhat at the margins and his operatic works have been largely neglected. While some consider Rachmaninoff a backwards-looking composer who reflects more of the ideals of the preceding Romantic era instead of the musical practices of the new century, this tendency may have contributed to the intense emotional quality that so many listeners value in his music. Given his success in other areas, it is unfortunate that scholars have not explored his operatic works more thoroughly.

It is difficult to measure the later success of Rachmaninoff's operas because traditionally Russian opera has had limited appeal outside of Russia, due in part to the unfamiliarity of the language to performers and audiences and its difficulty in being produced outside the country. Furthermore, Rachmaninoff left Russia shortly after the 1917 Russian Revolution and his operas were unlikely to be produced by the newly installed Communist government. He traveled widely, across Europe and the United States for the rest of his life. He finally settled in Beverly Hills and died there at his home in 1943. Throughout his life, despite his proximity to Russia, he remained a devout

¹ In this thesis the traditional American spelling of Sergei Rachmaninoff will be used. I have left the European spellings intact in subsequent quotation, but for the body of the essay the American spelling will be used. It is also important to note that whenever possible the new Russian calendar will be used. However, in some sources it does not indicate which form of the calendar is being used, so I have kept the dates as they are.

Russian. He insisted on speaking Russian and his family followed Russian customs, employed Russian servants, and entertained Russian guests.

From his student days, opera was important to Rachmaninoff's career.

Rachmaninoff's graduation project from the Moscow Conservatory, *Aleko*, received top marks and the Great Gold Medal. Tchaikovsky became a mentor as a result, and many expected Rachmaninoff to develop into a successful opera composer. In the years 1897-1904, Rachmaninoff held significant operatic conducting assignments ranging from the Moscow Private Russian Opera to the Bolshoi. This thesis explores the critical reception of the completed operas both at their premieres and in subsequent performances and discusses the aspects that reflect Rachmaninoff's developing maturity in the field. After *Aleko*, Rachmaninoff began work on *Francesca da Rimini* in 1900 which was completed in August of 1905 and also began work on *The Miserly Knight* in 1903 which was completed in June 1905. One year later Rachmaninoff embarked on an opera based on Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna*. Unable to secure the operatic rights to the play, Rachmaninoff abandoned the project after completing a piano-vocal score of the first act, and never returned to opera composition.

With each successive opera, Rachmaninoff worked to capture a style which William Schoell calls realism or *verismo*. To distinguish this from realism in literature and painting, I will call it operatic realism. As in other forms of realism, operatic realism brought a change in focus from the previous century by providing stories not about kings and queens or mythological figures, but rather about the problems of the average contemporary man and woman, which were generally of a sexual, romantic, or violent

nature.² These problems of the average human being were supposed to be the stuff of real life, and were characterized by pettiness, sordidness, and emotional intensity.³ Derived to some degree from Wagner and influenced by Massenet, this new emotional rhetoric remained a distinguishing feature of operatic realism, even as it expanded beyond its original context of everyday life and lower-class characters.⁴ Realism was not to be characterized merely by the rawness and crudeness that so many saw in its premiere opera, *Cavalleria rusticana*, but also by its emotional intensity through real situations. However, according to Schoell, “the musical style was more relevant than the subject matter”⁵ in realist opera. In the best works of operatic realism, solo pieces, recitatives, and orchestral lines achieve equal status. The texture is cohesive due to orchestral motifs and the absence of full arias.⁶

Rachmaninoff eventually came to associate this style with Richard Strauss’s *Salome*, and his effort to emulate Straussian qualities came closest to fruition with *Monna Vanna*. For this reason I will explore areas in *Monna Vanna* which appear to respond to the critics’ advice and which show evidence of his growing maturity as an opera composer. The style of operatic realism allowed for a more continuous flow than he was able to achieve in the highly sectionalized *Aleko*, which is divided distinctly into thirteen numbers. However, the unfinished opera, *Monna Vanna* has a seamless flow

² William Schoell, *The Opera of the Twentieth Century: A Passionate Art in Transition* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006): 7.

³ Ibid.7.

⁴ Matteo Sansone, “Verismo” In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* Ed. Deane Root *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed October 20, 2009).

⁵ Schoell, *The Opera*, 7.

⁶ Ibid.

between numbers. The action of the opera is quick moving and all the sections flow together quite well as one beautiful melody leads to the next. The opera utilizes Rachmaninoff's mature compositional style and a libretto better suited for the operatic stage than his previous operas.

Unfortunately, audiences and critics did not always like some aspects of operatic realism because they crowded out the beautiful, lyrical arias present in earlier operas from Mozart through Verdi. However, Puccini successfully integrated operatic realism with the rich melodies that the critics love. Responding to the critics, Rachmaninoff also began to add richer melodies to *Monna Vanna*. In the second half of the 19th century, the two most dominant figures in opera were Wagner and Verdi. Verdi stood as one of the few composers of the time that was free from the influence of Wagner; he wrote with mostly melodic idioms instead of chromatic and did not fully harness the power of the orchestra as Wagner did. However, Verdi was always interested in making opera more dramatic, as evidenced by the literary sources he chose for his operas, such as Hugo, Schiller, and Shakespeare. Wagner on the other hand, created a new genre, the music drama. Wagner sought to create a "oneness of drama and music."⁷ In doing this he moved away from the separate recitative and aria sections. He fused everything together so that there were no breaks. Wagnerian opera also drew on the symphonic styles and techniques that were so important to German musical identity, leading to an increase in chromatic harmony and heavy use of the orchestra for color and dramatic

⁷ Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*. 6th ed. (New York: W.W. North & Company, 2001): 625.

expression. The emphasis is on the inner voices and texture rather than the Italian stress on melody.⁸ William Schoell provides a great contrast between the two schools:

An opera by Verdi is like an accessible, well-written commercial bestseller that a talented author has tailored to popular tastes. An opera by Wagner is like the literary novel that is not for every taste, not as accessible, but is well worth the extra work it takes to understand it.⁹

Consistent with this quote, because Rachmaninoff followed the Wagnerian branch of opera, he did not fare as well with the critics. However, Rachmaninoff persisted through the criticism to formulate his own style based on Strauss's continuation of Wagnerian ideals.

Richard Strauss who was considered to be Wagner's heir, took operatic realism further by pushing the boundaries of human pathology and the standard musical conventions, "for the first time in history it [Strauss] explored the mental pathology of characters achieved by the 105-strong orchestra, which like a stream of consciousness, tells us what is in the characters' hearts and minds."¹⁰ His operas dealt with subjects, actions, and emotions stronger than any attempted before in opera.¹¹ Strauss developed a Wagnerian infused operatic realism by creating "harmonically complex and dissonant musical idioms that greatly influenced the later growth of expressionism and the dissolution of tonality in German music."¹² Strauss created a balance between melody and recitative in his use of *arioso*. *Ariosso* is a style that is songlike, as opposed

⁸ Ibid., 618.

⁹ William Schoell, *The Opera of the Twentieth Century: A Passionate Art in Transition* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006): 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Grout and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 641.

¹² Ibid.

to declamatory; a short passage in a regular tempo in the middle or at the end of a recitative; a short aria and not so connected.¹³ Rachmaninoff was deeply moved when he saw Strauss's *Salome* in 1906. He said that, "I was completely delighted by it. Most of all the orchestra, of course, but there were many things in the music itself I liked, whenever it didn't sound too discordant. Yet Strauss is a very talented man. And his instrumentation is amazing."¹⁴ *Salome* is both modern and romantic at the same time. It has both themes and arias and is the perfect synthesis between words and music.¹⁵ Strauss rejected the Italian tradition of all melody in his synthesis of words and music. Strauss on Puccini, "Ja, Ja, very beautiful, all melody, all melody.....Everyone thinks I'm hostile to Puccini. It isn't true. But I can't listen to his operas because if I do, I can't get the melodies out of my head afterwards."¹⁶ Strauss sought to continue the Wagnerian tradition of a seamless line, a music drama.

Russian opera on the other hand took a much different path than the battle between Germany and Italy. The group known as the "Mighty Handful" or "The Five" consisted of composers Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, Mily Balakirev, César Cui, and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. The group sought to create their own brand of opera through Russian nationalism. Rimsky-Korsakov was a lyrical and pictorial composer whose music was rich in orchestral and harmonic effects. His operas were popular, but his style was evolutionary rather than innovative. *The Tsar's Bride*, which premiered in 1899, was a tragedy in the Italian style with Wagnerian *leitmotifs*, Dargomyzhsky's

¹³ Julian Budden, "Arioso" In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* Ed. Deane Root *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed October 20, 2009).

¹⁴ Jacobson, "The Vocal Rachmaninoff," 27.

¹⁵ Schoell, *The Opera*, 78.

¹⁶ Schoell, *The Opera*, 21.

melodic recitative, and Russian folk melodies. Rimsky-Korsakov believed that opera was primarily a musical rather than a dramatic work and therefore rejected realism. The most original of the “Mighty Handful” was Mussorgsky, whose showpiece opera *Boris Godunov* premiered in 1874. Mussorgsky’s music blended declamation and the melodic line so that it managed to convey the emotion of the text in the most direct manner.¹⁷ His melodies were ultimately out of Russian folksong with peculiar intervals, monotonous reiteration of patterns, irregularity of phrase structures, and archaic modal basis.¹⁸ Rachmaninoff however, had little interest in these nationalistic trends.¹⁹ Instead he initially sought to emulate his mentor Tchaikovsky, the leader of the cosmopolitan school in Russia. He was cosmopolitan in that he was trained in Germany and appreciated Italian opera and French ballet. His masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* is an old-fashioned Romantic opera with graceful melodies and expressive harmonies, with transparent and imaginative orchestration.²⁰ Much of Rachmaninoff’s composition style, particularly his sweepingly passionate, melodious idiom,²¹ can be traced to his admiration for Tchaikovsky.

