

Soundtrack to a Love Story: The Use of
Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto
In the Film *Brief Encounter*

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Classic FM, an independent radio station in the United Kingdom, has held a poll each Easter weekend since 1996 where listeners can vote on the top 300 most popular works of classical music. In 2013, Sergei Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor* filled the number-one spot for the third year in a row. However, when BBC News first published an online article about this in April 2011, the headline did not mention the composition's actual title. Instead, it referred to the concerto as the "Brief Encounter theme"¹. Rather than being known as a concerto by Rachmaninov, many listeners in the United Kingdom recognize the music as the score prominently used in the classic British motion picture *Brief Encounter* (1945). How is it that so many listeners associate the music with this film rather than as arguably Rachmaninov's most celebrated work? To determine the reason, listeners must critically analyze the concerto and the film together to find a unifying emotion through recurring themes. This analysis will do just that, examining each movement and where excerpts from those movements appear in the film.

That analysis must begin, however, with background information on both works. Today, Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto is considered one of the finest musical compositions of the late romantic period, as well as, according to the poll mentioned earlier, one of the most popular pieces of "classical music" around the world. However, the circumstances preceding the creation of this work gave no indication that this concerto would ever be successful at all. At the close of the nineteenth century, Rachmaninov was enjoying the success of his *Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1*. All around Moscow, composers and patrons were eager to be involved in Rachmaninov's work, including one philanthropist named Mitrofan Belyayev, who helped finance the "Russian Symphony Concerts" in St. Petersburg, where one of Rachmaninov's tone poems had recently been performed. When Belyayev heard that the young

¹ "Brief Encounter theme tops Classic FM poll". *BBC News*. BBC, 25 April 2011. Web. 2 February 2013.

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composer had written his first full symphony, Belyayev agreed to program his work for the event, and in 1897, *Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13*, premiered in St. Petersburg.²

The result: a failure. The symphony is regarded today as a fine composition, but for various reasons, many critics immediately rejected it. It was a huge disappointment for Rachmaninov especially, who would later recount his frustration about the orchestra, which struggled heavily due to limited rehearsal time. But he could not help but admit that the music itself was poorly written³. In the years that followed, he constantly went back and forth between public performance and seclusion in his home in Russia.

Rachmaninov even experimented with therapy by hypnosis, going to a practicing “doctor” in Moscow consistently for three months in 1900 at the advice of some friends. Eventually, Rachmaninov discussed with the hypnotist his desire to write another piano concerto, which the doctor encouraged him to complete—through his therapy, of course⁴. To the surprise of Rachmaninov and his colleagues, the therapy worked, and within months he had started work on his Second Piano Concerto. By the fall of 1900, he had written the first two movements, and by 1902, not only had the work been completed, performed, and met with huge success, but he had also regained his courage to write other smaller but still successful works, ranging from his *Suite No. 2, Op. 17*, to his *Cello Sonata, Op. 19*, to his *Twelve Songs, Op. 21*.

As the decades went by, Rachmaninov’s music only grew in popularity throughout the world, and the Second Piano Concerto was about to find an even larger audience near the end of World War Two. Around this time, David Lean was beginning a career in the British motion picture industry, learning the art of filmmaking through editing for many well-recognized directors, notably including Michael Powell with his films *49th Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our*

² Oskar von Rieseemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1934, 1970), 97.

³ Rieseemann, 98.

⁴ Rieseemann, 112.

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Aircraft Is Missing (1942)⁵. In the early 1940's, Lean began to collaborate with British playwright Noël Coward on bringing several of his stage plays to the cinema, including *In Which We Serve* (1942), *This Happy Breed* (1944), and *Blithe Spirit* (1945). Lean gradually got more and more control as a director with each progressing film, but it was his next collaboration with Coward that truly set his career in motion. Transforming Coward's one-act play, *Still Life*, into a feature-length screenplay, Lean created *Brief Encounter*, which, in a rare feat, features not an original musical score but instead excerpts from Rachmaninov's Second Concerto used throughout the film—a decision that most audiences and critics actually praised.

