

Teachers Resource Kit

RACHMANINOV

Piano Concerto No.2



Learning & Engagement
Stages 5 & 6

Acknowledgements

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“Your life can be changed and enriched through all sorts of music; music from now, music from the past, music from the very distant past and music from as recently as yesterday.

Through intensive listening students become involved in one of the highest orders of thinking.

As a teacher, by bringing students to a concert and studying music in the classroom, you are providing your students with a special pathway to musical knowledge through direct experience of and contact with live music.”

Richard Gill AO
(1941 – 2018)


Conductor, notable educator and advocate. Richard was the founding Artistic Director of Education at Sydney Symphony. He has inspired generations of musicians through his work and continues to inspire new generations through his legacy.

Background:

Historic Context

Many key events happened during this time in European history. The first half of the Twentieth Century was a time of change, rapid technological innovation, revolution and conflict.

A snapshot of events include:

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- 1901** The Commonwealth of Australia is established; Queen Victoria dies.
 - 1903** First controlled flight in an aeroplane, first mass produced cars designed.
 - 1905** Einstein develops theory of relativity, Trans-Siberian railway completed.
 - 1909** First man to reach the North Pole.
 - Revolution and civil war in Mexico, Russia, China, Portugal and Spain.
 - First and Second World Wars and other wars between two countries with millions dying in combat and wartime atrocities.
 - US develop and drop the first nuclear bomb.
 - 1945** The United Nations is formed in the wake of WWII.

Features of early 20th Century Music

The transition between late Romanticism and the C20th tradition was gradual, many claiming it had arrived with the Rite of Spring in 1913. Much of the description of the elements of music outlined below are relevant for music from 1910 onwards.

The rapid acceleration of change in the world was reflected in compositions of the period. Whilst composers of previous eras had inherited established usages and techniques, however in the early years of the Twentieth Century change became so powerful that many composers completely abandoned the musical traditions of the past. Audiences across western Europe believed that Art music as coming to an end and responded with boos, jeers, even riots. Composers were writing music that was relevant to their time.

Pitch (Melody and Harmony)

Modern composers did not continue the formal beauty of Classical melodies or the expansive lyricism of the Romantics. Instead they looked to plainsong, modes, oriental and eastern European traditions. They did not abandon melody, but they abandoned the familiar landmarks that traditionally shaped melody.

- Not usually shaped to the standard patterns: often angular, using chromatic and dissonant intervals, detaching instrumental melodies from their original vocal origins.
- Tend to be short and fragmented, or just suggestions of melodic ideas grouped into irregular phrase lengths, and often only stated once.
- Sometimes no melodic idea was used
- Exploration and exploitation of registers
- Composers began moving away from traditional scales to pitch sets.
- Dissonant chords, extensive use of clusters without the need for resolution
- Introduction of new chord structures including polychords, chords built from new scale types, chords built by intervals and cluster chords.

Duration (Rhythm and Metre)

A revolt against standard metres became evident leading to the use of less symmetrical patterns. As with pitch, composers drew from non-western classical traditions and some previously abandoned practices from the past. The bar line lost its power as the manager of rhythmic flow.

- Rhythm was of equal importance to pitch.
- Many techniques used to create unexpected rhythmic patterns such as syncopation and unusually placed accents; unusual metres based upon odd numbers e.g. 3+2; 5+2+3; use of multi-metre (changing time signatures); cross rhythms
- Poly rhythm and extensive development of rhythmic motive
- Use of motor rhythms and ostinatos used to relentlessly drive music forward

Tone Colour

The 20th Century musician aspired to make his instrument stand out, as composers turned back to the classical ideals of clarity of line and texture. No longer did composers reinforce or double a melody line by blending instruments for various families, instead they emphasize different textures.

- Much greater interest in the range of timbres that an instrument and combinations of instruments could produce.
- Emphasis on percussive sounds and ways of using instruments in a percussive way

- Exploiting extremes of register and sound production methods which made the familiar sound unfamiliar
 - Use of extended techniques – especially in stringed instruments.
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Tonality

Composers left the sense of dominant keys and notes, instead allowing all pitches to be equally important, or even establishing multi tonal centres simultaneously. Colour became a means of clarifying the structural design.