When Rachmaninoff learned that Maeterlinck had granted the operatic rights of *Monna Vanna* to Henry Février, he abandoned the project, having completed the piano score for the first act and sketches for the second and third acts. After Rachmaninoff’s death, the opera remained in the possession of his widow, Natalia Rachmaninoff. Eight

¹⁷ Donald Jay Grout and Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*. 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 517.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Grout and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 651.

²⁰ Grout and Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 514.

²¹ Grout and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 651.

years after Rachmaninoff's death, Mrs. Rachmaninoff donated the *Monna Vanna* manuscript along with several other manuscripts to the Library of Congress archives. Igor Buketoff recalls that around 1974, Rachmaninoff's sister-in-law, Sophie Satina, asked him, a family friend, to transcribe the opera for full orchestra. With a letter of introduction for the project from Sophie Satina, Buketoff gained entrance into the Library of Congress archives. He discovered the manuscript exactly as Miss Satina had described it—a piano vocal score in ink of the first act along with the libretto for the two remaining acts and fifteen pages of minute sketches.²² The sketches consist of short musical examples from act two; unfortunately the musical examples are not substantial enough to draw any accurate conclusions on what Rachmaninoff might have intended for the act. No sketches exist for act three; however, all three acts of the libretto were completed. With the assistance of a grant from Louisa Stude Sarofim, a personal friend of Buketoff's, the libretto was translated into English by Daniel J. Skvir and Tamara Turkevich Skvir and Buketoff orchestrated the first act from the piano-vocal score. This was eventually performed in a concert hall rather than on the operatic stage.

I argue that *Monna Vanna* reflects a more mature operatic style than his previous completed operas. Rachmaninoff addressed the criticism of his previous operas, but in the end, culminated a more mature operatic style based on the influence of operatic realism and Strauss. In this thesis I will address some of these areas of

²² Igor Buketoff "Rachmaninoff's 'Monna Vanna,'" *High Fidelity/Musical America* 34:8 (August 1984): MA 19-20.

improvement, which I believe would have received more positive criticism, had *Monna Vanna* been produced.

CHAPTER 2

THE RECEPTION OF RACHMANINOFF'S COMPLETED OPERAS

Aleko

Aleko was written as Rachmaninoff's graduation project from the Moscow Conservatory of Music in 1892. In a letter to Natalia Skalon dated February 18, 1892, Rachmaninoff described the details of the project.²³ The students of the graduating class in theory were to be given one month to complete a one act opera, beginning on March 15. The best one-act operas were to be performed at a special ceremony in May. Rachmaninoff and his classmates Leo Conus and Nikita Morozov were given a libretto by Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko on the subject of Pushkin's 1824 poem *The Gypsies*. In another letter to Natalia Skalon, Rachmaninoff expressed his excitement for the chosen libretto: "The opera is entitled 'Aleko.' The libretto is done very well. Subject is wonderful."²⁴ Despite the fact that the young composers were given the libretto almost two weeks after March 15, Rachmaninoff managed to speed through the composing process. When his composition teacher Arensky asked Rachmaninoff how he was doing on the opera, Rachmaninoff replied that he was finished. A confused Arensky asked if he meant the piano score, but Rachmaninoff clarified that he had completed the entire opera with the orchestral parts.²⁵ Upon the final examination held by the conservatory faculty on May 7, 1892, Rachmaninoff received the top score of 5+ on his opera. Upon hearing the opera Rachmaninoff's former teacher Zverev, who

²³ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956): 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

had angrily broken contact with the composer years earlier, offered Rachmaninoff his gold watch in honor of completing such a strong work. *Aleko* unanimously received the Great Gold Medal, the highest honor the conservatory offered. *Aleko* is a one act opera written in thirteen numbers.

In the plot, Aleko, a young nobleman, joins a gypsy caravan in search of a more meaningful existence. He falls in love with the gypsy girl Zemfira, who after a time tires of him and takes a young gypsy lover. Ignoring the civilized values he has been taught during his upper class upbringing, Aleko kills the couple in a fit of jealous rage and is expelled from the tribe. Patricia Klapthor comments that the opera bears a close resemblance to Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria rusticana*, and Richard Taruskin says that, "The libretto underscores the parallel with *Cavalleria rusticana*, then the latest sensation, by providing a lyrical orchestral intermezzo immediately before the murder."²⁶

Taruskin goes on to deduce that "the libretto is a primitive, disjointed affair providing a string of numbers covering a variety of operatic forms but little in the way of dramatic continuity or motivation."²⁷ However, Rachmaninoff did make an attempt to give shape to the opera through thematic consistency. The most obvious of these themes is the three-note *leitmotiv* ascending and descending by a semitone that corresponds in rhythm and contour to the pronunciation of the title character's name. The *leitmotiv* is heard anytime Aleko appears on stage or is talked about.

²⁶ Richard Taruskin, "Aleko" In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* Ed. Deane Root *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed October 20, 2009).

²⁷ Ibid.

Figure 1: *Aleko*, “Aleko’s Leitmotiv”



By June 10, 1892 *Aleko* had been accepted for performance at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Rachmaninoff expressed his concerns about the performance of his first opera in a letter to Natalia:

For me the production of *Aleko* is both a pleasant and an unpleasant prospect. Pleasant—because it’s good experience for me to see my opera on the stage and to check my theatrical mistakes. Unpleasant—because the opera is sure to fail. I say this quite sincerely. It’s the way things are. All first operas by young composers usually fail, and for good reason; they are full of defects that can’t be corrected until we know the stage...²⁸

After attending rehearsals of *Aleko*, Tchaikovsky suggested that *Aleko* be performed alongside his opera *Iolanthe*. Tchaikovsky mentored Rachmaninoff through the rehearsal process, speaking up for him when the composer was afraid to make suggestions to the conductor Ippolit Altani. *Aleko* premiered in Moscow on April 27, 1893 with excerpts from Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* and Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades*. Bertensson and Leyda take note that Tchaikovsky applauded loudly, leaning over the ledge of the balcony to show the audience that he approved of this opera.²⁹ Semyon Kruglikov reviewed the premiere performance of *Aleko* in *Artiste*, writing that Rachmaninoff had the potential to be a good opera composer because he had a good feeling of the stage, understanding of the human voice, and a good sense of melody. He

²⁸ Ibid., 47-48.

²⁹ Ibid., 54.

praised the project as the work of an eighteen-year-old student, but said that the work as “designed for the stage of the Bolshoi Theater” left a “great deal to be desired.”³⁰ A reporter for the *Moskovskiye vedomosti* wrote that *Aleko* lacked coherence between numbers and scenes and that almost every scene came to an abrupt end. He said however that the faults “are far outweighed by merits, which leads one to expect much from this young composer in the future...”³¹ The reporter’s complaint is largely due to the libretto, although Geoffrey Norris argues that it could have been possible to create musical links rather than sectioning the opera into separate songs and numbers. For example, one of the most uncomfortable sections of the opera occurs immediately after the Old Gypsy’s tale and the argument afterwards (Nos. 3 and 4), when the gypsies break into dancing (Nos. 5 and 6). Norris suggests that had these dances been omitted No. 7 would flow quite naturally from No. 4. However, given the libretto Rachmaninoff had no choice but to insert the dances here, since the text at the end of No. 4 states, “That’s enough, old fellow. This tale is tedious, and we shall forget it in merry-making and dancing.” Since it was a graduation project, Rachmaninoff was not at liberty to make changes to the libretto; he simply had to work with what he had.

Early performances throughout Russia included the premiere performance in Moscow on April 27, 1893, performances in Kiev shortly before Tchaikovsky’s death in October of 1893, and St. Petersburg in May 1899. Despite the initial excitement of having his first opera performed, Rachmaninoff soured on the opera later in his career. Rachmaninoff’s popularity in the U.S. led to an American tour for the opera by the

³⁰ Ibid., 54-55.

³¹ Geoffrey Norris, “Rachmaninov’s Student Opera,” *Musical Quarterly*. 54 (July 1973): 443.

Musical Studio of the Moscow Art Theater in December of 1925.³² However, when asked to attend one of these performances, Rachmaninoff replied, “Not only will I not come, but I am ashamed to have written such nonsense.”³³ Modern critics seem to have agreed with Rachmaninoff’s assessment. A performance of *Aleko* at the Camden Festival in London in July of 1973 was met with mixed reviews. Reviewer Winton Dean said that the opera was “a poor piece, ungainly in design, short in invention, and without the saving grace of memorable tunes.”³⁴ In his review and commentary of the performance in 1973, Geoffrey Norris suggested that the principal fault with *Aleko* lies in the slow action in the libretto. He says that the libretto was most likely hastily prepared and that due to the novice level of the graduates assigned the libretto, they did not notice its obvious flaws. In stark contrast to Dean’s review, Norris writes that in Aleko’s cavatina (No. 10) there are “long, well phrased, yearning melod[ies]” and that they are “richly accompanied with the ever-resolving harmonies which later became a principal feature of the expansive tunes in many of his more famous works.”³⁵

In her master’s thesis, Patricia Klapthor analyzes each of Rachmaninoff’s completed operas. In her analysis of *Aleko* she notes that Nemirovich-Danchenko based the libretto on one of Pushkin’s narrative poems that was quite long and not really intended for dramatization. While Nemirovich-Danchenko tried to use as much as possible of Pushkin’s original poem, it does not particularly fit in the limited amount of time of a one act opera. The libretto spans the time period of two years which is

³² I have been unable to locate exact details of this American tour, i.e. locations and number of performances. The tour is mentioned in Bertensson and Leyda *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 241.

³³ Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 242.

³⁴ Winton Dean, “Aleko, La Navarraise,” *Musical Times*. 113:1553 (July 1972): 677.

³⁵ Norris, “Rakhmaninov,” 446.

crammed into just under 50 minutes. Klapthor analyzed the portions that Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote himself and concluded that “they only serve to interrupt the action or break the established mood.”³⁶ She comments that there is no unifying element to the libretto: “The story is told almost entirely in solo songs and the characters rarely interact with each other.”³⁷ Klapthor also identified several places where Rachmaninoff successfully linked music to the characters by placing thematic material in the Introduction representing the characters Aleko and Zemfira.