Brief Encounter was not the only film at that time to use classical music rather than an original score. Many other films in that era might have used Romantic or post-Romantic music, from Chopin to Rachmaninov, to match the extravagant emotions on-screen⁶. However, the specific reason for why the filmmakers chose to feature Rachmaninov's work is rather unclear. The short answer is that the concerto was Noël Coward's favorite piece of music. This was a frustrating decision for the film's original composer, Muir Mathieson, known today primarily as the conductor of dozens of other film scores, including that of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). When Mathieson complained to Coward that he wanted to write a score himself, Coward insisted that the Rachmaninov piece was part of the character's life and that it needed to be in the film. Mathieson, who eventually wrote very brief additional music for the film, gave in only if the music was indeed part of the character's life—the lead

⁵ "David Lean," *The Internet Movie Database*, The Internet Movie Database, Inc.; <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000180/>

⁶ Charles and Mirella Jona Affron, *Best Years: Going to the Movies, 1945-1946* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 256.

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character would have to go to her radio and turn on the music herself⁷. Whatever the intention was behind the music's inclusion, the film's emotional level reaches a new height because of it.

The first minute of the first movement plays over the film's opening titles which, shown below in example one, are superimposed over a train station, a setting which becomes much more significant as the film progresses. The opening eight measures, also shown below, give a solemn start to what is about to become a wild first movement, the piano chords resembling the tolling of a bell, getting louder and louder with each stroke⁸. When Rachmaninov performed the piece himself, he would sound the bottom note of the chord first. Many others have taken that same approach of building the chord, among them Eileen Joyce, who recorded the concerto with the National Symphony Orchestra in Britain for *Brief Encounter*.

Example 1: Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 1, first eight bars and downbeat of mm. nine⁹, with still from *Brief Encounter*¹⁰

The image displays a musical score for the piano part of the first movement of Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 2, mvt. 1. The score is in C minor, 2/4 time, and is marked 'Moderato' with a tempo of quarter note = 66. The first eight bars are marked 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'poco a poco cresc.' (poco a poco crescendo). The ninth bar is marked 'rit.' (ritardando) and 'a tempo con passione' (a tempo con passione). The score is written for piano, with a treble clef and a bass clef. To the right of the score is a film still from 'Brief Encounter' showing a woman in a dark setting, with the title 'NOEL COWARD'S BRIEF ENCOUNTER' and 'A NOEL COWARD - CINEGUILD PRODUCTION' overlaid.

After the introduction, the piano finally goes into C minor, soon joined by the strings, clarinets, and bassoons with the first of many well-known melodies. After brief modulations, a solo piano line, and a transition into *un poco più mosso* tempo, the full orchestra suddenly sounds a loud E flat major chord before the clarinets and violas carry a brief melody in the beginning tempo. The piano follows with what has been called the most famous melody in the concerto.

Rachmaninov repeats this second subject in various forms throughout the work. In its first use, it is a piano solo in E flat major, which other sections slowly build upon until the piano

⁷ Frank Miller, "Behind the Camera on *Brief Encounter*," *Turner Classic Movies*. Turner Entertainment Networks, Inc.; <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/69696/Brief-Encounter/articles.html#04>

⁸ Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (England: Scholar Press, 1990), 126.

⁹ Sergei Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra in C minor, Op. 18*, orchestra score (Boca Raton: Edwin F. Kalmus & Co, Inc., 1901), 1.

¹⁰ Coward, N. (Producer) and Lean, D. (Director). *Brief Encounter* [film]. London: Eagle-Lion Distributors Limited, 1945. Still from film at 00:24.

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starts an ascending line of eighth notes in E flat, as shown below. As the piano goes higher and higher in its register, the dynamic gets softer overall, and suddenly, the orchestra returns to the quicker second tempo, descending in range and dynamic even with quicker note values, including the violins and violas with triplets against the piano's sixteenth notes.

Example 2: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 1, nine bars after rehearsal Six¹¹, with still from film¹²

The image displays a musical score for the piano part of Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 2, first movement. The score is written in E-flat major and common time (C). It features a complex texture with triplets and sixteenth notes. The dynamic markings include *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *dim.* (diminuendo). A tempo change is indicated by a dashed line labeled '8^{va}' above the staff. To the right of the score is a black and white film still showing a man and a woman in a close embrace, looking at each other.

