

RICE UNIVERSITY

**A Stylistic, Contextual, and Musical Analysis of Rachmaninoff's
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43**

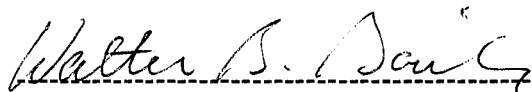
by

Ying Zhang

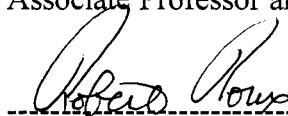
A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Musical Arts

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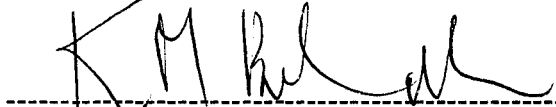
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ABSTRACT

A Stylistic, Contextual, and Musical Analysis of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43

by

Ying Zhang

This document explores the use of the theme from Paganini's 24th Caprice and the *Dies Irae* in Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43. The two themes are studied from a historical and musical perspective, and their contribution to the work's dramatic and musical design is analyzed. Chapter V is an extensive musical discussion of each of the work's twenty-four variations, where phrase structure, thematic relations, harmonic and melodic shapes, rhythmic patterns, dramatic implications, and performance challenges are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Walter Bailey, Professor of Musicology at Shepherd School of Music of Rice University. Without his patience, encouragement, and many long and involved hours of reviewing and guidance, this thesis would not have been possible. During the past six years, as a member of my graduate committee, Dr. Bailey has inspired me to believe in myself with his unceasing support.

I wish also to express special thanks to Dr. Robert Roux, for being my principle piano professor and mentor at Rice University. He has shown me unwavering dedication and passion in teaching, and has contributed tremendously to my growth as a musician.

Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Jeanne Kierman Fischer and Dr. Kathleen Beckingham, for taking the time to read my thesis and for kindly serving as my thesis committee.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This document will study the genre, structure, thematic/motivic organization, relationship between the piano and orchestra, and other aspects of the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43, Rachmaninoff's last work involving the piano. The Rhapsody is written in a style resembling that of Rachmaninoff's four piano concertos, but it is constructed in a theme and variations form. Essentially, the twenty-four variations are derived from two familiar themes – the first is the theme of Paganini's 24th Caprice, Op.1, for unaccompanied violin, and the second is the plain chant *Dies Irae*. Both themes were used by other composers, but Rachmaninoff's manipulation of them is distinctive and provides not only the skeletal structure of the work, but also its dramatic tone.

Although Rachmaninoff's compositional style is generally considered to be “traditional” and consistent throughout his creative career, in the Rhapsody the texture tends to be thinner and the writing more integrated and economical compared to his earlier works. In addition to this thinning-out procedure, the piano tends to be treated more percussively and as a more equal partner to the orchestra. In regard to timbre, texture, and harmony Rachmaninoff employs many quasi-impressionistic techniques. Programmatically, he weaves into the work the diabolical and amorous elements of the notorious Paganini legend in a new and, for the time, original manner.

During the time between the two World Wars (1918-39), Marxist revolutionaries and Fascists accelerated political change in Europe. At the same time, the musical world branched into different paths. Schoenberg, who had introduced the concept of atonal music in 1908, developed the twelve-tone method in the early 1920s. He and his followers Webern and Berg continued to refine the new system in the next few decades. Stravinsky pushed Russian musical nationalism to its limits with *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913, yet during the 1920s he was drawn to the neoclassical style and produced works such as the ballet *Pulcinella* (1920) and the *Violin Concerto in D* (1931). By the time Rachmaninoff composed the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in 1934, the above works and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin* (1919), Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), Berg's expressionistic opera *Wozzeck* (1925), and Schoenberg's *Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31* (1926/28) had been shaping the way people heard music throughout Europe and America. Compared to his contemporaries, Rachmaninoff's compositional approach was old-fashioned – influenced by the works of Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky and rooted firmly in the style of Romantic period. In this respect, Rachmaninoff is the last composer, virtuoso, and conductor of the late Romantic period. Although as a pianist, he is considered to be one of the greatest virtuosos of the twentieth century, as a composer, due to his resistance to contemporary musical developments, his works were initially rather controversial because they sounded old fashioned. Nevertheless, over the years they have gained in popularity and are now popular favorites of performers and audiences. He thought that the traditional musical language had more substance and that it was the only way for him to write music from the heart. Except as noted above his compositional language never really changed during

his career: he consistently wrote music with passionately lush melodies that spoke of melancholic emotions. He mastered a keen understanding of harmonic rhythm, which gave his music a constant forward motion even when the music is at its softest and slowest. His ability as a virtuoso pianist and his unusually large hands led him to compose technically challenging passages in his piano works, which often feature thick chords with large intervallic spans and repetitive and leaping octaves in extended passages. In its musical and technical language, Rachmaninoff's music is more of the nineteenth than the twentieth century.

In 1918, on the heels of the revolution, Rachmaninoff left Russia and immigrated to America with his family. In his new home he had to make a practical decision on how to provide for his family. He felt that pursuing his interests in composing and conducting would not bring him the stability and the freedom that he needed at the time. American audiences loved him as a pianist, and once he made the decision to become fully engaged in concert performing, he was offered numerous contracts and opportunities. The powerful concert manager Charles Ellis, the piano manufacturer Steinway & Sons, and the Edison recording company all quickly engaged in business with him. At the time he was forty-five, and this decision turned out to make him one of the most successful pianists of the twentieth century. At the peak of his performance career around the year 1922, he was engaged for as many as seventy-one concerts per season, playing with the finest orchestras in the United States and Europe.

As a result of this new career path, Rachmaninoff's compositional output after 1918 was greatly reduced. In twenty years he wrote only six works: the *Fourth Piano Concerto* (1926), a work for chorus and orchestra – *Three Russian Songs* (1926), his last

solo piano work – *Variations on a theme of Corelli* (1931), *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934), the *Third Symphony* (1935-36), and his last work – the *Symphonic Dances* – for orchestra (1940). It is noteworthy that despite the lack of original works during this period, he transcribed numerous pieces by earlier composers and frequently performed them in concerts.

The *Rhapsody on the Theme of Paganini* resulted from a surge of inspiration and a renewed desire to compose. After completing his concert season in Paris and Liège in April of 1934, Rachmaninoff arrived at his newly constructed villa, “Senar,” near Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, where a brand new concert grand piano was waiting for him – a gift from the Steinway Company. The new environment and the new piano seem to have aroused his creativity and he engaged intensely in composing of the *Rhapsody* for the next seven weeks.

CHAPTER II

The Two Themes

Since the beginning of Western music history composers have reworked preexisting themes or melodies in their compositions. They have been drawn to specific melodies for a number of reasons, including the amount of attention a theme had received historically, or how memorable and catchy the tune is. In fact, the two reasons go hand in hand. When working with this type of preexisting material, composers are faced with the decision of how to preserve the old while giving it new life. Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is an example of such a work: it is based on two pre-existing melodies: the famous theme from Nicolò Paganini's 24th Caprice for solo violin and the tune from the *Mass for the Dead* known as *Dies Irae* in Latin, translated as "Day of Wrath."

By nature these two themes are opposite: the Paganini theme comes from a nineteenth-century virtuosic showpiece, devilish and secular, while the *Dies Irae* originated from a medieval sacred chant. Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody*, his final piano work, manipulates these two themes dramatically, reflecting the composer's masterful musical approach during his final creative period.

The *Rhapsody*'s main theme is revealed in the title. It is not a surprise that the legendary Paganini fascinated Rachmaninoff; they share a similar background. Both were composers who were also renowned virtuoso performers. Unlike many other composers who came before, the great Paganini had proven that he was a consummate

technician in the art of playing his instrument, the violin. His unsurpassed technique both visually dazzled and aurally stunned the audiences who flocked to claim him as their favorite performer. With the overwhelming recognition of his great virtuosity, there were always rampant rumors that his fantastic skills were enhanced by a supernatural boost beyond that which was humanly possible. Some said that Paganini was “possessed of the devil.” As Renée Saussine wrote in the preface to her biography of Paganini:

A haze of legend surrounds the great violinist, whom all Europe believed to be possessed of the devil. There was no other explanation possible, they declared, for this infernal skill, the long procession of adoring women, the infatuation of entire nations. Actuated by vanity or credulity, Paganini bore on his lean shoulders the double inheritance of Orpheus and Don Juan. The legend of Faust, which was beginning to spread through Italy, contributed to the Mephistophelean aspect of the virtuoso, without actually defining the details of a possible pact.¹

Paganini reportedly enjoyed these rumors tremendously and even encouraged them. He actively cultivated a reputation that marked him as a cutting-edge performer who was able to push the bounds of what his instrument could do. He was an opportunist when it came to self-promotion, and he fully exploited the astonishment of his listeners and viewers with clever tricks during each and every performance. These memorable “flourishes” relied on skill, timing, and his special brand of flamboyant charm. As a virtuosic performer, he transformed the violin from an ensemble instrument into a purely solo instrument that commanded attention, aided by his own glamour and rugged

¹ Renee Saussine, *Paganini* (London: Hutchinson, 1953)

individualism. Essentially, Paganini had given birth to a bold new concept—a new kind of playing which focused on performance style, the complexity of what was possible with the instrument, and a devilish mastery of technique.

His set of twenty-four Caprices for solo violin allowed him to show off his unparalleled technique. The works generated unprecedented fanfare and adoration from composers, who saluted Paganini with their own compositions based on the Caprices. Among the first influential composers to have come under Paganini's spell were Liszt and Schumann. Each composer transferred the effect of the virtuosic playing of the violin Caprices to the piano in their own way. In 1833, Schumann composed six *Concert Etudes on Caprices by Paganini*, Op. 10; in 1841, Liszt published six *Grande Etudes de Paganini*, and later revised them in 1851. Influenced greatly by Paganini's virtuosity and showmanship, these works were titled *Etudes* or Studies, but they were in fact more showpieces than studies. Pianists perform them to demonstrate a virtuosity that they have already acquired rather than employing them as exercises.

Brahms was among the first composers to have dedicated an entire composition for piano to the single theme of the last of Paganini's twenty-four Caprices. In Brahms's two books of *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, he expanded the structure of the original theme from AAB into AABB with a repeat of the B section. While the harmonic progression of the theme stays intact throughout, each variation focuses on a different aspect of skill on the piano. As a result, instead of simply being a transcription of Paganini's violin Caprice, as composers had done previously, Brahms's composition is a work organically written for the piano. Brahms's innovation paved the way for Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody. Not only did Rachmaninoff compose the Rhapsody solely

from a pianist's perspective, he also utilized the theme from the 24th Caprice as the seed for a large-scale, masterful work consisting of twenty-four variations.

