

KRIS HARTLEY

YUNCHAN LIM AND THE RACHMANINOFF THIRD PIANO CONCERTO



Yunchan Lim of South Korea performs during the Preliminary round at the Sixteenth Cliburn International Piano Competition in Van Cliburn Concert Hall at TCU in Fort Worth, Texas. (Photo by Ralph Lauer)

THIS YEAR we celebrate the 150th anniversary of composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's birth. It is also one year since Yunchan Lim became the youngest pianist ever to win the gold medal in the sixteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, held once every four years. Lim's acclaimed performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under the baton of conductor Marin Alsop, clinched his victory and was by all accounts a rare moment.

Music competitions are not ephemeral events. They impact the broader world of classical music by determining which newcomer artists receive media attention and influencing the level of prestige accorded to their concert appearances and recording deals. Competitions also serve as a barometer for stylistic and interpretive trends, in a similar way as

literary, film, or art festivals. What happens in competitions should be scrutinized, and this essay takes the occasion of the first anniversary of Lim's historic performance to do so.

Rachmaninoff's towering Piano Concerto No. 3 is a concert hall "warhorse." Written in part to showcase the composer's own virtuosity on a performance tour in the United States, it has also been used by aspiring pianists to boost their careers. This approach has paid off for several Cliburn Competition gold medalists, including Jon Nakamatsu in 1997, Olga Kern in 2001, Yekwon Sunwoo in 2017, and now Yunchan Lim. The concerto's colossal physical and interpretive demands can test the limits of even the most seasoned concert pianist. If competitions offer a glimpse of undiscovered artistic greatness, this concerto is a particularly worthy gauge, given its difficulty and special role in music history.

In the year since his competition victory, Lim has given numerous performances, including a heralded debut playing the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3 with the New York Philharmonic in May 2023. Despite Lim's doubts about his Cliburn Competition performance of the work, this historic moment remains worthy of close reflection as a snapshot of his artistic identity in the early stages of what will likely be a decades-long career. The performance also has the potential to become an interpretive benchmark in the same manner as the great historical recordings. Indeed, it garnered more than eleven million views on YouTube during the year after its posting—an astonishingly high number for a classical music performance.

In this essay, I will focus on a handful of moments in the concerto that grant substantial interpretive latitude. These passages are not only virtuosic showcases of speed and dexterity but also lyrical episodes, rich with inner voicing and overlapping musical ideas. Complex, reverent, and beautiful, the passages are opportunities to compare Lim's musical vision with those of the historic greats, including Martha Argerich, Vladimir Horowitz, Lazar Berman, Evgeny Kissin, Byron Janis, Garrick Ohlsson, Andrei Gavrilov, Abbey Simon, Grigory Sokolov, Simon Trpčeski, Olga Kern, Rachmaninoff himself, and many others. Scrutiny of such moments can yield a better understanding about Lim's musical vision, while also providing an example of how performances can be appreciated in detail on both technical and artistic levels.



FIRST MOVEMENT (ALLEGRO MA NON TANTO)

1. [2:53](#) (*Allegro-veloce*)

A common theme in Lim’s interpretation is the balance of drama and understatement. The opening three minutes of this concerto often tempt eager pianists to force virtuosity into a passage that exists merely to establish a musical atmosphere and serve as a foil for later drama. Lim reveals his maturity by holding back during these note-filled yet understated runs. His approach reflects confidence that later opportunities will be enough to demonstrate technical skills; early on, structural artistry prevails over showmanship. As he does throughout the concerto, Lim highlights overlooked moments—like the descending counterpoint (G#-F-E-A), where phrasing is indicated in the score but rarely highlighted in performance (Example 1). He also begins the solo passage unassumingly then pulls back significantly after the high-E climax; to close, he resists adding an unwritten low A that pianists often use to dramatically “bottom-out” the end of the passage (consider [Cliburn](#) and [Argerich](#) [softly]), [Kern](#) (in her gold medal winning performance at the 2001 Cliburn Competition, which I had the pleasure of attending), and surprisingly the otherwise reserved [Simon](#)). This approach gives a narrative arc (low-high-low) to the passage while revealing that Lim is in no hurry to venture beyond the score in proving his technical prowess; lyrical exigencies take first priority.