Besides the resemblance to *Cavalleria rusticana*, Klapthor notes that portions of the opera contain beautiful melodies of *bel canto* style, most notably in the Young Gypsy’s song (No. 12). After perhaps a more careful study than the typical critic, Klapthor ultimately concludes:

The story contains too few dramatic events, and, as noted earlier, characters seldom interact. Much of the text is written for soloists and it’s reflective in nature, full of feeling but with no dramatic force...Perhaps because he [Nemirovich-Danchenko] was preparing the libretto for use as an academic exercise, he did not consider that it would ever be performed. In any event, there is a noticeable lack of dramatic action that no composer could have remedied.³⁸

Norris concludes that the reason *Aleko* seems to have faded from the operatic repertoire is that it is too short to constitute a whole evening of entertainment and that it is too difficult to combine with another opera.³⁹ Richard Taruskin recognizes the demands *Aleko* presents on performers and qualifies it as an excellent exercise for

³⁶Patricia A. Klapthor “A Survey of the Operas of Sergei Rachmaninoff” (Master’s Thesis: Bowling Green State University, 1989): 17.

³⁷Ibid., 19

³⁸Ibid., 21.

³⁹Norris, “Rakhmaninov,” 448.

opera workshops and amateur troupes; he claims that these avenues have kept *Aleko* alive in Russia.⁴⁰

For the most part, I agree with the critics in their analysis of *Aleko*. The opera is extremely compartmentalized, and sounds more like an imitation of Tchaikovsky than something Rachmaninoff dreamed up himself; it lacks the richness of harmony and the dark edge that so many Rachmaninoff pieces have. Given Rachmaninoff's close relationship with and admiration for Tchaikovsky, this is not a surprise. While the tunes are nice in and of themselves, they are nothing special, and none of them stand out. The best piece of the opera is "Aleko's Cavatina," which almost has a waltz feeling. The piece is mostly lyrical with few moments of recitative material. The orchestra does a good job of pushing the melody forward; the most outstanding section of the piece occurs at the end where the orchestra finally envelops the voice in a richness that consumes the song and reflects the emotional connection with Aleko when he discovers that his lover has been unfaithful to him. In his use of *leitmotiv* material, Rachmaninoff does attempt to provide continuity in creating a total work of art as with Wagner, but the *leitmotifs* are not substantial enough to really round off the work. Such closed forms as "Zemfira's Song" do not really fit into the arioso style, which should provide a more seamless melody even as it curves in and out of recitative. *Aleko* is so sectionalized that cannot achieve this seamless effect. Overall, the opera is an excellent final exercise, but lacks the dramatic spark needed for success of the operatic stage.

⁴⁰ Richard Taruskin, "Aleko," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Deane Root (accessed October 29, 2009), www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

Francesca da Rimini

Rachmaninoff began composing his second complete opera, *Francesca da Rimini*, in 1900, although the bulk of the composition occurred during the same period, 1904-1905, when he was composing his third complete opera, *The Miserly Knight*. The two operas were premiered together at the Bolshoi on January 24, 1906.⁴¹ Rachmaninoff wrote to Modest Tchaikovsky in 1898 asking for a libretto presumably on the Shakespearian subject of *Richard III*. Modest replied with an idea for an opera based on Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*. Taruskin, Norris, and others have suggested that the collaboration with Modest and the chosen text bore much of the responsibility for the opera's failure. Patricia Klapthor suggests that part of the problem with the libretto was that the Francesca story is told in a mere forty-one lines in Dante's *Inferno* and Modest Tchaikovsky resorted to "composing the dialogue out of his own imagination."⁴² Rachmaninoff deemed Modest's attempts at expanding the poem insufficient and several letters survive documenting Rachmaninoff's repeated request of Modest to expand the libretto and change certain sections. The letters indicate that Rachmaninoff made many corrections, alterations, and omissions from Modest's original libretto. In a letter dated July 30, 1904, Rachmaninoff commented on the changes Modest had made in the libretto:

When I received [the libretto] I was horror-struck at the mass of corrections you had made...If you insist on [these changes], then I shall have to make fundamental alterations to the music in many places. In your final version some words are replaced by others, and with different stresses; there is one place

⁴¹ Richard Taruskin, "Francesca da Rimini," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Deane Root (accessed October 29, 2009), www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

⁴² Klapthor, "A Survey," 24.

where unnecessary words have been added; finally, there is a place where you have crossed out two phrases, and it's now absolutely impossible to alter it... I do ask you, respected Modest Ilyich, to let me keep to the old text...⁴³

In another letter dated August 3, 1904 to Modest, Rachmaninoff said that he “took the liberty of making some minor alterations to your text, and in one place, forgive me, I have even written two lines, for which I blush. But these two lines were essential, and, as I had no others, I was forced into it... Now that I have finished, I can tell you that, while I was working, I suffered above all because of the shortage of text.”⁴⁴ Geoffrey Norris concludes that it is obvious that these difficulties with a weak text undoubtedly contributed to the opera's lack of success.⁴⁵ Rachmaninoff tried to compensate for the weak text by extending dramatic situations in the orchestra.⁴⁶ Klapthor further writes,

His [Rachmaninoff's] desire to create an opera out of the sparse text provided by Modest caused him to include overly long orchestral introductions to all four sections of the work, as well as long orchestral interruptions during the actual scenes. These prolonged interludes interrupt any attempt at plot flow and disrupt the balance of the work as a whole.⁴⁷

She analyzed the Prologue of *Francesca* and concluded that following their entrance on the scene at m.133, Virgil and Dante sing for 20 measures. This is followed by an orchestral interruption of 121 measures. The next vocal segment is followed by 126 measures with no singing. Out of 652 measures of music in the Prologue, only 109 measures contain text.⁴⁸

⁴³ Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993): 136.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁶ Klapthor, “A Survey of the Operas,” 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

The opera is a tragedy in one act, consisting of two scenes with a prologue and epilogue. The characters are: Ghost of Virgil (baritone), Dante (tenor), Lanceotto Malatesta (baritone), Francesca (soprano), Paolo (tenor), and Cardinal (mute). The first performance of the completed opera occurred on January 11, 1906 in a double bill with *The Miserly Knight*, conducted by Rachmaninoff. Critics agreed that *Francesca da Rimini's* music had a more popular appeal than *The Miserly Knight*, but that the libretto was too weak for it to command any degree of respect.⁴⁹ In a review of the original premiere of the opera, Tideböhl said that the text was well adapted for musical treatment. However, there seems to have been too little text to make an acceptable opera.

Subsequent partial performances occurred in St. Petersburg, but received dismal reviews. In June 1973, Alan Blyth put out a challenge for opera companies to repeat the double-billed performances of *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini*. A champion of the two operas, Blyth declares that “musically both pieces are fascinating, much more individually orchestrated than the earlier *Aleko*, full of insights into character, and written with an innate feeling for the human voice.”⁵⁰ William Mann of *The Times* further states that, “Rachmaninov’s *Francesca* demonstrates its dramatic eloquence, quite effortlessly...”⁵¹ In a review for the Chester festival in September of 1973, Norris defends the opera, arguing that “With such highly-charged, dramatic music, it is a pity that Modest Tchaikovsky’s adaptation of the Dante is so anemic...However, there is

⁴⁹ Bertensson and Leyda, and Satina, *Rachmaninoff*, 115.

⁵⁰ Alan Blyth, “On Radio,” *Opera* 24:9 (Sept 1973): 847.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 848.

much fine orchestral writing, and this is enhanced by the moaning of the lost souls.”⁵² Hugh MacDonald clearly took issue with *Francesca da Rimini*'s poor reputation in his review of an April 1990 performance by Indiana University: “The universal belief that Rachmaninov’s last opera *Francesca da Rimini* is a failure because of its bad libretto, repeated *ad nauseam* in all writings on the composer, is nonsense. It was put about by, amongst others, Rachmaninov himself, in an attempt to explain, though not to justify, the opera’s lack of success after its Moscow premiere in 1906. If Chaliapin had sung the role of Malatesta, as Rachmaninov had intended, and if it had not been a one-act work, its history would have been entirely different.”⁵³ In his 2006 book, Schoell argued that there is good vocal writing in *Francesca*, but the opera is too static, with a listless libretto.⁵⁴

The opera itself contains some wonderful music; the music’s most notable feature is probably the chorus constantly moaning to portray the inner circle of hell. Homage to Wagner can be seen through the various *leitmotifs* present particularly that of *Francesca* herself. The *leitmotiv* is really the first melodic, lyrical theme that develops in the opera. It is first heard when Paolo and *Francesca* enter the scene. The five-note, syncopated, descending figure serves as a portrait of *Francesca*. Rachmaninoff begins to develop the theme in the first real scene of the opera when *Francesca* meets her husband and then further in the love duet between Paolo and *Francesca*. See figure 2 for *Francesca*'s *leitmotiv*.

⁵² Geoffrey Norris, “Chester,” *Musical Times* 114:1567 (September 1973): 929.

⁵³ Hugh MacDonald, “*Francesca da Rimini*/The Cry of Clytaemnestra,” *Musical Times* 131:1653 (June 1990): 321.

⁵⁴ Schoell, *The Opera*, 125.

Figure 2: *Francesca da Rimini*, “Francesca’s Leitmotiv”



The main problem with *Francesca da Rimini* is the libretto and in turn, the compensations Rachmaninoff made in order to accommodate the libretto. The orchestral interludes and choral sections, while beautiful, cause the opera to become monotonous and distract from the story line.

