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4-12-2024

# Making the Piano Sing: Focal Impulses in The Russian Piano Performing Tradition

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Repository citation: Triezenberg, Anna, "Making the Piano Sing: Focal Impulses in The Russian Piano Performing Tradition" (2024). *23rd Annual A. Paul and Carol C. Schaap Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity (2024)*. Paper 83.

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# Making the Piano Sing: Focal Impulses in The Russian Piano Performing Tradition

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## Rachmaninov, “Lilacs”

As performed by:  
Sergei Rachmaninov



As performed by:  
Nikolai Lugansky



As performed by:  
Sergei Babayan



## Topic

The Russian tradition of piano performance – known as the “Russian school” – is well known for its unique execution of the greatest illusion in the piano’s capabilities: to sound like a singing human voice. Called the “cantabile tone”, this is often achieved in repertoire composed with long-breathed phrases, transcending the piano’s percussive qualities.

## Question

How does one create a long-breathed vocal quality within a melodic phrase at the piano?

## Methodology

Emulate and embody performances by famous Russian pianists at your own piano. Use focal impulse theory to analyze how long phrases are articulated.

## Results

Through our own recordings/videos that reproduce the selected performances by Russian pianists, we show that fewer focal impulses are better than more when building the architecture of the “cantabile line.” Performers articulate them quite differently, even when playing the same piece, showing that the score does not necessarily prescribe a single path for creating a sung phrase at the piano.

## Sources

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Lugansky, Nikolai. 2020. <https://m.facebook.com/1596721260377523/videos/1159499904412687/>  
Nikolayeva, Tatiana. 2005. “Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1” *Berlin Classics* 0782124213428.  
Rachmaninov, Sergei. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da724lbAqk>

## Tchaikovsky, Piano Concerto No. 1, II. Andantino semplice

As performed by: Anna Fedorova



As performed by: Tatiana Nikolayeva