As a pianist, Rachmaninoff's repertoire included Schumann's, Liszt's, and Brahms's settings of the Paganini Caprices. He must have been aware of the possibilities inherent in the theme from the 24th Caprice, and he was intrigued by what had been done with it previously. But it was not until years after he first encountered these works that he finally worked on the theme himself.

The theme has a very catchy and almost hypnotic effect. Its flexibility and open-ended character, supported by its simple harmonic and melodic structure, make it a good subject for variations. It establishes and confirms the key of A minor both harmonically and melodically.



It is in the form AAB, where A is the antecedent, and B is the consequent, and together they form a complete musical sentence. The most distinctive element of this theme is its

repetitive rhythmic pattern:



It occurs in all but the final measure of each section. The second repetitive element of this theme is its arch-shaped, sixteenth-note melodic motif on every second beat of the measure, which we will call x .



The second borrowed theme of the *Rhapsody* is the *Dies Irae*, a thirteenth-century sequence from the *Mass for the Dead*. In the hands of Berlioz and Liszt, the first line of the tune had been transformed during the nineteenth century into a dark and diabolical “death theme” often heard in classical music. Through the years, this theme became symbolic of “not only death and fear of death, but also the supernatural.” Works that quote it to evoke the supernatural include Bantock’s ‘Witches’ Dance’ in *Macbeth* (1926) and Saint-Saëns’s *Danse macabre* (1874). The theme has also been used to represent political oppression in Dallapiccola’s *Canti di prigionia* (1938-41) and Ronald Steveson’s *Passacaglia on DSCH* (1960-62). In Respighi’s *Impressioni brasiliane* (1928) it is quoted to evoke ophidiophobia.” [fear of snakes]² The new theme contrasts sharply with the rather frivolous Paganini theme. As is typical Rachmaninoff’s music in general, the theme carries with it a sense of ultimate doom and a profound fatalism. The Aeolian mode, and the slow-moving descending progression perfectly illustrate the

² Malcolm Boyd: ‘Dies irae’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 22 January 2007), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

seriousness and the darkness that Rachmaninoff's music conveys. It is significant to note that he identified with this particular theme and incorporated variations of it in as many as one third of his forty-five numbered compositions. However, it was not until 1931, that Rachmaninoff made an attempt to learn the original *Dies Irae* chant in its entirety, having been familiar with only the first few lines. He never quoted the complete theme, and it was only in his last works, namely, the *Paganini Rhapsody* and the *Symphonic Dances* (1940), that he even quoted its first phrase in its entirety. Here in the Rhapsody, he uses the first seven notes from the sequence.



The tune is constructed with “falling” intervals of seconds and thirds (C-B, C-A, B-G), and a double neighbor motion (B-C, A-B). It is centered on the note A: the C descends through B to reach A, and the G, as a lower neighbor, resolves upwards to it. The overall downward direction of the tune and its double focus on A (from above and below) lends it an inexorable, fatalistic quality.

CHAPTER III

The Setting of the Rhapsody – Dramatic Undertones

Rachmaninoff once commented on the core of his compositional intent:

I am not a composer who produces works to the formulas of preconceived theories. Music, I have always felt, should be the expression of a composer's complex personality. A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books that have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the sum total of a composer's experiences.³

The Rhapsody is a good example of how Rachmaninoff integrates drama and life into his compositions. Instead of simply developing the two pre-existing themes in elaborate passage work, as would be the case with most other variations for piano and orchestra, the Rhapsody's dark, fatalistic *Dies Irae* theme dramatically counters and contrasts with the rather superficial, frivolous *Paganini* theme. This contrast serves as a fundamental element in the musical drama the piece produces. Although Rachmaninoff left us with no direct programmatic associations for the Rhapsody from the time when he composed it, about three years *after* the completion of the *Rhapsody* Rachmaninoff provided a plot for the piece to suit the Russian choreographer Michel Fokine's new ballet production based on the legend of Paganini. In a letter to Fokine, Rachmaninoff wrote:

³ Patrick Piggott, *Rachmaninoff* (Cambridge: Faber and Faber Limited, 1978), 56.

About my *Rhapsody* I want to say that I shall be very happy if you will do something with it. Last night I was thinking about a possible subject, and here is what came into my head. I will give you only the main structure now; the details are still in a haze. Why not resurrect the legend about Paganini, who, for perfection in his art and for a woman, sold his soul to an evil spirit? All the variations which have the theme of Dies Irae represent the evil spirit. The variations from XI to XVIII are love episodes. Paganini himself appears in the Theme and, defeated, appears for the last time, but conquered, in variation XXIII – the first 12 bars – after which, until the end of the composition represent the triumph of his conquerors. The first appearance of the Devil will be in variation VII, where at 19 there can be a dialogue with Paganini about his own and the one of the Dies Irae. Variations VIII to X are the progress of the Devil while XI is a transition to the domain of love. Variation VII, the minuet, portrays the first appearance of the woman, XIII is the first conversation between Paganini and the woman, who is also present in the variations up to XVIII. Variation XIX is the triumph of Paganini's art and his diabolic *pizzicato*. It would be interesting to represent Paganini with a violin – not a real one, of course, but something made up and fantastical. Also, it seems to me that at the end of the ballet some of the characters associated with the Devil in the struggle for the woman and for art should look like

caricatures of Paganini. They too should have violins yet even more fantastic and grotesque. You are not going to laugh at me, are you?⁴

This correspondence is the only mention of a program for the *Rhapsody* from Rachmaninoff himself. Even though he wrote it three years after the original work, it provides a vivid description of the music. In Chapter V, I will further analyze this dramatic setting and its effect on the form, structure, and content of the Rhapsody.

⁴ Victor Seroff, *Rachmaninoff* (London: Cassell & Company, 1951), 188.

CHAPTER IV

The Structure

Rachmaninoff explored the dramatic relationship between the Paganini theme and the *Dies Irae* theme in theme and variations form. In the ample space of twenty-four variations on the theme, he explored the fleeting and passionate set of emotions he wished to convey. As the word “rhapsody” in the title suggests, the composition has an inspired, rapturous character. On a structural level, Rachmaninoff divided the composition into three sections of several variations each: the two themes are introduced in the first section, developed and woven into a “love story” in the second section, and finally used to showcase the virtuosity of the pianist in the last section. Within each section, variations tend to be of similar character and often flow from one to the next without obvious breaks. The three major sections are arranged in such a way that the composition resembles a piano concerto: faster bookend “movements” surround the contrasting “slow-movement” in the center.

Section 1:

The first section includes an introduction and ten variations. It establishes the structure of the theme and the key of A minor; it also portrays the Paganini theme with a spirited, diabolical, and energetic character. The contrasting *Dies Irae* theme, first heard in Variation VII, creates an immediate struggle for dramatic purpose.

This first section demonstrates a compositional procedure based on gradual growth on several different levels. First, just as Brahms had done in his Paganini

composition, Rachmaninoff extends the theme to twenty-four measures with internal repetition, producing the structure AABB'. While A remains simple, B grows from or is derived out of A, and B' grows to become even more ornamental. Secondly, from the beginning to the fifth variation, the scoring for piano is pared down to a bare minimum, using single notes, single hand at a time, melodies in parallel motion in eighth or quarter notes, and at the most engaging moment, figurations of sixteenth notes that alternate between two hands. Compared to other more etude-like compositions based of the same theme, this first section is distinctive because of its simplicity: Rachmaninoff seems to be seeking an aesthetic expression that is organic in its approach. At Variation VII, Rachmaninoff introduces the *Dies Irae* for the first time. As a second theme it contrasts with the frivolous Paganini theme. To achieve an even more dramatic effect, Rachmaninoff slows down the tempo with the indication of: *meno mosso, a tempo moderato*. Harmonically, unlike a second theme area in a first movement of a typical concerto form, the *Dies Irae* does not modulate but stays firmly in the tonic key of A minor. Furthermore, the Paganini theme is presented as a countermelody to it in the orchestra, which produces a persistent conflict between the two themes. Here, two performance forces, the piano and the orchestra, are treated as equals: two distinguished characters engaging in dialogue and competition.

Starting from variation VIII, there is a noticeable change of character as the tempo resets to *tempo I* and the *x* motif breaks into the foreground, expressed as staccato chords in the piano. The *Dies Irae* disappears for a moment, but the music keeps driving forward with newly added complexities. The piano part is noticeably more challenging, involving full-chord octave jumps coming from awkward opposite directions and

sustained in a powerful dynamic range. The orchestra echoes the very same character – interrupting and “chasing” the piano.

Variation IX continues the gradually increasing complexity that is typical of this section of the work as the rhythmic pattern between the piano and the orchestra creates a constant conflict between duple and triple, which often leads to problems in ensemble work: the offbeat eighth notes in the piano are difficult to place within the repetitive triplet rhythm in the orchestra. These rhythmic irregularities capture the feeling of jazz, creating a new and refreshing sound experience.

Variation X concludes the first section of the composition with the Paganini and *Dies Irae* themes joined together in the piano.

Section 2:

The second section begins from Variation XI and ends with Rachmaninoff’s famous “Variation XVIII.” Within these eight variations lies an array of contrasting moods and characters, as well as changing tonal centers. Variation XI is a transition from A minor to D minor, a tonal center which is firmly established in Variations XII and XIII; Variations XIV and XV modulate to F major; Variations XVI and XVII are in B-flat major. Finally, the climatic Variation XVIII is in the key of D-flat major. The predominant character to this section, as is appropriate for the middle section of a concerto-like work, is an extreme lyricism, achieved repeatedly through the transformation of both Paganini and *Dies Irae* themes.

Variation XI metaphorically breathes air into the *x* motif, giving it an impressionistic quality. Variation XII, a melancholic *minuetto*, takes the first two notes

(a half step) from the *Dies Irae* and turns them into a winding melodic counterpoint, which is sounded against lush melodies in the orchestra derived from the first, third, and fifth scale degrees of the *x* motif. Variation XVI is a graceful little dance in B-flat minor. While the piano preserves the rhythmic pattern of the *x* motif, the intervals are completely altered; the oboes and English horn sweetly recall the *x* motif and finally the violin solo introduces a new melodic motif derived out of the double neighbor motion of the *Dies Irae*: B-flat, C-flat, B-flat, A-flat, B-flat. The following variation is an extensive application of this double neighbor motif, setting the atmosphere and miraculously preparing the arrival of the “love” episode in the final variation of this section.

In general, Rachmaninoff’s music is structured around a “culminating point,” which he believed to be the climatic point of the entire piece. This “culminating point” must be planned carefully; if it is missed, the composition loses its force. In the Rhapsody, the *andante cantabile* at Variation XVIII represents this point with a passage of Rachmaninoff’s signature lyricism.

