

In every harmonic minor scale is embedded another minor chord: take, for example, D harmonic minor:

The 3 notes can be heard as the chord of i.e. Bb minor.

Similarly, if we take the scale of Bb harmonic minor:

the 3 notes can be heard as the chord of i.e. F# minor.

If we take the scale of F# harmonic minor:

the 3 notes can be heard as the chord of i.e. D minor.

Thus we have "come full circle!"

This gives rise to other possibilities. For example, the diminished 7th can be used as a "pivot" chord — changing C# enharmonically to Db:

D minor \rightarrow dim. 7th \rightarrow Bb minor

TONAL AMBIGUITY
[This sense of tonal ambiguity was known to J.S. Bach]

See bars 20-21 of the Fantasia from the Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, BWV 542: the sudden change of key (via the diminished 7th) to Eb minor does not lose its powerful effect with repeated hearings (now after 270 years since it was written):

Starting in Bb minor:

Bb minor \rightarrow Diminished 7th \rightarrow F# minor
- all the same chord!

Basic harmonic change: (=)

Starting in F# minor:

F# minor \rightarrow Diminished 7th \rightarrow D minor

I was perhaps not consciously aware of the possibilities of this tonal ambiguity when the first melodic idea of the Study in D minor occurred to me in 1967 - watching the autumn storms sweeping in over Lough Erne from the Atlantic:*

(2)

Ex. 1

(or

But I soon became aware that although the notes were being played separately, the music could be heard as

the notes of the chord of Bb minor.

I soon became aware that there was another idea struggling to break free - based on the white notes from D to D (the Dorian mode):

Ex. 2

(In A minor)

Another idea, slightly "bitter-sweet" - built upwards from the ascending melodic minor scale - downwards from the harmonic minor scale

Ex. 3

Another idea - perhaps with a sub-conscious recollection of Bach's Fugue in E minor for organ (BWV 548) (?):

Ex. 4

Ex. 1 reappears - starting on Bb:

Ex. 5

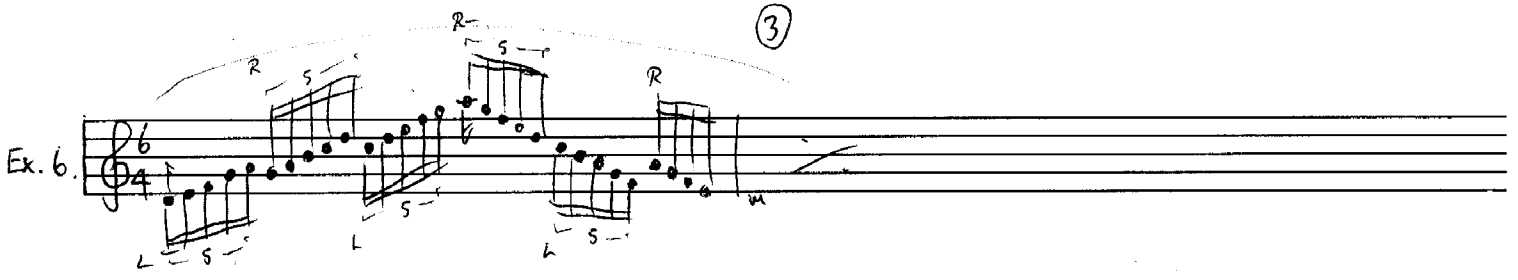
etc.

Then the music gets faster: the Dorian mode of Ex. 2 becomes a whirl, and breaks free.

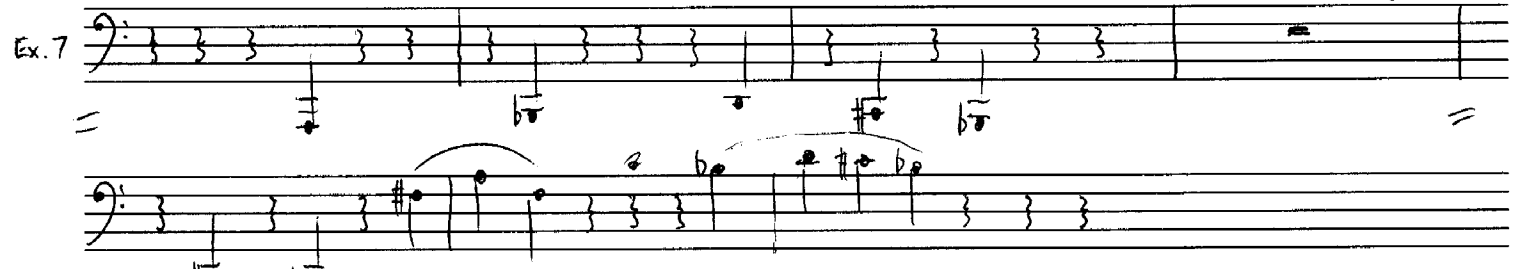
L.H. wavy line

E D F D# E D

* I was teaching at Portora Royal School at the time.