2. [5:47](#) (*a tempo e un poco cresc.*)

Lim spreads his wings in the first romantic and sunny outburst of the concerto, beginning the phrase with a relaxed unfolding of the chord progression while letting the low register octaves control the pace. The emotional weight of this passage can lure a pianist into pushing the tempo, but Lim takes a more refined approach. In a similarly patient and sensitive reading, [Cliburn](#) takes the passage as a single arching

daydream, consistent with the high lyricism he brings to the concerto overall. [Sunwoo](#), in his gold medal-winning performance in the 2017 Cliburn Competition, approaches the passage much the same way, with a rolled chord on the build-up lending lyrical richness while cleverly making the painful stretch of a minor tenth interval easier to manage. Lim's approach also reflects that of [Horowitz](#), who proceeds with a subtle offset between the left and right hands while rolling the base chords and highlighting the tonal shear that adds propulsion to the passage's otherwise stately character. One of Horowitz's trademarks is the halt before a particularly consequential note (accentuated by the raw, sparkling sound of his personal piano-in-tow); here, the halt occurs before the low Eb octave one bar before a Tempo (Example 2). This is no arbitrary improvisation—the halt is evident both in the previously linked recording (Eugene Ormandy and the New York Philharmonic) and in his [recording](#) with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic. Horowitz's possible reasons are numerous: physical leverage, the prevailing pedagogical style during his youth, some matter he and Rachmaninoff discussed personally, or any of these in combination with the musical value of a tense split second of unfulfilled anticipation. Indeed, the halt seems to be one of Horowitz's personal markers. In time, Lim's own markers will surely emerge.

3. [6:51](#) (*Tempo precedente, ma un poco piu mosso*)

Here is another moment where Lim resists the temptation to press his artistic case too insistently. He offers instead a relaxed and sensitive revelation of the music's airy quality, which is particularly evident towards the higher register in contrast with the heavier content that flanks it. Lim's approach also creates space for showcasing the orchestra; apparent are the dreamlike sighs of the strings and descending chromaticisms of the English horn. The value of this and many other passages

in Rachmaninoff's works lies in the space afforded for interpretation, and the numerous recordings exhibit a diversity of approaches. For example, [Berman](#) treats it as a long build-up, climaxing at poco a poco accelerando (Example 3) and the chromatic descent; winding thirds in the right hand set up an orchestral solo that the London Symphony Orchestra clarinetist wholly relishes. Like Berman, Lim plays in a way that is focused not on himself but on the ensemble as a whole, evident in the many instances when he visually interacts with orchestra members (rather than with the conductor only). In competition performances, this is an uncommon quality.



4. [Cadenza](#)

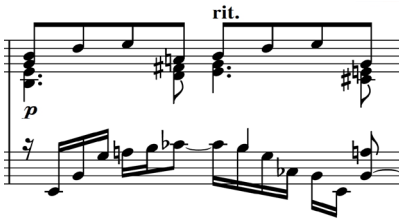
Horowitz is largely credited with popularizing this concerto in concert halls and record collections. His friendship with Rachmaninoff gave him insights into the character of the piece that few other pianists had the opportunity to gain first-hand. Many of the concerto's earliest recordings are Horowitz's own, causing his interpretation to be imprinted on the early public life of the work and establishing a decades-long interpretive benchmark (Lim admitted to having listened to Horowitz's recordings at least one thousand times). Until his passing in 1989, Horowitz was a treasured living connection to a bygone era of late Romantic music—an individual with direct memories of Rachmaninoff the person, experience with the social and intellectual world in which Rachmaninoff wrote, and decades of personal observation about the early life of this concerto. By any consideration, there will never again be anyone who has as intimate a familiarity with Rachmaninoff's works. For these reasons, Horowitz's interpretations—for all their (albeit thrilling) idiosyncrasies—always deserve mention when comparing performances of this concerto. In short, no modern pianist could get away with what Horowitz did, and this quirky charm should be celebrated.