As mentioned earlier in regard to the plot for Fokine’s ballet, Variation XVIII is the ultimate buildup of a love episode in this composition. Its entire “new” theme is derived from Paganini’s melody, the motif of which is inverted in mirror motion and transposed to D-flat major. The inverted melodic contour, under Rachmaninoff’s imagination, develops into a luxuriant and a full-bodied lyrical statement. As one of the most famous passages in the entire classical music literature, this variation is charged with sophistication, sincerity, and refined musical taste, as well as a masterful compositional skill that ultimately provides an architectural building-up toward an emotionally exuberant peak.

Aside from the rich emotional and musical achievement in the second section, there are two virtuosic *cadenzi* in the piano part placed at the end of Variation XI and in the main body of Variation XV.

Section 3:

Having woven a slow and dramatic love story into the previous section, Rachmaninoff uses the third section (Variations XIX-XXIV) to showcase the feverish technical virtuosity of the pianist. As if awakened from a dream, the pianist must make an abrupt change in a six-measure transition. Here Rachmaninoff enharmonically modulates using C-sharp in the place of D-flat; a chromatic descent from C-sharp to C-natural returns the musical focus to the tonal center of the first section, A minor. This quick modulation marks the beginning of section three, which functions as would a finale in a traditional concerto.

The tempo picks up and Rachmaninoff challenges the pianist to endure 263 measures of nonstop technical challenges. It starts with a relatively fast tempo at Variation IX, and then progressively accelerates all the way until the tempo is set at Variation XXIII. Furthermore, as often is the case in a concerto, two virtuosic *cadenzas* are featured at critical moments, magnifying the virtuosic effect. Overall, this section is the most technically challenging of the work and therefore reminiscent of Paganini's virtuosity on the violin.

Variation XIX through XXII demonstrate a recurring compositional procedure seen throughout this piece. The tempo marking for each additional variation indicates a gradual acceleration of speed. Inevitably, these four variations are bound together with a

growing momentum that finally reaches an outburst of energy and sound towards the *cadenza* in Variation XXII. As we might recall, this developmental procedure was also a fundamental element in the first section, where the music grew from simple to complex. Rachmaninoff achieved an overall large structural unity as he applied the same progressive method to this section.

Variation XXIII continues in the tempo set at the end of the acceleration. Its restless character is conveyed through a chase between the piano and the orchestra, and the music is increasingly intensified. Both the piano and the orchestra take turns with the restatement of the A material of the original Paganini theme, reestablishing the theme in the midst of an impressive technical adventure. Then the rest of the variation displays a succession of technical challenges that include synchronizations between two hands over chordal octaves, parallel octaves, and a short but brilliant *cadenza*.

Variation XXIV starts off with a slightly slower tempo, and its extended jumps in both hands magnify the technical difficulty to an unprecedented degree. Furthermore, the triplet *staccato* figure creates an aural complexity over its hemiola rhythm, especially when it works against the orchestra as an ensemble. Similar to the previous variation, the technical challenges are presented one after another without any transition. The next ten measures mark a sudden change of articulation, requiring a *legato* effect over uneven intervallic leaps. Musically the pianist is expected to bring out the melodic contour of the inner voice; rhythmically the challenge lies in the hemiola effect of having six beats in the right hand against four beats in the left. The battle does not cease in the last four measures approaching the Coda. The pianist must facilitate herself with a completely

flexible upper body, and still maintain a powerful and accurate aim. The two two-measure phrases are structured with a strong momentum thrusting forward.

The Coda starts where the tempo is marked as *più vivo*. Various musical ideas are revisited as motivic cells, which seem to be perpetually revolving. The *x* motif is heard prominently between the piano and the orchestra, and a statement of the *Dies Irae* is heard in the orchestra for the last time against the *x* motif of the piano. Speed and power continue to challenge the performer. A *glissando* in the piano resolves to an A major harmony, provoking a sense of triumph over evil. Humorously and yet suggestively, the last two measures of the entire piece surprise the audience with a sudden dynamic drop from *sff* to *p*: the devilish character built on the *x* motif from the Paganini theme is revisited for the last time. The Rhapsody ends in a sole tonic note on A, leaving the composition with an open-ended quality.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

Introduction *Allegro vivace*

Before revealing the theme, Rachmaninoff writes an introduction, in which he only hints at it with the sixteenth-note motif that we have labeled *x*. The motif appears in the orchestra combined with a half-step rising motion, *e* to *f*, at the end of each short statement, accompanied by a rising octatonic scale (*f*-sharp, *g*, *a*, *b*-flat, *c*, *c*-sharp, *d*-sharp, *e*) in the bass. The piano merely reinforces the tonic with octaves in both hands on the downbeats where the orchestra is silent, creating a refreshing rhythmic accentuation that disrupts the otherwise static and repetitive nature of the orchestra part. This rhythmic nuance between soloist and orchestra is highlighted by a scoring that is strikingly thin-textured for Rachmaninoff. The *x* motif starts off in the violins alone and is then doubled by the oboe while the violins transfer to a higher octave; the flute and clarinet then replace the flute, doubling yet another octave-transfer in the violins. The passage culminates in a *tutti* statement of the motif in measure 6 and 7. It then cadences quickly, wrapping up the Introduction with a minimally scored V7 chord (on the downbeat of measure 8) that resolves to a tonic note in every sounding part of the orchestra as well as in the piano. In the context of this thin-textured scoring, the pianist's octaves add a percussive effect. All of the devices found in this introduction of but nine measures project the "language" of the entire piece. It is a language that speaks richly of

a “modern” sound that is chromatic, rhythmically accentuated, percussive, and more thinly textured than what we commonly associate with the works of Rachmaninoff.

Variation I (Precedente)

Variation I is played by the orchestra alone, which presents the structure of the complete theme (ABAB’) for the first time. To further establish the “modern” sound, and as a continuation of the introduction, the *Paganini* theme is now heard only in its barest form: it is outlined with notes that are at the core of the theme – tonic and dominant in the A section, and in the B section, a sequence of descending pitches from the subdominant down to the tonic. It is interesting to note that this variation was only added to the rest of the piece at the last minute, prior to the final publication.⁵ Since the first five variations, including the introduction and the Tema, are interconnected in such a way that one flows right into the next, and since all of them are orientated around the *Paganini* theme, this first variation not only prepares the first entrance of the full theme, but also provides the starting place from which the increasing intensity and complexity of each subsequent variation can grow. As we will see later in this work, Rachmaninoff often employed this model of gradually increasing intensity to drive his music forward. He is a composer that did not focus solely on the local importance of a musical idea; instead, he focused on the placement of such events in a larger structural design.

⁵ Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1990), 332

Tema *L'istesso tempo*

With the Tema, the orchestra puts flesh back on the skeleton and presents the full theme. The piano here is simply an accompaniment, picking out the prominent notes, such as tonic and dominant, that had been outlined in Variation I by the orchestra. These notes fall on beats that precisely double the orchestra, and provide a *marcato* effect. Then, in the B' section, the piano contributes to the passage with a touch of characteristic *staccato*, continuing to convey the diabolical nature of the theme. Having the orchestra introduce the theme corresponds to the typical structural organization of piano concertos, where the entrance of the soloist is usually prepped by a substantial passage for the orchestra alone. Here the statement of the theme is simple and straightforward, nothing extravagant; the texture remains spare and the sound focused and rhythmic.

Variation II *L'istesso tempo*

This variation features the piano's first statement of the theme; the orchestra now provides the accompaniment and it punctuates the piano's phrases the same way the piano had done in the Tema. The music stays simple and straightforward, but to give the piano special prominence and to emphasize the playful and diabolical nature of the theme, Rachmaninoff colors this variation with grace notes that "kick" at each of the punctuation points where the orchestra doubles the piano. The pianist is to present an articulate, characteristic statement of the theme while the orchestra stays in the background. The last phrase of the theme, B', shows the first variant, where the right hand is stretched out into an arpeggiated passage that descends sequentially. This variation is so very closely connected to the Tema that one flows right into the next.

Unlike most piano concertos, where the soloist's entrance is often dramatic and emphasized, here the soloist's entrance is treated as a continuation of what had happened earlier in the orchestra.

Variation III *L'istesso tempo*

Continuing in the same tempo, both the orchestra and the piano now deviate from the original theme. The piano part provides a new, clearly extended phrase structure: A (six-bars), A' (six-bars), B (nine-bars), and B' (ten-bars). In spite of its irregular phrasing and extension, the repetitive and sectional orientation of this new variation of the theme clearly resembles the old. Furthermore, harmonically, this variation stays entirely in A minor, as did the original theme, and the B section recalls the descending sequential material from the subdominant to the tonic. Almost entirely in parallel octaves, the melodic gesture of the piano is angular and aloof, consisting of intervals of augmented seconds, diminished fourth, and minor seconds. The basic note values are eighth, quarter, and half notes, all of which are to be played *legato*. In contrast with the piano part, and matching the *leggiere* performance instruction, the orchestra plays accentuated patterns of articulations over a series of swirling sixteenth notes. Rachmaninoff achieved a dramatic setting that drives the music forward with excitement by contrasting this mysterious and restless orchestral passage with the simplicity and distant approach of the piano part.

Variation IV *Più vivo*

The momentum from the previous variation results in the slightly faster tempo of this variation. Entirely based on the *x* motif, the variation explores various shapes and forms of the motif, including its inversions. Piano and orchestra are integrated into a “tight” movement, playing with each other and trading the motif between them. The phrase structure, A (eight-bars), A’ (eight-bars), B (twelve-bars), and B’ (twelve-bars), is similar to that of the last variation, but the A sections are now twice as long as in the original theme and each of the B sections is extended by only four measures. The four extended measures of B (bars 137-140), and B’ (149-152) essentially act as transitions and are identical in their melodic progressions. This progression lies in two contrary chromatic motions: the top moves up with D, E-F, F-sharp-G, G-sharp, and the bottom moves down with B flat, A-A flat, G-F-sharp, F-E. Generally speaking, the B sections are motivically related to the A section, but instead of A minor, they are set in A major. This minor-to-major progression is also observed in the larger context when the composition ends triumphantly in A major. An interesting detail not to be overlooked is that not only each section of the variation starts off on the note A, and end on E, but also the harmonic progressions focus on tonic-dominant relations. Furthermore, the last four measures of this variation consist of a chromatic ascending scale that starts off on E and ends on A. It is not difficult to observe that the framing notes of this entire variation are A and E, tonic and dominant, the core of the Paganini theme. This unquestionably demonstrates one aspect of Rachmaninoff’s keen sense of structural balance.

