Rachmaninoff's Subdominant

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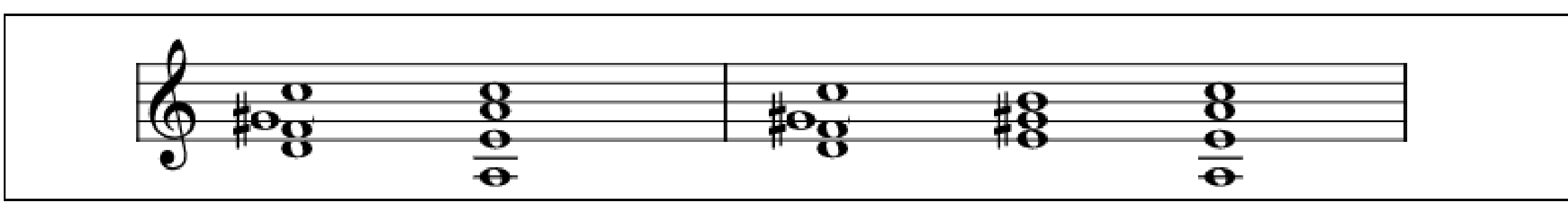
Ellen Bakulina, PhD

University of North Texas

Ellen.Bakulina@unt.edu

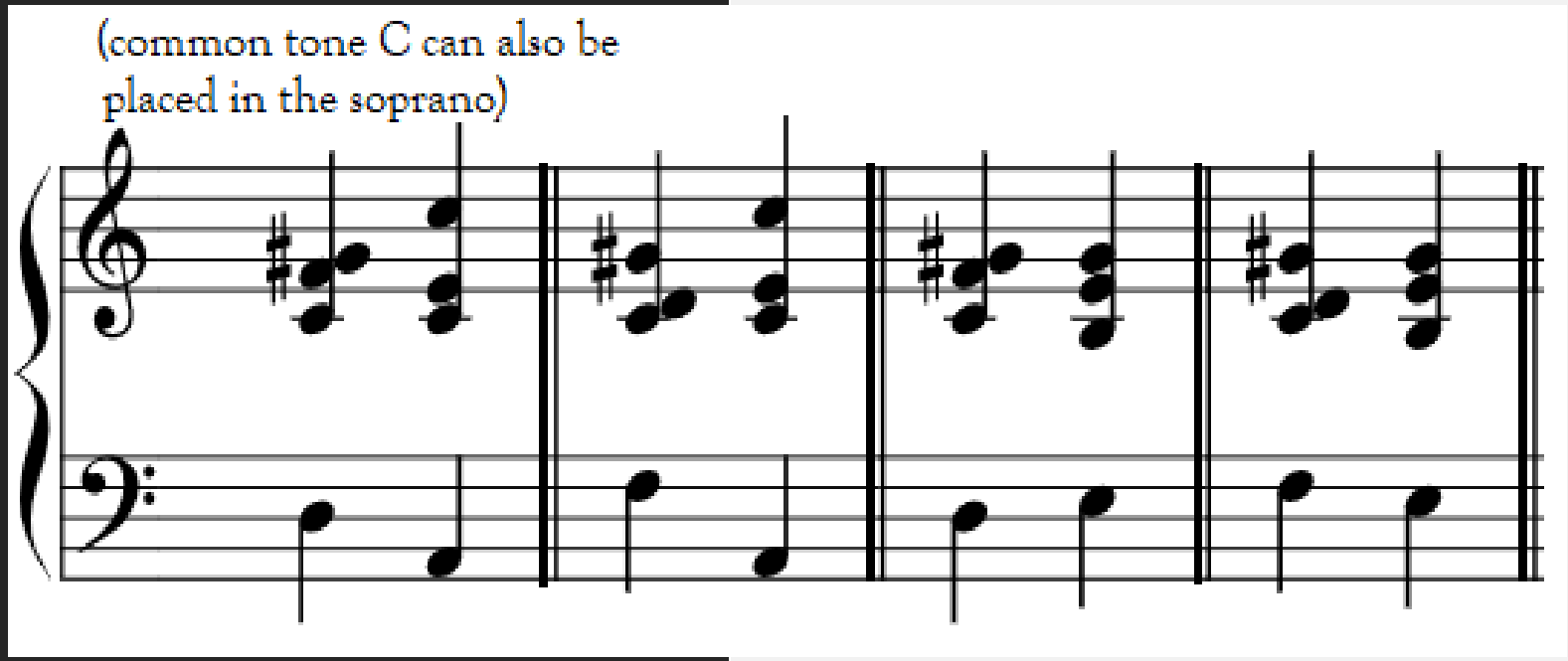
Rachmaninoff’s harmony (Рахманиновская гармония), later renamed “Rachmaninoff’s subdominant,” as described by Viktor Berkov (1960)



Goals:

1. Contextualize Rachmaninoff's chord in modern theories of harmonic function as a functionally mixed harmony
2. Show the chord's role on larger levels of structure
3. Relate the chord to tonal pairing and broad-scale plagalism

Rachmaninoff’s subdominant resolving to I and to V: some common contrapuntal options



Part 1: Some modern theories of harmonic function

Daniel Harrison (1994):

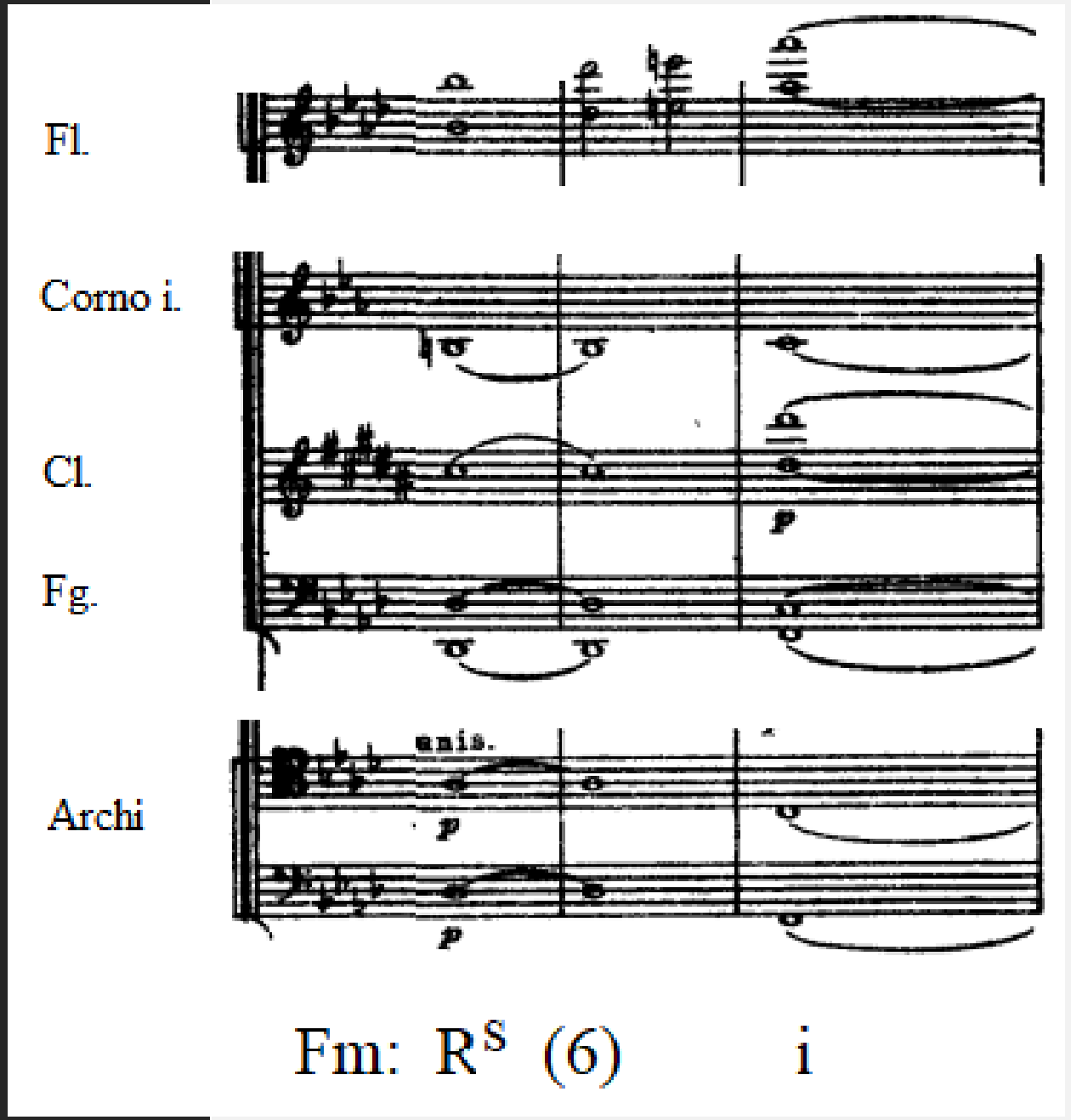
- Scale degrees are understood as bearers of harmonic function
- Root = functional base; third = functional agent; fifth = functional associate
- Functional agents: chordal thirds of the three central triads (T, S, D)

  tonic agent: 3/^{b}3 (*mi/me*); dominant agent: 7/$^{\#}$7 (*ti*); subdominant agent: ^{b}6 (*le*)