In *Francesca da Rimini*, Rachmaninoff is beginning to experiment with his operatic style. He uses *leitmotifs* and allows the orchestra a greater role, but the balance between orchestra and singers is clearly not right. The prologue is extremely long and seems like a separate tone poem. Throughout, Rachmaninoff had a difficult time balancing orchestra and singing due to too little text in the libretto. To compensate Rachmaninoff added lengthy orchestral interludes, but ultimately these distract from the music drama effect that Rachmaninoff wants to achieve. Perhaps a reason for its greater popular appeal than *The Miserly Knight* is its longer aria-like forms rather than the shorter bursts of melody. For example, in scene 2 when Paolo and Francesca express their frustrations about not being able to be together, Francesca sings a twenty-eight measure aria-like melody to Paolo. Paolo in turn answers her with more recitative.

Francesca da Rimini may be a far cry from the Straussian goal of *Salome*, but it is clear that Rachmaninoff is beginning to break away from the Tchaikovsky mold and experiment with different types of opera.

The Miserly Knight

Marking his third operatic attempt, *The Miserly Knight* was composed during Rachmaninoff's honeymoon in Bayreuth, perhaps an indication of its obvious Wagnerian elements, and was finished by February 1904. Due to his conducting contract with the Bolshoi, the orchestration of *The Miserly Knight* had to be delayed until May/June 1905. Unlike *Aleko*, *The Miserly Knight's* libretto came directly from Pushkin; there was no librettist to alter the text from Pushkin's original poem. Based on Pushkin's "little tragedies" on the seven deadly sins, *The Miserly Knight* represents greed. *The Miserly Knight* is a tragedy in one act with three scenes.

Because Rachmaninoff took the libretto directly from Pushkin, with minimal additions, it also inherited the play's structural problems. In her analysis, Klapthor notes that there are few characters, two of which have quite small roles, and that most of the drama is expressed in monologue form; there are only two confrontations in the play, the first between Albert and the Moneylender in Scene 1, and the second with Albert and the Baron in Scene 3. Otherwise, there is little interaction between characters. Although there are melodic lines in some places, the vocal line is "basically declamatory in style and changes range, tempo, and dynamic level to correspond with dramatic

changes in the text.”⁵⁵ While *The Miserly Knight* does include some arioso sections, it is mostly declamatory. Rachmaninoff has yet to strike the balance between declamation through recitative and arioso.

Rimsky-Korsakov concluded that Rachmaninoff “concentrated excessively on the orchestral effects to the detriment of the singer’s part.”⁵⁶ This is the exact opposite of Dargomyzhsky’s opera *The Stone Guest*, which was also taken word for word from Pushkin’s “little tragedies.” *The Stone Guest*, which premiered in St. Petersburg in 1872, was written in a style where the entire work is in a melodic recitative and there is a heavy emphasis on vocal declamation. However, due to this technique it lacks melodic interest and does little to compensate in the orchestral part, which functions more as an accompaniment rather than a continuous symphonic texture.⁵⁷ William Huck notes that, “The method that the composer [Dargomyzhsky] worked out in *The Stone Guest* treated ‘the note as the direct expression of the word’ with the result that the music would become a ‘melodic recitative,...the vocal line being always controlled by the sense and natural inflection of the words, while at the same time retaining the rhythms and curves of melody.’”⁵⁸ If Rimsky-Korsakov believed that Dargomyzhsky developed the right balance of melodic recitative, then Rachmaninoff, following the influence of the

⁵⁵ Klapthor, “A Survey,” 31.

⁵⁶ Philip Taylor, “Rachmaninov: The Miserly Knight,” in *Rachmaninov: The Miserly Knight*. Directed by Valeri Polyansky. Russian State Symphony Orchestra, 2004, 4.

⁵⁷ Grout and Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 513.

⁵⁸ William Huck, “The Music in Pushkin” *San Francisco Opera Magazine* 10 (Fall 1987): 56.

Wagnerian school with a greater use of the orchestra, put too much emphasis on the orchestra and overpowered the singers.

Rimsky-Korsakov's criticisms notwithstanding, the orchestra does not describe what is happening in the plot or the thoughts of the characters as it does in Wagner. For example, scene 3 in the opera proves to be the main conflict of the opera. The entire opera has built up to this scene; after his father the Baron refuses to give him money to live on, Albert goes to the Duke to ask for assistance in reasoning with his father. The father ultimately calls his son a liar and a thief and refuses to listen to what the Duke suggests to remedy the problem. The singing is almost entirely in recitative while the Duke and the Knight are discussing the Knight's son. The problem however, lies in the orchestra part. The orchestra is loudly banging underneath the recitative with these odd woodwind flourishes that Rimsky-Korsakov called "effects;" these effects make for a very distracting time trying to listening to the engagement between the Duke and the Knight. Furthermore, they do little to help the scene along and are merely distractions (see figure 3).

Figure 3: *The Miserly Knight*, Scene 3⁵⁹

Герц.
Herrz.

ВЪ ЧЕМЪ О - НО, СКАЖИ - ТЕ, СОСТО - ИТЬ? Э - ТО О - ЧЕНЬ
in allein besteht es? Sagt es mir! Das ist äußerst

Б.
D.B.

У - ВОДЬ - ТЕ, ГЕРЦОГЪ...
Ent-las-set, Herr, mich...

108

Герц.
Herrz.

СТРАН - НО! И - ЛИ ВАМЪ СТЫД - НО ЗА НЕ - ГО?
selt-sam! Vielleicht nur Schan-de bringt er Euch?

Б.
D.B.

Да...
Ja,

cresc.

⁵⁹ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *The Miserly Knight* (Moscow: A. Gutheil, 1905), 107-108. Please note that a fully orchestrated score was unavailable.

While the music does much to enhance the drama and emotion of the scene, many critics directed their ire at the libretto, not at the music itself. Rachmaninoff had no librettist, but took the libretto directly from Pushkin's poem. Pushkin's other 'little tragedies' had already been set by famous Russian composers by the time Rachmaninoff ventured *The Miserly Knight*. While Pushkin's works are generally recognized as masterpieces, by Rachmaninoff not choosing to alter the poem in any way, it limits the flexibility he has within the opera. In his article on *The Stone Guest*, Taruskin states that in Pushkin's "little tragedies", "there is little action in Pushkin's play, and it is generally taken for granted that the poet never meant it for the stage. It is in effect not a tiny play but an extended lyric meditation on love and death. Its merits are precisely those normally shunned by librettists as inimical to music; its beauties are of nuance and detail."⁶⁰ Perhaps Rachmaninoff chose this libretto in his quest to develop his own operatic style. The libretto itself reflects many of the operatic realism qualities. The plot is about real people with real problems no matter how petty. The scene where the Baron is alone in the basement counting his money provides a real insight into his lonely world full of greed. (see figure 4).

⁶⁰ Richard Taruskin, "The Stone Guest," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Deane Root. (accessed October 29, 2009), www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

Figure 4: *The Miserly Knight*, Scene 2, Libretto⁶¹

Every time I start to open a chest
I break out in fever and trembling;
It is not fear, oh no, but some unknown feeling
constricts my heart...
There are people who find pleasure in murder.
When I insert the key into the lock, I feel the same as
they must feel, as they plunge the knife into their
victim: both pleasure and terror together.
(opens the chest)
Here is bliss for me!
I want to arrange a feast for myself today:
I shall light a candle before each chest,
I shall open them all and stand in the midst of them,
gazing at the gleaming heaps.
*(He lights the candles and opens the chests one after
another)*
I am sovereign!
What enchanting glitter!
Obedient to me and mighty is my power;
therein lies my happiness, my honour and my glory.
I am sovereign! But after me who will have possession of it?
My heir! That madcap, that young wastrel!
I will have barely passed away and he will come down
here beneath these peaceful, silent vaults.
Stealing the keys from my corpse he will laughingly
open the chests and my treasure will ebb away
in satin pockets full of holes.

The Baron's greed is depicted almost as a mental illness in this scene. He compares his love for money and fear that he might lose it with someone's love for murder and the terror of committing such a heinous act. He believes that with his money intact that he is sovereign and that no one can overtake him. In choosing this

⁶¹ Sergei Rachmaninoff, "The Miserly Knight, Op. 24," in *Rachmaninov: The Miserly Knight*. Translated by Philip Taylor. Directed by Valeri Polyansky. Russian State Symphony Orchestra, 2004, 4.

libretto, Rachmaninoff provides a glimpse into someone's soul and adds a dark element by choosing a character that suffers psychologically from his greed.

In *The Miserly Knight*, Rachmaninoff further distances himself from the conventions of the traditional Italian style of opera, and even from its late-19th-century exponents such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Puccini. Rachmaninoff instead begins to explore the characteristics of operatic realism and Wagnerian/Straussian ideas. Rachmaninoff employed a large orchestra, demanded a high level of virtuosity from the singers and the orchestra, and chose a plot that is intensely psychological. He introduces different thematic material in the orchestra with each textual change, many of these themes having been previously stated in the overture. In a review of the opera's original premiere dated July 1, 1906, Ellen von Tidebühl immediately commented on the Wagnerian elements present: "the music is written in a broad Wagnerian style with declamation for the singers, and rich orchestration in which the chromatic element abounds; but it is always dignified and fascinating." She notes that the style departs from Wagner slightly in that "it does not use representative themes, but he [Rachmaninoff] has selected the minor mode as generally characteristic of the old knight, and the major for the young son, who in himself represents youthful life and love of pleasure."⁶²

Despite these problems with the opera there has been a wealth of praise concerning the musical elements and declamation. Taruskin says that it is "unquestionably Rakhmaninov's finest operatic achievement;" however he does further

⁶² Ibid.

