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MARIETTA SHAGINYAN AND THE  
FOURTEEN SONGS OP. 34 BY SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

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## **Abstract**

My thesis has three components: a recital, program notes, and a research paper. My recital was thirty minutes long and included the *Vocalise*, Op. 34, No.14 by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), the *Elégie*, Op. 24 by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1942), and the *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 73 by Robert Schumann (1810-1856). For my program notes, I wrote brief descriptions and background information on the pieces to help my audience better understand and appreciate the music. The purpose of the research-paper component is to investigate the *Fourteen Songs*, Op. 34 more thoroughly, and particular to consider the influence Shaginyan had on these works and on Rachmaninoff's musical career. My thesis allowed me to explore, study, and contemplate what I love: music and creativity.

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## Introduction

The twenty-three-year-old poet Marietta Shaginyan started writing to Rachmaninoff in February 1912, using a fake name *Re* (the note D) (Bertensson 1956, 176). Shaginyan wanted to confess her faith in and love for his music. In Rachmaninoff's first reply, he wrote as if he were talking to a child and kept it very brief (Bertensson 1956, 176). Interestingly, during this time Rachmaninoff was not confident about his compositional skills because people said he was a phenomenal pianist, but not a good composer. Rachmaninoff needed someone to encourage him and give him ideas about his new music (Harrison 2005, 108). Shaginyan answered that need, as she was intelligent and a knowledgeable musician. In his second letter, Rachmaninoff asked *Re* for original texts for songs. Rachmaninoff also asked for sad lyrics because he was not comfortable with happy tones (Martyn 1990, 235). He then added that he could not answer Shaginyan's questions about him because he did not know how to talk about himself. He felt that he was an ordinary, boring person (Bertensson 1956, 177). Shaginyan sent Rachmaninoff books of poetry for ideas for his songs. In Rachmaninoff's third letter written on March 29, 1912, he only mentioned Yevgeny Baratynsky, a Russian poet, so it is not clear whether there were poems written by other poets in the book Shaginyan had sent. As well as his thoughts on the poems Shaginyan had sent, he opened up to her and discussed how he has two first cousins and he married one of them ten years previously. He also talked about literature, critics, quitting composition, and about his daughters. This was the beginning of *Fourteen Songs*, Op. 34.

## Death in Rachmaninoff's Music

The history of Russia during Rachmaninoff's time and his family history suggest that Rachmaninoff liked to express his sadness and attitude toward death through his compositions, especially the *Fourteen Songs*, Op. 34. On June 19, 1912, Rachmaninoff wrote to Shaginyan and informed her that he had finished writing his new songs. Shaginyan's copied poems from her notebooks provided the texts for about half of his new songs. He used "The Storm," "Arion," and "The Muse," all by Alexander Pushkin, a Russian poet, and told Shaginyan that "The Muse" was dedicated to her.

He used "It Cannot Be," by Maikov for the song he had written on March 7, 1910 after hearing about Vera Kommissarzhevskaya's death. Kommissarzhevskaya was a famous Russian actress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This connection is interesting because the *Vocalise*, Op. 34, No. 14 is also believed to be about mourning, loss, death, and his reaction to the carnage of Great War (1914-1918). The *Vocalise* was originally written in April 1912, but was later revised on September 21, 1915, and Great War could have had an effect on his decision to revise the song.

Many of Rachmaninoff's songs deal with death, and indeed many are dedicated to deceased people. Rachmaninoff once asked Shaginyan what she thought of death and if she feared it. This was shortly after his friend Alexander Scriabin and his professor Sergey Taneyev had died, and Shaginyan felt that he wanted to share his thoughts on death with someone. I think he probably experienced many losses in his life, which was more common in early 20<sup>th</sup> century as life expectancy today is much higher. This also suggests why Rachmaninoff wrote many works about death and loss. Rachmaninoff's father was an army officer and left his family when Rachmaninoff was nine years old (*Sergei Rachmaninoff*). This could have traumatized

Rachmaninoff and suggests that he wanted to express his feelings about loss.