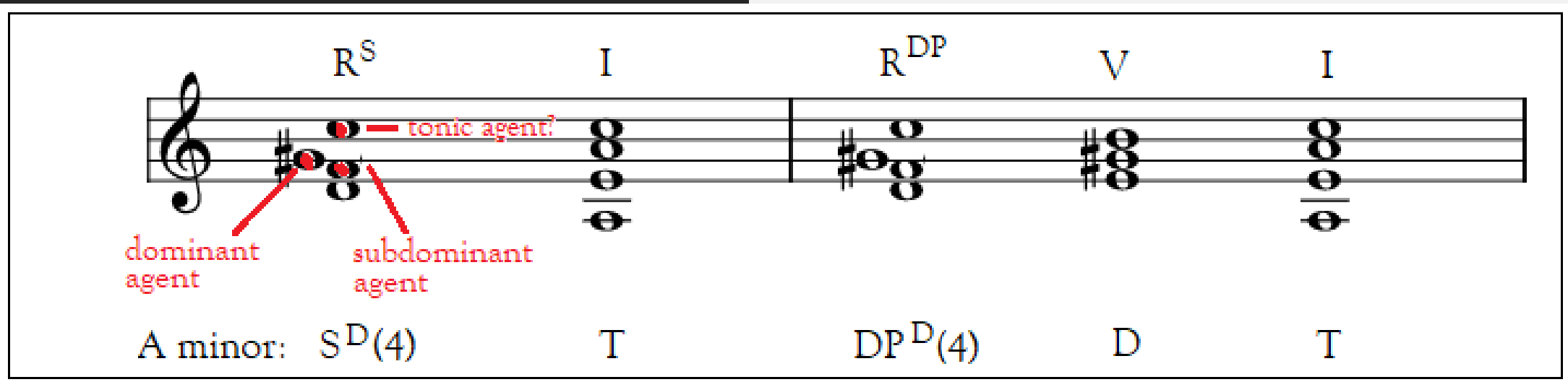
Kevin Swinden (2005):

- S^{D}: subdominant chord with a dominant element (e.g., dominant agent)
- DP^{D}: dominant-reparation chord with a dominant element
- D^{S}: dominant chord with a subdominant element

Tchaikovsky. Overture Romeo and Juliet (1872).



Rachmaninoff's subdominant as a functionally mixed chord



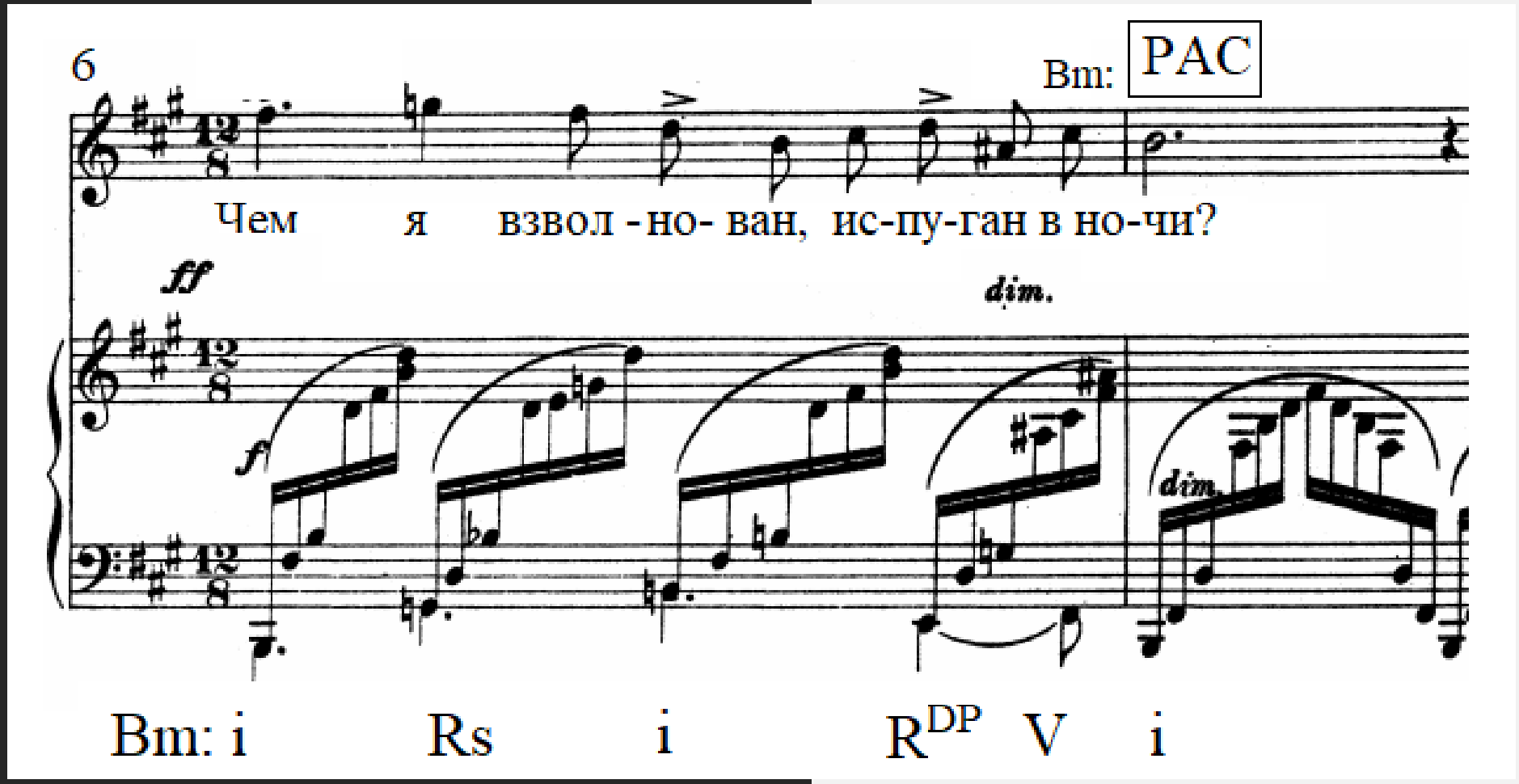
Swinden's nomenclature (2005):