⁶² Ellen von Tidebühl, "Sergei Rachmaninoff," *The Monthly Musical Record* 36 (1 July 1906): 149.

comment that it is “probably unrevivable, due to the screechy monotony of the outer scenes, the absence of female roles and the offensive musical caricature of the Jew.”⁶³

Harrison agreed with Taruskin in his observation that *The Miserly Knight* was “high among Rachmaninoff’s achievements” and it was “surely his finest dramatic music.”⁶⁴

Continuing the praise William Huck said that “*The Covetous Knight* is one of Rachmaninoff’s richest accomplishments—superbly paced with dazzling array of piquant melodies.”⁶⁵ In a review quoted in Bertensson and Leyda’s biography of the composer, Engle acknowledges that “The composer’s talent shows throughout *The Miserly Knight*, in harmonic richness and orchestral color as well as in the supple precision of its musical declamation, fused with the text.”⁶⁶

Despite the praise, reviews of the September 29, 2009 recording of the opera by conductor Gianandrea Noseda and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra have not acclaimed the work. Joshua Kosman of the San Francisco Chronicle remarked that the “dramaturgy is clumsy, the form is ungainly, and there’s a nasty little anti-Semitic caricature briefly stinking up the first of the opera’s three scenes,” but he agrees that there is some “tremendous music in this hour-long score, which owes an audible debt to Wagner.”⁶⁷ In the liner notes of the Glyndebourne film production of *The Miserly Knight* in 2004, Dennis Marks notes that since World War II the opera has appeared more frequently as an audio recording rather than a stage production. Stage director Annabel

⁶³ Richard Taruskin, “The Miserly Knight,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Deane Root. (accessed October 29, 2009), www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

⁶⁴ Harrison, *Rachmaninoff*, 120-122.

⁶⁵ William Huck, “The Music in Pushkin,” *San Francisco Opera Magazine* 10 (Fall 1987): 59.

⁶⁶ Bertensson and Leyda, *Rachmaninoff*, 115.

⁶⁷ Joshua Kosman, “Rachmaninoff ‘The Miserly Knight’,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Q-35 November 1, 2009 <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/10/30/PKOJ1A7032.DTL> .

Arden argued that “the work mainly happens in people’s heads—it is mythic and Wagnerian—an internal drama, a state of mind.”⁶⁸ In a review of the Glyndebourne production, Chris Mullins recognizes Rachmaninoff’s mastery of the orchestral texture and drama, as well as evidence of his melodic genius; yet he comments that none of these aspects make a case for the opera being a total success.⁶⁹

I largely agree with the critics, but I think that they slightly miss the point. The problem with *The Miserly Knight* isn’t a simple answer of bad libretto or awkward music. It is a deeper problem of how Rachmaninoff treated the text. Rimsky-Korsakov identified the most severe problem with *The Miserly Knight*, Rachmaninoff’s attention to orchestral flourishes rather than music that supports the vocal line (see figure 3 above). In looking at the opera from the style point of Strauss, it lacks balance between recitative and aria and support between the voices and the orchestra. While *The Miserly Knight* is clearly a huge step from *Aleko*, it is still far from the mature “Straussian” product to which Rachmaninoff aspired.

⁶⁸ Dennis Marks, “The Miserly Knight,” in *The Miserly Knight*, DVD, directed by Annabel Arden (Opusarte, 2004): 8.

⁶⁹ Chris Mullins, “Rachmaninov: The Miserly Knight,” *Opera Today* (21 Dec. 2005) www.operatoday.com/content/005552print.html (accessed November 17, 2009).

Conclusion

In her review of the original premiere, Tideböhl suggested that the paired operas *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini* created a “favourable impression” on the Russian public and that Rachmaninoff “confirmed his position as a first rate composer.”⁷⁰ Unfortunately this favorable review did not stand the test of time. Robert Jacobson declared that Rachmaninoff’s problems with opera stemmed from his sincerity: “Perhaps it was Rachmaninoff’s sincerity and direct expression of his inner feelings that stopped him from fully succeeding in the theater and made him realize that his three early attempts at musical drama, which succeed more in lyricism than in realistic dramatic expression, were not marked by any lasting success.”⁷¹ Furthermore Rachmaninoff himself seemed unsure and insecure of his operatic abilities, commenting after a performance of Strauss’s *Salome* in Dresden, “As I sat there in the theater after hearing *Salome*, I suddenly imagined, if an opera of mine should be played here, how awkward and ashamed I should feel. A feeling exactly as if I had appeared undressed before the audience.”⁷² Perhaps this indicates yet another reason Rachmaninoff did not chose to complete his score of *Monna Vanna*. Klapthor identifies what she believes is the primary reason for the obscurity of the three completed operas:

⁷⁰ Tideböhl, “Sergei Rachmaninoff,” 149.

⁷¹ Jacobson, “The Vocal Rachmaninoff,” 27.

⁷² Ibid.

...The inadequacy of their libretti. Each text relies heavily on monologue to tell the story. Expositions are drawn out or, in the case of *Aleko*, needlessly interrupted, and little attention is given to plot or character development of conclusion. Dramatic confrontations occur late in each opera and are abruptly curtailed.⁷³

As a whole critical feedback on the completed operas concludes that their failure derived from their musical inconsistencies and weak libretti. For example, *Aleko's* structure is divided up into different numbers; the numbers end abruptly and there is limited character interaction which severely limits the action of the opera. The lyrical passages in *The Miserly Knight* are diminished from the frequent unnecessary flourishes in the orchestra and *Francesca da Rimini's* libretto is so weak that Rachmaninoff was forced to write lengthy orchestral interludes to achieve the appropriate length for an opera.

The trend through Rachmaninoff's completed operas seems to be experimentation. Rachmaninoff was still a very inexperienced opera composer and through these operas he was trying to find a style that fit him. After experimenting with stylistic components from Tchaikovsky, he explored the operatic realism style and began to push forward to Wagnerian and Straussian elements in *The Miserly Knight*. He came closer each time to finding the fit for him, but his maturity is exhibited even more so in *Monna Vanna*.

⁷³ Klapthor, "A Survey of the Operas," 33.

CHAPTER 3

A SURVEY OF *MONNA VANNA*

Rachmaninoff began contemplating *Monna Vanna* after a period of intensive engagement with opera. In August 1903 he began work on *The Miserly Knight*, which was quickly followed by the hasty completion of *Francesca da Rimini* in the summer of 1905, which he began five years earlier. Rachmaninoff resigned his conducting position at the Bolshoi in 1906, citing his upcoming concert tour in the United States. After resigning from his position, Rachmaninoff began sketches for the opera *Salammbô*; however, the project was quickly abandoned before any music was written when Rachmaninoff was unable to secure an adequate libretto.

In September of 1906, Rachmaninoff decided to move his family to Dresden. Bertensson and Leyda commented that Rachmaninoff had no choice but to move to Dresden for his artistic survival. "So long as he [Rachmaninoff] spent the winter in Russia he would be forced to do the one thing that hindered his composition most: work on the music of others...Taking his wife and daughter to Dresden was not a move away from responsibility, but a move toward work."⁷⁴ Rachmaninoff saved money from teaching lessons and conducting in Russia to support his family; however, he did remark in a letter to Morozov in August of 1906, that he had no choice but to compose to feed his family.⁷⁵ In his next letter to Morozov dated November 9, 1906, Rachmaninoff commented on how expensive it was to live in Dresden but that their villa was

⁷⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 128.

reasonably priced and that he absolutely loved it, “No apartment has ever pleased me as this does.”⁷⁶ Upon his arrival in Dresden, Rachmaninoff set to work on three new compositions, a symphony, a piano sonata, and the opera *Monna Vanna*, all of which were to be kept in absolute secrecy. In a letter from Rachmaninoff to the librettist Mikhail Akimovich Slonov, Rachmaninoff said that “not a single soul must know,”⁷⁷ and in a subsequent letter, “I beg you now to be swift and secretive.”⁷⁸ Rachmaninoff cites his lack of confidence as his reasoning for the secrecy of the project, “I am in general very distrustful of myself while composing, and particularly in selecting a subject. Only while I see myself making great progress do I become almost convinced of the final result, and only then do I definitely and almost imperceptibly acknowledge my aim.”⁷⁹ Igor Buketoff, friend and student of Rachmaninoff, suggested that because of Rachmaninoff’s self-doubt as a composer, he kept *Monna Vanna* fairly secret; he had not even taken steps to secure the operatic rights to Maurice Maeterlinck’s play, on which the opera is based. Perhaps if Rachmaninoff had been more open about the project, he would have been able to secure the rights to the play from the Maeterlinck family in a more timely fashion. In a report of his progress on these three secret works to friend Morozov on April 13, 1907, Rachmaninoff wrote, “I am fully satisfied only with my third work [*Monna Vanna*]. This is my whole consolation. Otherwise I’d be completely crushed. But this one is farthest away from completion.”⁸⁰ However in a subsequent letter Rachmaninoff said that, “My next to last work is an opera. I’ve

⁷⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 137.

finished, that is, composed one act. (Some changes still necessary.) When I finished it, it unfortunately began to seem less satisfactory to me. *This work is a secret.*⁸¹ In a letter dated June 16, 1907, Rachmaninoff acknowledged the receipt of the second act from Slonov of *Monna Vanna* and was horrified at its length of about 1,000 lines. A frustrated Rachmaninoff writes, "I am now mainly occupied in cutting down the text. So far it seems very difficult to bring order to it. It's a pity, but, with few exceptions, very little can be discarded."⁸²

In July, Rachmaninoff wrote to Slonov expressing his apologies for not evaluating the libretto sooner. Prone to periods of depression, Rachmaninoff stated that upon waiting for the second act of the libretto to arrive he entered into a depression because of his forced idleness. The birth of his second daughter brought him out of the depression, but by that time, "Now, regretfully, I cannot work on the opera, for I must devote myself to the orchestration of the symphony."⁸³ Upon completion of the Second Symphony in 1908, Rachmaninoff regained interest in *Monna Vanna* and requested that Stanislavsky ask Maeterlinck to grant him the operatic rights to *Monna Vanna* in Russia and Germany. However, Maeterlinck's contract with the music publisher Heugel granted Février the exclusive rights to compose an opera based on his play; Maeterlinck even served as the librettist for the project. Février's *Monna Vanna* premiered on January 13, 1909. The review of the New York premiere on February 18, 1914 opined, "There are excellences in the work, of which the literary qualities of the book are the

⁸¹ Ibid., 138.