Aside from the music in the opening credits, this is the first prominent excerpt from the concerto to be featured in *Brief Encounter*, and it sets up a recurring idea of repeated melodies and ideas. The film is told in flashback, as the lead character of Laura (Celia Johnson) sits in her living room with her husband staring into space, listening to the Second Concerto on her radio and thinking about her time with another man, Alec (Trevor Howard). Laura sits remembering the day they met, at a café by a train station, shown above. When a piece of grit gets in her eye, Alec, a doctor, removes it, and a bond starts between them. She narrates as she remembers: “I completely forgot the whole incident. It didn’t mean anything to me at all. At least I didn’t think it did.”¹³ However, the audience learns her true feelings later on in the film, as we hear this same section of the movement again but underneath Laura and Alec’s date in a park, a date where they eventually confess their love for one another. This is a trait that the concerto and the film immediately share: the repetition of a musical theme, or even an entire excerpt. Honoring the Wagnerian *leitmotiv* idea from the late-nineteenth century, Rachmaninov uses recurring themes and alters them slightly when repeated to transform the emotion. The film even takes this a step further as the themes accompany the early and then later stages of Laura and Alec’s relationship.

¹¹ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 15-16.

¹² Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 18:06.

¹³ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 18:25.

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The movement goes on to a *moto precedente* tempo, finally returning to tonic, though it begins with a rather unsettling C major chord, with a quiet B flat in the violins. In *Brief Encounter*, this theme appears about halfway through the film, as Laura starts going so far into her relationship with Alec as to lie to her husband about where she goes during the day. The excerpt in the film is cut short, but the movement goes on to a quicker, *piú vivo* tempo with modulations to G and B flat major. The full orchestra ascends clearly into G major before finally landing in *fortissimo* at a *maestoso alla marcia* tempo, in the original tonic of C minor. The orchestra transitions into this new tempo so smoothly that the listener may not even realize at first that the recapitulation is reached—and yet, although the piano is pounding out a slightly different tune, the piece has indeed reached its capitulation following this climax¹⁴.

Example 3: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 1, 10 bars after rehearsal 10¹⁵, with still from film¹⁶

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef) in a 2/4 time signature. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score is marked with a piano dynamic (p) and includes various musical notations such as chords, eighth notes, and rests. A dashed line above the first few measures indicates an 8-measure phrase. To the right of the score is a black and white film still showing a man sitting on a sofa in a living room, looking towards the camera.

The film plays on this idea of the music building to tonic to full effect in a scene near the middle of the film. After Laura and Alec have declared their love to each other, both knowing that it is an illicit love, they kiss at the train station before departing for their homes. The music swells as they leave, and suddenly a voice calls out among the noise: “Do you think we might have that down a bit, darling? Hi, Laura!”¹⁷ Laura’s husband, shown above, interrupts her thoughts and turns down the radio, still playing the concerto. The film thus transports the viewer from this extended flashback to the original setting, the living room where Laura is remembering all of this, not unlike how the concerto here brings the listener back to its original themes.

¹⁴ John Culshaw, *Sergei Rachmaninov* (Great Britain: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1963), 81.

¹⁵ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 34.

¹⁶ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 46:01.

¹⁷ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 45:53.

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The movement continues as it moves into a *meno mosso* tempo, reaching a *ritardando* that leads to what sounds at first like a different theme, but is actually another repetition. A horn soloist sings the second theme from before at a *moderato* tempo, shown below, and it is a haunting contrast with the previous, much stronger dynamic of the pianist. The solo slowly becomes a duet with the bassoons, then the clarinets join, and soon most of the orchestra has joined in, before the piano starts carrying a new theme of eighth notes.

Example 4a: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 1, rehearsal 13¹⁸



The image shows a musical score for Horn in F. The notation is in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The melody consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a long slur over the first two phrases. Dynamics are marked as *p dolce*, *dim.*, and *pp*. There are also some performance markings like '<' and '>'.

Brief Encounter uses this section of the movement three times, stills from each scene shown below. The first scene takes place in the beginning of the film, in the first scene with actual music, as Laura sits and stares on the train home, her inner narration muttering angrily underneath. The music occurs again as Laura first turns on the radio after getting home and sits in her living room watching her husband solve a crossword puzzle, as her narration laments that she can never tell her husband about Alec. The film here associates this excerpt with Laura thinking about her past, her loneliness, and her guilt. The third scene to use this excerpt reinforces this idea, after Laura has called up her friend asking to help her lie to her husband.

