Introduction

Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43* in 1934. Written fifteen years before he died, it is one of his last compositions because his compositional output was slow during the later years of his life. While it was popular at its premiere, it has gained even more popularity today and is one of Rachmaninoff's most famed and loved compositions. The following “five-sided musical matrix” gives an overview of the *Rhapsody*:

The Musical Matrix:
- **Composer:** Sergei Rachmaninoff
- **Era:** Twentieth Century (Neo-Romantic/Romantic in Rachmaninoff’s approach)
- **Country:** Russia
- **Trends:** Very expressive, tending toward expressionism (dark side of romanticism)
- **Form:** Concerto – Theme and Variations

Rachmaninoff, a Russian composer, has been considered not only one of the world's greatest pianists but composers as well. Rachmaninoff gained his reputation when he began writing pieces in music school. During his early studies, he composed *Prelude in C-sharp Minor* which preceded him in reputation to the United States. There he was received with an enthusiastic response on his first tour. Rachmaninoff spent most of his life traveling, giving concerts, and writing music.

Brahms, Liszt, Lutoslawski, Blacher, and many others, have been intrigued by the Paganini theme and created variations of it. Rachmaninoff himself heard and perhaps even played these pieces so it is not surprising that he took it upon himself to create his own set of variations. Oddly enough, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is probably the most well known of the vast number of Paganini variations by other composers. Many of these composers who wrote variations of the Paganini theme are obscured by Rachmaninoff's powerful concerto-like work on the theme, although Brahms' brilliant *Paganini Variations* for piano is probably the next best known if not tough competition for Rachmaninoff's variations.

The question may be posed, and perhaps rightly so, why the study of this particular piece is of any importance? Perhaps the answer comes from the fact that an understanding of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody* gives more insight to the composer than some of his other works because it is *unique* from his other compositions written around the same time. Studying other works by Rachmaninoff may be advantageous in building a general understanding of his style in a consistent manner but the *Rhapsody* gives a feel for the genius that Rachmaninoff employed, his personal style, his fascination with the *Dies Irae* theme and its ramifications on his music as well as the affect his Russian roots had on his personal life and compositions.
Biography of Rachmaninoff

Sergei Vassilyevitch Rachmaninoff was born into a wealthy family in Semyonovo, north-western Russia on April 2, 1873.¹ At the age of four his mother gave him piano lessons and eventually the family brought in an outside teacher to continue his instruction in 1882. After the Rachmaninoffs moved to Moscow, Sergei studied piano at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. There he showed great talent for playing and composing, winning several awards. In Moscow as a teenager, he met Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky who commissioned him to arrange a piano transcription of the suite from his ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. This was an important time for Rachmaninoff as he developed his compositional skills under the guidance of other famous composers.

At the age of fifteen, Sergei Rachmaninoff graduated from the lower division of the Conservatory and moved into the upper division where he studied under Alexander Siloti. During this time at the Moscow Conservatory, Rachmaninoff, at the age of nineteen, composed his famous *Prelude in C-sharp Minor* which ultimately gained him great popularity in the United States.

Rachmaninoff’s first symphony was premiered in 1897 but was a disaster with critics. This, along with a recently failed love affair put Rachmaninoff into a state of depression and lack of self-confidence. He wrote very little music until he began therapy with Nikolai Dahl. The result of these sessions was the Piano Concerto No. 2 which was very well received at its premier and it remains one of his most popular compositions. In 1902, Rachmaninoff married his cousin Natalia Satina and in 1909, Rachmaninoff made his first tour as a pianist in the United States where he became highly esteemed and popular. In 1917, due to the Russian Revolution, Rachmaninoff lost his estate and belongings and was forced to move to Scandinavia. There he spent a year giving concerts but was in financial distress. In 1918 he was offered three contracts to work in the United States but he declined all three. The Rachmaninoffs eventually moved to the U.S. in 1921 and Rachmaninoff gave many concert tours in an effort to support himself and his family.

In 1921, Rachmaninoff also made his first recordings for Edison Records. At that time, the Edison company had the best audio fidelity in recording the piano. Rachmaninoff did not consider himself a great pianist and thought that his own recordings were variable in quality. He therefore required that any recording of him that was to be produced commercially be personally approved by him. However the Edison Company issued multiple takes of Rachmaninoff’s recordings which angered him. He then left them to join the RCA Victor company. They proudly advertised him as one of their great pianists.

Rachmaninoff’s compositional output slowed significantly during this time of performing and recording but, after building a house in Switzerland, he had enough time to write his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43* in 1934. Rachmaninoff continued to give concerts and compose until his death in 1943.