⁸² Ibid., 140.

⁸³ Ibid., 141.

most important. The composer's contribution is neither deeply significant musically nor does it heighten to an important degree the dramatic and emotional effect of the drama."⁸⁴ The reviewer goes on to comment that Maeterlinck, unlike so many other playwrights, wanted his play to have an operatic setting and might have been mistaken to trust his operatic adaption to the young Février, whose only operatic work to date had not received favorable reviews.

Rachmaninoff could have restricted the performance of his *Monna Vanna* to Russia, which did not participate in copyright laws at the time, but instead he decided to abandon the project. According to Buketoff, Rachmaninoff was devastated at the loss of being able to produce *Monna Vanna*. Buketoff said that when Rachmaninoff was asked to play some of his compositions by his friends, he often played *Monna Vanna*. Furthermore, *Monna Vanna* was one of the only major compositions he took with him when he left Russia for the last time.⁸⁵ Buketoff said that "Rachmaninoff was very pleased with [*Monna Vanna*] and later observed that he had never been so happy while composing."⁸⁶

Monna Vanna marked Rachmaninoff's last operatic effort. Written during the composer's most creative years, it comes from the same period as the Third Piano Concerto and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*. In 1923, when asked if he was composing, Rachmaninoff replied "When I think of two major compositions that I

⁸⁴ "'Monna Vanna' Has New York Premiere," *New York Times*, February 18, 1914.

⁸⁵ Buketoff, "Rachmaninoff, Monna Vanna, and the Fourth," 5.

⁸⁶ Igor Buketoff, "Rachmaninoff's 'Monna Vanna,'" *High Fidelity/Musical America* 34:8 (August 1984): 20.

started not long before leaving Russia...I long to finish them."⁸⁷ These two compositions are generally believed to be *Monna Vanna* and the Fourth Piano Concerto. According to Geoffrey Norris, Rachmaninoff's Symphony no. 2 in E Minor shows a marked affinity to the surviving music of *Monna Vanna*.⁸⁸

Bertensson and Leyda claim that Rachmaninoff toyed with subjects for other operas, including an opera set in the landscape of a Russian country estate, Turgenev's *Spring Floods*, *The Lull*, and *A Song of Triumphant Love*, and even Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. The press also speculated that Rachmaninoff was working on *The Minstrel* based on a poem by Maikov and *The Mysterious Island*; however, neither of these ventures was ever confirmed by the composer.

In 1951, Rachmaninoff's widow donated the manuscript of *Monna Vanna* to the Library of Congress archives. In the 1970s, Rachmaninoff's sister-in-law Sophie Satina went to Buketoff with the request that he orchestrate Rachmaninoff's *Monna Vanna*. Buketoff agreed and undertook considerable research on the history of the score as well as the composer's composition style during 1907.

Igor Buketoff was an American conductor who specialized in Russian music, particularly the music of Rachmaninoff. Buketoff met Rachmaninoff in 1927 when Rachmaninoff premiered his "Three Russian Folk Songs" in the church where Buketoff's father was a member of the clergy. Buketoff recalls his first encounter with Rachmaninoff in a 1984 interview:

⁸⁷ Buketoff, "Rachmaninoff, Monna Vanna, and the Fourth," 6.

⁸⁸ Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, 40.

I went to a rehearsal for the world premiere of his [Rachmaninoff] 'Three Russian Folk Songs,' a work for choir and orchestra. Leopold Stokowski was conducting, and the basses in the choir were all deacons of the Russian church, because Rachmaninoff wanted a very deep, Russian bass sound. Because my father was in the clergy and knew all the other deacons and priests who had suitable voices, he assembled the choir, and when he went to the rehearsal, I went with him.⁸⁹

Buketoff earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Julliard and conducted the choirs at Julliard, Adelphi College, and Columbia University among other professional orchestras including the Iceland Symphony Orchestra.

Monna Vanna is an opera in three projected acts; the completed portion consists of one act, made up of a short prelude and three scenes. The first act was the only act to be completed and Rachmaninoff said that it was still under construction,⁹⁰ it is reasonable to expect that Rachmaninoff might have improved the first act had he seen the opera through to completion. The characters include Guido, Commander of the Garrison of Pisa (baritone), Guido's father Marco (tenor), Monna Vanna, Guido's wife (soprano), Torello, Lieutenant to Guido (baritone), and Borso, Lieutenant to Guido (tenor). Buketoff produced a fully orchestrated score of the completed first act of *Monna Vanna* with the accompanying vocal lines, translated into English, based on the piano-vocal manuscript of *Monna Vanna*. The sketches for Act Two were not substantial enough for Buketoff to attempt to orchestrate anything for Act Two. Buketoff expressed concern about his ability to orchestrate the score but found that "[Rachmaninoff's] superb skill in writing for the piano enabled him to put an entire

⁸⁹ Allan Kozinn, "Igor Buketoff, 87, Conductor and Expert on Rachmaninoff," *New York Times*, 11 September 2001.

⁹⁰ Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 138.

orchestra under ten fingers.”⁹¹ When Buketoff set out to orchestrate Rachmaninoff’s piano score he said, “I found orchestrating the sketches of *Monna Vanna* the easiest thing in the world, because whenever I looked at his manuscript I could only hear the instrument he liked to use. He was very heavy on the low clarinets and bassoons, with divided low strings: a very thick bottom.”⁹² Buketoff’s score was never published and I have been unable to locate it. The compact disc recording of the work is currently out of print, but available from Chandos online.⁹³

In a review of the premiere recording of Buketoff’s orchestration of *Monna Vanna* with the Icelandic Opera Chorus and the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Buketoff, Geoffrey Norris gives Rachmaninoff credit for capturing the essence of Maeterlinck: “Even though it remains a tantalizing torso, this single act does demonstrate that Rachmaninov had the musical vocabulary to interpret Maeterlinck’s fraught, romantic plot with telling dramatic touches.”⁹⁴ Buketoff chose to have the opera performed in a concert setting as opposed to a full scale opera production. Perhaps it was easier to produce the completed first act of three projected acts in concert form rather than a full scaled opera production with no conclusion. Buketoff concludes his article on *Monna Vanna* with the statement that:

Monna Vanna is quintessential Rachmaninoff, with all the romantic elements that have made him one of the most popular and beloved composers of the

⁹¹ Buketoff, “Rachmaninoff’s ‘Monna Vanna,’” 20.

⁹² Allan Kozinn, “My Lessons with Rachmaninoff: Igor Buketoff Talks to Allan Kozinn,” *Keyboard Classics*. 4:5 (1984): 9.

⁹³ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Monna Vanna* etc., conductors Igor Buketoff and Peter Locke (Chandos 8987), 1991. Available online at The Classical Shop (accessed July 8, 2010), <http://www.theclassicalshop.net/Details.aspx?CatalogueNumber=CHAN%208987>.

⁹⁴ Geoffrey Norris, “Rachmaninov: Monna Vanna; Piano Concerto No. 4,” *The Musical Times*, 133: 1792 (June 1992): 302.

twentieth century. The hauntingly simple melodies, cloaked in rich harmonies, the long sequential progressions, the virile, growling outbursts in the lower voices—all are Rachmaninoff through and through...For those who love Rachmaninoff's music, *Monna Vanna* will be a glorious addition to the repertoire.⁹⁵

This quotation suggests that perhaps *Monna Vanna* found a way to bring elements of his mature style to the style of operatic realism.

Despite the positive review from Norris, Will Crutchfield was not as impressed. He commented that, "the operatic world lost a lush, brooding score, but probably not a masterpiece."⁹⁶ Crutchfield observed that Rachmaninoff had a deep feeling for the mood or atmosphere of the opera but not for the interpersonal drama it depicts. He does however identify several striking passages including the choral cries for Vanna which have an "extraordinary, other-worldly quality, as though heard in a dream"⁹⁷ and the climaxes of Guido's outbursts. Of Buketoff's orchestration, Crutchfield said that it was done skillfully, but "there was no flash of startling color, no inventive combination of sonorities that leapt out to make one say 'how brilliant,' but nothing either to inspire doubt in the conductor's confident command of the composer's idiom."⁹⁸

While the reviews are mixed of Buketoff's orchestration, I feel that in comparison to the other operas, *Monna Vanna* displays a more solid grasp of the Straussian style Rachmaninoff was trying to exhibit. I am convinced that had Rachmaninoff been able to continue work on *Monna Vanna*, it may well have been

⁹⁵ Buketoff, "Rachmaninoff's 'Monna Vanna,'" 20.

⁹⁶ Will Crutchfield, "Opera: Rachmaninoff's 'Monna Vanna' Fragment," *New York Times*, 13 August 1984.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

significantly more successful than its predecessors, giving Rachmaninoff the much needed confidence to whole-heartedly pursue an operatic career. My analysis of *Monna Vanna* will focus on two components of the opera: Rachmaninoff's new operatic maturity in the Straussian style and the features of the libretto that make for a smoother production.

