

Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

Jonathan James

Introduction

Aged 60, with stiffening hands and frequent migraines, Sergei Rachmaninov was slowly running out of steam. The last major work he had written, the Piano Concerto No. 4 (in 1926), had been a flop, and his punishing schedule as a solo recitalist — which required him on stage at least 70 times a season — was taking its toll. Somehow, however, he found time to retreat and compose what has since become a signature piece in the orchestral repertoire, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

This is one of the two set works chosen by IB for assessment from 2020, and it allows students to approach many different concepts and themes: Romanticism and Rachmaninov's place as the 'last great Romantic'; variation form and its Baroque history; and both instrumentation and orchestration. The *Rhapsody* also, as we will find out, tells a distinct story, something that's always a helpful teaching prop, and way in to listening.

This resource will pick up on these core aspects, and is accompanied by a Spotify playlist (<https://open.spotify.com/user/jonpjames/playlist/4a8r1nDRNFGz6PoHNj4z9O?si=SnUlnVxXT6mMrx4MjsjJMA>) for quick reference and illustration.

We will cover:

- ▶ the context of the *Rhapsody* within Rachmaninov's output, and broader stylistic concerns.
- ▶ details on the inspiration and narrative behind the piece.
- ▶ the work's overall structure and formal elements.
- ▶ analysis of the theme – or themes – and variations.

Context

In an interview for a Belgian newspaper during one of his many tours as a piano soloist in the 1920s, Rachmaninov admitted: 'I do not understand the music of the day.' Later, to the *New York Times*, he commented that modern music was unable to 'rehabilitate minds and souls' or 'bring relief', which should in his view be the principal benefits of any listening experience. For him, modern composers were a little like zoologists, pinning music down and dissecting it into abstract parts. He went on in that interview to make one of his most quoted remarks:

'Music cannot be just colour and rhythm; it must reveal the emotions of the heart.'

This might well have been directed at any of the modernists who were forging a brave new world of sounds and ideas at the time. Schoenberg and his disciples Berg and Webern were exploring the 12-note system; Bartók and Stravinsky were delighting in dissonance and aggressive rhythms; Debussy had embraced the East and a more fluid sense of form; and back at home, Prokofiev and Shostakovich were rebelling against state dictates and expectations.

Radical early 20th-century works for context

- ▶ Schoenberg *Pierrot lunaire* (1912)
- ▶ Debussy *La mer* (1905)
- ▶ Bartók *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1925)
- ▶ Berg *Wozzeck* (1925)

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Rachmaninov held steadfast to his old-world sound, both in the programmes he chose for his piano recitals (a lot of Chopin, Liszt and Schumann), and in his own compositional style. Critics at the time cast him as an irrelevant dinosaur, but posterity has proved them wrong: his work continues to have abundant life on the concert stage today.

A quick comparison

Listen to the tribal rhythms and bloodlust that open Bartók's First Piano Concerto (<https://open.spotify.com/track/1khhcL8o7E7okwbJHM8K1z>), written in 1926, and compare it with the Romantic bombast of Rachmaninov's Fourth Piano Concerto, composed the very same year. The pieces sound as if they have been written 50 years apart. They characterise two very different phases of their respective composers' careers: one trying to make his mark by provoking and pushing boundaries; the other content to rest back on the sounds that had worked so well for him in the past.

Rachmaninov's creative choices

Rachmaninov recognised that he could not pursue his considerable talents in conducting, composing and performing all at once without burning out. As he put it: 'I have chased three hares all my life. Can I be sure I have captured one?' Once he had emigrated to the USA in 1918 and made such a striking impression on the stage, it can't have been easy to resist the job offers that came his way. In the early 1920s he turned down offers to conduct the Boston and Cincinnati symphony orchestras, and was hugely sought after as a teacher.

After the failure of his Fourth Piano Concerto in 1926 opened up some old wounds and badly dented his confidence, he chose to 'chase the hare' of piano recitals first and foremost, chalking up numerous international tours and 26 recordings.

He felt exhausted by the constant touring and pressures of solo performance, but the success did at least pay off the debts he had brought with him as his family fled Russia, and gave him the funds to build his very own villa, Senar, in 1932, overlooking Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. Steinway furnished it with their latest model of grand piano and it soon became the perfect composing retreat.