At a practical level, Horowitz's technical prowess matches the concerto's demands, and his artistic credibility grants him freedom in the many moments where he adds notes and goes off-score in dynamics and phrasing. In his many recorded performances of the piece, Horowitz plays the shorter cadenza, as does [Rachmaninoff](#) himself (in what seems to be his only extant recording of the concerto—unfortunate for its cuts and low audio quality). The shorter cadenza is a breezier and more delicate contrast to the heavier and longer alternative (*ossia*). It eventually became common for pianists to play the latter, and the reasons are understandable: it demonstrates technical ability and fits the heavy, even brooding tone of the first movement overall. Among those taking the longer cadenza are Cliburn, Berman, and the more recent phenomenon Trpčeski. Notably, Argerich takes the shorter, as does Lim—an interesting choice, given that performances of the same concerto across the recent history of the Cliburn Competition have more often featured the longer version.

At the onset of the [cadenza](#), Lim shows characteristic restraint, evoking a reserved but tense atmosphere and foregoing a virtuosic display until the cadenza requires momentum. He savors the delicate moments, holding back for a tasteful effect before the [restatement](#) of the D-minor theme, where he playfully reveals the staccato/portato inner voicings. At this point, the two versions of the cadenza converge, and Lim returns to the stately descent and D-major climax. A passionate chord-roll right before the resolution exhibits artistic serendipity while avoiding the competition faux pas of overwrought artistic indulgence. Like nearly all other score-faithful performances of this concerto, Lim resists the temptation to re-notate the climax measures in a way that gives the bass notes maximum effect; his restraint contrasts with [Horowitz](#), who offers the only such departure in the standard recording corpus (note the low octaves on beat 1 rather than beat 2 of the triplets in Example 4). One can appreciate how Horowitz's revision might seem more straightforwardly powerful than what Rachmaninoff notated.

The image shows a musical score for a piano cadenza, consisting of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is in D major and 3/4 time. The treble staff features a series of chords, many of which are marked with an '8' and a slur, indicating an eighth-note triplet. A 'rit.' (ritardando) marking is placed above the first few chords. The bass staff features a more rhythmic accompaniment, with some chords marked with a '7' and a slur, indicating a seventh-note triplet. The overall texture is dense and complex, with many overlapping notes and chords.

After the woodwinds make their unexpected appearance (odd for cadenzas, which are typically solo passages), the remainder of the cadenza captures a trance-like tone. Lim renders the chords approaching the coda relaxed, airy, and unfussy, but some well-placed pauses generate the anticipatory tension possible only when a phrase is unrushed. For example, consider the portato in the left hand (Example 5), where Lim remains in interpretive character while offering phrasing that listeners have likely never heard. He shows himself to be versatile, thoughtful, and patient, and thus the first movement concludes with evidence that this will be a performance to remember.



SECOND MOVEMENT (INTERMEZZO)

5. 20:12 (*Piu mosso*)

One should not compare interpretations of this concerto without recognizing Martha Argerich, perhaps the greatest living pianist. Her 1982 performance is often considered the gold standard and has drawn countless listeners into Rachmaninoff's fold. At the entry of the piano in the second movement (Example 6), Argerich bursts forth with her deeply committed vision of the piece—fiery, passionate, and free-form. In an apt visual written for the recording program notes, Bryce Morrison describes how Argerich's approach conjures images of “dark pearls flung on velvet.” Also notable is Kern's exploration of the multiple contours and emotional shades of this brief passage, with a propulsive and angsty entry that subsides quickly into a supple and fading transition for the main Db-major theme; the playing is gorgeously fluid throughout.

This passage is a mix of textures and emotions, with numerous opportunities for idiosyncratic novelties; consider, for example, the uniquely crisp articulation of Sunwoo's descending left-hand scale. Lim's reading is more understated if just as velvety, capturing the atmosphere of disorientation as the piano emerges from the dark orchestral statement preceding it. When the main theme brings an enchanting resolution, the concerto's most operatic moment, Lim's supple touch enhances the contrast and demonstrates his appreciation for the grand narrative juxtapositions typical of Rachmaninoff.