- The introduction of microtones through pitch bending and glissandi took music away from major/minor and re-engaged with the modes from various parts of the world, which also resulted in a whole new harmonic vocabulary.
 - Instead of talking about keys, music had tonal centres
 - Some works, including the Rite of Spring included polytonality, where several keys are suggested simultaneously.
 - Atonality become normal in a number of early 20th Century genres and schools.
 - This led to the construction of new scales or pitch sets
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Texture

To give music a sense of unobstructed movement, there was a great revival of counterpoint (both pitched and rhythmic). It was felt that consonant was considered to unite, dissonance to separate, so intervals between individual lines more and more consisted of dissonances instead of perfect and consonant intervals.

- Instrument equality meant that all lines were important across the texture of a work, especially through rhythmic counterpoint.
 - Often dissonance allowed each line to be clearly heard, rather than blending in.
 - Clarity of line was often achieved by wide spacing between instruments
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Dynamics and Expressive Devices

- Extremes, pushing players to the limits of what is possible was explored.
 - Scores were covered with performance instructions by the composer, extending the vocabulary of expressive devices and technique.
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Structure

Curiously, early 20th Century composers embraced the classical period tradition of form as a construction of purely musical elements, returning to a more objective use of all elements in the wake of high Romanticism.

- Irregular or unbalanced phrases
- Rejection of the overextended forms of the late C19th, returning to some of the simpler, more straight forward forms of the past but adding new elements to adapt the forms of the past for modern use.

Return of motif as a key unifying device – however motif could also be a colour, a chord, some musical event other than a recognisable pitch and or rhythmic shape.

The 19th Century Orchestra Instrumentation

By the end of the nineteenth century composers such as Mahler were using enormous orchestras with extensive percussion sections including snare and bass drums, cymbals, glockenspiels and tubular bells and many more. The bass trombones, tuba, cor anglais, piccolo, contra bassoon and bass clarinet had also become standard fixtures. As composers' sort to experiment across a comprehensive range of possible tone colour combinations even more instruments were added, and the string family lost its traditional role as the heart of the orchestra. The Rite of Spring is a typical early 20th Century orchestra and features:

Woodwind	Brass	Percussion	Strings
Piccolo	8 Horns in F (7 th and 8 th doubling Tenor Tuba)	Timpani (2 players)	Violin I
3 Flutes (3 rd doubling Piccolo 2)		Bass Drum	Violin II
Alto Flute	Piccolo Trumpet in D	Tam-tam	Viola
4 Oboes (4 th doubling Cor Anglais 2)	4 Trumpets in C (4 th doubling Bass Trumpet in Eb)	Triangle	Cello
Cor Anglais		Tambourine	Double Bass
Piccolo Clarinet in D & Eb	3 Trombones	Guero	
3 Clarinets in Bb & A (2 nd doubling Bass Clarinet 2)	2 Tuba	Antique Cymbals in Ab & Bb	
Bass Clarinet			
4 Bassoons (4 th doubling Contrabassoon 2)			
Contrabassoon			

Stop for a minute and think about how many people on stage that would have been- many orchestras of this time held about 100 players!

Techniques of Orchestration

Some have described this period as the “emancipation of the orchestra”. The strings no longer dominated the orchestra sound and all sections of the orchestra had equal importance. Consequently, the required technical skills of all players was raised and the orchestra became a virtuoso instrument in its own right.

Composers began to favour the less expressive winds over the traditionally more expressive strings. Avoiding an over brilliant sound, such as was achieved by high strings, darker sounding instrumental combinations came into prominence. The lyricism of the violin was replaced by the more reserved tones of the viola; the mellow French horn was replaced by the more incisive trumpet.

Exploration of percussive rhythms meant that not only were instruments used percussively, but the percussion section itself was expanded and emancipated from its traditional punctuation roles and given solo prominence. Composers were attracted to the objective sonorities of the glockenspiel and xylophone.