Example 4b: stills from film¹⁹



¹⁸ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 40.

¹⁹ Coward and Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 07:15, 14:34, 52:14.

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The first movement then builds to a final C minor chord, and though the second movement begins in that very key, it provides a stark, mellow contrast from the surrounding movements. The orchestra builds to E major, which remains the primary tonic for the movement, and the strings fade away as the piano begins a slow run of eighth notes. A solo flute joins as the melody leads to a new three-two time signature, providing a contrast of two eighth notes against three, as the piano continues its sets of triplets. This is one of many examples in the concerto of Rachmaninov's improved orchestration since his First Symphony. Critics have noted that here, the composer does not allow empty musical techniques to replace the overall emotion²⁰.

Repetitions of the theme continue until the rest of the orchestra dies away, approaching *un poco piú animato* tempo. The piano, shown below, begins a high descending line into F sharp minor that modulates further, and as other sections join, the theme swells into an *allargando* before returning to *a tempo* and modulating once again to what becomes A minor.

Example 5: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 2, three bars before rehearsal 19²¹, with still from film²²

The image displays a musical score for the piano part of the second movement of Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 2. The score is written in treble and bass clefs, with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature (C). The piano part features a series of triplets in the right hand and a descending line in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *mf*. To the right of the score is a black and white film still showing a man and a woman in a train car, looking at each other.

Out of all three movements in the Second Concerto, *Brief Encounter* uses the second the least, but because its use is so sparse, its themes have an even greater impact. Entering the third act, Laura and Alec, now faced with the reality that they must end their relationship before it gets out of control, are torn with the idea of never seeing each other again. When Alec tells Laura that he has taken a job offer to work as a doctor far away, Laura knows that it is the right thing for him to do, but she is still devastated. Shown above, she boards her train home and Alec bids her

²⁰ Jonathan Yungkans, "The Second Piano Concerto", *The Flying Inkpot*, The Flying Inkpot Classical Music and Concert Reviews. <http://inkpot.com/classical/rachpfc2.html>.

²¹ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 52.

²² Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 74:35.

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farewell until they meet again the following Thursday for the last time, and the music swells as Laura's train starts moving out of the station. As she passes, looking solemnly at Alec as she grows farther and farther away from him, the piano's solo in its high register going into F sharp minor is distinctly heard, and the music continues softly underneath Laura's narration of the following Thursday. Because of the offsetting note pattern of two against three, the scene becomes perhaps even more unbearable emotionally: the characters are definitely in love, but many factors are keeping their relationship from flourishing.

The piano continues, eventually reaching a loud D flat major chord with the rest of the orchestra, and the piano has a brief cadenza ranging through several octaves before the violins take over the melody. After several modulations, the orchestra lands unexpectedly on an F major chord, and the piano follows with another cadenza, longer than the first but slightly more mellow in tone. The soloist ends in E major, joined by a brief line from the flutes before returning to the recapitulation in *adagio sostenuto* and to the original melodies used in the beginning of the movement, nearly identical to their previous use. The violins carry the melody in this repetition, although the melody takes a slightly different turn at the coda this time.

Example 6: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 2, four bars before rehearsal 26²³, with still from film²⁴



Later on in *Brief Encounter*, Laura finds herself in Alec's apartment but has to sneak out shortly before Alec's roommate returns. After Alec's roommate does return and confronts him, the film cuts to Laura running through the streets, trying to get back home. Juxtaposed with this cut is the piano's cadenza in D flat major, and the music continues under Laura's next narration.

²³ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 64.

²⁴ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 67:14.

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She phones home, lies to her husband the reason she will be home later, and, as shown above, starts her slow journey home. This scene comes almost right before Alec coming to the café and beginning to tell Laura that he must move far away, so this is the first time this melody is heard clearly in the film. The theme thus becomes associated at first with Laura's guilt, then with her realization that she and Alec will soon be separated after all, and then just a few minutes later as Laura narrates about going with Alec back through town for the last time. These are the only scenes in the film where any excerpt from the second movement is heard, save one.