6. [23:43](#) (*a tempo, più mosso*)

Punctuated by a low A that introduces the D-major passage (Example 7), Lim's interpretation of the second movement leaps immediately into rare company. The low A may have been the most thrilling single note of Lim's entire competition appearance. He bursts down the keyboard in striking fashion, evoking the Horowitzian sound that "remains such a beautiful mystery." Lim's is an octave lower than written (his first apparent departure from the score), and although many pianists do the same, his execution is unique in its jarring reverberation and tonal rawness not apparent in other registers of the Bass Hall piano. The power-under-control needed to execute this moment is fraught with risk, and had Lim jumped three feet down the keyboard in one second only to land on, say, Bb, every juror and most of the Bass Hall crowd would have known. As in many other moments, Lim pulls it off like a consummate professional, neither surprised nor thrilled to find himself on solid ground, but simply pressing forward.



The D-major passage introduced by the aforementioned note is a repeat of the principal second movement theme, triumphally recast moments later in Db-major. In the D-major version, [Lim](#) gives the left-hand chords an articulation that is often obscured by pedaling or the general noise of the orchestration (Example 8). In his hands, the chords are crisp without sounding mechanical, and he articulates the lyrical line in the upper notes of the left-hand chords—a rare treat (I attempt to illustrate this clarity on my own in a brief clip). It is a clear display of talent that Lim gives varying weights to different notes within these chords while maintaining the salience of the top-line melody in the right hand. For comparison, [Horowitz](#) executes the passage with equal gravity, flair, and abandon, turning the moment into the unmistakable climax of the movement and, arguably, of the entire concerto (accompanied by Eugene Ormandy’s Philadelphia Orchestra, whose bed of strings in that moment may be the most luscious and full-throated orchestral sound ever put to vinyl).



Lim’s decision to emphasize the second note in the D-major descending chord [progressions](#) may seem arbitrary, but the approach adds emotional weight to a movement that is already the apex of the concerto’s romantic narrative. There must also be an underlying pulse in order to

prevent the passage from descending into a nondescript wall of sound: Rachmaninoff writes the low notes to propel it forward, and Lim embraces this. Virtuosity is only a secondary consideration here, but many pianists force it—doing extra work by approaching the chords in jarringly aggressive fashion. Lim brings just enough projection to balance the piano with a deep foundation of strings, recognizing again that a concerto is a collaborative rather than solo undertaking.

After the resolution to Db-major, Lim finds more ways to be both powerful and delicate. Here, Rachmaninoff blends subtle harmonic evolution with gentle dissonance. Each pianist brings something unique to this passage, but Lim captures the moment with uncommon mastery. The peculiar but brilliantly written chord progression beginning at 24:52 has the same kind of disorienting quality as the opening passage of the movement, but this moment has a sunnier disposition. Lim maintains its nobility while, again, carrying the theme without losing the counterpoint. For example, consider his simultaneous execution of melodies in the top-notes of both hands (the left-hand melody being Bb-Bbb-Ab; Example 9). Moreover, the rolling of the chord at 25:09 is not written in the score, yet Lim's artistic license is welcomed; by this point in the performance, he has earned the right. Kern's reading is an overwhelming display of pure muscle by contrast, punctuated by the phrases cascading into the devastating crash of the low Db. For a more subtle take, consider Jorge Bolet's effort to highlight the descending line in top note of the left-hand chords (followed by another unwritten but well placed chord-roll)—an approach that is unique, satisfying, and ultimately consistent with his lyrically oriented interpretation of the piece. Sunwoo focuses on the top theme, bringing out in characteristically rich form the Gb-Bb-Gb and F ♯-Ab-F ♯ figures, as Rachmaninoff had indicated in the score through tenuto markings (Sunwoo enhances this moment with a well-placed chord roll).