It was there that he composed the *Rhapsody* (which he initially called a *Fantasia*) *on a Theme of Paganini*, and later works such as his Third Symphony. The *Rhapsody* seemed to flow off the pen as he worked day and night through seven weeks of his summer break.

Paganini, his legend and his famous tune

Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) was a virtuoso violinist whose technique was so prodigious and astounding that rumour abounded he must be in a secret pact with the devil. He became a legend in his own day, helped by a cadaverous appearance and party tricks that included playing the violin upside down. Could it be, people whispered, that he had sacrificed his wife to the devil, and that his strings were made of her own intestines? If you listened to him for too long, would your face melt? Such superstitions were rife.

Paganini wrote his 24 Caprices in order to showcase his formidable talents on the instrument, and his 24th is by far the most famous of them all, itself a set of variations on a catchy theme.

What makes the theme so catchy?

This is a question you could put to your students. First of all, it has a short, 16-bar AB structure with the A section repeating its first four bars. Secondly, there are many repeated elements to it, whether in the motivic rhythm or the melodic shape. That repetition alone makes it stick in the memory. Finally it uses basic, strong harmonic progressions, whether tonic-dominant in the first half, or a cycle of 5ths in the second.

The musical notation shows the first 10 bars of the Paganini theme. The chords indicated below the notes are: I, V, I, V, A7, Dm, G7, C.

The Soviets used his hallmark Romantic sound as a propaganda tool, much to Rachmaninov's annoyance.

Paganini means 'little pagan' in Italian, which added spice to the rumours.

With such a beguilingly simple tune, it's no wonder that many composers have been drawn to write variations on it. Rachmaninov was aware of Schumann, Liszt and Brahms's versions, and since his own set many others have followed, from Lutoslawski to Benny Goodman and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Caprice quiz

If you give the students the names of the composers, can they match them to excerpts given in the Spotify playlist (<https://open.spotify.com/user/jonpjames/playlist/4a8r1nDRNFGz6PoHNj4z9O?si=ApjP7eXETkumFiKVYJJ7A>)?

The art of variation and rhapsody

Providing variations on a theme is a practice that goes back to medieval folksong, but it was particularly developed in instrumental music from 1650 onwards, often as a means for the composer both to show off what they could do with the simplest of resources – ‘throw me a scrap and I'll make a banquet’ – as well as act as a technical showpiece as the variations got increasingly complex. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven often improvised their variations and the written-out version gives us a close idea of how their spontaneous ideas might have played out at the keyboard.

Rachmaninov himself wrote two other sets of variations before he came to the Paganini Caprice:

- ▶ Variations on a Theme of Chopin (1903) (<https://open.spotify.com/track/zieYuO3ooRVArPNoprKEoH>)
- ▶ Variations on a Theme of Corelli (called ‘La folia’) (1931) (<https://open.spotify.com/track/5IEB6n1MzjhO4vPVSQAWGY>)

The Corelli Variations were written just a few years before the Paganini ones, also at the piano overlooking the lake in Villa Senar. In some ways, they act as a warm-up to the more innovative, orchestrated Paganini set.

The addition of the term ‘Rhapsody’ came in the second draft. It is an apt title for a work that moves so fluidly between variations, almost as though it were improvised. Interestingly, Rachmaninov's recital just before he wrote this work was entirely made up of fantasias by Schumann, Chopin and others. This way of composing – extemporising on an initial idea – was clearly on his mind.

The ‘other’ theme

On closer look, the Rhapsody actually contains variations on two themes, not one. The second theme is the ‘Dies irae’ (or ‘Day of Wrath’) plainchant taken from the medieval mass for the dead.



Di - es i - rae, di - es il - la, Sol - vet saec - lum



in fa - vil - la, Tes - te Da - vid cum Si - bil - la.

This had become a leitmotif for fate and death for many Romantic composers from Berlioz onwards, and Rachmaninov used it almost obsessively throughout his career, as if haunted by the prospect of his own death. The theme turns up in no fewer than 17 of his works, roughly equivalent to a third of his output, and takes on a talismanic presence whenever it is quoted. Often Rachmaninov, like his predecessors, only used the opening phrase to the chant, and he confessed to not having learnt the rest of it until shortly before writing the Paganini Rhapsody.