Variation V *Tempo Precedente*

This variation presents a unique textural change and a characteristic rhythmic challenge. Unlike the simultaneous motion between piano and orchestra in the previous variations, this variation engages the two forces alternately, and rarely do they overlap. A “hocket” effect is produced as the piano plays during the orchestra’s rests and vice versa. Rachmaninoff plays with offbeat ideas in both piano and orchestra on different beats, creating a coordination challenge that is also very exciting when the two parts are put together: an intense sense of rhythmic precision is absolutely necessary in this passage. If the performer only counts and listens for her own beats, she might drag out the quickly moving subdivisions of eighth and sixteenth rests and end up uncoordinated with the orchestra. The underlying challenge remains in maintaining a strict tempo while moving forward to get the music to flow as it was designed. Despite the textural and rhythmic changes of this variation, both the harmonic progression and the phrase structure still resemble that of the original theme with only moderate alterations: the phrase structure is now A (four-bar), A’ (four-bar), B (fourteen-bar), B’ (fourteen-bar). Harmonically, the A section explores tonic-dominant relations and the B section descends in sequence. However, in the piano there is an added “spice” to the entire variation, where the left hand provides a chromatic lower neighbor. Perhaps this was inspired by the grace note heard in Variation II, where the piano presented its theme for the first time.

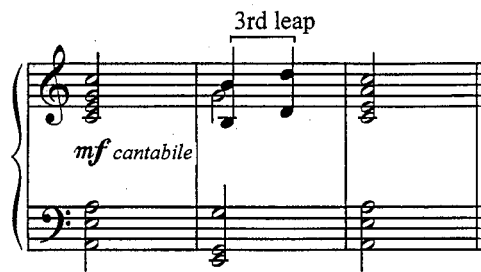
Variation VI *L'istesso tempo*

For the first time since the beginning of the piece, the momentum of the Paganini theme is interrupted in this Variation. Although it starts off at the same tempo as the preceding variation, the phrases are constructed to have more of a “stop and go” freedom. The first two phrases, a total of fourteen measures (189-201) represent the A section. Each of the two phrases starts with the tonic harmony of A minor, and through a *vivo* arpeggiation in the piano, they both end in the dominant with *poco ritardando* in the piano while the orchestra awaits at *colla parte*. The lingering E and G-sharp create an atmosphere that is quiet and full of suspense. For the next eight measures (203-210), the B section is heard in the tonic; it is continued in the following eight measures (211-218) by a statement of the same in the dominant. The following twelve bars of music represent a repeat of the B section, presenting the same material first in the tonic and then in the dominant. At measures 231, the return of A minor quietly wraps up the variation as it echoes a fragment of the beginning phrase, ornamented with a frill at the end that consists of an arpeggiated $i6/4$ chord in the right hand and its lower neighbors in the left. Throughout the entire variation, the orchestra is heard in a supporting role, ceding the stage to the piano. However, there is a subtle effect that defines the function of the orchestra. In both the A and B sections there are two distinctively different ideas presented: 1) the long held tonic chords that extend up to five measures at a time; and 2) the contrasting eighth notes in *staccato* during the following statement. The repeated presentations of these two ideas help unify the variation and counteract the sectional effect.

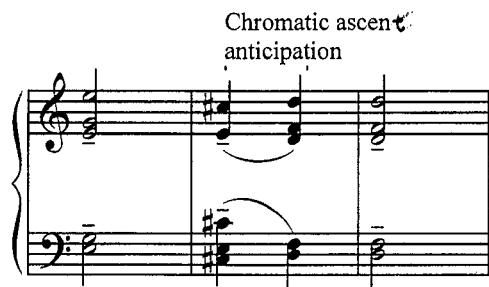
Variation VII *Meno mosso, a tempo moderato*

The *Dies Irae* theme is first stated in the piano in Variation VII as a sustained melody in half notes. In contrast to the earlier variations, this variation is played at a slower tempo and its atmosphere is *poco pesante*. With this new tempo, mood, and thematic material, Rachmaninoff also introduces new rhythms and articulations. In other words, everything but the harmony is new in Variation VII. Unlike the introduction of a contrasting theme in the exposition of a traditional sonata form, this second theme stays in the tonic – A minor. The orchestra hauntingly recalls the *Paganini* theme in the background using only a fragment, motif *x*, and at a reduced speed. Without a doubt, this is one of the first major dramatic moments of the piece. Not only does it introduce a new theme with a new mood, but it also joins the two themes over the same harmonic foundation. Rhetorically speaking, this passage corresponds dramatically to Rachmaninoff's plot for the Ballet. The *Dies Irae* is a dark force, representing perhaps the devil; the slow moving *x* motif represents Paganini under this dark shadow, his vitality and energy suppressed. At rehearsal 19, the two themes engage in a dialogue, where the piano forcefully represents the devil with *f* while the violins nervously and quietly inject the B section material of the Paganini theme in thirty-second notes.

The *Dies Irae* theme starts off on the third scale degree in the first phrase (of four phrases in the variation) that lasts eight bars; the second phrase is intensified with fuller chords in the piano including the extension of the bass down an octave. Never satisfied with repeating something exactly, Rachmaninoff adds an extra melodic figure in this phrase, a leap of a third that hints at the very beginning intervallic material of the Paganini theme.



The third phrase deviates further from the previous two. It is expanded to ten measures, the harmonic language is shifted from a diatonic to a chromatic inflection, and it starts at a higher pitch as it skips up a third to begin on the fifth scale degree in the piano. The half-step chromatic motion at the middle and end of the phrase creates a harmonic anticipation, where the resolution is introduced a beat earlier – the half-note value becomes two quarter notes in that measure.



In the orchestra, the Paganini theme continues in its “incomplete” fashion with eight rests, alternating some of the diatonic notes with chromatics. This rhythmic and harmonic change emphasizes these measures and creates a new melodic interest in the piano part.

The peak of this variation takes place in its final phrase, where the dialogue between the devil and Paganini begins. The phrase is extended to sixteen measures. The dynamic level rises up to *f*, and the starting pitch is another third higher than the starting pitch of the previous phrase. A leading tone G starts the phrase off dramatically on an incomplete A7 chord. The piano opens all the way up into the higher end of the register, creating a sharp sonority that contrasts with the *poco marcato* quality in the bass of the orchestra. The Paganini theme (in diminution) continues in the violins, engaging in the dialogue. At the same time, the horns state the *Dies Irae* a sixth below the pitch of the piano, starting a measure later to create a brief canon. Harmonically, the phrase begins with dissonance-filled octaves in the piano and chromatic descending lines in the bass of the orchestra. As the phrase progresses, the harmonic language relaxes and the chromatic pitches give way to diatonic scale degrees. With this harmonic transformation, the intensity dissolves.

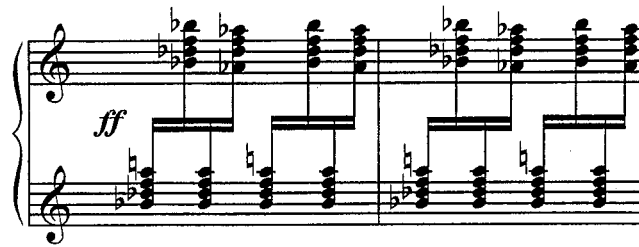
Variation VIII *Tempo I*

In Variation VIII the tempo picks up and the mood suddenly changes. As described in Rachmaninoff's letter to Fokine, Variations XIII through X portray the progress of the Devil. Now, a sturdy and straightforward rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in both the piano and the orchestra, approached with a staccato articulation, comes to the foreground. The material in the piano is a recognizable variation of the Paganini theme, mostly containing the *x* motif, and it is phrased like the original – AA'BB'. However, here the phrases are divided into 8+8+14(4+4+6)+14(4+4+6). This square rhythmic and

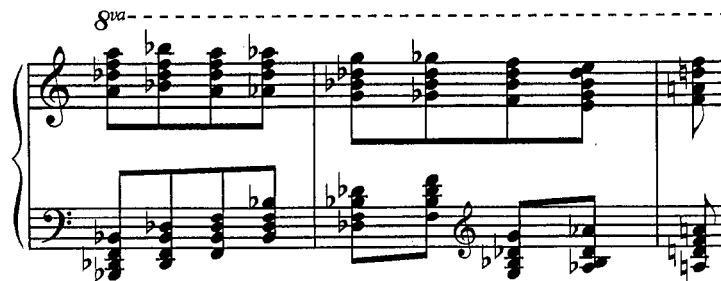
structural design allows the music to build momentum and “take off.” Finally the music will come to its first climatic moment through this and the next two variations.

There is a progressive expansion of technique required in the piano part. From single-note melodies at the very beginning to full-powered octave chords in both hands synchronized at a dynamic level of *ff*, this variation presents the beginning of a long, physically exhausting section of the piece. The clashing chords at B create an extremely satisfying explosion of sound in the piano part, which is even more dramatically illuminated at the repeat when both hands are playing simultaneously, emphasizing the dissonances at the dynamic level of *ff*.

Measures 301-302:



Measures 315-316:



But then, in sharp contrast, the next two measures begin with the dynamic of *p*.

Measures 317-318



Here the material in the piano is reduced to simple parallel octaves while the orchestra fills in the harmonies. This variation is marked by sudden dynamic and figuration shifts. It requires of the performer extreme sensitivity and an unfailing sustaining power. Adding to the drama of the variation is the very characteristic dynamic shaping of a short time span *crescendo*. From measures 317 to 318, and again from measures 321 to 322, Rachmaninoff pushes the dynamic level from *p* all the way to *ff* within just two measures each.

Variation IX *L'istesso tempo*

This variation delivers an extremely exciting and jazzy rhythmic effect. The piano alternates eighth-note rests and eighth notes, having the two eighth notes in each measure fall on the weak beats of the duple meter. The orchestra is also organized in duple meter, having two triplets per measure. The third element of the triplets is often missing, but the first is accented and emphasized. Essentially producing a complex rhythm of two against three, the pianist and the orchestra stubbornly persist with their own patterns. While the orchestra taps the first two notes of the triplets, the pianist

sounds off precisely half way between the second and third divisions of those triplets.

Perhaps because of this fundamental complexity, Rachmaninoff provides stability with a simple and square structure. The four phrases are divided into 8 (4+4) + 8 (4+4) + 12 (4+4+ 4) + 12 (4+4+4), matching the structure of the Paganini theme: AABB'.

Harmonically speaking, just as in much of the rest of the piece, this variation continues strongly in A minor. In the orchestra, the entire A section features a repeating A minor chord, which persists through almost the entire sixteen measures except for the cadential moments at measures 4, 8, 12, and 16. Melodically, the use of an augmented 2nd from C up to a D-sharp in both piano and orchestra gives this variation a twist. This melodic interval is followed by an E, which gives the music an exotic chromatic inflection. Contrast is achieved in this variation with the use of diatonic vs. chromatic harmonies as well as rhythmic complexity vs. structural simplicity. Dynamically, instead of sharp contrast as heard in the previous variation, here the plan is to create a larger span of dynamic range, which corresponds to the four sections. Each section starts off softly, and gets louder towards the end; at the same time, the overall dynamic grows. In the repeat of A, in the piano part, the dynamic starts louder than the first A section, *mf* instead of *p*. But this dynamic difference only appears in the piano; the orchestra stays at *p*. A similar change happens in the repeat of B, and this time the piano stays in *p* while the orchestra gets a notch louder and starts with *mf*. Rachmaninoff is extremely precise about his dynamics: both B sections are marked with *f* in the piano and *sf* in the orchestra, while in both A sections he only suggested a louder dynamic level with the indication of *crescendo*.