7. [28:29](#) (*L'istesso tempo*)

Lim makes a unique imprint on this passage (Example 10) by taking the ascending broken chords at tempo and capturing a pulsing quality (i.e., dividing the run into three-note clusters and emphasizing the first note of every second cluster). This approach is taken by few others, including [Argerich](#), Daniil [Trifonov](#), and Rachmaninoff (note three things about the composer's reading of this passage: contravening his own markings by leaving almost no room for the *accelerando*; taking an arguably inhuman pace in the descending Eb-major chords, and lingering dramatically on the low-G before the final run). Most other approaches (e.g., [Janis](#) and [Trpčeski](#)) take this run as build-up to the descending chords—a strategy with its own dramatic effect. However, Lim has the technical prowess to execute the climb-and-dive at tempo, resisting anticipatory coyness at the top of the phrase and aiming instead for an abrupt lurch. Even his slight hesitation before the descent (as opposed to that of [Sokolov](#), who blends them in equally gripping fashion) is enough to signal this important turning point without interrupting the momentum.

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, specifically Example 10. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is written in bass clef and is marked "L'istesso tempo" with a tempo of quarter note = 54. It begins with a piano (*mf*) dynamic and a crescendo leading to a forte (*f*) dynamic. The tempo then changes to quarter note = 126. The second system is written in treble clef and is marked "accel." and "cresc. ...", leading to a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The tempo remains at quarter note = 126. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

The broader effect of this passage is transitional urgency between the “slow” (second) and “fast” (final) movements. Embracing this frantic episode to full effect, Lim hints that his approach to the final movement will be more fiery than stately—in contrast to the grand-scale and reverent readings by Berman and Cliburn. Like the previously men-

tioned descending Eb-major chords (Example 11), this is a moment where [Rachmaninoff's](#) own recording distinguishes itself in unmatched tempo. Given the lyrical quality Rachmaninoff demands elsewhere, some opportunities for raw showmanship can be forgiven and even celebrated. Lim, Argerich, and Sokolov all come close to capturing this virtuosic spirit. Also deserving mention is [Sunwoo](#), whose descending chords are propelled by a clear underlying pulse, and both [Trifonov](#) and [Ponti](#), whose single-note and pedal-free scales down to the low G have a clarity that is satisfying technically but also gripping in its atmosphere of descent and anticipation.

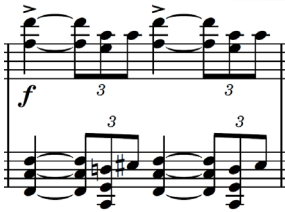


THIRD MOVEMENT (*ALLA BREVE*)

8. [28:53](#) (*Alla breve*)

Lim cuts a corner at the beginning of the third movement, taking the low A slightly early and treating it as a quarter note rather than an eighth note (Example 12); to be fair, this is a trait of nearly every performance of the piece. Rachmaninoff did not write it this way, but few listeners will recognize the difference in the rush of the moment. If one's interpretive vision requires a launch at lightning speed, cutting this corner is the only option. At Lim's speed, it is not physically possible to play it as written: this is one of the calculated tradeoffs that comes with much of Rachmaninoff (common across the performance repertoire; cf., [Janis](#) and [Kern](#)). Slower performances reveal the effect as Rachmaninoff likely intended it; consider first [Berman](#) and [Bolet](#) and secondarily [Cliburn](#)

(who still begins slightly early in the left hand in what comes close to a chord roll). An alternative approach is to de-emphasize the left hand, but dropping the low A undercuts the effect of the counterpoint. For example, [Trifonov](#) does not seem to enter early but fails to catch the low A in the convincing way that Berman and Cliburn do. Notably, the approaches of the latter two to this single measure encapsulate their vision of the entire concerto: Mount Everest at sunset rather than whitewater rapids on the Colorado river.



9. [33:43](#) (*Meno mosso*)

In Lim's hands, this passage is a rich tapestry in which no note is superfluous. While it is tempting in this lyrical middle section of the final movement to highlight only the melody, Lim's reading reveals the intricacies of Rachmaninoff's inner voicings while propelling the passage where it risks dragging (compare, for example, [Alexis Weissenberg's](#) lyrical but slightly lethargic interpretation). Lim takes a rather brisk tempo to conclude the [passage](#), setting up the whimsical piano-woodwind duets that follow and thus paying close attention to the "chamber" moments that characterize this middle section. By comparison, [Argerich's](#) equally compelling but distinct reading elicits a rich vocal tone in the top line, with the counterpoint as luscious as the main theme and off-beats concluding the passage clearly and creatively. The interpretations of both [Cliburn](#) and [Kern](#) of the same passage are also notable for their yearning quality, where each measure lurches forward then holds back in a breathlike rhythm.