The stepwise movement and interlocking 3rds of the ‘Dies irae’ theme make it ripe for development, and its modal colours (Aeolian) can be used as a contrast to the diatonic context in which it is often quoted.

He called his first draft a Fantasia, not a Rhapsody.

Form, narrative and analysis

The Rhapsody's 24 variations fall into three sections, giving the impression of a three-movement piano concerto with the equivalent first-movement exposition of characters, a lyrical slow movement, and a furious finale:

- ▶ First movement: variations 1 to 10
- ▶ Second movement: variations 11 to 18
- ▶ Third movement: variations 19 to 24

Rachmaninov always insisted on having a clear culmination point within the structure of any piece he wrote, whether a short prelude or a lengthy symphony. In the case of the Paganini Rhapsody, that point comes with the popular 18th variation, often performed in its own right. It is this variation that features most strongly the expansive, lyrical sound we associate with Rachmaninov, and is all the more eloquent for its romance in an otherwise quite neo-Baroque setting. The orchestration of the preceding variations is either bare and transparent to allow for the nimble lines of the piano, or dark and brooding, particularly when the 'Dies irae' plainchant rears its head. The variations that follow (nos 19-24), however, become increasingly colourful and more heavily orchestrated.

Rag-time inspiration?

Canadian pianist Jon Kimura Parker makes an interesting case in this YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPgzDZDkzMM>) for comparing some of the more skittish passages in Rachmaninov's writing to Art Tatum's acrobatic right hand in 'Tiger Rag' (<https://open.spotify.com/track/2toW1tAUAefjdu5q29u8m9>).

Fokine's commission

The celebrated choreographer Michel Fokine had become a close friend of Rachmaninov from 1919, and the two had often discussed creating dance to the composer's music. Three years after the Rhapsody had its successful concert premiere, Rachmaninov approached Fokine with a possible ballet scenario based on the legend of Paganini.

Rachmaninov proposed that the opening, string-led variations could represent Paganini and his impish energy, and that the Devil could make his entry in **variation seven**, where a bassoon snakes around a solemn intonation of 'Dies irae' on the piano. In Rachmaninov's version of the Faustian tale, Paganini sells his soul in exchange for mastery on the violin and for a woman. He writes of **variation 11** being the 'transition to the realm of love', and the woman first appears dancing a beguiling minuet in **variation 12**. Paganini exalts in his new-found powers from **variation 19** onwards (the beginning of the final section), but evil triumphs in the final battle between the two themes, the Caprice and 'Dies irae'.

It's a compelling story, and it seems to fit perfectly with the course of the music, although we should be careful not to view it retrospectively as the original inspiration for the work. In the end, there were several complications in staging the ballet version, and Rachmaninov was appalled to see that Paganini was dancing on stage with a guitar, not a violin. However, the ballet proved as successful as the concert work, and Rachmaninov was sufficiently impressed to suggest his *Symphonic Dances* (1940) should also be choreographed by Fokine. Sadly, he died before seeing that realised on stage.

Nobody's too old for a story. Before telling the students this ballet scenario, you could ask them for their own story response, based on one listen. Rachmaninov's music is so vivid and cinematic that it naturally seems to suggest a narrative line, and the orchestration lends a fantastical quality to the sound. A Russian fairy tale, perhaps?

Fokine collaborated with many figurehead 20th-century composers, including Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Ravel.

Brief analysis of the material

Rather than an exhaustive analysis of each variation, the following offers a way into listening to the music for the student, as well as identifying some core features. It uses the Boosey & Hawkes score, available on the IMSLP website ([https://imslp.org/wiki/Rhapsody_on_a_Theme_of_Paganini%2C_Op.43_\(Rachmaninoff%2C_Sergei\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Rhapsody_on_a_Theme_of_Paganini%2C_Op.43_(Rachmaninoff%2C_Sergei))).