S^D = Subdominant with a dominant element; proceeds to T

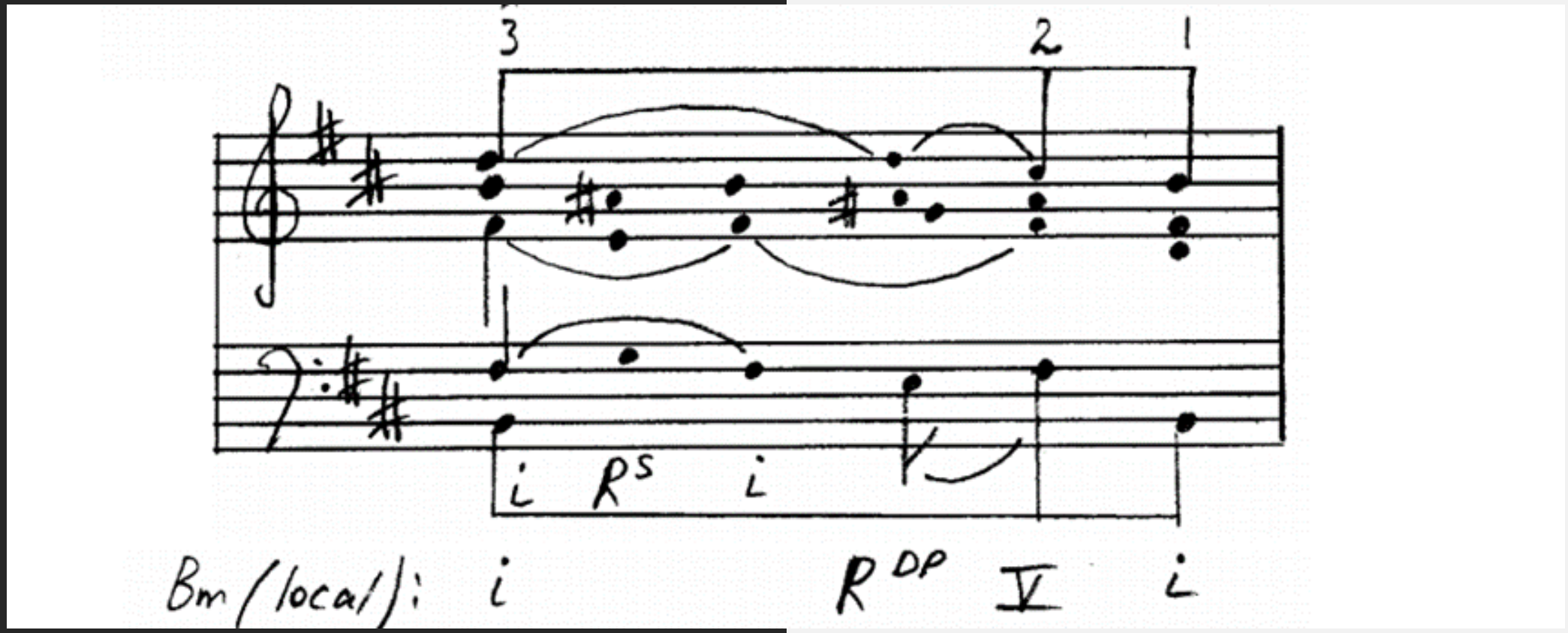
DP D = Dominant preparation with a dominant element; proceeds to D

Arabic numerals refer to the bass note

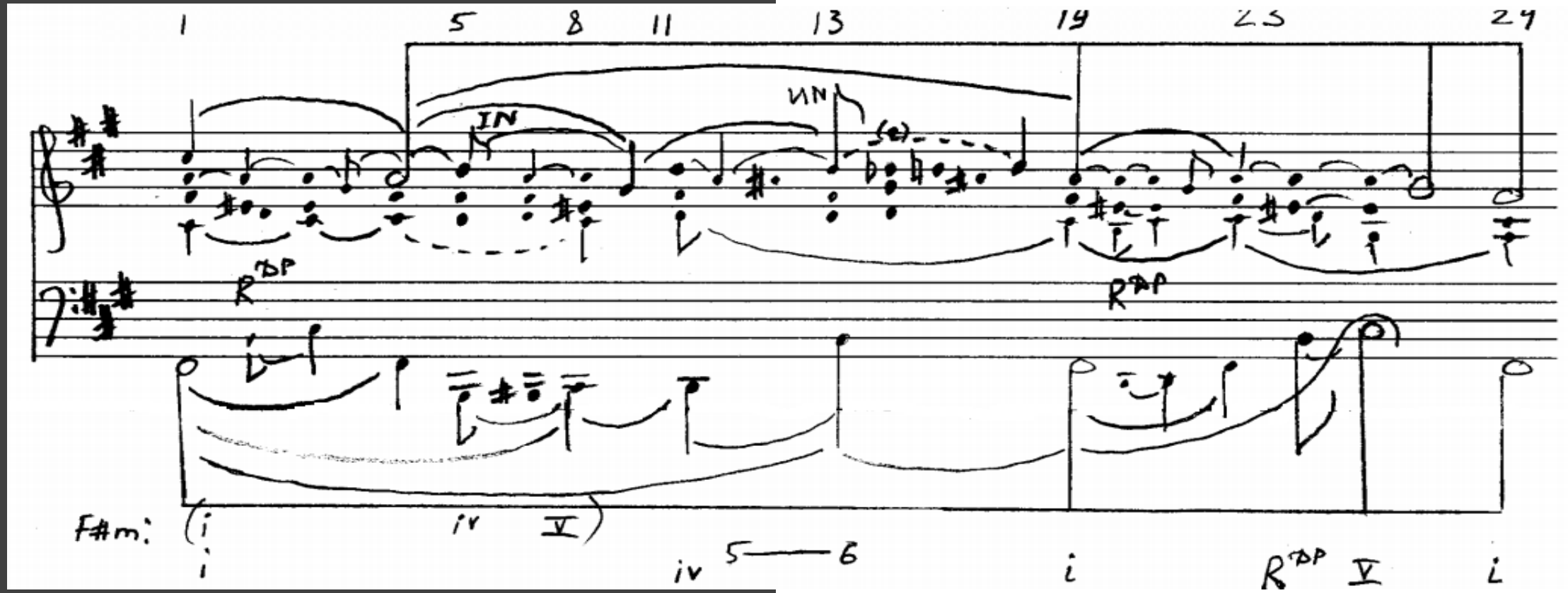
Rachmaninoff. “Loneliness (“Fragment from Musset”), op. 21 no. 6 (1902), mm. 6-7. R-S and R-DP



Rachmaninoff. “Loneliness,” mm. 6-7. Voice-leading graph. R-S locally prolongs the tonic, R-DP serves as the pre-dominant chord within the phrase

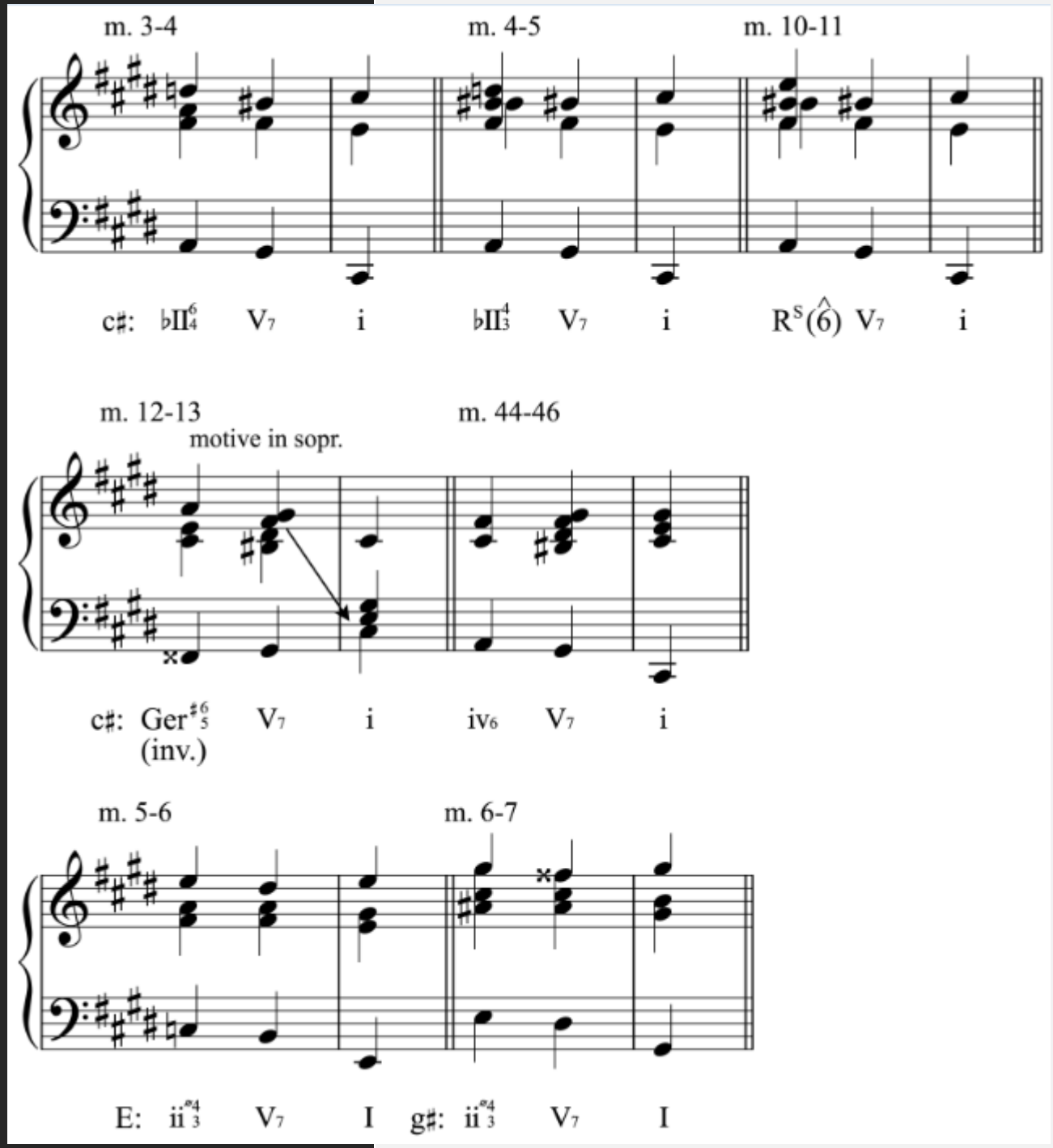


“Loneliness,” complete graph.