196 *Meno mosso* ♩ = 60

mf

sempre legato

10. [38:54](#) (*Poco mosso*)

This galloping passage is a repeat of one that appears earlier in the third movement—first in C-major and now in Bb-major (Example 14). The latter falls more easily under the hands than the former, given the favorable balance of black and white keys, and Lim takes this shift as an invitation to push the tempo and create a climbing sense of drama towards the concerto's frantic finale. This passage can be approached lyrically, aggressively, or understatedly to highlight orchestral details (woodwinds in particular). The challenge Lim accepts is how to adopt an outlandishly fast tempo while maintaining some lyrical character. The technical demands are significant: double chords in both hands (even as the easier approach of many pianists is to take the right-hand chords as octaves), with the left hand registering a low Bb on the third beat of each triplet. The pianist must also maintain the clarity of a descending chromatic scale rendered in the middle, not the edges, of each chord (and do so simultaneously in both hands). This expression is repeated in Bb-major, then again in D-minor, and then, in the final iteration, D-minor turns to F-major to set up a repeat of the earlier lyrical theme. Lim holds nothing back, reaching for reserves of energy that seem boundless while never spiraling out of control. His reading contrasts admirably with many other recordings, which are broadly classifiable as either raw showmanship or lyrical introspection. For the former, consider the angular rhythm and propulsive energy of [Weissenberg](#) and [Lukáš Vondráček](#), the crash-the-gates aggression of [Horowitz](#) and [Denis Matsuev](#) (the latter captures the counterpoint well, if a bit belaboredly),

and the extraordinarily clean and strongest all-around reading of Yefim Bronfman. For a less showy style, consider the understated and well-balanced work of [Simon](#) and [Bolet](#), who seem most interested in catching all the interior notes while allowing the intricate but often overlooked orchestral writing to shine (including a startling but delightful clarinet entrance in the Simon recording). [Berman](#) gives this passage true musical shaping, letting each phrase build into its own miniature climax without ever seeming impatient.

320 **Più mosso**

324

Deserving additional mention is the passage immediately following (*Più vivo*): the lyrical walk through the earlier G-major theme, now in F-major, that provides an eye-of-the-storm reprieve before Rachmaninoff closes the concerto in harrowing fashion (Example 15). These measures call for clarity, delicacy of touch, and—as usual for Rachmaninoff, a Bach devotee like so many other composers—clear counterpoint. A notable moment in the recording history of this passage is that of [Kissin](#). While the counterpoint could be overblown in a more literal interpretation, he takes it as its own lyrical line and executes the phrase seamlessly (Ab-G-F-E). No other recording reveals this oft-ignored moment as clearly, and Kissin’s ability to blend it with the prevailing theme is pianism of rare quality. The remainder of Kissin’s passage breathes with the ease of an afternoon walk, alternately pushing forward and pulling back in a way that takes supreme attention by the conductor (Seiji Ozawa, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra). [Simon](#) takes this pas-

sage with just as much contemplation, leaving auditory space for the big band-style chattiness of the orchestral accompaniment's inner voicings ("busier" here than in the earlier G-major iteration). It helps that conductor Leonard Slatkin's characteristically responsive reading with the marvelous St. Louis Symphony Orchestra supports Simon's approach; the chromatic quarter notes in the strings highlight Rachmaninoff's ever-present rhythmic vitality (this recording by Simon and Slatkin is among the best for piano-orchestra balance, a trait particularly apparent during the string-forward lyrical passages elsewhere). [Lim](#) finds his own path in the shadow of these greats, again balancing well with the orchestra but using punctuation to give the passage form and direction (e.g., the E-minor chord that begins *poco a poco dim.*).

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 352-356. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. Measures 352-355 show a melodic line in the right hand with chromatic quarter notes and a bass line with quarter notes. Measure 356 shows a triplet in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamics include "dim." and "cresc.".