That excerpt comes in the coda, as the entire orchestra enters clearly into E major, the left hand of the pianist playing sets of five sixteenth notes against triplets in the flutes and clarinets. However, the whole passage still feels very sublime despite the pattern of five against three, perhaps because for once, the orchestra has slowed down and remained nearly consistently in tonic. It is made even more sublime in the final bars, as the winds and strings end their phrasing in *pianissimo* and allow the pianist to conclude, getting slower and slower and remaining comfortably in the tonic, and creating ultimately a satisfying final chord. However, although this concludes the movement, it is actually used within the first few minutes of *Brief Encounter*.

Example 7: *Concerto No.2*, mvt. 2, rehearsal 27²⁵, with still from film²⁶



The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Flute and Clarinet in A. The score is written in E major (two sharps) and common time (C). The Flute part features a melodic line with triplets of eighth notes, starting with a dynamic marking of *p*. The Clarinet part provides a rhythmic accompaniment of triplets of eighth notes. To the right of the score is a black and white film still showing a woman (Laura) looking down with a somber expression.

In the beginning of the film, we meet Laura and Alec, although in the first scene we know absolutely nothing about them. A friend of Laura's sits down with them, uninvited but babbling on to Laura all the same, prompting Alec to leave the table without even saying goodbye to her. As her friend continues talking, Laura leaves the café briefly as a train comes

²⁵ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 66.

²⁶ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 08:45.

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into the station. Once the train passes, Laura returns into the café practically about to faint. Her friend joins her on the train home continuing to talk as Laura just sits there, not listening to her at all. As the train finally leaves, the coda builds underneath her inner narration:

This can't last. This misery can't last. I must remember that and try to control myself. Nothing lasts, really, neither happiness nor despair. Not even life lasts very long. There'll come a time in the future when I shan't mind about this anymore, when I can look back and say quite peacefully and cheerfully, 'How silly I was.' No, no, I don't want that time to come ever. I want to remember every minute, always, always to the end of my days...²⁷

Suddenly, the whistle blows as her train arrives at the station, and the music dies away.

Audiences may not immediately make the connection between this theme and that in the third act upon watching the film for the first time, but by connecting their similarities on a second or third viewing, audiences may feel even more emotionally impacted when comparing the two scenes.

The third movement begins in E major where the second movement leaves off, before beginning a strong C minor theme once again. In *Brief Encounter*, this theme is heard as Laura recalls the train home after confessing her love to Alec. Laura looks out the window, her inner narration accompanied by the new C minor theme, until the images of her and Alec suddenly appear out the window (through her imagination, of course). Other music, presumably written by Mathieson, plays faintly as Laura and Alec dance in a ballroom, go to the theater, and drive through the country together, until the train stops and Laura gets off, ending the music as well.

Example 8: *Concerto No 2.*, mvt. 3, rehearsal 28²⁸, with still from film²⁹



The image displays a musical score for Piano, marked *mf*, in 4/4 time. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff features a melodic line with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes) and a final double bar line. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment, also featuring triplet markings. To the right of the musical score is a small, dark, grainy film still showing a close-up of a person's face, likely Laura, looking out a window.

²⁷ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 09:23.

²⁸ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 72.

²⁹ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 47:57.

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After modulating over several bars, the piano quietly lands in B flat major, as the violas and solo oboe begin another famous melody from the movement that stays within the key, though with a few accidentals. The piano then repeats the theme, shown below, and the strings and clarinets gradually join in with long notes, in a *crescendo* that culminates in a *forte* E flat major chord, followed by a *decrescendo* where the strings and winds slowly drop out. The piano continues into a *ritardando* that transforms into the next tempo change.

Example 9: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 3, rehearsal 31³⁰, with stills from film³¹

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system shows the beginning of the excerpt, with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat major). The second system continues the piece. To the right of the score are two black and white film stills. The first still shows a woman in a dark coat and hat looking at a man in profile. The second still shows a man and a woman embracing outdoors in a wooded area.