¹ The Grove dictionary gives the date of the composer’s birth as April 1, 1873, but the correct date is April 2 according to Lyle, Watson. *Rachmaninoff: A Biography*. London: W. Reeves, 1976, pg. 5.
Historical Context of the Rhapsody²

In April of 1934, Rachmaninoff arrived at his villa Senar, near Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, which had been recently built under his supervision. Along with the house, he also received a new grand piano as a present from the Steinway Company in New York. After returning from a vacation at Lake Como, Rachmaninoff began work on the Rhapsody with intense fervor. Vladimir Horowitz recalled that the composer telephoned him nearly every day saying, “I have a new variation to play for you.”³ Rachmaninoff began the work after July 1, 1934, when he arrived back at his villa after his vacation; but he finished the work on August 18. The day after he completed it, he wrote to his sister-in-law, saying:

“...ever since the very day of my return from Como and Monte Carlo on July 1, I've kept myself at work, working literally from morn to night, as they say. This work is rather a large one, and only yesterday, late at night, I finished it.”

The premiere of the Rhapsody was performed by Rachmaninoff with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski on November 7 in Baltimore. Overall, the work gained great popularity and about six weeks later RCA decided to record the Rhapsody with Rachmaninoff and the original performers. The Rhapsody was performed at Carnegie Hall in New York with Bruno Walter conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra; it created a critical and popular sensation. One New Yorker, Robert A. Simon, wrote:

“...After the business of composing variations on a theme had been pretty well upset by an untimely revival of Reger’s variations on a theme by Hiller, Mr. Rachmaninoff restored the industry with a Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. The Rachmaninoff variations, written with all of the composer’s skill, turned out to be the most successful novelty that the Philharmonic Symphony has had since Mr. Toscanini overwhelmed the subscribers with Ravel’s Bolero. Of course, the Rhapsody had the advantage of Mr. Rachmaninoff’s pianism and Mr. Walter’s adroit direction of ensemble music, but the succession of brilliances for the piano, dramatic references to the Dies Irae, wide-open Schmalz for divided strings, and old-fashioned bravura was enough to insure success...”⁴

The popularity of the Rhapsody attracted the attention of the Russian choreographer Michel Fokine. Fokine wrote to Rachmaninoff asking about possible uses of the Rhapsody or programmatic ideas and Rachmaninoff was happy to comply and discuss the possibilities. Three years after the Rhapsody was composed, the ballet “Paganini: Fantastic Ballet in Three Scenes by S. Rachmaninoff and M. Fokine” was produced. The ballet was performed at Covent Garden in London on June 30, 1939 and became a great success.

---

² This historical context of the Rhapsody is extensively referenced from Kang, Heejung. Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Analysis and Discourse. pg. 8 – 14.
⁴ Quoted in Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda. 1956, pg. 309.
Analysis

The following analysis details the overarching structure that Rachmaninoff used for the *Rhapsody* and how the large pieces fit together. Interestingly enough, Rachmaninoff claims that his piece is not a piano concerto and yet it follows the general form of a standard three movement concerto. Rachmaninoff also chose to implement the *Dies Irae* theme in his *Rhapsody* which not only has had special meaning in sacred settings, but secular as well. What, if any, significance this theme held for Rachmaninoff will try to be determined. Finally, this analysis will demonstrate, through specific examples from the score, the genius that Rachmaninoff employed in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

There are many well written and exhaustive research articles, documents and books devoted specifically to the analysis and study of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody*. Given these resources, this analysis will, in all probability, bring nothing new to the subject. Rather it is an attempt to be a guide that is thorough in the most important points and at least interesting and effective in the demonstration of more detailed points in support of the former.

Large-Scale Structure

Although Rachmaninoff, in a letter to his sister-in-law, Sophia Satina, claimed that his *Rhapsody* was “not a concerto,” it bears a striking resemblance with respect to the overall structure of the piece. The *Rhapsody* can be divided distinctly into three sections corresponding to the conventional movements of a concerto: the first predominantly fast, the second slow and the last vivacious throughout. The three groupings are as follows:

1. Introduction, Variation 1, Theme, and Variations 2-10 in A minor. Variation 11-transition to Variation 12, preparing the dominant of D minor
2. Variations 12-18 in D minor, F major, B-flat minor, D-flat major
3. Variations 19-24 in A minor, but revalued as the upper fifth of D

Groupings by Tempo

These divisions may not be immediately apparent to the casual or even alert listener. In the first section, the quick pacing is obvious but it is broken by Variation 7 which introduces the *Dies Irae* theme in the piano with broad solemn chords. However, the fast tempo is picked up again in Variation 8 and continues until Variation 11 where Rachmaninoff indicates a tempo change from the original “Allegro Vivace” to the much slower “Moderato.” Although the fast tempo is broken once by Variation 7, the first section is, without a doubt, predominantly fast. It is not uncommon for a movement in a concerto to vary in speed within itself. However, it usually maintains a certain overall tempo.