Some composers tried to model the orchestras sound upon instruments that had not been in the orchestra. Stravinsky was attracted to the sound of an accordion and wind chords can at time sound like this in the Rite of Spring and later including it in his works. Gradually more and more instruments appeared in the orchestra like the accordion, guitar and mandolin and a myriad of new percussion sounds.

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor (1900-1901)

Composer Background

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873 – 1943)

Rachmaninov was a spectacular and brilliant concert pianist. We are fortunate to have a record of his pianistic style and interpretative insight. Gramophone recordings of his playing from 1920–1940s reveal his precision, pearly-tone, elegance and clarity, clear articulation, rhythmic clarity, energy and drive, refined legato, highly refined dynamic gradation, phrases exquisitely shaped and shaded, clarity of texture, muscular strength, virtuosic technical facility, expansive compass and mobility of his left hand, structural understanding and intense expression in his piano playing.

Work Background

He represented a new breed of pianists who adhered closely to the printed page with tighter rhythmic control and restrained rubato, avoiding super-romantic effects. In the interpretation of musical works he prepared the musical structure believing that a musical work only contained one real climax and that everything had to relate to that culminating moment that he referred to as “the point”. Rachmaninov writes in the late romantic style, despite being dated as an early 20th Century work.

Instrumentation

The scored in the Peer Gynt suites is typical of the standard mid-19th Century orchestra.

Woodwind	Brass	Percussion	Strings
2 Flutes	4 Horns in F	Timpani	Strings
2 Oboes	2 Trumpets in B flat	Solo Piano	
2 Clarinets	3 Trombones		
2 Bassoons	Tuba		

Overview: Listening Guide

- The second piano concerto shows evidence of Rachmaninov's moving away from rigid structures, and his extensive exploration of tonality. Typical features of his style included in this work are:
- 3 movement concerto loosely in the sonata style but generally flexible in structure.
- Concludes movements with extended codas for the soloist.
- Brilliant, virtuosic piano cadenzas and writing in second and third movements.
- Contrasting and dramatic character, depicted in strongly contrasting themes.
- Long highly lyrical and soaring melodies which extended from small motives.
- Elaborate and florid technical embellishment/decoration in the piano writing.
- Large hand stretches required in the piano writing exploiting the range and sonorities of the instrument and the technical virtuosity of the player.
- Idiomatic writing for the piano that sits under the hand well
- Constant development and transformation of thematic material.
- Rich harmonies – increased use of chromaticism and minor tonality.
- Restless modulation exploring distant keys.
- Increased pitch range, dynamic levels, structure/length of movements.
- Varied, rich, sonorous tonal colours (bass and treble registers of the piano exploited for dramatic effect).
- Rich, thick and sonorous textures (especially dense in the amount of notes in a bar in the piano writing) and contrasts and interplay between solo and tutti layers.

- Romantic compositional techniques/devices (e.g. broken chord/arpeggio patterns, fugato, antiphonal interplay, countermelody, cross rhythms).
- Uses Romantic period instrumentation and orchestration techniques including solo passages from many sections of the orchestra.

Movement I: *Moderato*

Sonata Form

Exposition: Bars 1–152

1. First subject group – c minor First theme – c minor (bars 9–27) clarinet I, violin I and II, viola



2. Second group – E^b Major (bars 83–132)

RH piano melody



3. Codetta – c minor – E^b Major (bars 133–152)

Development: Bars 153–240

Recapitulation: Bars 241–370

Movement II: *Adagio sostenuto*

Ternary Form

1. A section: Bars 5–45; *Adagio sostenuto*



2. B section: Bars 46–126; *Un poco più mosso*

- Second theme – f# minor modulates to c# minor and derived from First theme
- After much modulation this section ends in a cadenza.

