



Sergei RACHMANINOFF

Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini, Op. 43

Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff (April 1, 1873–March 28, 1943) was a Russian virtuoso pianist, composer, and conductor of the late-Romantic period, some of whose works are among the most popular in the classical repertoire. Born into a musical family, Rachmaninoff took up the piano at age four. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 and had composed several piano and orchestral pieces by this time. In 1897, following the critical reaction to his Symphony No. 1, Rachmaninoff entered a four-year depression and composed little until successful therapy allowed him to complete his enthusiastically received Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1901. After the Russian Revolution, Rachmaninoff and his family left Russia and resided in the United States, first in New York City. Demanding piano concert tour schedules caused his output as composer to slow tremendously; between 1918 and 1943, he completed just six compositions, including *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Symphony No. 3, and *Symphonic Dances*. In 1942, Rachmaninoff moved to Beverly Hills, California. One month before his death from advanced melanoma, Rachmaninoff acquired American citizenship.

Early influences of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and other Russian composers gave way to a personal style notable for its song-like melodicism, expressiveness and his use of rich orchestral colors. The piano is featured prominently in Rachmaninoff's compositional output, and through his own skills as a performer he explored the expressive possibilities of the instrument.

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43, was written at Rachmaninoff's Villa, the Villa Senar, in Switzerland, according to the score, from July 3 to August 18, 1934. The piece is a set of 24 variations, mostly are in A minor. After a brief introduction, the first variation is played before the theme. Paganini's theme is stated on strings with the piano picking out salient notes, after the first variation. Rachmaninoff likely got the idea of having a variation before the theme from the finale of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony. Variations II to VI recombine elements of the theme. The pauses and rhetorical flourishes for the piano in variation VI herald a change of tempo and tone. The piano next gravely intones the Dies Irae, the "day of wrath" plainchant from the medieval Mass of the Dead, while the orchestra accompanies with a slower version of the opening motif of the Paganini theme. The piece is one of several by Rachmaninoff to quote the Dies Irae plainchant melody.

The slow eighteenth variation is by far the best known, and it is often included on classical music compilations without the rest of the work. It is based on an inversion of the melody of Paganini's theme. In other words, the A minor Paganini theme is literally played "upside down" in D \flat major, with a few other changes. Rachmaninoff himself recognized the appeal of this variation, saying "This one, is for my agent." The 24th and last variation of the Rhapsody presents considerable technical difficulty for the pianist, and shortly before the Rhapsody's world première performance, Rachmaninoff confessed trepidation over his ability to play it. Upon the suggestion of his friend Benno Moiseiwitsch, Rachmaninoff broke his usual rule against drinking alcohol and had a glass of crème de menthe to steady his nerves. His performance was a spectacular success, and prior to every subsequent performance of the Rhapsody, he drank crème de menthe. This led to Rachmaninoff nicknaming the twenty-fourth the "Crème de Menthe Variation".