I believe that Rachmaninoff's chaotic environment played a role in his asking Shaginyan for sad poems, and also in his difficulty writing lively music. Rachmaninoff lived during a dark era in Russia where bad government, war, and revolution were all happening. Rachmaninoff was also annoyed with the government because the government would not allow him to get a tractor even though he wanted one for his farm. The government agreed after talking with Rachmaninoff. However, when it was time for the government to allow Rachmaninoff to get a tractor, war broke out and he could not. His music could reflect external turmoil as well as his internal struggles.

## **Shaginyan's Feelings towards Rachmaninoff**

Shaginyan's infatuation with Rachmaninoff could have been deeper and psychological as her father had died when she was fourteen years old in 1902. She could have seen Rachmaninoff as a father figure, which could explain why they remained strictly platonic friends even though Shaginyan seemed to be in love with Rachmaninoff.

Another piece of evidence that Shaginyan liked Rachmaninoff more than as a friend is that she became jealous when she learned of another girl, who wrote to Rachmaninoff (*Rachmaninoff and Shaginyan: Voice of Russia*). Shaginyan and Rachmaninoff met for the first time at the end of 1912 by chance at a concert hall. Rachmaninoff knew right away who Shaginyan was and introduced her to his wife. Rachmaninoff visited Shaginyan at her cousin's place in Moscow often in 1913 and 1914. The entire block would come out to see Rachmaninoff and his car stood out in the littered alley. One time, Rachmaninoff told Shaginyan he was working on his *Bells*, Op. 35 (1913) and that he was in love with Balmont's translation of Edgar Poe's text. The *Bells* was about the road, the wedding, the alarm bell, and death. Rachmaninoff got these ideas from someone else who had sent him the poem in a letter. Shaginyan said that she became jealous when she learned of another muse; she had believed she was the only one Rachmaninoff wrote to about musical ideas. In Shaginyan's letters, she asked Rachmaninoff about Rachmaninoff's daughters and the type of women Rachmaninoff liked. These tendencies suggest that Shaginyan was infatuated with Rachmaninoff from the beginning and may have been interested in Rachmaninoff romantically.

## **Rachmaninoff's feelings towards Shaginyan**

The last time they met was July 28, 1917 before Rachmaninoff left for America. According to "Rachmaninoff and Shaginyan," Shaginyan had come to Rachmaninoff's concert with her husband, Y.S. Khachatryants. Shaginyan went to see Rachmaninoff after the concert and tried to convince Rachmaninoff to stay in Russia. Rachmaninoff was worried about the Russian revolution of 1917, his estate, his kids, and losing everything he had. Rachmaninoff sent his final letter a few weeks after this incident saying that he had re-read some of Shaginyan's letters and he wanted to see her and wondered if he would ever see her again. Rachmaninoff and his family left Russia in late 1917 for America. Thus Rachmaninoff seems to have become fond of Shaginyan after five years of correspondence. According to Shaginyan's diary, Rachmaninoff had a breakdown spring of 1916, because his wife was sick and he had gotten arthritis in his hand joints. He also felt that he was only a mediocre composer. He felt that he used to be able to write anything in a day. Shaginyan and Rachmaninoff looked at Shaginyan's notebook with poems in it and started looking for ideas for his love songs. Rachmaninoff was open about his emotions and vulnerability and that he was close to Shaginyan at least at the end of the relationship.

My interpretation of the letters and relationship between Rachmaninoff and Shaginyan is that Rachmaninoff saw Shaginyan as a muse, a friend, and nothing more in the beginning, but that his feelings changed over time. Although Rachmaninoff talked about many other things besides music like politics and literature, he mostly considered topics relevant to his work in the beginning. Rachmaninoff's tone is very light and friendly in the beginning as well, which suggests he saw Shaginyan as a young, fun person. Then he talked about more serious topics like his favorite critics, his family, and his inner thoughts. Shaginyan's letters arrived just when



he was having crises in the 1910s when his compositions were criticized, which could have helped Rachmaninoff become close to Shaginyan. Shaginyan was also an admirer and a confidante of Rachmaninoff when he really needed someone to assist him with his musical career, which could have helped Rachmaninoff grow to have more feelings for Shaginyan. The last letter especially seemed like a love letter, hoping to see Shaginyan before leaving Russia. As he got to know Shaginyan, he opened up and revealed many things about his true feelings that no other correspondent got to see.