3. A section: Bars 127–160; *Adagio sostenuto*

Movement III: *Allegro scherzando*

Loose Sonata form style

Exposition: Bars 1–161; *Allegro scherzando*

1. First theme – c minor (bars 43–53) solo piano

- Second group – B^b Major (bars 106–149) *Moderato*

2. First theme (bars 106-122) oboe and viola

Development: Bars 162 – 301; *Allegro scherzando*

Recapitulation: Bars 302–476. Note the relentless and constant change in tempo, key and thematic material:

- First group – A^b Major then second subject – D^b Major *Moderato* (bars 310–355)

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RH piano melody

3. Codetta – *Meno mosso* - Transition – *Allegro scherzando*. Surprisingly this is followed by a new theme from cello in C Major *Agitato* followed by the piano cadenza.

- Second Group – C Major *Maestoso* and coda – C Major *Piu vivo*.

Audio Excerpts

[Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No.2](#)

Excerpt No.	Movement	Time	Activity	Page
1	Movement 1: <i>Moderato</i>	0:00 – 0:21	Activity 1	13
2	Movement 2: <i>Adagio sostenuto</i>	0:00 – 3:31	Activity 3	15
3	Movement 3: <i>Allegro scherzando</i>	Whole movement	Activity 5	20

Score Excerpts (Click below to access)

[Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No.2](#)

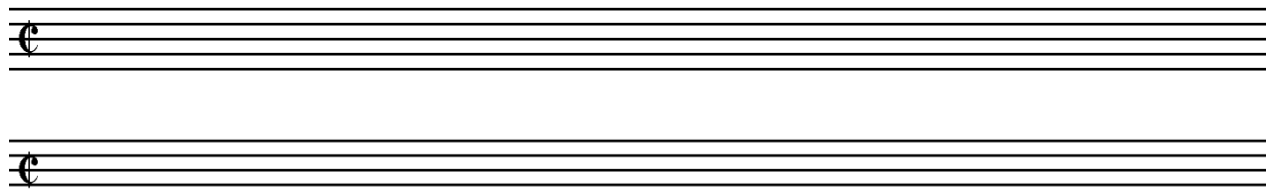
Excerpt No.	Movement	Bars	Activity	Page
1	Movement 1: <i>Moderato</i>	1– 66	1	13
2	Movement 2: <i>Adagio sostenuto</i>	48 – 51	Activity 3	15

Learning Activities

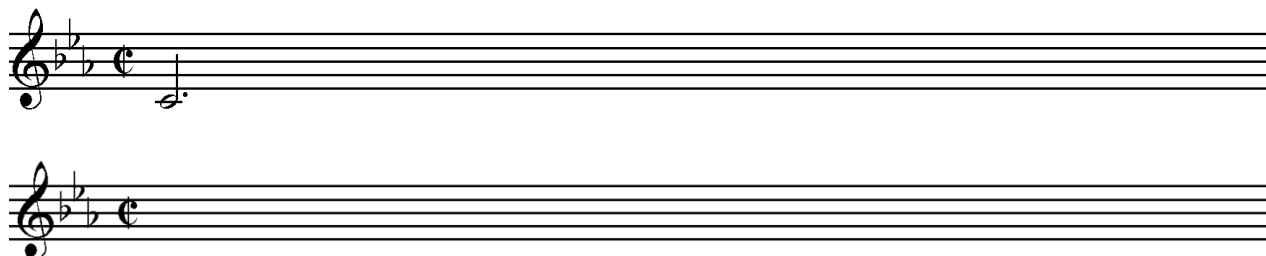
Activity 1: Aural, then listening and score reading

Listen to the First Group, First theme (**Audio Excerpt 1**) **without following** Score Extract 1 and answer the questions below.

1. Notate the rhythm of bars 11–18 of the violin I part. (NB cue in excerpt for this is 0:29–0:43)



2. Using your notated rhythm above, notate the pitch of the Violin I part.



3. Add articulation, tempo marking and dynamics to your score.

Now Listen again **while following Score Extract 1** and answer the following questions.

4. Describe the character of the opening 27 bars.
5. How is this suggested through the use of the musical concepts?
6. Complete the following table by identifying those instruments that provide the following roles.
(NB: some instruments may provide more than one role.)

