

# Notes on the Program

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## Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

### Born

April 1, 1873, at Oneg, in the Novgorod region of Russia

### Died

March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

### Work composed

July 3–August 18, 1934

### World premiere

November 7, 1934, in Baltimore, Maryland, with the composer as soloist and Leopold Stokowski conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra

### New York Philharmonic premiere

December 27, 1934, Bruno Walter, conductor, the composer as soloist; this was the work's New York premiere

### Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

November 17, 2006, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Joyce Yang, soloist, in Daejeon, South Korea

### Estimated duration

ca. 25 minutes

was deemed worthy of receiving the “Great Gold Medal,” an honor that had previously been bestowed on only two students. Then, in 1897, he was dealt a major setback with the public failure of his First Symphony, which one particularly prominent and dismissive review (by none other than César Cui) likened to “a program symphony on the ‘Seven Plagues of Egypt’” that “would bring delight to the inhabitants of Hell.”

In fact, the failure of that First Symphony threatened to undo Rachmaninoff, and for the next three years he didn't write a note. His talent was such that, in the psychological aftermath of this embarrassment, he simply turned to a different musical pursuit and for the next few years focused on conducting. Before long he also sought the help of a physician who was investigating psychological therapy through hypnosis, and by 1901 Rachmaninoff was back on track as a composer. A few years later he would add the obligations of a touring concert pianist to his schedule, and his numerous recordings reveal that his outstanding reputation as a performer — refined, precise, impressive of technique, and analytical in approach — was fully merited.

He composed four piano concertos over the course of his career (in 1890–91, 1900–01, 1909, and 1926) and was the soloist at the premiere of each. Standing as a pendant to these is a fifth work for piano and orchestra, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, composed during the summer of 1934 and premiered that November. The work does not pretend to be a concerto, and it will not serve any

Sergei Rachmaninoff was clearly a bundle of talent, but the early years of his career nonetheless proceeded rather by fits and starts. He was not at first a standout at the Moscow Conservatory, but by the time he graduated, in 1892, he

purpose to argue that it actually is one, even though it displays magnificent mastery of the dramatic balance between soloist and orchestra and, what's more, is structured in a way that evokes the three-movement form of most Romantic concertos.

The "Theme of Paganini" on which Rachmaninoff based this work was Paganini's Caprice No. 24, which that master of the violin had composed in the early 19th century and which composers of ensuing generations — from Schumann to George Rochberg — have found unusually intriguing. It is a striking and memorable

theme, and listeners will only occasionally have trouble spotting it as Rachmaninoff pokes and reshapes it through the 24 variations that make up this piece (not counting a short introduction and, at the other end, a short coda).

The variations of the Rhapsody are all connected without breaks, but they fall into groups that give the piece an unending logic and momentum as it unrolls. The first ten variations show off the piano to tremendous effect, and — in their growing sense of the demonic — seem to be playing with the legend, widely circulated in Paganini's day, that

## Angels and Muses

For his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Rachmaninoff worked and reworked the Caprice No. 24 by Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840). The son of a shopkeeper, this Italian composer and violin virtuoso of an earlier generation had achieved a level of super-stardom in his own lifetime. Rumors circulated that he had achieved his unprecedented ability thanks to a pact with the devil. Paganini appreciated the attention that arose from this speculation, and he fanned the flames with what was considered a "demonic" appearance and sometimes eccentric behavior. In his 1836 novella *Florentine Nights* the poet Heinrich Heine reported of a concert: "At length a dark form appeared on the stage, looking as if it had risen from the underworld. This was Paganini in his black gala clothes: his black coat and vest of a terrible cut, such as is probably dictated by the hellish etiquette of Proserpine's court." He was perhaps echoing Goethe, who in 1827 had observed: "The demonic is that which cannot be explained in a cerebral and a rational manner. Paganini is imbued with it to a remarkable degree and it is through this that he produces such a great effect."



A lithograph, ca. 1820, after a portrait of Paganini by Karl Begas (1794–1854)

the violinist was in league with the devil. In the seventh variation Rachmaninoff accordingly introduces another borrowed theme, which plays a secondary role to Paganini's: the Dies Irae chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. After a few variations investigate how those melodies might work together, the first section winds down in Variation 11, a sort of cadenza that serves as a transition to the second section.

On the whole this second, or middle, section (the composer referred to it as "love episodes") adheres to a slower tempo than the first, although parts of it skip

along quickly all the same. After that, Rachmaninoff embarks on the last six variations, effectively his "finale," tying everything together by revisiting the Dies Irae in the final climactic pages of this justly popular masterwork.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, orchestra bells, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

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## Listen for ...

The "slow movement" of the Rhapsody, which begins with Variation 12, reaches its peak with **Variation 18 (Andante cantabile)**, revered as the jewel in this work's crown. It is, of course, the famous moment for which everybody has been waiting. It rarely fails to satisfy, and not just because of its graceful beauty; it also provides a welcome change of variation procedure.

In the work's opening, the theme is voiced by the violins:

**THEME**  
*Allegro vivace*



*p* etc.

In the eighteenth variation Rachmaninoff inverts Paganini's theme, when the piano plays it upside down and much slower:

**VAR. XVIII**  
*Andante cantabile*



*mf* *p* *mf* *dim.* *p* etc.

Rachmaninoff has skewed it from the work's overall key of A minor into the distant harmonic realm of D-flat major, a contrast the ear welcomes at this advanced stage of the piece. Acknowledging this section's stand-alone popularity, Rachmaninoff observed, "That one's for my manager."