Rachmaninoff Prelude in C# minor, op. 3 no. 2 (1892).

A summary of progressions that accompany the le-so-do ostinato



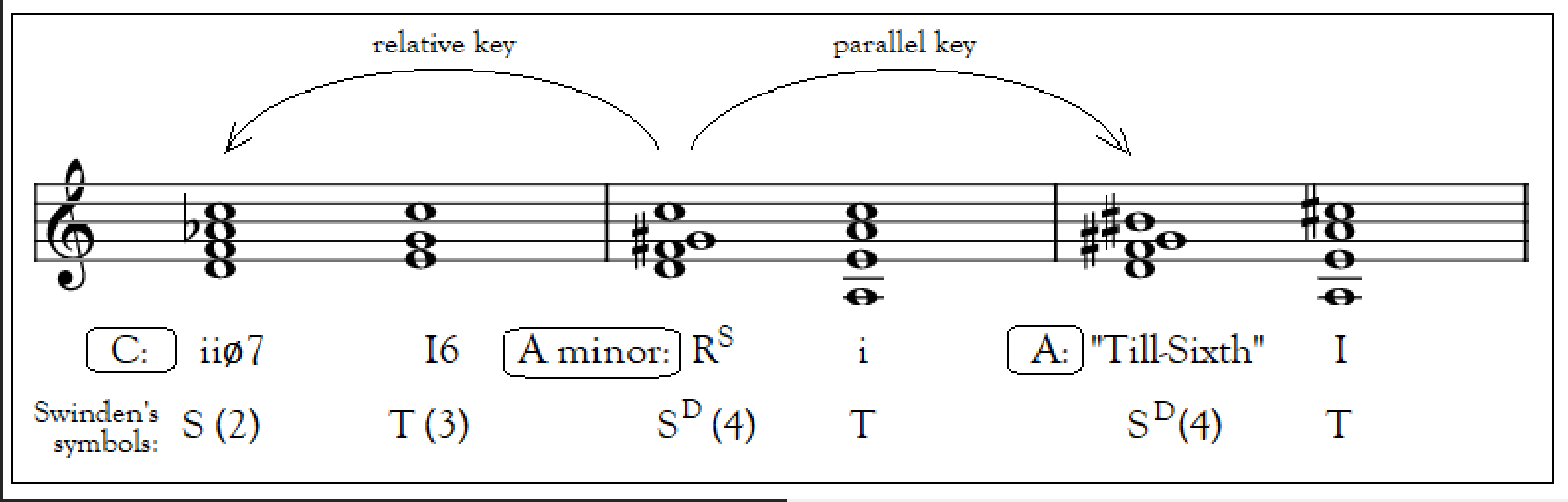
Part 2: Rachmaninoff's chord and the pairing of relative keys

Mutability (*peremennost', ladovaia peremennost'*):

Russian term approximately corresponding to the concepts of tonal pairing and directional tonality

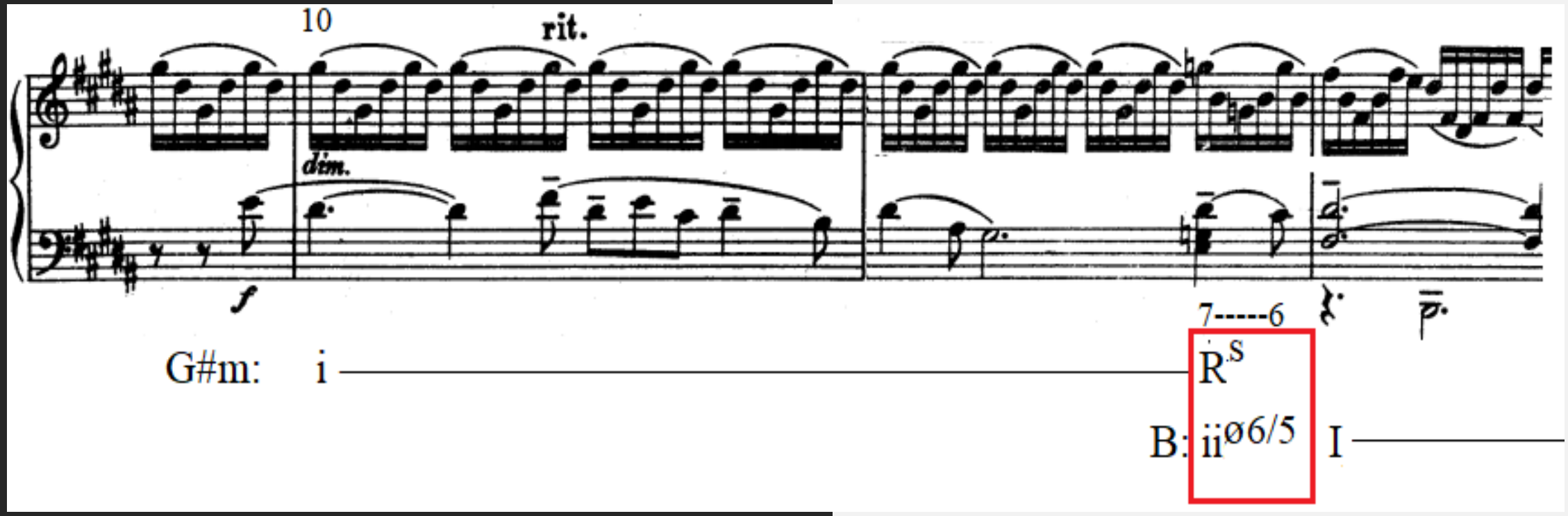
Opera *Aleko*, 1892. One act, libretto by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, based on a poem by Alexander Pushkin.

Rachmaninoff’s subdominant as a modulatory pivot

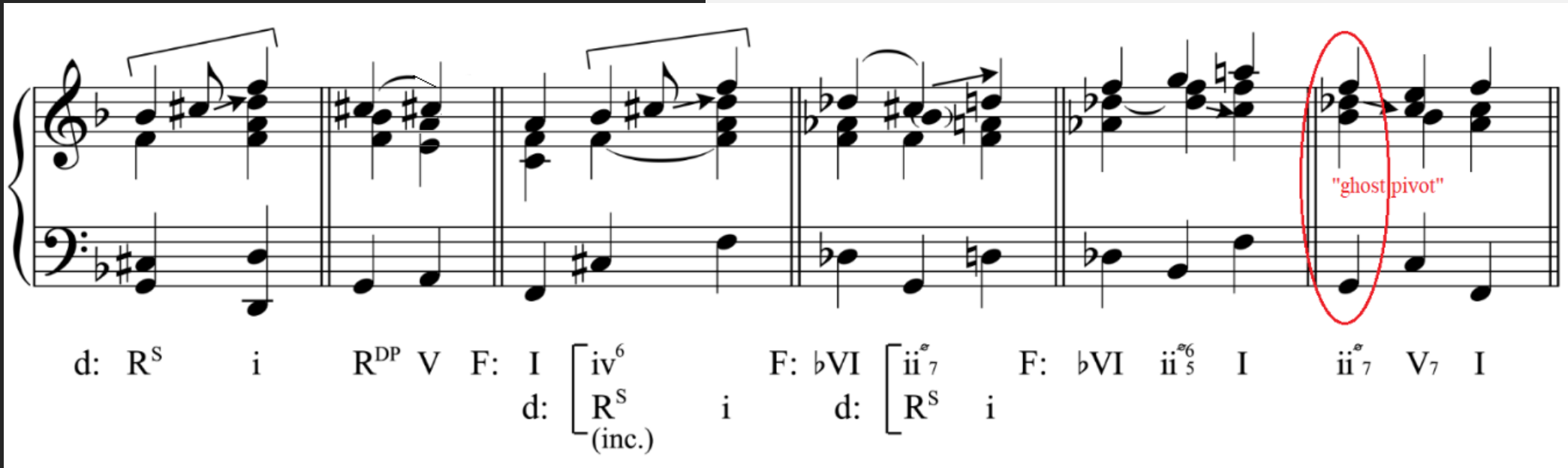


Rachmaninoff. Prelude in G# minor, op. 32 no. 12.