The film uses this excerpt twice, and its use in these two scenes, one early on in the film and the other near the third act, emphasizes the change that occurs in the characters' relationship over the course of those few weeks. The first takes place on their first day together, after Alec sees her coincidentally at a restaurant and sits down with her to lunch. The two of them spend the whole Thursday together before ending at the café by the train station again for coffee, as Alec tells Laura about his sense of duty as a doctor. As he describes his practice to her, she cannot help but feel entranced. "You suddenly look much younger," she tells him. "Almost like a little boy."³² Alec tries to go on, but he too starts becoming entranced in Laura. The music plays underneath their slow conversation before another excerpt from the movement begins.

The second scene to use this excerpt comes much later in the film, and it is now accompanied by Laura's guilt and uncertainty that has come from her relationship with Alec.

³⁰ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 78.

³¹ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 28:52, 56:19.

³² Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 28:47.

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After going with him to lunch one day, she suddenly runs into some friends, and Laura has certainly not told them who Alec is and what she is doing there with him. The couple pretend to be just friends, but after Laura's girlfriends leave, she feels remorse for having to lie to them. Alec drives her to a nearby bridge, where they spend some more time together, and Laura admits that even though she is not really happy, her feelings for him are as true as his feelings for her. They kiss and embrace as the music swells to the large E flat major chord, before the scene dissolves to later that night and the music fades out.

The movement goes on for some time, with the piano leading the rest of the orchestra in several dynamic changes and key modulations. The entire orchestra swells at one point to a *fortissimo* at *più vivo* tempo. Sudden cymbal crashes join the theme for several measures on beats two and four, resulting in a syncopated intensity. The piano then comes back in on its own, at a new *meno mosso* tempo, gradually slowing down and ending softly in D flat major. Just as this melody was earlier heard from one section and repeated by the piano, the repetition here is similar, as the piano carries the melody following the strings and winds, accompanied this time briefly by the clarinets rather than bassoons.

Example 10a: *Concerto No. 2*, mvt. 3, 16 measures before rehearsal 37³³

The image shows a musical score for two violins. The top staff is labeled 'Violin 1' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Violin 2'. Both staves are in the key of E-flat major (three flats) and common time (C). The Violin 1 part begins with a dynamic marking of *mf* and the instruction *espress.* The Violin 2 part begins with a dynamic marking of *p*. The score consists of 16 measures. The Violin 1 part features a melodic line with various ornaments and dynamics, while the Violin 2 part provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The music concludes with a final cadence in D-flat major.

Two additional scenes feature this excerpt as well, the repetition providing an even stronger contrast between Laura's emotions in the beginning and end of the film. In the earlier scene of Laura and Alec's first date at the café, the excerpt from earlier in the movement is followed suddenly by this one, as the two of them promise to meet the following Thursday for lunch

³³ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 97.

again. As he boards his train and waves to her as he leaves the station, Laura waves back, as shown below left, before her own train arrives and noisily interrupts her inner monologue:

I stood there and watched his train go out of the station. I imagined him getting out... letting himself into his house with his latchkey. His wife Madeleine would probably be in the hall to meet him. ...I wondered if he'd say, 'I met such a nice woman at the Kardomah. We had lunch and went to the pictures.' Then suddenly, I knew that he wouldn't. ...And at that moment, the first awful feeling of danger swept over me.³⁴

Example 10b: stills from film³⁵



The film repeats the excerpt once more in its last few minutes, as shown above right. After Alec has left her alone in the café, Laura suddenly runs out and almost jumps in front of an oncoming train; however, she stops. She narrates that she really wanted to do it, but the thought of her husband and children kept her from it. The music begins as she walks back into the café when suddenly the film cuts to the living room presently, where Laura is sitting still, looking into nothing, as her husband has stopped his crossword puzzle and goes to her to comfort her. The use of this excerpt in these two contrasting scenes seems strange, as the two scenes seem at first quite different in tone. But some critics have noted that in a way, this is a “happy ending” after all, as Laura holds herself back from defeat by keeping her devotion to her family³⁶. In this sense, the use of this final repetition makes perfect sense to use in the scene. Here, as the music

³⁴ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 31:45.

³⁵ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 30:47, 80:05.

³⁶ Gene D. Phillips, *Major Film Directors of the American and British Cinema* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 180-181.

feels less overpowering than in the earlier scenes, it reflects the calmness that Laura begins to feel as she comes to terms with her present life, a life that is now free from fear.

