Rachmaninoff’s Subdominant

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Rachmaninoff’s harmony (Рахманиновская гармония), later renamed “Rachmaninoff’s subdominant,” as described by Viktor Berkov (1960)
Goals:

1. Contextualize Rachmaninoff’s chord in modern theories of harmonic function as a functionally mixed harmony
2. Show the chord’s role on larger levels of structure
3. Relate the chord to tonal pairing and broad-scale plagalism
Rachmaninoff’s subdominant resolving to I and to V: some common contrapuntal options
Part 1: Some modern theories of harmonic function

Daniel Harrison (1994):
- Scale degrees are understood as bearers of harmonic function
- Root = functional base; third = functional agent; fifth = functional associate
- Functional agents: chordal thirds of the three central triads (T, S, D)
  - tonic agent: $3/\text{b}3$ ($mi/me$); dominant agent: $7/\text{#}7$ ($ti$); subdominant agent: $\text{b}6$ ($le$)

Kevin Swinden (2005):
- $SD$: subdominant chord with a dominant element (e.g., dominant agent)
- $DPD$: dominant-reparation chord with a dominant element
- $DS$: dominant chord with a subdominant element
Tchaikovsky. Overture Romeo and Juliet (1872).
Rachmaninoff’s subdominant as a functionally mixed chord

Swinden’s nomenclature (2005):
- SD = Subdominant with a dominant element; proceeds to T
- DP D = Dominant preparation with a dominant element; proceeds to D

Arabic numerals refer to the bass note.
Rachmaninoff. “Loneliness (‘Fragment from Musset’), op. 21 no. 6 (1902), mm. 6-7. R-S and R-DP
Rachmaninoff. “Loneliness,” mm. 6-7.
Voice-leading graph. R-S locally prolongs the tonic, R-DP serves as the pre-dominant chord within the phrase.
“Loneliness,” complete graph.
Rachmaninoff
Prelude in C# minor, op. 3 no. 2 (1892).

A summary of progressions that accompany the le-so-do ostinato.
Part 2: Rachmaninoff’s chord and the pairing of relative keys

Mutability (*peremennost’, *ladovaia peremennost’*):
Russian term approximately corresponding to the concepts of tonal pairing and directional tonality

Opera *Aleko*, 1892. One act, libretto by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, based on a poem by Alexander Pushkin.
Rachmaninoff’s subdominant as a modulatory pivot
Rachmaninoff. Prelude in G# minor, op. 32 no. 12.

R-S as an enharmonic pivot
Rachmaninoff. *Aleko*, Old Man’s Story. Summary of progressions with Rachmaninoff’s chord.

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d:  $R^S$  i  $R^{Dp}$  V  F:  I  \\
   d:  $R^S$  (inc.)  i  d:  $R^S$  i
F:  $bVI$  ii$^7$  F:  $bVI$  ii$^6$  I  ii$^7$  V$_7$  I
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“ghost pivot”
Old Man’s Story. Form

(interpreted as a small ternary, A-B-A)
Old Man’s Story
Initial phrase

(Piano reduction by Bakulina)
Old Man’s Story
Final phrase.

“Ghost pivot” circled
Part 3: Rachmaninoff’s subdominant and background plagalism
Rachmaninoff. “O Stay My Love,”

op. 4 no. 1 (1892). Form
“O Stay My Love.” Motivic material:
Focal phrase and basic idea
“O Stay My Love”

Mm. 6-22, voice-leading graph
“O Stay My Love”

Mm. 24-34, voice-leading graph

This corresponds to the song’s overall structure.

Notice the plagal background, I-IV-I

Plagal Background structures for Phrygian chorales
Suggested plagal background progressions. An alternative to Schenker’s authentic background progressions, *Free Composition*, fig. 16
Bibliography


Ewell, Philipp. “Harmonic Functionalism in Russian Music Theory: A Primer” Forthcoming in Theoria