R-S as an enharmonic pivot

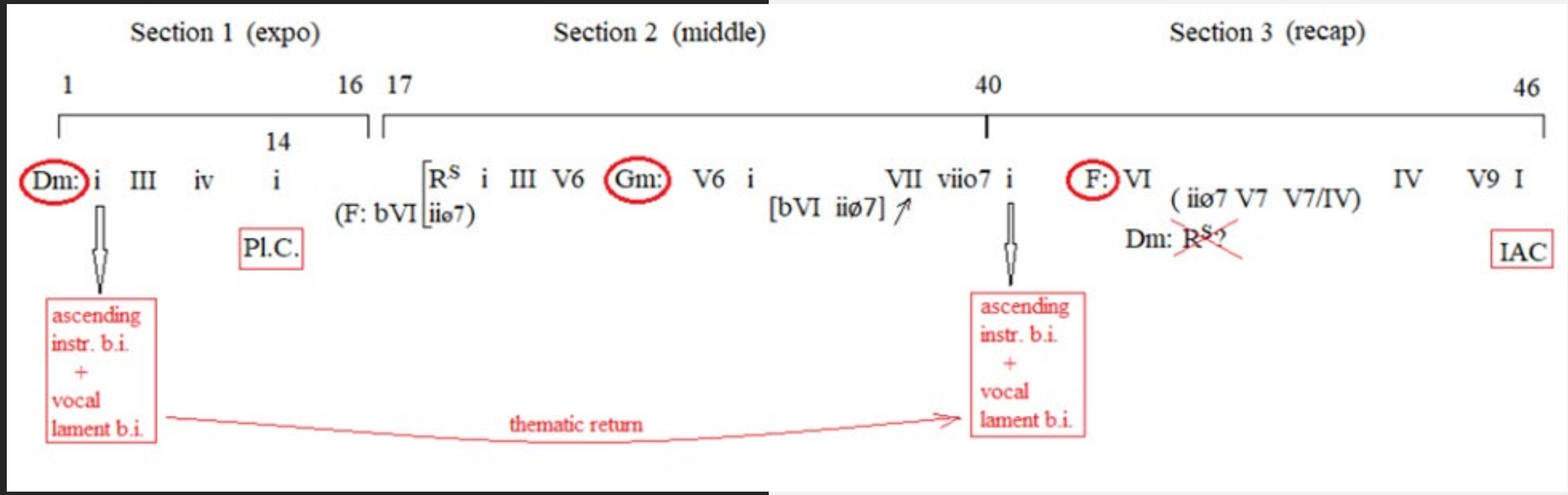


Rachmaninoff. *Aleko*, Old Man's Story. Summary of progressions with Rachmaninoff's chord



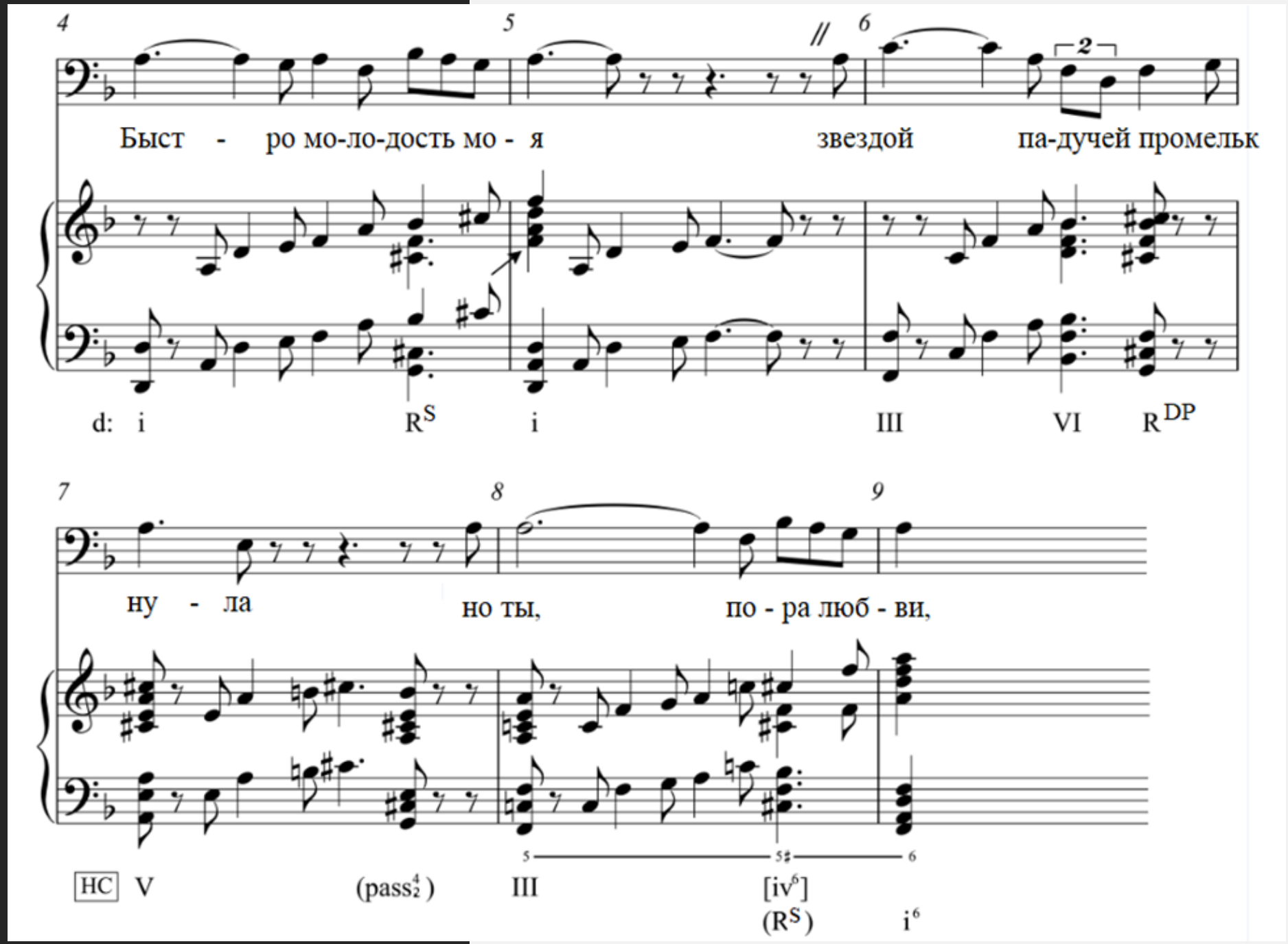
Old Man's Story. Form

(interpreted as a small ternary, A-B-A)