The tempo changes eventually to another *allegro scherzando*, led by short, articulated phrases that continue until the piano gets louder and louder, faster and faster until it reaches a *forte*, with constant octaves of A in triplets. The second act of the film features this excerpt briefly, when Laura tries to find Alec on the train platform but he is not there. He finally runs up to meet her, just in time to catch his train, as the music rises to intensify Laura's emotion, feeling "panic-stricken at the thought of not seeing him again."³⁷ The music dies away as she waves goodbye to Alec in relief that she was able to see him—although looking back on this event, Laura might wonder how much better off she would be if she had not seen Alec that day after all.

Entering a *fortissimo alla breve agitato*, the orchestra is now carrying a melody that modulates to C major and G major. Eventually, the orchestra ends at a fermata where the piano performs a thrilling cadenza in G major, preparing for the final modulation into C major. The next *maestoso* tempo brings in the entire orchestra now in the new key, the main melody of the movement being led by the flutes, oboes, and all strings but the basses. (This briefly concludes *Brief Encounter*, although the film ends finally on a long note in the tonic, while the original piece continues on.) This melody continues on through its entirety until the next tempo, *più vivo*, shortly becoming a slightly faster *risoluto* that remains consistently in C major until the final chords, a C played in octaves throughout the full orchestra (with the exception of the flutes, possibly to give the chords a deeper sound). With those accented notes, the concerto ends³⁸.

In his Second Concerto, Sergei Rachmaninov created what many consider to be his crowning achievement. Almost immediately, listeners identified the confidence of the concerto as that of Rachmaninov himself, coming out of his depression after the failure of the First

³⁷ Coward & Lean, *Brief Encounter*, 38:47.

³⁸ Rachmaninov, *Concerto No. 2*, 116.

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Symphony. Compared to this work, the structure in the Second Concerto is an incredible improvement. The orchestra has an equal role to the pianist. The repetitions of passages are not so overdone that it loses momentum or becomes caught up in itself. When the piano does reach those passages where it shines, specifically the cadenzas, it remains under control, never self-indulgent, and yet extremely powerful in its lyricism. For more than a century, the work has proclaimed Sergei Rachmaninov as one of the great Russian lyricists—and forty years after its premiere, the concerto and its emotive passages gave life to *Brief Encounter* and made the film an instant classic, setting the stage for Lean to create some of British cinema's finest work, from Charles Dickens adaptations *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948) to grand historical epics *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).

However, even though the film's use of the concerto has gotten mostly positive critical acclaim, its constant use throughout the film still receives some criticism from viewers who believe that using classical music in film is a shortcut to adding to the emotion on screen. Joe Queenan writes about this humorously, citing *Brief Encounter* as one of the rare instances where an entire film uses preexisting music throughout. "The truth is, it is not guilt or self-loathing or even a desire to salvage what remains of his self-respect that motivates [Alec] to flee Albion. It is the burning desire to escape the strains of Rachmaninov's hammy Second Piano Concerto forever."³⁹ Queenan later admits, however, that even though "purists" complain about the constant use of classical music in film, particularly compositions used too often, motion pictures have certainly helped classical music stay in public consciousness every once in a while. Filmmakers ranging in style from Ingmar Bergman to Stanley Kubrick to Martin Scorsese have used classical music to not only give the stories in their films deeper meaning, but also to breathe new life into music that present generations may not otherwise get to hear.

³⁹ Joe Queenan, "Hey, there's an orchestra up here!" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/oct/05/classicalmusicandopera.joequeenan>

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Brief Encounter has certainly done that for the Second Concerto, particularly in the United Kingdom. When *Classic FM* ranked the piece once again at number one on its poll, the site acknowledged “glorious melody after glorious melody [flowing] from the keyboard”⁴⁰ that makes the piece so celebrated. Even a century after the Concerto’s premiere, and several decades after the film’s, both works have become so synonymous with each other that audiences cannot help but think of them as one outstanding work of art.

⁴⁰ “Hall of Fame 2013: Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor”, *Classic FM*, This is Global Limited; <http://halloffame.classicfm.com/2013/chart/position/1/>

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