11. [40:16](#) (*Vivace*)

As a purely technical curiosity, it is always exciting to listen for the left-hand octaves in the growling and dramatic *Vivace*, a frenetic recasting of a chord progression from the first movement cadenza (Example 16). At anything faster than a walking pace, most pianists make somewhat of a mess of Rachmaninoff's eight-measure athletic challenge. Others are up for the task. [Lim](#), for example, faithfully powers through at the blistering speed to which he earlier committed, accenting the upper note of the repeated left-hand triplet to highlight the counterpoint (rather than accenting the repeated low A octave; [Sunwoo](#) takes the same approach, but not at such a rapid tempo). Beyond [Lim](#), the

corpus of recordings presents all manner of interesting and quirky approaches to this brief but treacherous passage: the reckless abandon of [Horowitz](#), studied precision of [Kern](#), paced and mechanical sharpness of [Berman](#) and [Ponti](#), staccato urgency of [Trifonov](#), furious chaos of [Matsuev](#), [Bolet](#)'s lyrical hold-outs on the second beat, and a peculiar but gripping effort by Arcadi [Volodos](#) to make the counterpoint line into the main theme. This passage is one of few for which mere survival can be considered success; making musical meaning is merely a bonus. This is Rachmaninoff, after all, and one can always expect several opportunities to simply show off.

12. [42:16](#) (*A Tempo*)

Rachmaninoff's endings rival Tchaikovsky's in excitement, and he does his towering showpiece full justice with a thrilling and virtuosic coda. The rousing conclusion (Example 17) consists of a rapidly descending scale of chords (not octaves only) in triplets—or, in the almost-never played ossia, quadruplets for the first several measures ([Sokolov](#) and [André Watts](#)). This phrase is followed by a flurry of ascending D-major chords, initially alternating between both hands, but coming together in the final four measures. By this time, many pianists have lost energy. The intricate fingerwork of the passage is also frequently obscured by the orchestra in numerous otherwise admirable recordings, including that of [Simon](#) (where the piano is largely absent in the final measures). Pacing and clarity are paramount when executing this im-

portant final statement, and the corpus of recordings provides numerous differing approaches. At the fast end are the ever-breathhtaking but marginally carnivalesque approach of [Horowitz](#) (off-score with octaves rather than chords on the descent, chords together rather than apart on the final climb—a technically easier approach), the fleet but gripping [Argerich](#) (compare the lightness of her descending chords with [Rachmaninoff's](#)), the bravado of [Weissenberg](#) (octaves only on a searing descent), [Matsuev](#) and [Ponti](#) (heavy but slightly obscured on the climb), [Kern](#) (the most assertive and confident post-descent climb in the recording corpus), and [Bronfman](#) (maintaining the best balance and control over the entire passage, given his tempo).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, likely a Chopin Nocturne. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system starts at measure 497, marked with a forte (ff) dynamic and a fermata over the first eighth note. The second system starts at measure 500, marked 'Più vivo'. Both systems feature a descending eighth-note line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with triplets of eighth notes throughout. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

At the same time, what is gained in white-knuckle excitement can be lost in nuance, when considering that these chords make a substantive musical contribution beyond showmanship. At this end of the spectrum are the more relaxed and lyrical readings. One example is [Berman](#), who proceeds in a stately manner with what sound like arm-weighted strokes, producing uncommon tonal richness and harmonic clarity. His pacing gives conductor Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra an opportunity to highlight the triplets—something Berman also achieves in a live [recording](#) with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic (an occasionally overpowering but stately orchestral accompaniment that exemplifies the brass-heavy sound of the 1960s and