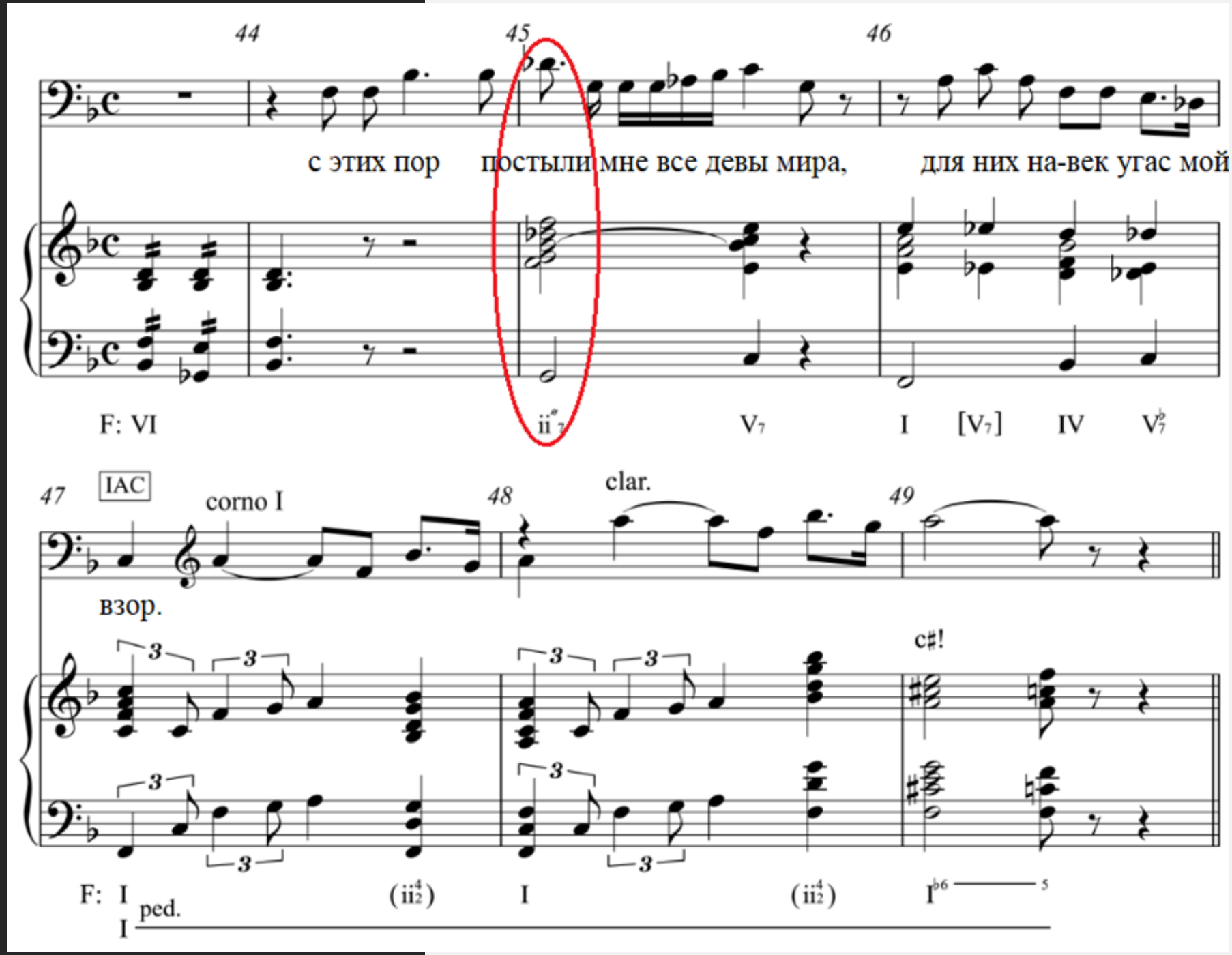
Old Man's Story
Initial phrase

(Piano reduction by Bakulina)



Old Man’s Story
Final phrase.

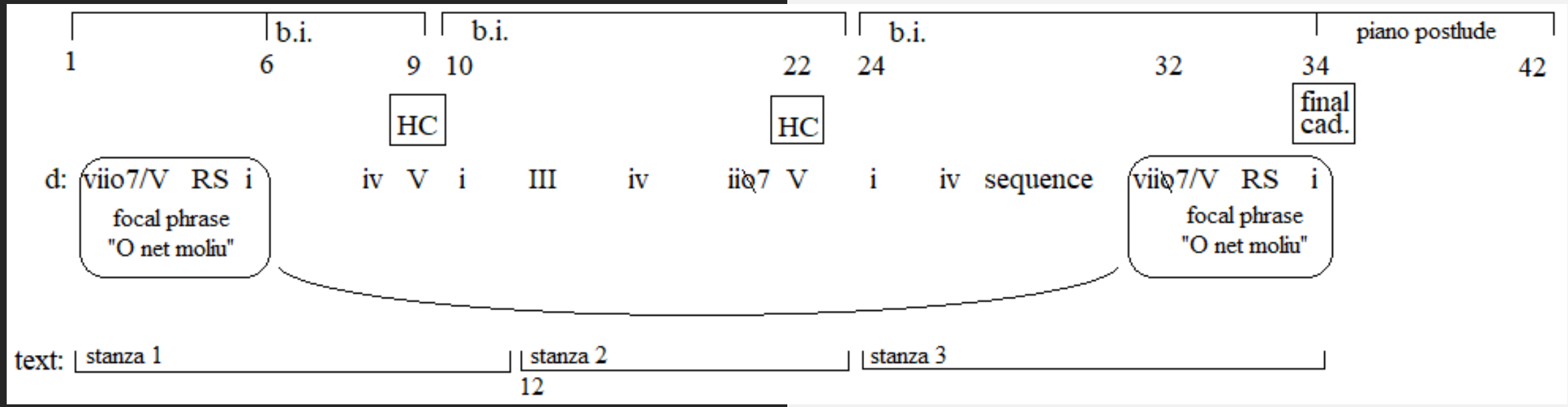
“Ghost pivot” circled



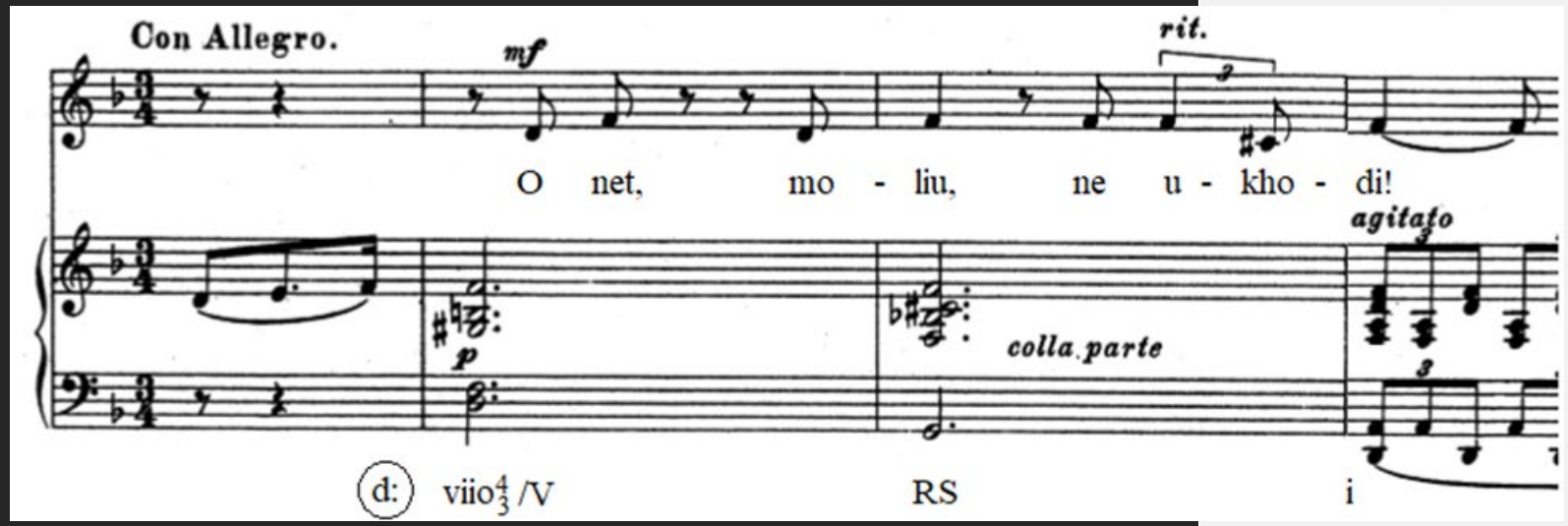
Part 3: Rachmaninoff’s subdominant and background plagalism

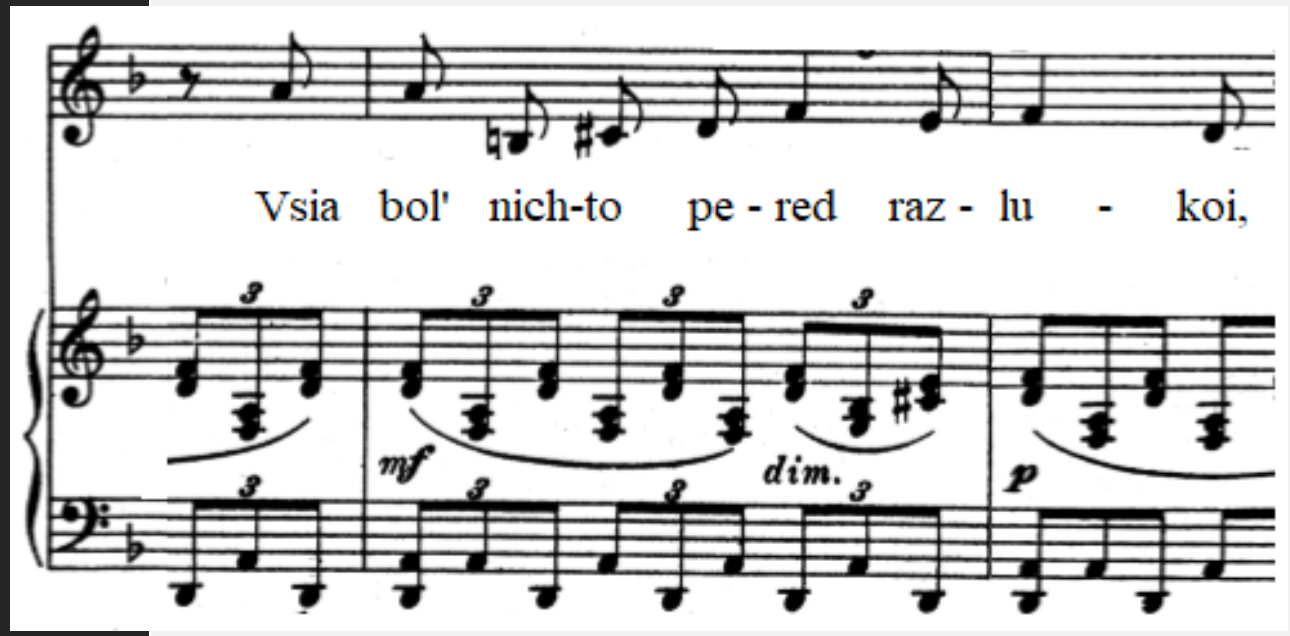
Rachmaninoff. “O Stay My Love,”

