

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff was clearly a bundle of talent, but the early years of his career 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 was deemed worthy of 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 a particularly prominent review (by fellow composer César Cui) likened to “a program symphony on the ‘Seven Plagues of Egypt’” that “would bring delight to the inhabitants of Hell.”

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 his public failure, he simply turned to a different musical pursuit and 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 of approach — was fully merited.

He composed four piano concertos spread throughout 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. It does not pretend to be a concerto, and it will not serve any purpose to argue that it actually is one, even though it displays 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 found unusually intriguing. Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms all wrote compositions that tackled the possibilities inherent in this melody and, in the years since Rachmaninoff, such composers as Witold Lutosławski, Boris Blacher, and George Rochberg have kept the tune in play. It’s a striking and memorable theme, and listeners will have only occasional trouble spotting it as Rachmaninoff pokes and massages it through the 24 variations that make up this piece (not counting a short introduction and, at the other end, a short coda).

IN SHORT

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, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, with the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 27, 1934, Bruno Walter, conductor, Sergei Rachmaninoff, soloist, which marked the New York Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 17, 2015, Cristian Măcelaru, conductor, Daniil Trifonov, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 24 minutes

The variations of the Rhapsody are all connected without punctuation-like breaks, but they fall into groups that give the piece an unflinching 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 the violinist was in league with the devil. In the seventh variation, Rachmaninoff therefore introduces another borrowed theme, which plays a secondary role to Paganini's: the Dies Irae chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. (This theme has also proved a favorite of composers, putting in famous appearances in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, Liszt's *Totentanz*, and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, to name only three well-known titles from a very long list.) After a few variations investigate how

those melodies might work together, the first section winds down in Variation Eleven, a sort of cadenza that serves as a transition to the second section.

On the whole this second, middle section (the composer referred to it as "love episodes") adheres to a slower tempo than the first, but 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.

Angels and Muses

For his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Rachmaninoff worked and reworked the Caprice No. 24 by Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840). That 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.

Paganini, in a painting by Georg Friedrich Kersting, ca. 1830