1970s). In the London recording, Berman's final upward push is confident, balanced, and ends with a slight hold-out to provide a pianistic aftertaste (as against the resounding punch of the orchestra). In a recent live recording, [Ohlsson](#) accomplishes much the same, gaining clarity as he makes the climb by regrouping for one last push at measure six from the end (incidentally, Ohlsson also offers incisive and engaging [pointers](#) about performing this piece). Like Berman's performance overall, Ohlsson's is balanced, mature, and profoundly musical. A final example is [Trifonov's](#) (Myung-Whun Chung with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France). After initially entering late on the descending chords (oops!), he finds total coordination with the orchestra. Chung is fantastically sharp in the final moments (compare to a similarly clear reading of this passage by [Gavrilov](#)) and Trifonov's climb matches this crispness. Use of pedal in this passage is also noteworthy; for example, Vondráček's pedaling serves not necessarily to obscure fatigue at the end of a very tiring concerto but to produce a musical build-up, each chord on the back of the other and exploding at the end in near-total coordination with the orchestra. [Cliburn's](#) recording is a compromise between these two approaches, with the descending chords gathering pace at the hurtle downward, and a pedal-heavy ascent (accompanied by a slightly overzealous cymbalist). At this concluding moment, the visions of Lim and Cliburn are distinct, but both have immense musical value. Lim's chords are duly clear and paced, and he maintains the descending line of the octave scale even when it drops to one note in the right hand (before Presto). He also avoids getting finger-tied in the final climb, most importantly at the moment when the alternating chords come together and must synchronize exactly with the orchestra. I have heard this moment come apart during many lesser performances, but Lim predictably masters it and the Fort Worth audience responds in kind.



Yunchan Lim delivered perhaps the most thrilling performance in Cliburn Competition history. He not only accomplished a milestone for his own career but also registered a moment of historic significance that acknowledges the revered champions of this formidable concerto. His performance offered excitement, surprise, and youthful sunniness, bringing welcome freshness to Rachmaninoff's concert hall mainstay. While I have paid attention to only a handful of moments, all notes

of Lim's performance—and those of other performances referenced here—deserve close consideration.

At the same time, it could be rewarding to look beyond incidental moments to consider Lim's overarching vision. This is where the analytical task becomes more challenging. What indicates the presence of such a vision, beyond a forty-five-minute series of even the most satisfying episodes? Artistry is as much about overall structure as about an individual moment—the entire canvas versus a single brush stroke. The recordings of Berman, Horowitz, Cliburn, Argerich, and Bolet stand out in visionary and interpretive consistency; a passage excerpted in any part of the recording is immediately identifiable as belonging with the rest. Can we assess Lim the same way? As much as a performance is interpretation, so too is the act of listening. Lim's Rachmaninoff will strike listeners in many different ways, and this versatility itself distinguishes his complex artistry.

Moreover, is it possible to tell a story through the performance of a piece that had no specific “program” in the mind of the composer? The answer depends as much on context as on the performer—a particular interpretation may seem pedestrian in a vacuum but sublime in historic relief. I have sought to cast Lim's performance in the latter light. As he further develops his distinct musical voice in the years and decades ahead, a re-listening of this early-career milestone may reveal undiscovered hints about his budding greatness. Until such time, Lim's performance can be considered one for the ages by offering “something for everyone” in its mix of serendipity, historical call-outs, and consummate emotional immersion.

NOTES

¹Woolfe, Zachary. “Review: Yunchan Lim, Teenage Piano Star, Arrives in New York.” *New York Times*. May 11, 2023. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/11/arts/music/review-yunchan-lim-piano-philharmonic.html>>

²Hernández, Javier C. “A 19-Year-Old Pianist Electrifies Audiences. But He's Unimpressed.” *New York Times*. May 9, 2023. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/09/arts/music/yunchan-lim-new-york-philharmonic-rachmaninoff.html>>

³Hernández, “Pianist Electrifies Audiences.”

⁴Morrison, Bryce. Program Notes: Rachmaninoff - Concerto No. 3, Martha Argerich piano – Klavier, RSO Berlin – Riccardo Chailly (Rachmaninoff). Philips Classic Productions. (1995). <http://albumlinenotes.com/Piano_Concerto_No_1.html>

⁵Hartley, Kris. “Musical Review: Yunchan Lim's performance of Rachmaninoff's

Third Piano Concerto (16th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition).” June 21, 2022. <<http://www.krishartley.com/2022/06/21/musical-review-yunchan-lims-performance-of-rachmaninoffs-third-piano-concerto-16th-van-cliburn-international-piano-competition/>>

KRIS HARTLEY is an assistant professor of Public Policy at the City University of Hong Kong. He also writes on music.