Variation X

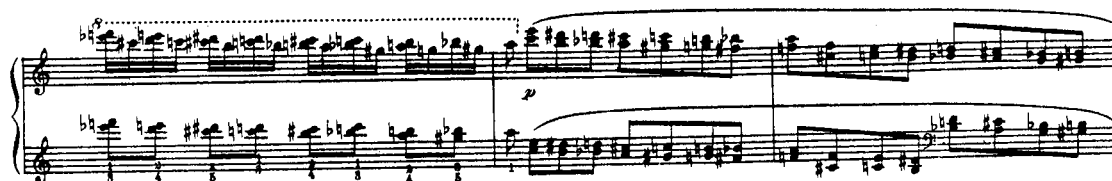
Variation X marks the end of the first section of the Rhapsody. The indication of $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ shows that it takes its tempo from the preceding variation. As opposed to its first appearance in Variation VII, the *Dies Irae* is to be played *marcato* here in low and middle-register octaves. Apparently, this approach is intended to be less melodic and more severe and determined. The orchestra emphasizes the same persistent effect through the use of repetition (the first three beats of each measure) and chromaticism (the final beat of each measure).

The dynamic of this passage is kept under *mf* for most of the time, except the piano's final note, an accented A held for eighth-beats at the dynamic of *f*. Conversely, the orchestra is reduced to *pp*, a dynamic level that it retains until a dramatic *poco a poco crescendo* eventually reaches *ff*. Again, Rachmaninoff has designed a detailed dramatic plot within just a few measures. The climatic moment is reached at the end of this *crescendo* at rehearsal number 28.

For the next seven measures, the meter changes back and forth from triple to duple; along with this shifting meter, the rhythm is strongly syncopated, creating a jazzy feel. The sound is highly American and is evidently a continuation of the jazz influence heard in Variation IX. Upon closer examination, the melodic component of these seven measures is revealed to be the *Dies Irae* theme given a new rhythmic pattern. Moreover, what follows after this at rehearsal number 29 is a further development of the theme fused with jazz rhythms. This time, the right hand of the piano is a variation of the Paganini theme, and both the left hand of the piano and the orchestra present the *Dies Irae* in alternating eighth-notes. As for the pianist, his or her hands must be crossed over

at this point, since the left hand is to be played in the high treble range while the right hand is to remain in the middle register. This apparently is one of the ways Rachmaninoff wished to achieve a virtuosic effect both visually and technically. At the end of eight measures, the brass instruments state the *Dies Irae* again, this time in a more recognizable form – in quarter notes, *tenuto* and *marcato*. The piano presents an ornamental counterpoint to it, descending chromatically all the way down from the highest A to the middle register over four measures of sixteenth notes. Interestingly, there is an exchange of rhythmic patterns at the third measure: while the chromatic descent continues in the piano it becomes twice as slow, switching from sixteenth-notes to eighth notes. At the same time the flute rises up and then falls with a long, winding chromatic scale in sixteenth notes.

Piano – measures 392-394:



Flute – measures 392-394:



In the final four measures, the piano dominates and formulates an interesting structure. There are four segments of material that are basically continuations of the sixteenth-note rhythmic material from the earlier content of the variation. The first two are a variation of the *Dies Irae* in diminution, with the second segment answering the first a sixth below; the third is the *x* motif, which is answered in the orchestra a fifth higher. Finally there is a dominant-tonic resolution, except that it is presented as bare octaves. Overall, the ending presents a reduction both rhythmically and melodically.

Variation XI *Moderato*

After a grand pause comes the second stage of the piece. The meter is changed to 3/4, and a new mood takes over. The overall diabolic nature and the contrast of dark vs. light of the first section are completely replaced by an almost impressionistic emphasis on color. As Rachmaninoff suggested in the letter to Fokine, this variation is the transition to the domain of love. The orchestra comes in with tremolos in the strings, which are then rounded off with a mysterious rolled chord in the harp. On top of this, the piano adds a *cantabile* melodic stretch, rising from the tonic A4 up to C5 and then passing down back to A4 before a leap to the dominant note E5. In fact, this is the *x* motif in disguise. The stretched out roll in the right hand on the downbeat, accompanied by the left hand arpeggiation, certainly enhances the mysteriousness set up by the orchestra, and the total effect softens the rhythmic drive of the previous section. Rachmaninoff indicates *a capriccio* in the score for the piano, and *colla parte* in the orchestra, encouraging the performers to capture a nonchalant quality. There are two

other phrases following the exact formation of this first phrase, and each is introduced by the shimmering strings. The second phrase expands the *x* motif in the piano, reaching A5 with a flip of the motif a fifth higher starting on an E5. In the third phrase, the motif is tripled, ending up in the high treble register starting on A4 and ending on E6. However similar the three phrases may seem, the sound is refreshing in every phrase due to the changing harmonic inflections. The first phrase contains a tritone between D-sharp and A; the D-sharp resolves to E across the measure, ending the phrase on the dominant note. The second phrase reduces the tension of the tritone, softening the harmonic color with a D-natural, which resolves down to C, the median of A minor. The final phrase is the most interesting: while the orchestra sustains an A dominant-seventh harmony, the piano explores a Phrygian inflection beginning on A but including a flat-second scale degree in the right hand, accompanied by the same dominant seventh in the left. Rachmaninoff is playing with the harmony here, since the right hand Phrygian figuration shares the tones of B-flat and C-natural in common with the key of D minor, and the A dominant-seventh chord is also the V of D. For the first time in this entire piece, the harmonies begin to drift away from the tonic center of A minor.

Following the third phrase of the variation, beginning at rehearsal number 31, the music continues to make its strategic transition from the home key downward a fifth to D minor. Between measures 409 and 412, under the cadenza-like figurations in the piano, the sustained bass notes in the orchestra shift back and forth between D-flat/C-sharp and D-natural, which eventually settles on D in measure 412 as the piano rushes down forcefully and rapidly to reach the lowest pitch over the octave above D1. The octave resonates through and under the continually fast and arpeggiated figurations, which

have now changed their direction, ascending instead of descending in a brilliant sweep all the way up to the higher end of piano. The underlying harmony carried on by this figuration is essentially an A dominant seventh over a bass note of D. The transition to D minor becomes even more apparent as the dominant chord is elaborated over continuous figurations in measures 413 and 414. Rachmaninoff handles the dominant harmony in D minor by creating a modern and provoking sound, by enforcing the harmonic transition over a harp *glissando* on an A dominant-seventh harmony, and by employing a strikingly sharp sonority in the piano's highest register. The piano part consists of melodic dissonances such as double neighbors, minor seconds, and tritones, which are emphasized with a dynamic of *f*; it stubbornly repeats itself across the measure. A brief *cadenza* in the piano follows, descending irregularly and rapidly to confirm the key of D minor with the use of B-flat (the sixth scale degree), and C-sharp (the sharpened seventh scale degree). The *cadenza* is eventually reduced to motivic reminiscent of the Paganini theme: C-sharp, B-flat, A, E, and G-F-E-A, which is essentially an embellishment of the dominant note A in the key of D minor. The arrival of the next variation confirms the new key.

Variation XII *Tempo di Minuetto*

Although the previous variation had already changed its meter from 4/4 to 3/4, the capricious nature of the passage somehow reduced the impact of the new meter. Variation XII, however, is strictly in 3/4 and is a *minuetto*, as Rachmaninoff indicates. The Italian word *minuetto* came from the triple-meter French social dance, which was first incorporated into art music in Jean-Baptiste Lully's operas in the Baroque period. It was

a ternary structure with a contrasting middle section later on called a *trio*. However, in this variation Rachmaninoff adapts only the slow tempo of a minuet and not its form to create the effect of a love story. According to the letter to Fokine, Rachmaninoff thought this variation portrayed the first appearance of the woman. He discretely utilized both the Paganini and the *Dies Irae* themes in the variation to create a unique dialogue that dramatizes the passage. The three-note motif D-F-A, heard first in the orchestra, is a reminiscence of the Paganini theme. It starts out unobtrusively in the strings, *pizzicato*, filling the second beat with a rest in each measure. The clarinet transforms the *pizzicato* of the strings into a melodic and lyrical statement in measure 423, which is then given to the horn in measure 427 and joined by the cello in measure 430. The lyrical, three-note motif expands with the entrance of the cello; however, as it deviates from the Paganini theme even further, the *x* motif comes into the scene on the final beat of measure 428 and again at 430. Beginning on the last beat in measure 438, the oboe trades off an extension of the *x* motif with the clarinet, reaching a climactic peak of lyricism.

The piano part works in collaboration with the orchestra. At the beginning of this variation, the piano comes in on beat two at measure five. In the following measures it continues this rhythmic pattern, with its main note falling on the second beat. The underlying motivic idea is outlined on the second beat of each measure, recalling the first two descending notes of the *Dies Irae* theme (F-E). While the motivic idea of the orchestra is based on rising thirds – a fundamental element of the Paganini theme – the piano part is derived from the half-step motion featured in the *Dies Irae* theme, but diatonically inflected with rising or falling whole-step motion. In the beginning, the piano is heard as an individual entity that stands alone against the orchestra's *pizzicato*

motif. It is clearly phrased and is the dominant voice. While this melodic shaping continues, the orchestra eventually expands into lyrical phrases as mentioned above, and the two forces then start to join together, building up what could be heard as the first highly emotionally-charged moment of the piece. The winding melodic motion, and the constant effect of unresolved tension that accompanies it, creates forward momentum and emotional satisfaction.

Variation XIII *Allegro*

The orchestra dominates Variation XIII with a statement of the Paganini theme, but the *minuet* of the last variation is now transformed into a heavy waltz, *molto marcato*. Still in D minor, the original theme is revisited with little alteration, providing the same phrase structure and melodic motif. Besides the change of key area, the original sixteenth notes become eighth notes, the original duple meter is now triple; tonic and dominant notes are still placed on the downbeat of each measure. The end of A is rhythmically emphasized with syncopation and accents. B also stays very close to the original. Despite the limited differences between this variation and the theme, the character changes dramatically. The orchestra's *marcato* character pervades throughout; the piano carries on a chordal movement that produces a massive and relentless sound, almost percussive and monochromatic. The piano cuts through the orchestra with stresses on the second beat of each measure, creating two strong beats and a weak third beat. The pianist must sustain a powerful *ff* while managing chordal jumps across the high and low ends of the keyboard. This variation also provides a sharp contrast to the previous two variations. Instead of focusing on tone color and emotional details, here the approach is relentlessly

rhythmic. This variation provides a moment of stability within the ongoing shifting moods and characters of the surrounding variations.