## ***Fourteen Songs, Op. 34***

### **No. 1: The Muse**

Rachmaninoff used Pushkin's "The Muse," which he dedicated to Shaginyan, for his first song of the *Fourteen Songs*. Pushkin describes a singer who was taught in childhood by the Muse to play and write music. Shaginyan sent Pushkin's "The Muse" to Nikolai Medtner as well, who also dedicated a piece to Shaginyan (Martyn 1990, 236). The first song sounds like the echoing of the pipe and starts with his favorite interval of a fifth. I think this has to do with the pure sound of perfect fifths and innocence of children who are just learning by the muse.

### **No. 7: It Cannot Be**

The seventh song, So dread a fate ('It cannot be'), which used words from Maykov's poem, which is about the poet's daughter's death. Rachmaninoff dedicated this song to the famous Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya, in which he conveys the feelings of despair, disbelief, passion, and agony (Martyn 1990, 238).

### **No. 14: *Vocalise***

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were several wars and revolutions in Russia and throughout Europe. Nicholas II Romanov, who was the emperor of Russia during 1894-1917 promised constitutional reforms, but no actual changes were made, which caused rebellions. During his era, the government was inefficient, isolated its people, and the economy was underdeveloped (*Chronology of Russia*).

The last song *Vocalise* is a wordless song, which Rachmaninoff dedicated to Antonina Nezhdanova (1873-1950), a Russian coloratura soprano, and the first performer of the piece. Nezhdanova complained that there was no text, but Rachmaninoff felt that she didn't need words

because she was going to convey everything better and more expressively by her voice and interpretation than anyone could with words (Martyn 1990, 240). The *Vocalise* was the only song that was revised in September 1915, unlike the other songs, which were written in 1912. It could have been that the *Vocalise* was about death, and Rachmaninoff wanted to add his emotions after the Great War in 1915. In addition, the fact that this song did not have words makes the *Vocalise* sound like keening, which makes one believe this song is about mourning. Nikolay Struve suggested that Rachmaninoff make an orchestral version of the work after a successful premiere in January 1916. The original version of *Vocalise* was in C<sup>#</sup> minor, but the cello version is in E minor.

## **Analysis of *Vocalise***

### **Harmony/Voicing of chords**

The *Vocalise* starts out in E minor and modulates into several keys throughout the piece, which reflect the feeling of confusion and internal struggle that people experience in the event of loss and grief. In the bass line, the piano starts out in a descending natural minor scale E-D-C-B-A-G-F-E-D-E. The cello starts with a melody that has a narrow range and half-steps.

Rachminoff uses many minor chords that give a sad and dark mood in the piece. He also uses numerous seventh chords, which makes the demarcation of keys unclear with four notes that are common in many keys when modulating.

In the second half of measure 2, Rachmaninoff already changes the key to G major and in measure 3, changes back to E minor. In measure 5, the key changes to A minor and in the second half of measure 5, it changes to G major. The pattern continues with different keys, which reflect the irrational emotional changes in mourning people. Keys used in the piece are E minor, G major, A minor, F<sup>#</sup> minor, F minor, E major, F major, D major, and B minor.

Rachmaninoff always goes back to E minor throughout the piece. Although there are major keys in the *Vocalise*, Rachmaninoff utilizes minor keys to give the sad feeling.

### **Melody**

There is much half-step motion in the melody. Many notes resolve to the half-step higher note giving the longing feeling when holding on to the first note. For example, in measure 6, D<sup>#</sup> resolves to E. Holding onto the first notes feels like holding onto deceased people and not being able to let go in the mourning and grieving process, which adds the feeling of loss in the piece. In general, there are no big jumps and most lines are smooth and in stepwise manner (half or whole steps). Big jumps in notes could sound cheerful, which suggests why Rachmaninoff used

this technique to make the piece melancholy. Overall, the melody has a narrow range, about two octaves. Rachmaninoff may not have used the narrow range to contribute to the feeling of sadness because the *Vocalise* was originally written for voice and therefore this could have been the singer's voice range (in a different key C# minor).

## **Rhythm**

The right hand of the piano has eighth notes throughout the piece, which give a funeral march-like feeling. The left hand has longer notes like quarter and half-notes that move in whole and half steps that are usually natural or harmonic minor scales. Rachmaninoff also uses sharps and naturals to move the notes chromatically.