op. 4 no. 1 (1892). Form



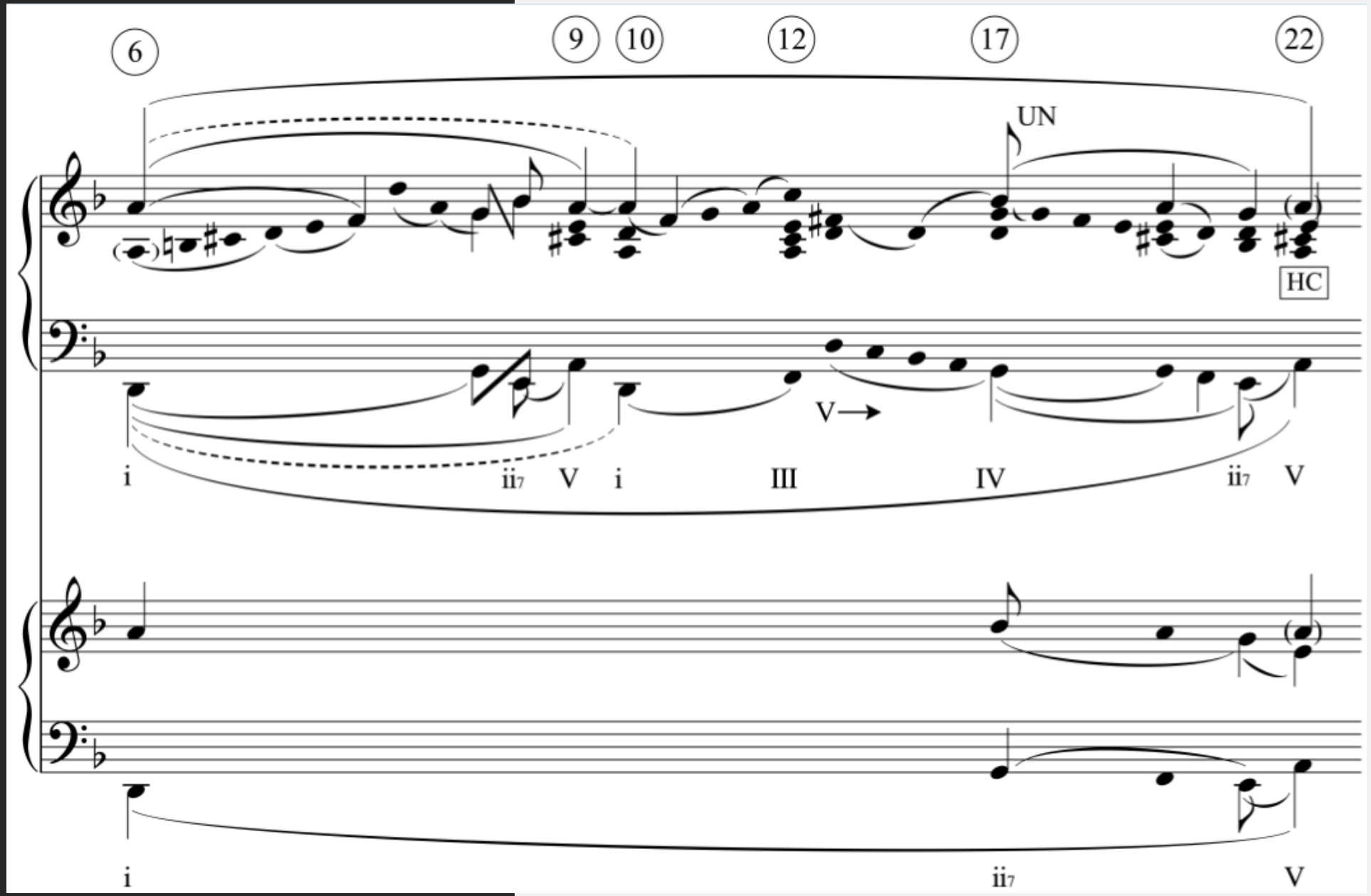
“O Stay My Love.” Motivic material: Focal phrase and basic idea





“O Stay My Love”

Mm. 6-22, voice-leading graph

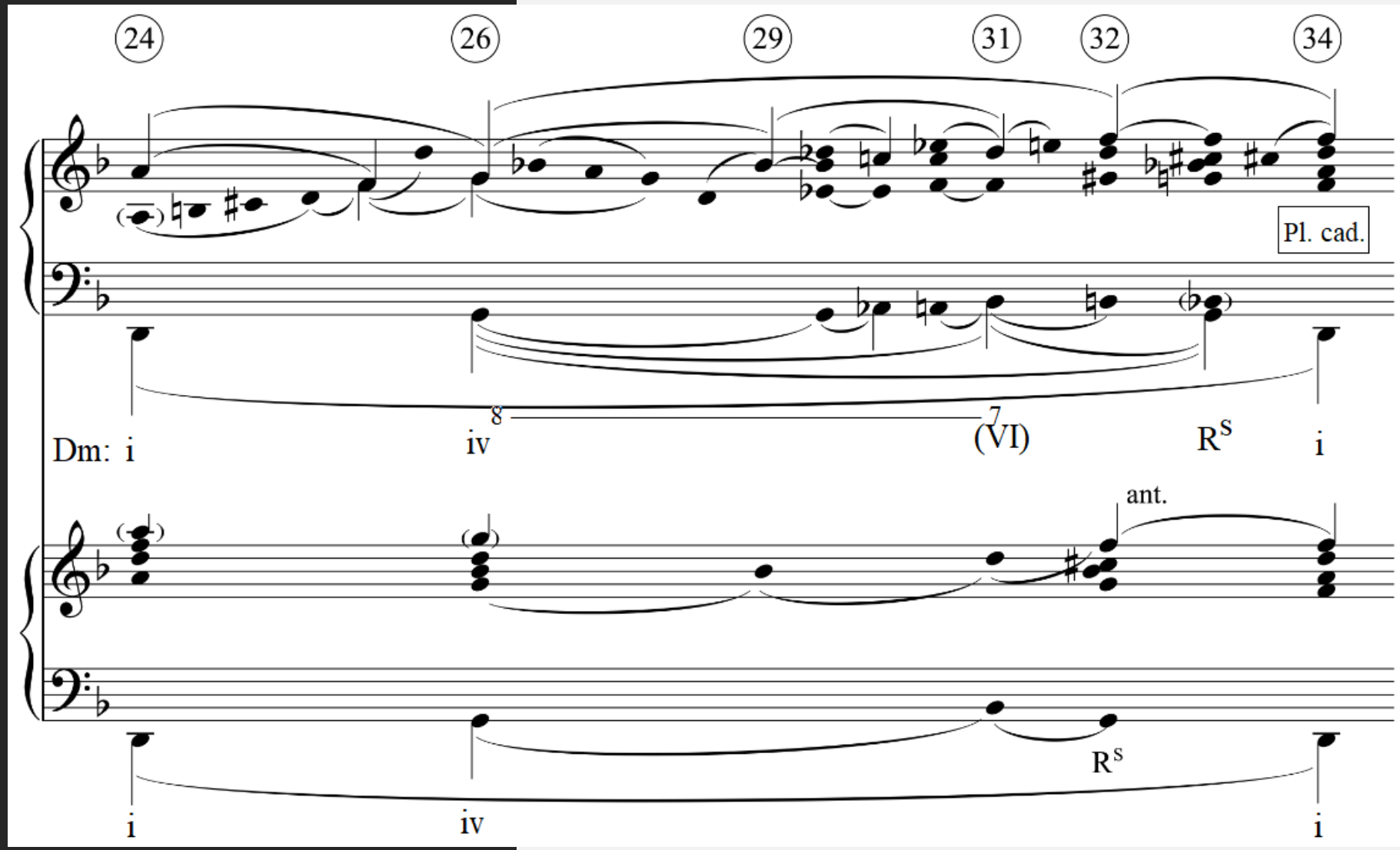


“O Stay My Love”