Variation XIV *L'istesso tempo*

The same heavy character from the previous variation continues into Variation XIV. However, the key is changed with a direct modulation into F major, the relative major of D minor and, although the tempo and the meter remain the same, the character changes from that of a waltz to a march. Even though the meter is 3/4, this march-like character is produced with the melody moving in groups of two bars, supported by rhythmic and harmonic emphases on the downbeat of each two-bar phrase. This is a variation for the tutti; it serves as a transition to the piano's cadenza in the following variation. The horns and strings start off the variation with rhythmic punctuations over staccato accented-eighth notes, providing a driving force for the entire passage. The woodwinds and first violins then present a new variation on the theme. Constructed melodically of skipping thirds and fifths, the beginning motif is derived from the open fifth of the *Paganini* theme. The rhythmic construction of the four-note motif brings up memories of Beethoven's "fate motif" in his Fifth Symphony. The melody of this variation lasts twelve bars before the piano strikes with thick chords in each hand in contrary motion. This interruption lasts only three measures, providing a small bridge before the melody repeats. During this second statement, the piano part is labeled *ad libitum*; Rachmaninoff may have felt that the heavy texture of the orchestra made the piano superfluous in this passage.

Throughout this variation there is a rhythmic complication, with parts of the orchestra playing in duple divisions of the beat and the rest in triple. Here, the strings and horns provide the duple basis, and the piano and the rest of the orchestra maintain a triple orientation, and this subtle internal complexity creates a rich nuance. At measure 495, at the end of the *ad libitum* passage, the piano continues with octave-filled chords, now in triplets divided between the two hands. The melodic contour of this figure, which is doubled in the woodwinds, recalls the motivic pattern of the earlier three-measure bridge in the piano part. Then, beginning at measure 497, the four-note “fate” motif repeats through a diminuendo and finally wraps up the variation, overlapping with the sixteenth-note figuration in the piano that leads to the cadenza.

Variation XV (Orchestra: Tacet) *Più vivo. Scherzando*

The thick chordal texture of the previous variation is completely replaced by a flowing movement over winding, *scherzando* sixteenth-note figurations between the two hands of the pianist. The orchestra stays silent, yielding prominence to the pianist’s seemingly improvised cadenza. The passage is highly chromatic, filled with surprising twists and turns. In general it provides a wild contrast to the preceding variations while preserving the devilish quality of the Paganini theme. Although the content has an improvisatory character, Rachmaninoff structures the solo passage in two parts -- the first part starts at measure 505 and ends at 519, and the second part repeats the first part motivically but not harmonically. The tonality of this variation stays in F major, but the harmonic progression is irregular and unconventional. The abundant chromaticism weakens the tonal polarity and adds to the improvisatory character. When the orchestra

enters at measure 532, the music becomes multi dimensional: the left hand of the piano part becomes melodic and is stretched out to eighth and quarter note values, producing a lyrical foundation to the continuing fast moving right hand. Although the right hand is still entirely in sixteenth notes, the pianist is instructed to bring out certain notes, identified with stems in the opposite direction to the prevailing figuration, to add an additional “voice.” Furthermore, the cello adds one more melodic line to the passage, while the rest of the orchestra accompanies lightly with bouncing *staccato* eighth notes. At measure 548, the oboe introduces the motif from Variation XIV and it is promptly answered by the horn in the next measure. Then at measure 552 the clarinet introduces it again and is answered by the viola in the following measure. At measure 557 and 558, the orchestra rhythmically accents the second beat of the triple meter, anticipating the eighth-note pairs at the beginning of the next variation.

Variation XVI *Allegretto*

The tempo slows down to *Allegretto* for Variation XVI and the meter shifts back to the duple meter of the first section of the piece. The key is B-flat minor, a fifth down from the F major of the previous variation, which continues the pattern of progression (A minor-D minor-F major) utilized so far into the second section. The paired eighth-note figure starts gracefully on a single note, F, which, as the tonic in the key of F major and the fifth in the key of B-flat major, serves as a pivot. The note then is accompanied by a chromatic descent in an inner voice, providing a D-flat, the third scale degree of B-flat minor; when the B-flat is added a full tonic chord is sounded.

In this graceful little dance, the piano preserves the rhythmic pattern of the *x* motif, although the intervals are completely altered. The oboes and English horn also sweetly recall the *x* motif, and a shimmering chromatic tremolo in the bass-adds a sinister effect. Finally the violin solo introduces a new melodic motif based on a double neighbor, B-flat-C-flat-B-flat-A-flat-B-flat, which is reminiscent, rhythmically, of the *x* motif, and melodically, the *Dies Irae*.

The middle section of this variation is a beautiful culmination of lyricism based on the *y* motive in the orchestra. The thoroughly chromatic piano part, which echoes the effect of the tremolo in the orchestra earlier in the first section, accompanies the orchestra. The middle section ends after the completion of two statements of the lyrical theme based on the *Dies Irae*. Overall, this variation is in ternary form; the last section is a shortened restatement of the first.

Variation XVII

Variation XVII starts off with a brooding sound in the low register of the piano. It grows out of the orchestra's tremolo at the end of the previous variation; this B-flat/A-natural alternation, doubled by a minor third above, emphasizes the half step relation between the tonic and the seventh scale degree and prepares the continuation of B-flat minor in this variation. The piano part has a time signature of 12/8 in parenthesis besides the common time. Clearly Rachmaninoff intended for the music to be heard not in four groups of three eighth-notes per measure; instead, he emphasized irregular subdivisions of the measure and poly-layer voicing in the passage by the way he stemmed the notes.

The long notes, therefore, are the most important, and they produce a melody in this seemingly static passage.

Piano – measures 611-614



The orchestra adds melodic phrases of exceptionally large intervallic leaps in augmented rhythmic values throughout this variation: there are only five such statements in the orchestra, the first two start off with an octave drop then a leap up of a fourth in the first statement, and a fifth in the second. The next two statements are at the peak of this variation. The orchestra now has an upward octave leap, followed by a ninth drop, then a return gesture of a fourth. The piano part at this moment has launched an intense *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in the matter of two measures. As dramatic as it would be for the orchestra to play these phrases loudly, it uses dynamics ranging only from *p* to *pp*, creating the special effect of a negative accent against the piano's *f* at its climax. Rachmaninoff shows his masterful artistry here by not blasting out the elements, but rather letting sounds play off of, and work with, each other. The rhythmic impulse of the entire variation is inarguably slow, adding to its overall tranquil but occasionally “disturbing” moments. The final two measures miraculously transform from the dark, gloomy B-flat minor into a “hopeful” A-flat Major, the dominant of the key of the next variation – D-flat major.

Variation XVIII *Andante cantabile*

The beauty of Variation XVIII has inevitably made it the landmark of the entire composition. In fact, most people know only this variation through movies such as *Somewhere in Time*, *Groundhog Day*, and *Sabrina*, where it was used in the soundtracks. The association to “love” is almost automatic, perhaps due to its highly dramatic, romantic quality. Even Rachmaninoff himself, in the letter to Fokine, described the variation as the ultimate “love” episode. Despite the extensive preparation in the previous variation, one might still wonder how this magically beautiful and lyrical passage relates to the theme of Paganini’s *Caprice*. The melody, first introduced in the piano and then treated expressively in the orchestra, is derived in an ingenious way – not just the *x* motif, but the entire theme! The following comparison illustrates both the original Paganini theme and its inversion without the rhythmic values.⁶



⁶ Chien Chou, “Variation Procedure in Rachmaninoff’s Piano Works” (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1900), p. 141.

The power of this transformation of the theme into a luxuriant and a full-bodied lyrical statement demonstrates Rachmaninoff's mastery. As mentioned earlier, there is always a "culminating point" in Rachmaninoff's music. That point in this composition is unquestionably reached at this eighteenth variation -- a sublime, emotionally exuberant peak.

Structurally, the variation can be divided into three statements of the melody: in the first section the piano has the solo melody; in the second section the orchestra takes over and the piano becomes the accompaniment. Finally, in the last section, the two forces intertwine and progressively unwind. The melody is constructed from a combination of the sixteenth-note *x* motif and a triplet that resolves a fourth down. In the first piano solo section, there are four phrases made up of a combination of the above musical motifs, followed by three phrases based only on the *x* motif sixteenth notes, in a sort of rhythmical diminution. The first two phrases establish the I-V-I-V harmonic progression of the original A section of the Paganini theme. The second two phrases go through a sequential progression of A-flat, E-flat, B-flat, and F, resembling that of the B section of the Paganini theme. The last three phrases transition back to the theme once again. During the entire first statement, the dynamic stays relatively quiet and the mood calm, and the sound is tender. After the solo, the orchestra preserves the exact phrase structure and presents the whole theme with a light texture in the winds and strings. The dynamic is only *mf* in the orchestra, but *f* in the piano accompaniment. Momentum builds as the rhythm tightens and the dynamic grows at measure 654, and then the final statement starts heroically at measure 658. The orchestra is now in full force, including full strings, and winds playing *rubato*. At the dynamic level of *f*, the piano pounds out

chordal octaves over a range of six octaves. However, the music takes a surprising turn when everything seems to dissolve quickly into counterpoint between the piano and orchestra. While the piano carries on with a tender exchange of two voices, in which the top voice is the main melody and the inner voice is a descending scale outlining a fundamental descent (or *urlinie*⁷ in German), 5-4-3-2-1 in D-flat major, the orchestra echoes this descent in counterpoint to the piano.

The variation overall has a stable harmonic focus on D-flat major, leaving the passage both hopeful, in the piano solo, and triumphant, in the orchestra statement, and contrasting sharply with what was heard previously. This passionate love episode comes to an end as the piano recalls the main statement of the melody, which then ends softly on a tonic chord of D-flat major. Surprisingly, the following six measures of *a tempo vivace* serve as a quick but necessary transition to the next variation. A sudden shift of key from D-flat major to A minor is indicated with the change of key signature. Harmonically, an A major chord interrupts the long held D-flat major chord in the previous measure. C-sharp, the enharmonic equivalent of D-flat, is the third of the new chord; it descends to C-natural in the following A-minor harmony, and the key of A minor is now re-established.

A tempo vivace

The six-measure transition into the next variation not only sets up the key but also the change of character. Like a narrator it announces: listen carefully, something new is about to happen. The rest of the Rhapsody belongs to the third section, which showcases the pianist's virtuosity, explores various rhythmic devices, and builds up to an exciting,

⁷ In Schenkerian analysis, an *urlinie* is a stepwise descent from one of the triad notes to the tonic: 3-2-1, 5-4-3-2-1, or 8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1.

jaw-dropping finale. The first three variations are bound together in a single span of musical excitement; each accelerates a little more, creating a breathless race over a dazzling display of pianistic tricks.