Bar	Melodic	Harmonic	Bass
1-10			
11-27			
27-33			
34-55			
55-62			

7. From your observations from the above table, what instrument(s) tend to consistently provide melodic, harmonic and bass roles and which instruments play a 'double' role?
8. Notate the horn in F part b23-26 (below) at sounding pitch in bass clef on the staff provided.

9. What clef is indicated at the beginning of the trombone part (bar 1)?

Explain what is unusual about the rhythmic values in the piano part from bar 10 onwards.

Activity 2: Composition

Create your own arrangement of the **First movement first subject theme (bars 11–26)**.

- Play the theme through on your instrument.
- Use the main melody as a basis.
- You may transpose the chosen theme into a suitable key for your instrument / voice or other instruments in your composition.
- Compose for your own instrument.
- Arrange for other instruments you are familiar with and those of your class members.
- Choose at least one melodic, harmonic and bass sounding instruments/voices.
- Include articulation, dynamic, performance and expressive directions in your score.

Workshop, rehearse and perform your arrangement for the class.

Activity 3: Listening & Score Reading

Listen to **Sound Excerpt 2** while following Score Extract 2 and answer the following questions.

1. Describe the character of the second movement and how this is achieved referring to the concepts of music. How is it different to the first movement?
2. What difference do you note between the instrumentation of the first and second movements? Why do you think that the clarinet and trumpet in A have been used?
3. During the first section of the Second movement, various instruments swap thematic and accompaniment material. Refer to **Sound/Score Excerpt 2** and complete the table below.

	Bar	Instrument
Lead in melody	9	
	24	
Main melody	12	
	27	
	39	
Broken chord-type accompaniment pattern	5	
	24	
	39	

4. The RH piano part bars 5–8 contains stems that go downward. What does this indicate to the performer?
5. Name the composition technique used between the flute I, clarinet I and violin II (bars 22–23) and piano (bars 27–39).

6. Identify and explain each of the following notational/playing technique symbols.

Notation/playing technique	Definition
<i>con sord.</i> (bar 1, strings)	
<i>I solo</i> (bar 9, flute)	
<i>I, II, III Pult. In 3 div.</i> (bar 23, viola)	
<i>Adagio Sostenuto</i>	

7. What expressive technique is used at the beginning of the clarinet's First theme (bar 12)?

8. Identify and explain the rhythmic device between the clarinet and piano (RH) at bar 13 AND also between the RH and LH in the piano part at bars 15–16.

9. A frequent pattern in this movement is one or two bars of 3/2 followed by Common time metre. What is the underlying common rhythmic grouping between these two metres?

10. In terms of the metre and rhythmic values, what is interesting about the way in which the piano part (bars 5–8) is played?

11. Describe the melodic contour of the first theme (bars 12–23) in the clarinet I part.

12. Describe the accompaniment of the RH piano part (bars 5–23).

Activity 4: Listening & performing

Listen to and follow **Sound/Score Excerpt 6 (page 34)** and answer the following questions. This excerpt is the Second group theme.

1. Identify those instrument(s) that play the main melody.
2. How has Rachmaninov made it possible for the main melody to be clearly heard?
3. Describe the overall texture of this excerpt.
4. Rehearse and perform the Second subject theme as a class

Classroom Arrangement: Second Subject Theme

The image shows a classroom arrangement of the Second Subject Theme from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2. The score is written for a piano and a vocal soloist. The tempo is marked *Maestoso*. The piano part features a complex texture with multiple layers of chords and arpeggios, starting with a *ff* dynamic. The vocal part enters with a melodic line, marked *f* and *cresc.* (crescendo). The score includes various musical notations such as trills (*tr*), accents (*>*), and dynamic markings (*p*, *ff*, *f*, *cresc.*). The piano part is divided into two systems, with the first system showing the initial chords and the second system showing the continuation of the texture. The vocal part is written in a single system, with a long melodic line that spans across the piano part's systems.

The image displays a musical score for piano and strings, organized into two systems. The first system includes a grand staff (piano) and four string staves. The piano part features a complex texture with chords and a melodic line in the right hand, marked with accents and asterisks. The string parts are primarily sustained notes, with dynamic markings of *p* and *pp*. The second system follows a similar layout. The piano part includes a section marked *cresc.* (crescendo) leading to a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic. The string parts continue with sustained notes, also marked with *mf*. The score is written in a key signature with one flat and a common time signature.