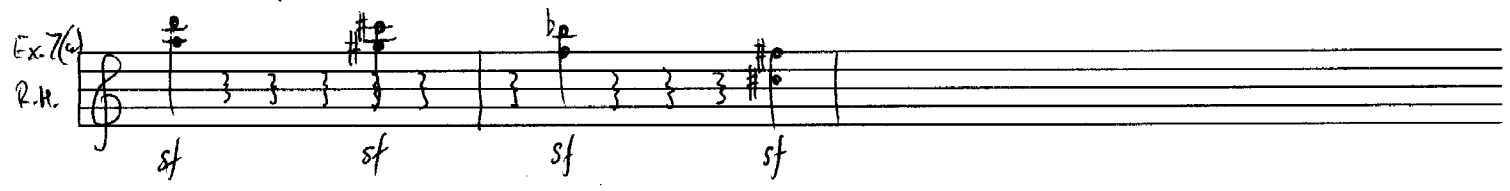
Ex. 6. 

Below this representation of force-9 south-westerly, a new idea emerges fragmentarily, in L.H. — the gaps are deliberately irregular:

Ex. 7 


This is the conflict joined between R.H. (Dorian mode) & L.H. (D harmonic minor); then the (with a glint of D major)

two hands swap round, with L.H. having the Dorian & R.H. the harmonic minor, in fourths:


Ex. 7(a) 

One more idea, derived from Ex. 7 & 7(a):

— then we return to the conflict between Ex. 6 & 7 & 7(a).

Ex. 8. 

After Ex. 8 re-appears, followed by the bitter-sweet Ex. 3, there is a hint of a new melodic idea amidst the wavy lines :-

Ex. 9. 

— before the music seems to die away.

But it breaks out, with Ex. 6 expanding over nearly 3 octaves, like a great wave. Then the music moves to a

kind of F major, like a sudden burst of sunlight, and we hear Ex. 9 apparently in a clear F major (though there is a low E flat lurking some octaves below — threatening to fall to D flat (can we hear this as C sharp?))

D-C# bursts forth, and soon Ex. 1 thunders ~~for~~ out in the bass below Bb-C# in R.H. - then a Dorian whiff in R.H. above the C# Bb in L.H. We are back to D minor with a vengeance. There are five successive bars completely round the scale of D harmonic minor, before the bitter-sweet Ex. 3 strides up in L.H. The shrill climax (marked *fff* possibly *strepitoso*) is all about the discrepancy between D harmonic minor (Bb-C#) & the Dorian mode (C-B) - the Right hand soon descends to D-E, proving that ^{L.H.} harmonic minor has won. The double trill (D v. C#, E v. Bb) becomes an iron alternation, subsiding on the E-versus-Bb

Below a rocking figure in R.H. (*Molto più tranquillo*), we least Ex. 7 in L.H., now in more regular melodic form:

Ex. 12

etc.

Ex. 7 reappears in Bb minor (see my comments on tonal ambiguity; R.H. of Ex. 12 could be written [↑])

+ 8ths

Perhaps I have gone into this in too much detail (the piece lasts only 12 minutes - or maybe less!). What happens after this is largely a re-working of what has gone before: we hear the bitter-sweet Ex. 3 in F# minor

with F D at the top - this works itself into a melodic fragment expanding*:

Ex. 13

FEDEC D

We hear Ex. 4, or at least C#-D# & C#-G#, with Ex 1 starting on Bb

There are more Dorian whiffs in R.H. (all white notes) while a new figure (derived from Ex. 7) leaps up in L.H.; eventually this passes to R.H.:

Ex. 14

F-E-D-E-C-D

* Those who care to see a sub-conscious reference to the Dies Irae (F-E-[F]-D-E-C-D) are at liberty to do so. Rachmaninoff never made any secret of his references to it - why should I (!?)

This is written in semibreves: what was the fragmentary Ex. 7 is now re-shaped

into a 2/4 figure
-time

Above this, a rising wavy line goes up D minor; D-C#-D then E-F then G#-A.

The Left Hand proves that in its end is the beginning. ^{Ex. 1} It has the last word -

- a desolate D minor.

No apology is made for the fact that this work was inspired by two other works in D minor:

(a) Brahms's 1st Piano Concerto (also written when the composer was in his ^{about 1858} 20's), and particularly the first movement, which is in 2/4 time; and Sibelius's 6th Symphony, much of which is in the Dorian mode. Both composers work (and re-work) their melodic material very thoroughly. The Brahms might seem to have a tendency to say "here & there" (some people might say that that is true of the Study in D minor as well!), but it has plenty of Sturm und Drang nevertheless; the Sibelius has a bleak ending in D minor at the end of the finale (all four movements end in a minor key), but it has many very beautiful passages in it; and it proves, in spite of its date (1922-23), that there is still much to be said (musically speaking) in major and minor keys.

(Written later, October 1995: I shall never have any regrets about having written this piece. Apart from its obvious references to Nature "red in tooth and claw", it accords perfectly with my pessimistic outlook on life - not to mention ~~and~~ a general disillusionment with the human race (of which I happen to be a member), which (if anything) increases as the years go by.