Variation XIX *L'istesso tempo*

In this variation, Paganini's super-human violin technique is powerfully transferred to the piano. During the transition, the string section introduces triplet *pizzicato* figures, which are then mimicked in the piano throughout the variation. Once again, the scoring is reduced to a minimum and the texture is thin. The phrasing is close to that of the original theme: four measures of A, four measures of A', six measures of B, and six measures of B'. However, the B sections are comparatively two measures shorter, and in the fourth measure of each B section, there is a change of meter from 4/4 to 3/4, creating a momentary rhythmic shift. To intensify this shift, it is introduced (measure 695) by a playful rhythmic nuance that creates a sense of hemiola between the piano and the orchestra.

Measures 695-696:

The musical score for measures 695-696 of Variation XIX is presented for four staves. The top staff is for Clarinets I and II in B, showing a triplet of eighth notes in measure 695 and a quarter note in measure 696. The second staff is for Horns I and II in F, also showing a triplet of eighth notes in measure 695 and a quarter note in measure 696. The third staff is for Horns III and IV, which are silent in both measures. The bottom staff is for the Piano, showing a complex rhythmic pattern in measure 695, including a triplet of eighth notes and a quarter note, and a similar pattern in measure 696. The piano part is marked with a forte (f) dynamic in measure 695 and a piano (p) dynamic in measure 696.

This variation challenges the pianist's dexterity as well as sensitivity. To recreate the sound of plucked strings on a violin, the pianist plays at the higher register of the instrument and with continuous snap-actions of the fingertips. Most of the passage is kept at a low dynamic level, with the exception of a few bursts of *f* and *sf* that are supported and emphasized with dissonant chords in the strings. These sharp and brief contrasts in sound punctuate the imitation of violin *pizzicati* on the piano, and convey an edgy modern sound.

Variation XX *Un poco più vivo*

Variation XX flows naturally from the end of the previous variation. The A minor tonality remains the same, the tempo picks up slightly, and the orchestra starts off with a sixteenth-note pattern in the manner of a perpetual motion. Every downbeat and third beat is accented in the strings. The piano part consists largely of a new rhythmic motif which energizes and spices up the nervous and meandering figure in the strings.

Measures 705-707:

The musical score for measures 705-707 of Variation XX is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled 'I', shows the piano part (I and II) and the string part (I and II). The piano part (I and II) consists of eighth notes with accents, starting with a *p* dynamic. The string part (I and II) consists of sixteenth notes with accents on the downbeat and third beat, starting with a *mf* dynamic. The second system, labeled 'II', continues the piano part (I and II) and the string part (I and II). The piano part (I and II) continues with eighth notes and accents, with a *cresc.* marking. The string part (I and II) continues with sixteenth notes and accents, with a *cresc.* marking. The score concludes with a key signature change to A minor (one flat) and a common time signature.

The two hands of the pianist play in parallel motion throughout the variation, with the occasional doubling of an octave in one hand or the other. The writing for piano is

straightforward and uncomplicated compared to many of the other variations. The phrase structure -- A (four bars), A' (four bars), B (nine bars), and B' (nine bars) -- preserves the original proportion of a shorter A section and a longer B section. Although the texture is thicker compared to the previous variation, it is still relatively light. In the A section, the scoring is limited to the strings and the piano for the most part. By the B' section, winds and harp are added and the piano reaches its textural peak with fuller chords. The music intensifies toward the end of the variation.

Variation XXI *Un poco più vivo*

The intensity from the end of the previous variation carries over to the beginning of Variation XXI. At a still faster tempo, the music takes off vigorously. The phrase structure stays predictable: A (four bars), A' (four bars), B (six bars), and B' (six bars). The texture and scoring remains thin as the orchestra is used mainly to intensify and punctuate the piano part. The piano now takes over the idea of perpetual motion that characterized the orchestra part in the previous variation; nervousness and excitement continue to build. As in the previous variation, the piano writing stays in parallel motion. However, the call for *staccato* and *piano* at the same time inevitably present the pianist a higher level of difficulty. In the B section, starting at measure 741, the pianist must alternate octaves and single notes in both hands, at the dynamic of *f*, in very awkward positions. Although Rachmaninoff certainly made it easy for the pianist by not asking for constant octaves in the passage, potential problems are still prevalent. First, the pianist must be able to adjust quickly to each and every change of direction while maintaining a powerful sound. This is especially difficult when one is trying to balance the sound of

the single notes in between the octaves. Secondly, related to the evenness of the sound, all of the notes must be precisely *staccato* and rhythmic. A common mistake that pianists make when playing this passage occurs at the eighth-note rest in such measures as 743, 745, 748 to 751.

Measures 748-751:



Often the preparation for the next octave is too long and the result is poor synchronization with the orchestra. The pianist must stay very close to the keys and eliminate all unnecessary hand and arm movements when playing this passage.

Variation XXII *Un poco piu vivo (alla breve)*

Variation XXII is the last in the sequence of variations marked by increasing tempos, but there is much to distinguish it from the other variations in this group. At sixty-two measures, this variation is the longest of the entire composition, and it is divided into three sections plus a brief piano *cadenza*. Instead of preserving the phrase structure of the original theme as done in many previous variations, this variation largely centers on the harmonic conflict between A and E-flat: both appear as pedal tones over extended passages. E-flat, the dominant of A-flat minor becomes a chromatic replacement of the dominant of A minor.

Among the three sections, the first (measures 753-785) features a march-like chordal display in the piano accompanied by both rhythmic and melodic fragments of the *x* motif in the strings and the timpani; the second (measures 785-798) features irregular scales in the piano and a lavish use of chromaticism in the orchestra; the third (measures 798-818) recalls fragments of the Paganini theme in the orchestra, accompanied by a powerful wave of arpeggios in the piano over the E-flat pedal point.

Throughout the first section of this variation, the constantly changing harmonies in the piano part are contrasted and restrained by the A pedal point in the double bass, timpani, and bassoons. The piano's octave-filled harmonies also illustrate a creative combination of ascending and descending motion: while the chord progression descends, each successive phrase begins at a higher pitch. Effectively, the "struggle" between harmonic progression and pedal points, and between descending and ascending motion, creates a delay of gratification.

Piano measures 753-770:

The image displays four staves of piano music. The first staff is marked 'marziale' and 'pp'. The second staff is marked 'crescendo'. The third and fourth staves continue the musical progression with various dynamics and articulations.

On top of everything, as mentioned earlier, reminiscences of the x motif are presented insistently in the timpani and violins. All of these features provide a complex dimension of expression.

The second section is approached by the piano through a wild buildup of diminished-seventh chords, still supported by a pedal point on A in the orchestra that is enhanced with the half-step chromatic leading tone of G-sharp. This G-sharp is critical here as it is the enharmonic equivalent to A-flat, which prepares the ear for the E-flat dominant-seventh chord on the downbeat of measure 785 – the beginning of the second section. The E-flat immediately takes over as the new pedal point in the double bass and

the bassoon. The piano trades the angular chordal texture for irregular scales in parallel motion. There are six entrances of these scales, but each one starts on a different note and on a different beat. Their rhythm is based on triplets, but it is not entirely consistent. In both the third and the fourth phrases there are four-note groups mixed in, and in the sixth phrase there is a quintuplet. The rest of the orchestra presents a busy texture, where nearly every part has its own rhythm. Compared to the first section of the variation, where the march-like beat provided a strong rhythmic organization, this passage feels almost improvised.

The start of the third section is indicated with a change of texture, dynamics, rhythm, and piano figuration. A harp is added to the sound, enhancing the arpeggiations of the piano. Horns and trumpets call out octaves and fifths, recalling the skeleton of the Paganini theme heard in the introduction of the composition. The strings and other parts of the orchestra then take turns restating the *x* motif, not as an accompanimental idea as earlier, but as the main melody. The two-beat division per measure returns, clearly divided by the arpeggios in the piano. After the chromatic middle section, E-flat major is established at the beginning of this third section, and it continues powerfully into the *cadenza*. The transition to the *cadenza* starts with a change of meter from duple to triple at measure 808. During the next eight measures there is a sense of hesitation and interruption. The overall melodic direction is descending. The piano interrupts the orchestra twice, the second time in a higher register, which contradicts the descending effect. After two more measures of the orchestra's chromatic descent, a triumphant rising gesture, accompanied by a strong *crescendo*, leads to the *cadenza*.

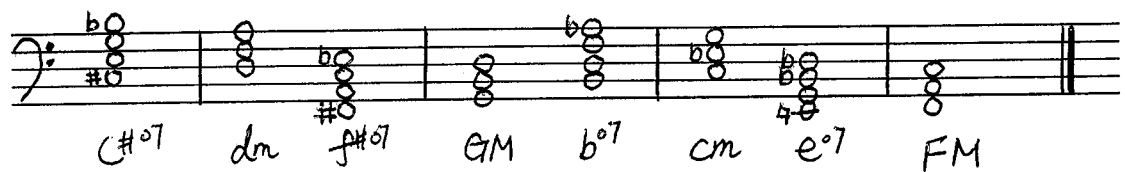
A *cadenza* is a typical showcase of the pianist's virtuosity, and here it shows a combination of power, speed, and octave passages. Both the opening melodic material and the ending are clearly restatements of the *x* motif in the key of E-flat major. The middle passage contains two extremely quick and powerful *crescendos*, both ending in *ff*, and both played with alternating hands. The first one is a chromatic rising octave passage, and the second consists of alternating thirds. These alternating thirds had first been heard in measure 413 of Variation XXI, where they were also presented in a *cadenza*. Here, in the left hand of these alternating thirds, there is a hint of the conflict between A minor and A-flat minor: the A-C implying A minor, and A-flat and C-flat, implying A-flat minor. As we shall now discover, this conflict is carried into the next variation.

Variation XXIII *L'istesso tempo*

The meter settles in 2/4, a return to the original meter of the Paganini theme in Variation XXIII. Structurally, both "A" and "B" sections of the original theme are extended in this variation. After four measures of introduction, the A section with its extension lasts sixteen measures (measures 821-836), and the B section with its extension lasts a total of twenty-four measures (measures 837-860). The variation ends with a final piano *cadenza* at measure 861.

The variation opens with an immediate conflict between A-flat minor and A minor represented by the piano and the orchestra. The piano finishes the phrase carried over from the previous *cadenza* on the dominant, E-flat, in the key of A-flat minor. The note is forcefully doubled at the octave in both hands and then repeated an octave lower.

After a one-measure pause, the orchestra responds in the same forceful way, but with E-natural, the dominant of A minor. For the next sixteen measures, this A-flat minor and A minor conflict is expanded into two equal eight-measure phrases, each restating the A section of the original Paganini theme, first in the piano then in the orchestra. The set up of this harmonic ambiguity continues to be exploited in the B section, which begins at measure 837. The downbeats of the next four measures outline the descending fifth progression of the original B section. However, these downbeats are approached chromatically through harmonies of viio7.