The melody mostly has eighth and sixteenth notes. A common pattern is one eighth note and then two sixteenth notes and vice versa. Rachmaninoff also uses numerous dotted notes followed by a note that is 1/3 the original note in length. For example, in measure 5, a dotted eighth note A is followed by a sixteenth note B. The first note is longing and then resolves to B, which again gives the feeling on holding on and not being able to let go. More examples of this funereal rhythmic character include measures 27 and 28 with a dotted quarter note and an eighth note and a dotted half note with a quarter note.

Rachmaninoff also uses tied notes to give the longing feeling again. In measure 25, Rachmaninoff ties a quarter note with the next occurring eighth note followed by three eighth notes that were part of the first eighth note. This again gives a feeling of sadness and mourning. Another example is measure 26 where Rachmaninoff uses a quarter note and four sixteenth notes, but ties the quarter note with the first sixteenth note. This rhythmic gesture elongates the first note and intensifies the mood associated with it.

The last tied note is in measure 36 and then the piece reaches its climax in measure 37.

In measure 36, a half note B ties into the next measure as an eighth note followed by three stepwise eighth notes C, D, and E, in which the note E is the highest point in the whole piece. From there, the piece goes down in register, which suggests finally letting go of the loved ones. The last longing-like note, but this time resolving down and not up like all the other longing-like notes, is in measure 38. Rachminoff uses trills to create the longing sound in which the melody goes F<sup>#</sup>-G-F<sup>#</sup>-E- F<sup>#</sup> and then resolves down to a whole note E in measure 39, which holds until measure 41 with a diminuendo to create the disappearing effect.

### **Texture**

The *Vocalise* has simple and light melodic lines and inner voices. The piano part has repeated eighth chords and long quarter and half notes throughout the piece. The melody is also fairly simple as well with no complicated shifts or chords. The graceful lines add to the sad and quiet mood of grieving people. The melody is almost always sustained with slurs in bowings, and the change in bowing parallels the breaths in the voice part. This gives a smooth melodic line that is soft, beautiful, and sad. All notes are played tenuto with no accents or emphases except for the two notes leading to the highest point, note E, in the piece in measure 37.

### **Timbre**

The tone of the *Vocalise* is sad yet exquisite. The piece starts out soft and is calm and tranquil. On the other hand, in the B section (starts in measure 19), the piece gets louder and more chaotic with the feeling of pulling and pushing. Rachmaninoff does this by using hairpins and going back and forth from the same notes, using the same intervals. Where there are two ideas repeated like in measures 19 through 21, it is played louder the second time to give the dramatic effect. As the note gets higher, the dynamic gets louder and vice versa.

Rachmaninoff uses these contrasting tones to illustrate different stages of grieving:

denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The beginning is peaceful and delicate, which could be describing bargaining. Rachmaninoff could be sweet-talking God or whoever trying to make a deal. The beginning could also be expressing denial as the piece is not quite depressing yet. The B section starting in measure 19 is describing anger. Its agitated and turbulent tone matches the feeling anger because bargaining from before did not work. In measure 23, the same phrase from measure 19 repeats, but this time a little softer, which could represent bargaining again. In measure 26, there is a run C-D-E-G with a crescendo resolving in a half-note A, making it dramatic. Then the note drops down to B and then goes back up to A resolving up to an octave higher B. This is the second high point of the piece after measure 37. This point could be expressing anger as well as depression, such as crying out loud. Then the piece calms down in measure 29 and sounds more stable, which could mean Rachmaninoff wanted to convey acceptance. In measure 37, the climax of the *Vocalise*, Rachmaninoff expresses his anger one more time before finally accepting and letting go in the end in measure 41. The accented C and D leading to E, the highest point, sound like screaming. The next measure and the rest of the piece are calm, but still has a dark tone as the *Vocalise* is a somber piece. The *Vocalise* is sad yet beautiful and is an intense, emotional piece. Table 1 describes a summary of songs 1, 7, and 14 from The Fourteen Songs (Rachmaninoff 1960, 1).

Table 1. Summary of Songs Mentioned from the *Fourteen Songs*

Number	Title	Text from	Dedicated to
1	The Muse	Pushkin	Marietta Shaginyan
7	So dread a fate ('It cannot be')	Maykov	Vera Komissarzhevskaya
14	Vocalise	No text	Antonina Nezhdanova (coloratura soprano)



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