Example 1. Excerpted from Adorno 1998, 38–40

Rachmaninov’s Prelude in C-sharp minor: there are passages familiar from pieces for children and from school concerts which are marked ‘grandioso’. Tiny hands execute the gesture of strength. Children imitate grown-ups, perhaps even the virtuosi who have been swelling up their Lisits. It sounds tremendously difficult and at all events very loud. But it is comfortably easy to play: the child knows that the colossal effect cannot mature and that he is assured in advance of a triumph that has been achieved without effort. The Prelude preserves this triumph for infantile adults. It owes its popularity to listeners who identify with the performer. They know they could do it just as well. As they marvel at the power which forces the four-stave system into a fourfold fortress, they marvel at themselves. In their mind’s eye they see their lion’s paws growing. Psychoanalysts have discovered the Nero complex. The Prelude gratifies this from the outset. It allows the megalomaniac free play, without pinning him down to anything definite. No one can blame the thundering chords for turning the dilettante who churns them out so immaculately into a conqueror of the world. Risk and security are fused in one of the boldest instances of musical daydreaming ever created.

The excitement rises to fever-pitch if, as a bonus, the piece is played in a three-quarters darkened hall. The somber mood of destruction which the Slav idiom of the piece simultaneously threatens and glorifies, awakens in every listener the certainty that in the foreboding gloom he too could easily smash the piano to pieces. He is assisted in this not just by the conjunction of heavy artillery and easy playability, but by the design of the entire colossal bagatelle. Almost all total music, especially that of the pre-Classical era, provides the contemporary amateur with the opportunity to make his own gesture of power in the final cadence. This is an affirmative statement which says: so be it. It is an affirmation as such, whatever has gone before. Hence the ritardando. Its function is to underline and its strength enables the performer to measure his own by exalting himself and raving in his own impiety. Even if this gestural meaning of the final cadence may only date from the Romantic movement, it can be said that in the course of its post-Romantic debasement Rachmaninov emptied it of all content, freed it of every genuine musical event and threw it on to the market as a commodity.

The Prelude is just one long final cadence; it could be described as a single, long, insatiable, repetitive ritardando. It parodies the passacaglia progressions by taking three cadence-forming bass notes which can conclude the theme of a passacaglia, and presents them, as it were, as a passacaglia theme. Repetition insists on the point of ruthless self-advertisement. The phrases are so short-ended that even the most insensitive ear can scarcely go wrong. Moreover, the motif-forming melodic counter-voice merely paraphrases the cadence. All the music does say is: so be it. The fact that we don’t know what is to be is what constitutes the essence of its Russian mysticism.

In the middle it breaks into a run with a heap series of triplets and creates the illusion of finiteness, the illusion of virtuosity. But in vain. It is only the motive counter-voice. Fate remains late and insists that things are so and not otherwise. And when at the end it explodes with all the primal force of conventionality, it can be assured of the gratitude of all those who have always known this and could see it coming.
Example 2. Measures 1–14

Rachmaninov: I endeavor to arrest attention by the opening theme. These three notes, proclaimed in unison in treble and bass, should boom solemnly and portentously. ...The nature of the principal theme is that of a massive foundation against which the melody in the chords furnishes a contrast to lighten up the gloom.

Example 3. Voice-leading reduction of measures 1–14, Lento

Adorno: The Prelude is just one long final cadence; ... It parodies the passacaglia progressions by taking three cadence-forming bass notes which can conclude the theme of a passacaglia, and presents them, as it were, as a passacaglia theme. ... it can be said that in the course of its post-Romantic debasement Rachmaninov emptied it of all content, freed it of every genuine musical event and threw it on to the market as a commodity.

Example 4. Measures 1–4

Rachmaninov: After this introduction the three-note melody runs through the first section of twelve bars, and counter to it, in both clefs, runs a contrasted melody in chords. Here we have two distinct melodic movements working against each other, and the effect is to arrest the attention of the listener.

Adorno: The phrases are so short-winded that even the most insensitive ear can scarcely go wrong. Moreover, the motif-forming melodic counter-voice merely paraphrases the cadence. All the music does say is: so be it.
Example 5. Measures 14–16

Rachmaninov: ...a middle movement intervenes quickly. The change of mood is abrupt, and for twenty-nine bars the music sweeps along like a rising storm, gaining in intensity as the melody mounts upward.

Adorno: In the middle it breaks into a run with a cheap series of triplets and creates the illusion of fluent virtuosity. But in vain. It is only the motivic counter-voice. Fate remains fate and insists that things are so and not otherwise.

Example 6. Voice-leading reduction of measures 14–26, Agitato

Example 7. Voice-leading reduction of measures 27–42, Agitato
Example 8. Measures 43–47

Rachmaninov: …at the climax the original movement reenters with everything doubled in both the right and left hand…call[ing] for all the force the player is capable of.

Video 1. Measures 1–2.
Performed by Emmanuelle Swiercz (2010)

Example 9a. Interlocked octaves in measures 2–3

Example 9b. Measures 2–3 rescored in parallel sonorities

Adorno: And when at the end it explodes with all the primal force of conventionality, it can be assured of the gratitude of all those who have always known this and could see it coming.
Example 9c. Measures 2–3 revoiced for the “average size hand”

Video 2a. (Cheek 2011)

Video 2b. (Cheek 2011)

Example 10a. Triplet passage of measures 35.3–42

Example 10b. Two-voice reduction of 4-beat motive and its liquidation

Video 3. Measures 35.3–49.1.
Performed by Katsura Mizumoto (2008)