---

8 Kang, Heejung. *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Analysis and Discourse*. pg. 19
The second group of variations also presents some difficulty in adhering to the strict three movement plan. The slow pace is set up from Variation 11 and carries through Variation 12. But Variations 13 and 14 are brilliantly fast followed by a scherzando on the piano in Variation 15. To the listener, these fast variations at first seem to give an impression of no overall structure with respect to tempo. And yet, it is only Variations 13 and 14 that break the relaxed tempo. Although Variation 15 is marked “Scherzando,” the piano is quiet and the orchestra has longer beats giving a general feeling of a slower, freer virtuosity in the piano (because the pianist is subject to fast, flowing arpeggios). From there, Variations 16 – 18 are certainly slow.

The last group of variations is fast throughout and holds true to building up to a magnificent finale. Although Rachmaninoff did not want to call his work a concerto, it seems to hold fast, from a tempo standpoint, to the three movement form that he always used in his “real” piano concertos.\(^9\)

**Groupings by Programmatic Suggestions**

Rachmaninoff appears to have had no definite programmatic-choreographic plan while composing the *Rhapsody*. However, three years after its completion, he wrote to Mikhail Fokine, the Russian choreographer:

“...About my *Rhapsody* I want to say that I will 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....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 No. 11 to No. 18 are love episodes. Paganini himself appears in the “theme” (his first appearance) and again, for the last time, but conquered, in variation No. 23. The first twelve measures after all the variations to the end of the composition represent the triumph of the conquerors. The evil spirit appears for the first time in variation No. 7, where at the place marked 19 one can have the dialogue with Paganini about his own theme and the one of Dies Irae. Variations Nos. 8, 9, 10 are the development of the “evil spirit.” Variation No. 11 is a turning point into the domain of love. Variation No. 12, the Menuet, portrays the first appearance of the woman. Variation No. 13 is the first conversation between the woman and Paganini. Variation No. 19, Paganini’s triumph, his diabolic pizzicato.”\(^{10}\)

Rachmaninoff himself thought of love as being the subject of Variations 11-18 with No. 11 being a “turning point into the domain of love.” By creating this group in the middle of the *Rhapsody*, Rachmaninoff has, to a certain extent, created three sections by defining one. This further supports the idea of a concerto-like form into which the twenty-four variations can be divided. By no means would it be appropriate to impose this three movement form onto the piece simply because it employs a solo piano with orchestra accompaniment. However, the comments by Rachmaninoff show that he also recognized the groupings, if not purposely composed the *Rhapsody* in this manner (perhaps the more likely).

---

**Dies Irae**

*Dies Irae* is one of the oldest and most frequently used of all melodies. A piece of somber beauty and solemn majesty, it is a Latin hymn that has historically been part of the Catholic Requiem (mass for the dead). Rachmaninoff appears to have had a fascination with the melody for it appears in several of his works: *The Symphonic Dances for Orchestra*, Op. 45 (1940) and the *Etudes Tableaux*, Op. 39 (#6), for solo piano (1916) as well as his tone-poem *Isle of the Dead* (1909). The *Dies Irae* melody is found in Variations 7 and 10 as well as the coda. Therefore, it is important to study the origins of *Dies Irae* and the significance it held for Rachmaninoff.

The sequence, *Dies Irae*, is a Latin poem that has been commonly ascribed to the Franciscan monk, Thomas of Celano (d. c. 1250). The author of the melody, as well as the exact time of its composition, remain unknown. It has been suggested that it is from the time period (if not the pen) of Adam Praecentor (cantor) of Notre Dame. Unlike other sequences, *Dies Irae* appears to have had only one melody. For reference, the beginning is quoted here:

![Illustration 1: Dies Irae First Verse]

The text is divided into nineteen verses, each one possessing three lines of eight syllables, with the exception of the eighteenth verse, which has four octosyllabic lines and the nineteenth verse which has two lines of seven syllables. However, the latter verses are of little importance since composers rarely introduce more of the plainsong than the first three phrases. The first few stanzas are reproduced here to give a sense of the solemn and terrifying subject, Judgment Day upon which “the dead are judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books”.