Mm. 24-34, voice-leading graph

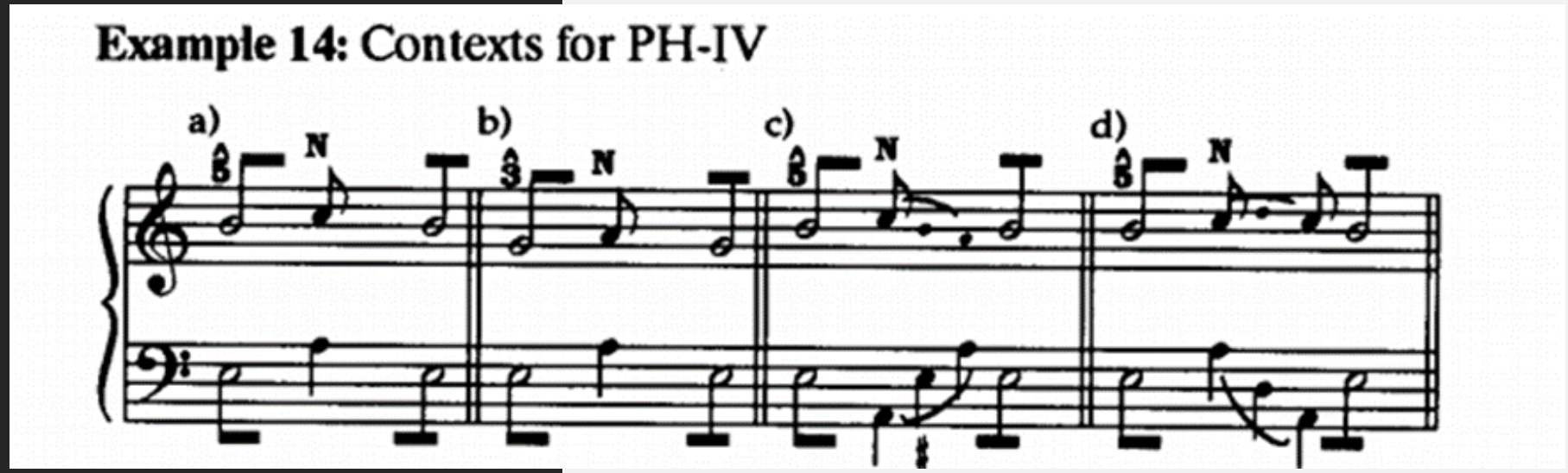
This corresponds to the song’s overall structure.

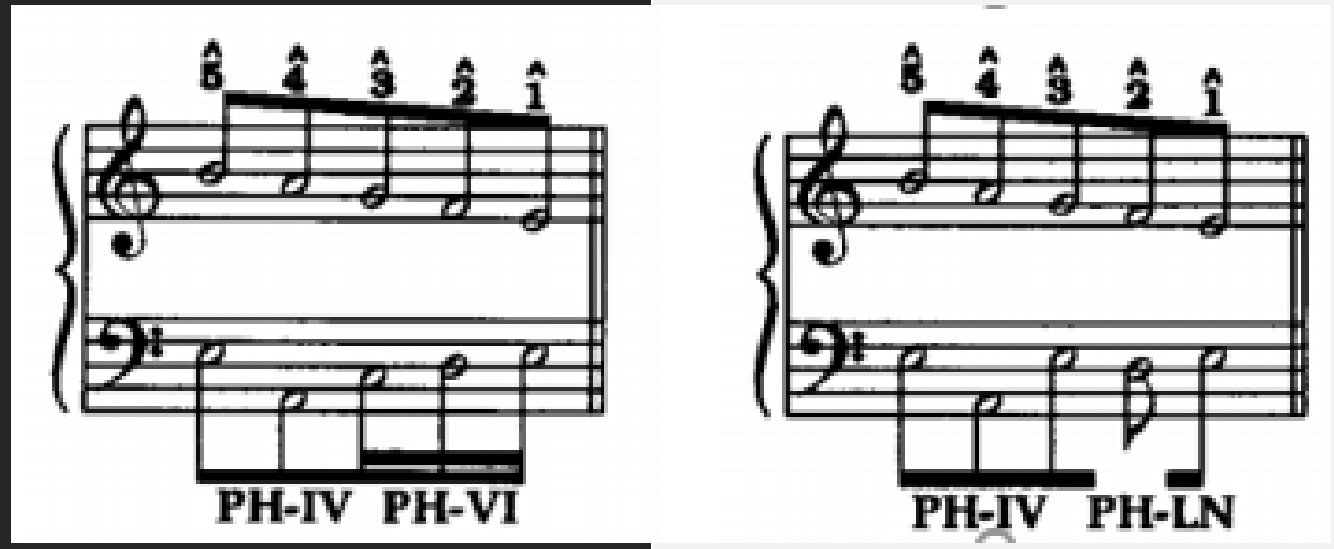
Notice the plagal background,
I-IV-I



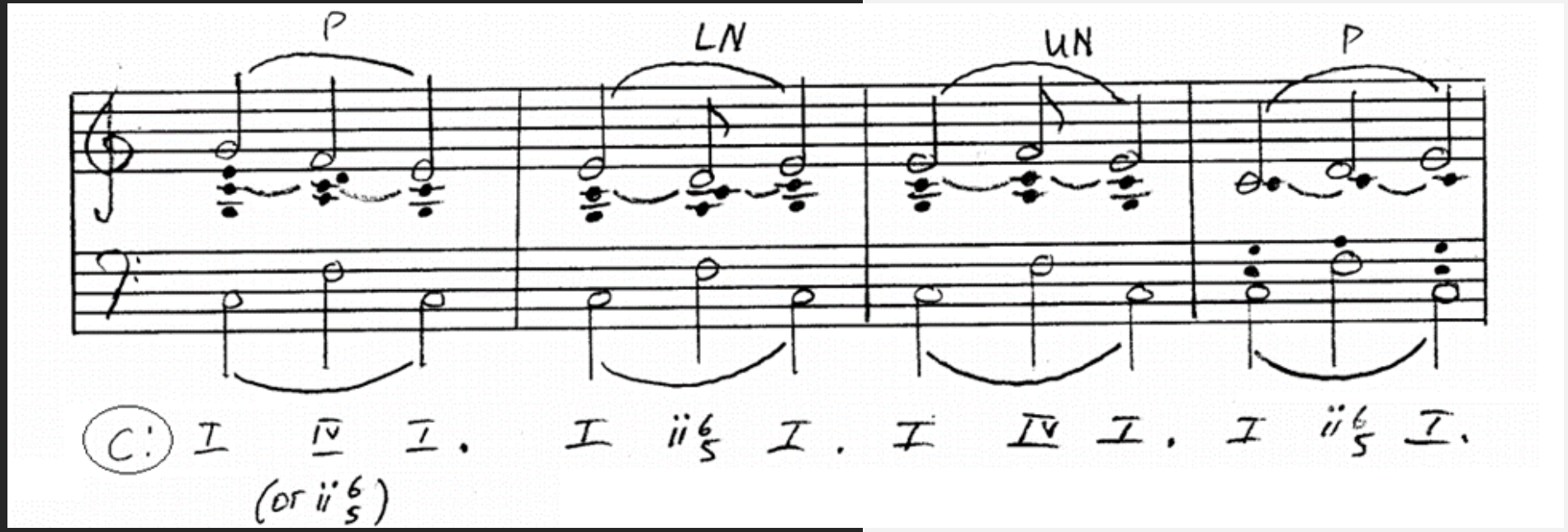
Lori Burns (1995).
Exs. 14, 32, 32

Plagal Background structures for Phrygian chorales





Suggested plagal background progressions. An alternative to Schenker's authentic background progressions,
Free Composition, fig. 16



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