The Music

Throughout *Monna Vanna* Rachmaninoff used the flexible techniques of operatic realism, in which the musical material fluctuates constantly from recitative to arioso to aria-like moments, according to the dramatic needs of the scene. While this technique is present in *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini*, I find it much more apparent and put to better use in *Monna Vanna*. A main criticism of Rachmaninoff's previous operas was that the music pursued its own agenda and did not necessarily fit the libretto well. Act 1, Scene 1 is an excellent example of how Rachmaninoff was able to create a more thorough interplay between the voices and the orchestral accompaniment (see figure 5). The vocal line is sung by Torello with the following text, "The guns of Prinzivalle have breached our fortress, and made a gap so mammoth that a wand'ring flock of stray sheep could pass through unhampered."⁹⁹ The passage features a mostly chromatic scale, with the vocal line doubled in the bass clef of the piano reduction. The right hand of the piano offers a series of ornamented triplets, perhaps indicating the feeling of uneasiness that the passage is supposed to invoke. The

⁹⁹ Due to the opera not being published and Rachmaninoff's cramped Russian script, I have elected to include the libretto for the examples separately and translated into English by Daniel J. Skvir and Tamara Turkevich Skvir, which is located in the liner notes of Buketoff's transcription of the opera.

passage concludes on an A half diminished chord, solidifying the feeling of doom indicated by the libretto. Here the orchestral accompaniment fits very well because it doubles the voice in octaves and provides extra flourishes to enhance the state of mind the singer is trying to invoke. The key point here is that the orchestra becomes a part of the singing rather than its own entity. In previous operas, Rachmaninoff does at times double the vocal line in the orchestra, but not to the extent that he does in *Monna Vanna*. In this example from *Monna Vanna* the bass clef doubles the vocal line in octaves and that the soprano line truly provides an accompaniment on top. In the previous operas such as in the final scene of *The Miserly Knight*, the orchestration is much busier and the orchestra rarely doubles the vocal lines. The orchestra is more independent in this section than one that complements the libretto as in *Monna Vanna* (See figure 6).

Figure 5: *Monna Vanna*, Manuscript p. 7, Act 1, Scene 1¹⁰⁰

The image displays a musical score for the character Torello, consisting of two systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (bass clef), a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs), and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system features a vocal line with a *p* dynamic marking and a piano accompaniment with triplet figures. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with more triplet figures and concludes with a double bar line.

¹⁰⁰ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Monna Vanna*, 1907, Performing Arts Reading Room, 89:20005, Library of Congress, 7.

Figure 6: *The Miserly Knight*, Score p.113, Scene 3¹⁰¹

113

Ал.
А.
Вотъ пер - - - ный даръ от - ца!
Des Fa - - - tors erst' Go - schenk!
(Барону.) (Zum Sohne.)

Герц.
Герц.
ца! Мол - чи - те, вы, бо - зу - мце! Брось - те э - то!
an! Für - stummt, ihr seid von Sin - nen! Macht ein Ein - del!

(Отнимаетъ ее.)
(Entreißt ihm den Handschuh.)

Герц.
Герц.
От - дай - те мне пер - чат - ку. По - ди - те;
Den Handschuh her, den Handschuh! Ver - laßt mich!

marcato

Герц.
Герц.
на гла - за мо - и не смѣй - те Яп - лять - ся до - тѣхъ
Wagt nicht wie - der mir vors Au - ge zu tre - ten, bis ich

Герц.
Герц.
поръ, по - на я самъ мо - емъ во - лу вѣсь.
Buch, ich selbst Buch hab' zu mir beschieden.

ff

¹⁰¹ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *The Miserly Knight* (opera in three scenes), libretto by Alexander Pushkin (Moscow: Muzyka, n.d.), 113.

Another criticism of Rachmaninoff's operas was that there seemed to be no "memorable melody." While Rachmaninoff did use *leitmotifs* in his operas, many times they were unacknowledged by the composer and were not nearly as consistent as a Wagnerian *leitmotiv*. Based on the criticism of the completed operas it is clear that in this particular style of opera the critics were looking for traditional aria-like moments, as well as a melodic recitative that is controlled by a natural inflection of the words with the rhythms and curves of melody.

During this time period, Puccini was the reigning king of melody. His operas were immensely popular and were packed full of beautiful aria-like sections. Puccini combined different types of sound: extended lyrical melodies, flexible motivic cells, tonality as a semantic tool, and brilliant and varied orchestral coloring.¹⁰² His melodies are extremely passionate and even erotic at times. Other than *Aleko*, which drew inspiration from the melodious Tchaikovsky, none of Rachmaninoff's previous operas include this dramatic of a melody. While few of the melodies present in *Monna Vanna* are of the same caliber as Puccini's, Rachmaninoff does make an effort in *Monna Vanna* to include more aria-like moments than in his previous works. An example of such a moment amidst a largely recitative-like texture can be seen in a tune sung by Guido in Act 1, Scene 1 (see figure 7). This example is packed full of emotion; Guido is singing about how his city is defenseless against their invaders. At the portion in question he sings, "The soldiers and the citizens are not aware yet; they live in hope that help will soon arrive. What will they do when they hear the awful truth?" Guido is in a state of

¹⁰² Gabriella Biagi Ravenni and Michele Girardi, "Puccini, Giacomo," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Deane Root. (accessed October 29, 2009), www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

utter despair; he is out of options and his poor citizens are still under the delusion that they will miraculously be saved from their enemies. Through his use of melody, Rachmaninoff expresses Guido's words through the techniques of operatic realism. The passage right before the example diminuendos to *piano* and Guido begins to sing very softly that the soldiers and citizens are not aware yet, almost as if he is whispering to keep them from finding out. The accompaniment consists of ascending chords, building the tension of the situation. The passage crescendos until Guido reaches his highest level of panic, "What will they do when they hear the awful truth?" Rachmaninoff sets the word "awful" (presumably its Russian equivalent was similar) to the greatest intervallic leap in the passage, dropping a sixth. This portrays the true severity of the situation and Guido's despair for his people. Buketoff added snare drum to punctuate the chord changes, which in turn helps to illustrate the discussion of soldiers and military aspects of the scene.

Figure 7: *Monna Vanna*, Manuscript p. 6, Act 1, Scene 1¹⁰³

The image displays a musical score for the character Guido, consisting of two systems of three staves each. The first system shows the vocal line in the top staff, a piano accompaniment in the middle staff, and a bass line in the bottom staff. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, while the bass line remains empty. The music is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The vocal line is characterized by a melodic line with various intervals and rests. The piano accompaniment includes chords and arpeggiated figures. The bass line in the first system consists of a few notes and rests.

Another example of where Rachmaninoff interjects arioso moments occurs in the first moment that the female character Monna Vanna appears on the stage. Rachmaninoff has been criticized for his lack of female roles, but the character Monna Vanna is present throughout the opera, although most prevalently in the unfinished second act. This passage marks the most lyrical section of the opera so far. In this scene Monna Vanna enters the room with crowds cheering her name. Guido sees her and begins an aria-like passionate plea for her to stay with him instead of going to the rival camp to make a sexual bargain for her town's safety. Directly preceding this passage, the citizens of Pisa are calling out Monna Vanna's name, which Rachmaninoff

¹⁰³ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Monna Vanna*, 1907, Performing Arts Reading Room, 89:20005, Library of Congress, 6.

realizes as a mixed chorus. The chorus starts 10 seconds into the third scene with very soft moans almost as if they are standing far away. To help drive the intensity forward, Rachmaninoff adds a series of four quarter notes ascending over and over up through different keys. The chorus continues, crescendos, and adds in intensity until 1:51 minutes into the third scene. At the end of the chorus section, Buketoff unleashes the entire orchestra, with piccolos trilling on top as if the crowd is pleading from the bottom of their hearts for Monna Vanna to agree to the bargain and save them from their enemies. He also adds harp glissandos to add an ethereal quality as Monna Vanna approaches. Guido enters the scene as seen in the example below and crescendos “O Monna Vanna” through the orchestra and chorus’s final push. Upon Guido’s entrance the chorus immediately drops out and Guido is alone in singing his plea to his wife. This alone makes for a gut-wrenching emotional moment; Guido sings Monna Vanna’s name so passionately that you can hear a man in love at his wit’s end (see figure 8). The passage is a mixture of aria and recitative. Up until this point in the opera, the melodic fragments have been very limited; much of the singing consists of recitative sections where the characters are conversing or relating the news of what is happening in their city. Guido’s initial speech in scene 3 marks the first time any melodic substance comes into the picture. Rachmaninoff has been floating in and out of recitative and arioso up until this point, but Guido’s speech is the most aria-like extended melodic segment of the entire first act. Rachmaninoff includes this aria-like Guido’s speech, without interrupting the flow of the scene. The opera does not stop to showcase an aria as in earlier times, but simply flows from the moaning voices of the choir, into Guido’s aria-

like speech, back into the recitative-arioso alternation as in the rest of the act. I believe that Rachmaninoff includes this aria-like section to give a real glimpse into the character's feelings and emotions, in accordance with the emotional intensity found in the operatic realism style. Rachmaninoff leavens the operatic realism he is trying to exhibit in this opera with a more traditional operatic pleasure, a beautiful melody. The presence of this powerful section in the first act raises the expectation that if Rachmaninoff had been able to finish the second act, he could have created several more of these aria-like sections for the conversation of Prinzivalle and Vanna in the second act. Figure 8 shows a chart diagramming the passage in terms of aria vs. recitative and climatic moments. Since a score is not available, the timings in the chart refer to Buketoff's recording of *Monna Vanna*. (see figure 9)

Figure 8: *Monna Vanna*, Manuscript p. 63, Act 1, Scene3

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Guido part, written in bass clef with a key signature of three flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure and a key signature change to two flats in the second measure. The middle staff is for the Chorus, with a vocal line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef, both in 4/4 time. The bottom staff is for the Piano, with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in 4/4 time, featuring a complex accompaniment with triplets and a key signature change to two flats in the second measure. The lyrics "Oh Mon-na Van-na, do not re-peat their words." are written below the vocal line.

The second system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Guido part, written in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure. The middle staff is for the Chorus, with a vocal line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef, both in 4/4 time. The bottom staff is for the Piano (Pno.), with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in 4/4 time, featuring a complex accompaniment with triplets and a key signature change to two flats in the second measure. The lyrics "Show me your face and let your eyes now" are written below the vocal line.

Guido

Chorus

Pno.

tell me.