Section	Commentary
Introduction	This is a snappy curtain-raiser, setting the impetuous tone to the work. It features the semiquaver four-note turn that is such a feature of the theme.
Variation 1	Rachmaninov takes a leaf out of Beethoven's book (the final theme and variations in the <i>Eroica</i> Symphony) by playfully starting with the bassline rather than the theme. At this stage you can imagine people dancing on tiptoe: everything is crisp and staccato, with the tambourine giving extra profile to the sound.
Theme	The theme, given out of turn after the first variation, is aptly played on the violins.
Variations 2-3	Notice how bare the orchestration is. The piano is often in unison octaves, with solo wind lines and no lower strings.
Variation 4	The piano introduces a 'perpetuum mobile' of semiquavers (making the most of the 'turn' motif above), culminating in the first two-handed chords of the piece.
Variation 5	Quick-fire interchanges between soloist and orchestra here, leaping between registers. The tempo has subtly built between variations from allegro to something closer to presto.
Variation 6	This marks a change of mood, even though it's based on the same underlying tempo. The harmony is more static, and the piano has questioning phrases over pause chords in the strings. Its lightness of touch contrasts the following variation.
Variation 7	The entrance of the Devil, following the ballet scenario. The piano plays a solemn 'Dies irae' quotation with the opening Caprice phrase underneath, both in augmentation and diminution. The solo bassoon and pizzicato lower strings provide lugubrious colour.
Variations 8 & 9	The pace picks up here as the battle for control begins. A new 'short-short-long' motif is used to accentuate the argument. The triplets in variation nine add to the restlessness, as do the off-beat chords in the piano.
Variation 10	The range of orchestration and imagination in this variation is ingenious, from the low demonic march at the start to jazzy brass, glockenspiel and piccolo. The variation ends with 'diabolic' chromatic runs.
Variation 11	This acts as a beautiful transition to the 'slow movement', keeping to the piano concerto model. The figuration in the piano part from figure 31 is very Lisztian and pure colour, with slow fragments of the Caprice threaded around the orchestra.
Variation 12	The 'woman' enters here with a gracious dance, according to the ballet scenario. The orchestra gives an elegant version of some of the melodic motifs from the Caprice, simplifying its shape into triads, with the piano accompanying on the theme's dotted rhythm. The scoring is very light throughout, with brushed tremolo violins and solo wind.
Variation 13	Is this sudden strutting our protagonist showing off and flexing his muscles, perhaps? The woodwind ornamentation at figure 35 adds a shine to the string line below.
Variation 14	Over pulsing quavers played at the heel for extra attack in the lower strings, the Caprice is flipped on its head and taken for a gallop by the rest of the orchestra.
Variation 15	This is the variation that recalls the nimble passagework of jazz pianist Art Tatum in the right hand. The Spotify playlist allows you to play his 'Tiger Rag' as a direct comparison. It's the piano's first completely unaccompanied moment.

Variation 16 & 17	Both of these set up the famous 18th variation. They are about building a sense of yearning and tension, while keeping the colour and mood subdued. Apart from some solo lines, the orchestra (strings in particular) is used purely for texture and effect. The big tune is around the corner...
Variation 18	'This one's for my agent,' said Rachmaninov, knowing that he had just written a crowd-pleaser. In the soft key of D flat major, the piano theme seems to be unrelated but is in fact an inversion of the Caprice, or at least of its main contours. This is string writing at its most luxuriant, and quintessential Rachmaninov, with plenty of rubato and long crescendos.
Variation 19	How do you burst the bubble after a variation like that? With dry pizzicato, capricious staccato and helter-skelter solo writing! This feels like a scherzo.
Variations 23-24	The momentum never lets go now until the end. Look out for another signature trait of cascading bells in variation 22, and how the 'Dies irae' makes a fearsome return in the brass in the final variation. The whole orchestra is unleashed in this final section (19-24), and there are two cadenzas for the soloist. Suddenly Rachmaninov pulls out all the stops, and it's all the more effective for his earlier restraint.

Conclusion

Initial reaction to the *Rhapsody* was mixed. One correspondent in Baltimore opined it was 'not an important opus, in all probability, but one eminently worth hearing'. The *New Yorker* was more positive, speaking of 'the succession of brilliances for the piano, dramatic references to the "Dies irae", wide-open *schmalz* for divided strings and old-fashioned bravura...', before concluding that:

'The Rhapsody isn't philosophical, significant or even artistic. It's something for audiences, and what our orchestras need at the moment is more music for audiences.'

The critic was right, in that the work has continued to be a big hit with audiences ever since its first hearing in November 1934. Its popular touch, however, should not detract the listener from appreciating the craftsmanship that lies behind the playful textures, big tunes and taut structure. All of these reveal a composer at the peak of his art.