Between measures 841 and 844, the piano illustrates this chromatic progression further by applying it to the x motif. Starting off with B-flat major in measure 841, the harmony moves to B major in measure 842. The progression speeds up with C major on the downbeat of measure 843, followed immediately by D-flat major on the second beat of the same measure. The last eighth-note of measure 844 implies an E7 harmony that resolves to A major on the downbeat of 845, the beginning of the repeat of the B section. Similar harmonic progressions are heard for the next eight measures. However, the downbeats of measures 845-849 are approached by secondary dominant-sevenths instead of viio7.

The next important harmonic progression happens in measure 852, the beginning of the extended B section, where the orchestra has the *x* motif. Here the D-flat major harmony is replaced by its enharmonic C-sharp major chord on the second half of the first beat. It progresses to an F major chord on the downbeat of measure 853, followed by a D minor chord on the downbeat of measure 854. The choice of keys may very well be intended as a flashback to the key progressions heard in the second section of the composition. C-sharp major, the enharmonic of D-flat major, is the key of Variation XVIII, F major is the key for both variation XIV and XV, and D minor is the key for both variation XII and XIII. The second beat of measure 854 starts off another combination of these three harmonies: C-sharp major-F major-D minor. Then, beginning with measure 856, the progression is reduced to C-sharp major-F major, which continues until an A minor harmony replaces the C-sharp major harmony at the second half of the first beat in measure 859. Rachmaninoff seems to be avoiding references to the tonic of A minor since he not only immediately ends the orchestra in F major on the downbeat of measure 861, but also omits the leading tone that would imply A minor in the piano's double-octave scale between measure 861 and 864. The orchestra ends on a B7 chord on the downbeat of measure 869 and kicks off the last piano *cadenza*, which extends the harmony through an arch-shaped flourish that rises up then falls down. It continues with another improvisatory ascending flourish, and then finally ends with four second-inversion triads that further emphasize harmonic ambiguity.

Along with this harmonic ambiguity, Rachmaninoff achieved a progressive, “modern” sound with the manipulation of percussive rhythms shaped by the two forces – piano and orchestra. The multi-dimensional rhythmic approach between the sections of the

orchestra and the piano creates exciting momentum throughout the variation. The rhythmic complexity evident in measures 852 through 861, for example, results in an unconventional and effective intensity that would push any listener to the edge of her seat.

Variation XXIV *A tempo un poco meno mosso*

After the completion of a breathtaking twenty-third variation, the momentum of the music continues to drive forward even though the tempo slows down a little and the time signature switches to 4/4. This slight drop of the tempo is extremely necessary due to the *staccato* triplet figure in the piano part, which dominates the entire variation. Between measures 872 and 883, the triplets in both hands demonstrate some of the unprecedented technical challenges in the composition: the right hand goes through passages of extended leaps as far as two octaves, while the left hand jumps back and forth between single notes and intervals or chords. The difficulty for the pianist is to present such irregular, *staccato*, and disjunct movements in ways that are smooth and effortless while maintaining a steady and exciting speed. This passage certainly is one of those “devilishly” difficult Paganini moments; even Rachmaninoff had to struggle with it.⁸

The next distinctive section of this variation starts at measure 884 and ends at 894. There is a significant change of character in the piano from the former *staccato* playing to *legato* playing. The sound changes from the previously “dry” to “wet”, incorporating abundant pedaling and dynamic nuances. Although the tempo stays the same, the sudden

⁸ Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1990), 331-2.

voicing of an inner voice, with six quarter notes in the right thumb against the four beats of triplets in the left hand, makes it best to feel two beats per measure rather than four.

Measure 894 starts off another contrasting section consisting of four measures where the piano part is labeled *scherzando*. Jumps in both hands are featured again at irregular intervals and directions. The *scherzando* effect is achieved with short *staccatos* on the first note, followed by a slurred second and third eighth note of each triplet.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, labeled with measure 13, consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The treble staff contains a series of eighth-note triplets, with the first note of each triplet marked with a staccato accent. The bass staff contains a series of eighth-note triplets, with the first note of each triplet marked with a staccato accent. The tempo/mood marking *p scherzando* is placed below the first measure. The second system, labeled with measure 15, also consists of a grand staff. The treble staff contains a series of eighth-note triplets, with the first note of each triplet marked with a staccato accent. The bass staff contains a series of eighth-note triplets, with the first note of each triplet marked with a staccato accent. The tempo/mood marking *p scherzando* is placed below the first measure.

Harmonically, this variation starts off right away in the tonic key of A minor, the first time the tonic has been visited since Variation XXII. Throughout the three sections discussed above, the tonic key lies buried under chromatic scales and voice leadings. However, beginning with measure 892, there is a strong re-calling of the tonic. First the downbeat constructs an E7th chord, then a persistent A minor chord demands attention while other “foreign” chords try to undermine its stability. Finally, the build up comes to the end at the last beat of measure 897, where a satisfying dominant 7th chord is heard before the Coda settles in A minor once again.

Coda *Più vivo*

A coda is usually used to conclude a piece of music through prolongation of its cadence. The chords of the cadence are developed elaborately, and the tonic key is reestablished through this process. In this specific coda, Rachmaninoff puts the music in “overdrive”; he speeds up the tempo and compresses what had formerly been a triplet figure into four sixteenth notes per beat. The newly designated 2/4 meter in fact feels as it is written with a single strong beat per measure, due to the fast moving sixteenth notes punctuated by sharp downbeats in the strings and timpani. This coda is also a summary of many musical materials used previously in the composition. The first four bars, 898-901, are a reminiscence of the *cadenzas* from the end of Variation XXII (measure 816), and earlier in the *cadenza* of Variation XI (measure 413). Here, the alternating fourths in the left hand against thirds in the right are accompanied by a rising figure in the strings: G, G-sharp, A.

This melodic element, combined with a rhythmic figure



derived from

the last three notes of the *x* motive, drives the momentum toward each downbeat and its A minor harmony. While the piano continues the alternating-hands figure, the *x* motif itself is heard in the first violin at measure 902, and it is then repeated in the subsequent three measures in the violin and woodwinds. When it stops at measure 906, the piano takes over with four measures of a powerful surge of *crescendo* with chord-filled octaves alternating between the hands, accompanied by the same rhythmic figure derived from the *x* motive (see above) in the strings. All of this activity ushers in one last episode of the Paganini theme vs. the *Dies Irae*. For the next eight measures, both the piano and the orchestra reach their fullest and highest peaks of sound. Although the texture and orchestration is dense, the two opposing themes are clearly evident throughout. This fanfare-like passage features the *x* motif in the brilliant top register of the piano, supported by harp and wind instruments. In the bass and middle registers, the brass and strings call out the grandiose *Dies Irae*, ending in a triumphant D major harmony in measure 918. The newly arrived major harmony rises up with four measures of broken-chord alternation between the two hands in the piano. The harmony passes through D minor to end with a *glissando* that starts with A. This *glissando* culminates in an A major harmony on the downbeat of measure 926, where a succession of explosive chord-filled octaves are revisited in the piano, alternating between hands, moving from the highest A down the entire keyboard to the lowest A. At measure 934, the piano continues in its alternating manner, now rising up in octaves with A and B-flat between the two hands. Adding to this localized chromaticism, the orchestra produces a shimmering effect with trills on the same notes, gradually getting louder and louder. The piano ends at measure

937 with a trill in octaves on the same two pitches, emphasizing this chromatic effect even more fervently. Just when one might be expecting a V-I cadence, Rachmaninoff places an E-flat major chord against the note A (sounding in several octaves) on the downbeat of measure 938, strengthened with a *sff* and followed by silence. This dissonance is clearly the chromatic neighbor of the V7 chord that follows in the next measure, which is then resolved to the tonic with a final laugh in the form of a fragment of the *x* motif in the piano.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

Upon first hearing of the *Rhapsody*, I was astounded by its attention-grabbing drive and its emotionally engaging setting. The title of the piece suggested to me that the Paganini theme would be the basis for variations, but I was not anticipating a full-fledged musical drama, one that would “tell” a story so emotively. As the composer’s final work for piano, the *Rhapsody* is a tribute to Rachmaninoff’s ability to synthesize high artistic values with abundant virtuosic technical demands. My research led me to a detailed structural, thematic, and contextual analysis, which opened my eyes to the depth of the musical meanings with which Rachmaninoff imbued Paganini’s theme.

The twenty-four variations on the theme are divided into three contrasting sections instead of a traditional through-composed setting that moves just from one variation to the next. Each of the three large sections has its own unique character, which contrasts with its neighboring section. Overall these three sections resemble the traditional sequence of movements in a piano concerto.

In the first section of the *Rhapsody*, two themes are introduced, the Paganini theme, and the *Dies Irae* theme. For the most part, the section has a feel of simplicity and frivolousness to it, staying true to the sound quality of the theme played on a solo violin. The first six variations move along quickly and uninterruptedly. When the

contrasting *Dies Irae* first appears in Variation XII, the mood changes and it sets the stage for dramatic conflict, which develops and struggles for resolution in the following two sections.

The second section in this composition is the place for love, expressed through dialogue between the piano and the orchestra and a highly lyrical character. Variation XI sets a laid back, dreamy atmosphere; variations XII and XVI present beautiful, slow melodies intertwined between the orchestra and the piano. Variation XVII prepares the spotlight of the section -- the ultimate “love” episode of variation XVIII. This variation is a magnificent transformation of the Paganini theme, which takes the role of a culminating point in the entire composition. Interrupting this overall lyrical and amorous section are two brilliantly written *cadenzi* for the pianist, placed first in the end of variation XI, and then more extensively in variation XV. These fleeting passages are there as a reminder that Paganini’s devilish spirit is truly an omniscient force.

The third section is when this force comes alive once again. Aided by unprecedented technical challenges for the pianist, this section is nothing like the simplicity of the first section. Between variations XIX and XXII, the tempo progressively moves up a notch with each variation, resulting in a fierce momentum from the beginning to the end. Along with technical displays and the over-the-edge speeds, the harmonic language becomes unclear and chromatic conflicts maximize the tension. The final appearance of the *Dies Irae* theme in the coda joins the *x* motif of the Paganini theme in a triumphant fanfare, which brings the piece to an A major ending.

My analysis of this piece led me to ponder what makes a piece of music last through time. What I found in the essence of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody* is what can be said about any master artwork; between its carefully chosen thematic elements and its strategic planning of structural design, lies the full-fledged, hearty content with both meat and bone. Music captures what life is: love, evil, struggle for freedom, betrayal, triumph... the *Rhapsody* vividly presents a microcosm of life.

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