Figure 9: Diagram of *Monna Vanna*, Beginning of Scene 3

Plot	Citizens of Pisa pleading for Monna Vanna to Save them	Crowd is the closest pressing up against the doors to hear Vanna's decision	Guido begins his passionate plea as Vanna walks in the room.	Guido pleads with Vanna	Guido pleads with Vanna
Lyrics			"O, Monna Vanna"	"Do not repeat their words"	"Show me your face and let your eyes now tell me"
Material	Beginning of choral singing	Climax of choral section	Guido's speech begins. Aria-like	Guido's speech Recitative	Guido's speech Aria-like
Dynamic Level	<i>p</i>	<i>ff</i>	<i>mf</i> < <i>f</i>	<i>Mf</i>	<i>mf</i>
CD timing (Track 4)	0:10	1:37	1:49	1:54	1:57

Plot		Praise of Monna Vanna		Praise of Monna Vanna	
Lyrics		"Your gaze remains so blameless and so true."		"I know well that the chasteness of your eyes....can be discerned from your modest glances."	
Material	Orchestral interlude	Guido's speech continues. Aria-like	Huge orchestral crescendo followed by new melodic material	Guido's speech continues, new melodic material	Melodic prep for recitative
Dynamic Level	<i>mp</i>	<i>mp < mf</i>	<i>mf < fff</i>	<i>Mf</i>	<i>mf</i>
CD timing (Track 4)	2:07	2:13	2:24	2:43	3:10

Plot	Discussion of Guido's father	Discussion of Guido's father	Discussion of Guido's father		Discussion of Guido's father
Lyrics	"But Vanna, look right here. This man the one I call my father"	"See how he hangs his head, and how his locks, now whitened, conceal his resignation"	"He's much too old to know the love that binds us, and for this weakness we will pardon him"		"Our fervent love...Give him your answer now"
Material	Guido's speech, recitative	Guido's speech, melodic material	Guido's speech, recitative	Orchestral interlude	Guido's speech Aria-like (end of Guido's speech)
Dynamic Level	<i>mf</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>mf > p</i>	<i>Pp</i>	<i>mf</i>
CD timing (Track 4)	3:14	3:25	3:37	3:56	4:05-4:57

The next example shows how Rachmaninoff used orchestral counterpoint. In his previous operas, he was criticized for making the orchestral accompaniment too independent of the vocal parts. In this example, at the end of the first scene, Rachmaninoff adds the orchestral frills for which Strauss was famous in the sixteenth note septuplets, which push what would have been a somewhat boring vocal line forward. In the scene, Guido is debating whether to tell his warriors that their cause is useless and they are not fighting a battle for life, but for death. The libretto for the selected passage reads, "...but death! No pity or mercy will be shown. And then our women..." Guido's part consists of a series of held-out notes in the upper register. The section continually builds from one phrase to the next. In order to achieve this forward motion, Rachmaninoff added septuplets underneath Guido's sustained notes to enliven the passage. The remainder of the accompaniment consists of heavy, filled out chords to support the severity of Guido's predicament. The accompaniment again shows Rachmaninoff's mature style of close integration with the vocal line and pushes the action forward. Rachmaninoff is still able to keep his embellishments but integrates them in such a way as to not be distracting as in *The Miserly Knight*. The selection also ends the first scene and pushes into the scene 2, where the main plot is introduced (see figure 10).

Figure 10: *Monna Vanna*, Manuscript p. 14, Act 1, Scene 1

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a character named Guido. Each system consists of three staves: a bass staff at the top, a treble staff in the middle, and another bass staff at the bottom. The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The first system includes dynamic markings of *f*, *dim.*, *p*, and *cresc.*. The second system includes *f*, *dim.*, and *p*. The third system includes *cresc.*. The notation features various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some performance instructions like '7' and 'cresc.' written below the staves.

The Libretto

One of the main problems with Rachmaninoff's previous operas was the inadequacy of their libretti. On the whole, critics saw the libretti as disjointed with little dramatic continuity, limited interaction between characters and/or two few characters, and shorter in length in comparison of the traditional length for a full one-act opera. *Monna Vanna's* libretto addresses all of these issues. Slonov's libretto was crucial to the potential success of the production. An important part of its success was that *Monna Vanna* began life as a play rather than a poem. While poems are certainly dramatic, a play is actually intended for the dramatic stage and is written in such a way as to provide dramatic continuity and stage cues. In comparison with the text from Maeterlinck's play the libretto of Rachmaninoff's *Monna Vanna* is quite similar, although Slonov does condense many superfluous passages to get right to the point. A representative example can be seen in figure 11.

Figure 11: Maeterlinck's Play vs. Slonov's Libretto

Maeterlinck's Play	Slonov's Libretto
Borso- "My men have nothing left— not an arrow, not a bullet, and you shall search every tun in the vaults without finding an ounce of powder." ¹⁰⁴	Borso- "My warriors' supplies have been depleted; no bullets, not a single arrow left." ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Maeterlinck, *Monna Vanna*, Translated by Alexis Irénée du Pont Coleman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903): 2.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Slonov, *Monna Vanna*, Translated by Daniel J. Skvir and Tamara Turkevich Skvir in *Rachmaninov: Monna Vanna; Piano Concerto No. 4*. Cond. Igor Buketoff and Peter Locke. Comp. Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1992, 23.

This fidelity to the original play does however help *Monna Vanna* be more dramatically engaging than the operas based on poems because it was actually designed for the stage. In addition, when choosing a play's text over a poem's text, it gives the librettist more options to cut, add, or paraphrase things when necessary without changing the internal literary structure. Annabel Arden's comment about *The Miserly Knight*, "the work mainly happens in people's heads...an internal drama, a state of mind," sums up the main issue at hand here. *The Miserly Knight* is generally considered to be Rachmaninoff's finest opera, but it again is based on Pushkin's poem. The work was meant to be read and imagined in one's mind not necessarily displayed on the stage; *Monna Vanna* was written with the stage in mind. While this philosophy of play over poem certainly does not pertain to some composers, in Rachmaninoff's case it helped the opera be more dramatically interesting.

As stated earlier, *Monna Vanna* consists of five characters in the completed first act and an additional three characters in the sketches of acts two and three. The characters in *Monna Vanna* interact far more than in *The Miserly Knight*. Scene one consists of Guido, the commander of the defending garrison, discussing the attack upon the city of Pisa with his lieutenants Torello and Borso. While Guido sings the most during the scene, which is understandable since he is the commander of the army, Torello and Borso interact frequently with Guido, eliminating the monologue feeling of *The Miserly Knight*. Scene two follows without pause, eliminating the disjointed transitions of *Aleko*. In scene two, Guido's father Marco informs Guido of Prinzivalle's demands and Vanna's response. Initially in the scene Marco and Guido each sing

lengthy passages but conclude the scene with banter back and forth. Rachmaninoff provides a brilliant transition to scene three with the chorus of the crowd of Pisa calling Monna Vanna's name. Instead of simply ending Scene Two with Guido's dilemma of sending Monna Vanna to Prinzivalle and then beginning immediately with scene three with Guido asking Monna Vanna not to go, Rachmaninoff transitions between the two scenes with the music for the chorus, which adds to the drama of the situation by displaying the pressure exerted on both Guido and Monna Vanna by the people of Pisa. The decision of how Monna Vanna will respond is now multi-faceted; instead of it just being an issue between Guido and Monna Vanna it is now an issue between Guido, Monna Vanna, and the people of Pisa. The final completed scene of the opera consists of Guido and Vanna discussing her agreement to go to Prinzivalle's camp for the evening. This scene really begins to unfold the drama and central conflict for the first act. Guido assumes Vanna agrees to go to assassinate Prinzivalle, but when she says no he accuses her of never having loved him. Vanna begs Guido to understand but an enraged Guido orders her to leave and act one closes with Vanna turning and slowly departing.

Monna Vanna is Rachmaninoff's first opera in more than one act. Originally the opera was projected to be three full acts. With the three full acts, the problem of lack of text present or too much text in the other libretti is eliminated. The extension allows for the inclusion of more characters, more interaction between characters, and the chance for the whole story of *Monna Vanna* to be included. However, given that only the first act was completed, it is difficult to evaluate the opera as a whole. Had he finished the

second act, which contains the heart of the play, we would have gained a more revealing glimpse into Rachmaninoff's operatic realism.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

Rationale

Rachmaninoff held *Monna Vanna* close to his heart, even though he was never able to complete the work. This passion is what sparked my interest in this study. What was so special about *Monna Vanna*? Through analysis of the surviving score I have discovered what I believe to be the answer to this question. Despite the mixed reviews of Rachmaninoff's completed operas, opera was a popular and significant form of artistic expression of the day, and it was doubtlessly important to Rachmaninoff that he succeed in the genre. As the conductor at the Bolshoi from 1904-1906 it seems likely that he also wanted to appear as an opera composer, since composition was close to his heart. While it is unclear from the multitude of biographies available on Rachmaninoff, I do not believe that Rachmaninoff obsessively pursued operatic success, but was simply experimenting to develop his own style along the Straussian path of operatic realism. The reason why *Monna Vanna* was so precious to the composer is that in it he came closer to realizing this style. While only a speculation, I believe that Rachmaninoff believed that were he ever given the opportunity to complete *Monna Vanna* it would have been an enormous success, solidifying his place in the operatic world.

Implications for a Change in Reputation

Since the opera clearly can never be finished or produced by the composer, what warrants the arguments presented in this thesis? While no one can fault Rachmaninoff

on his performing ability and the success of his performing career, Rachmaninoff's current reputation in the operatic world leaves a dark stain on an otherwise fairly successful career. His piano music can be found frequently on the piano recital program and recent interest in his symphonies has sparked festivals reviving his music. I believe that based on the evidence I found in Rachmaninoff's *Monna Vanna* a change to this reputation is in order. I would challenge opera companies to produce what is written of *Monna Vanna* and I believe critics will be pleasantly surprised with what they see. Perhaps more exposure will cause a whole new generation to fall in love with Rachmaninoff's music and to warrant a second look at the completed operas. I think it is safe to say that Rachmaninoff deserves a change in reputation from a floundering operatic career to a composer just budding in the operatic field, tragically cut short by logistics and a lack of confidence.

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