The image displays a musical score for piano and strings. At the top, a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) shows a piano part. The piano part begins with a *p* (piano) dynamic, followed by a crescendo leading to a *ff* (fortissimo) dynamic. A trill (*tr*) is indicated above a note in the final measure of the piano part. Below the grand staff, the piano accompaniment is shown in two staves (treble and bass clefs). The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and asterisks. The string parts are shown in four staves (treble and bass clefs). The first string part includes dynamics of *dim.* (diminuendo) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The second and third string parts also include *dim.* markings. The fourth string part is in the bass clef and includes a *dim.* marking. The score concludes with a double bar line.

Activity 5: Composition/performance

1. Compose a small set of variations based on one of the two themes from the third movement.

Theme 1



Theme 2



- Identify and describe the unique features of the contour of the chosen theme.
- Experiment and improvise using the chosen theme as a basis.
- You may transpose the chosen theme into a suitable key for your instrument/voice or other instruments in your composition.
- Compose for your own instrument.
- You may include other instruments that you are familiar with and those of your class members.
- Choose at least one melodic, harmonic, and bass sounding instruments/voices.
- Include articulation, dynamic, performance and expressive directions in your score.
- Workshop, rehearse and perform your arrangement for the class.

Then listen to the third movement of the concerto to hear how Rachmaninov has developed this musical material in the movement listening to **Audio excerpt 3**.

GLOSSARY

Musical term	Definition
a2	Two instruments play the given pitch.
Accompaniment	The part of the music that is not the main theme or tune, but the musical support.
Da capo	From the beginning.
Dissonant	The term describing the sound when notes played simultaneously do not blend together but clash.
Duration	Referring to the rhythmic aspects of music, length of sounds or silence.
Dynamics and expression	Volume and choice of how the sound is made.
Expressive techniques	Ways of playing or articulating a sound often related to the interpretation of a style.
Extended Techniques	When a player is required to play their instrument in an untraditional manner, such as blowing into a trumpet without the mouthpiece or tapping the belly of a stringed instrument.
Forte (<i>f</i>)	Loud
Fortepiano (<i>fp</i>)	To commence a note loudly and becoming very soft immediately after.
Graphic Notation	A method of indicating pitch, rhythm and dynamics using symbols instead of traditional musical notation.
Legato	Smoothly
Melody	Tune
Metre	The way that the beats are grouped in a piece of music, ie the number of beats in a bar
Orchestra	A group of mixed instruments comprising woodwind, brass, percussion and stringed instruments and usually directed by a conductor.
Ostinato	A repeating pattern – may be rhythm only or rhythm and pitch.
Pentatonic Scale	A scale consisting of five notes only – the most common being the 1 st , 2 nd 3 rd , 5 th , and 6 th notes of the scale.
Piano (<i>p</i>)	A dynamic marking meaning soft.
Pitch	The relative highness of lowness of sounds. Discussion of pitch includes the melody and direction of pitch movement and the harmony (different parts).

Pizzicato	A technique used by string players where the sound is made by plucking the string rather than bowing it.
Program music	Music which is inspired by a story, character, place or atmosphere i.e. it is inspired by a non musical program.
Sequence	A pattern that repeats at a higher or lower pitch.
Sforzando piano (sfp)	To accent the start of the note loudly, then become suddenly soft.
Soundscape	Compositions of organised sounds which are describe a scene of a place.
Staccato	Playing a note so that it sounds short and detached.
Structure (form)	The plan underlying the construction or the design of a piece of music. Structure relates to the ways in which sections of music sound similar or different.
Texture	The layers of sound in a piece of music.
Timbre/Tone Colour	The particular features of a sound which distinguish one sound (instrument or singer) from another.
Tuned and Untuned percussion	Tuned percussion refers to percussion instruments which play specific pitches such as xylophones. Untuned percussion instruments include shakers, triangles and other instruments with no definable pitch.