| Dies irae, dies illa,                  | Day of wrath, that day                  |
| Solvet saeculum in favilla            | Will dissolve the earth into ashes     |
| Teste David cum Sibilla.              | As David and the Sibyl testify.        |
| Quantus tremor est futurus            | What dread there will be               |
| Quando judex est venturus             | When the Judge shall come              |
| Cuncta stricte discussurus.           | To judge all things strictly.          |
| Tuba mirum spargens sonum             | The trumpet shall spread a wondrous sound |
| Per sepulcrum regionum                | Through every grave, in all lands,     |
| Coget omnes ante thronum.             | It will drive mankind before the throne.|

12 Chase (2003), pg. 509
14 Revelation 20:12 (New King James Version)
History of *Dies Irae*

The words of *Dies Irae* are a commentary upon the biblical text of Zephaniah:

> The great Day of the Lord is at hand: …
> That Day is a day of wrath...of trouble and distress...
> of waste and desolation...of darkness and gloom...
> of clouds and thick darkness...a day of the trumpet and alarm...
> against the fenced cities...and high battlements...

[Zephaniah I]

Although the *Dies Irae* sequence was instituted into the Roman Missal in 1585, it was dropped by the Second Vatican Council because of its “harsh” message of judgment. Today it is rarely sung, yet is is used in numerous secular settings and compositions and has come to be a symbol for creating the atmosphere in works dealing with “the supernatural, with wicked powers, with witches, madness, bad dreams, and the lower elements of darkness” as will be shown. Incidentally, this type of subject came into favor in the Romantic Movement.

In its proper context, *Dies Irae* generally retained the plainsong melody; but as orchestral resources increased, composers made more dramatic portrayals of it in the Requiem. Because the melodic theme is slow, solemn, and presents an aura of melancholy and foreboding, it does not always work in pieces with dramatic settings. However, the text is highly suggestive of dramatic events, hence the reason it has been such an attraction for both secular and sacred composers.

The secular use of *Dies Irae* is common and often meant to create a mood in the listeners and also to recall words of the text (assuming that they are familiar with it). During the Romantic Movement, secular composers wrote music on fantastic and supernatural subjects. Although *Dies Irae* had a specific meaning for Roman Catholic funeral services, composers were attracted to it and did not hesitate to make extensive use of it. Berlioz used it in the last movement of his *Fantastic Symphony*. During the “Dream of the Witches' Sabbath” with its “frightful crowd of ghosts, sorcerers and all manner of monster,” funeral bells are heard and then the theme of *Dies Irae* is played in a slow tempo by two tubas. Liszt, in his *Dante Symphony*, represents the Inferno and not surprisingly, *Dies Irae* is used. Liszt also used it in his *Totentanz*. The *Dance Macabre* was written by Saint-Saens who wrote this Dance of Death based on a poem by Jean Lahor which tells of skeletons dancing in a churchyard at midnight. Saint-Saens uses *Dies Irae* to induce the somber setting, though perhaps unsuccessfully.

---

15 This conclusion, and the following examples, are taken from the well researched and supported development in: Gregory, Robin. *Music & Letters*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr. 1953), Oxford University Press
16 Gregory (1953), pg. 137
Although the *Dies Irae* theme was originally used in a church setting, the change of character has gradually taken place since the early nineteenth century. Robin Gregory in an article in *Music & Letters* (1953) says:

“In its original form, *Dies Irae* had a grave and religious connotation; it was part of one of the most solemn rites of the Church and it was intended to call to mind awe-inspiring events, but it had no associations with anything evil. The parodies by Berlioz, Liszt and others, regarded by many as in bad taste and even approaching profanity, intentionally gave the melody a baleful significance. Repeated use in this manner has tended to debase its real character so that now it is almost taken for granted that its use is cynical in intention.”

The *Dies Irae* theme is rarely used today in the Church, partly because it was dropped by the Roman Missal and partly because it has been “taken over” by secular and non-liturgical uses. This was the state in which *Dies Irae* presented itself to Rachmaninoff. As such, Rachmaninoff was not untouched or uninfluenced by the secular portrayal of *Dies Irae*.

**Use of *Dies Irae* in the Rhapsody**

When Rachmaninoff wrote *The Isle of the Dead* (1909) and *The Bells* (1914), he employed the first few notes of the *Dies Irae* theme in each. However, in these works it is not certain whether Rachmaninoff intended the melody to arise, and yet, both deal with gloomy subjects, a coincidence that cannot be overlooked. It was not until much later that Rachmaninoff probed deeply into the character of the melody. Joseph Yasser, writing about the events of October 1931, says:

*He* [Rachmaninoff] began to tell me that he was very much interested in the familiar medieval chant, *Dies Irae*, usually known to musicians (including myself) only by its first lines, used so often in various musical works as a “Death theme.” However, he wished to obtain the whole music of this funeral chant, if it existed (though he wasn't sure of this); he would be extremely grateful for my help in this matter, for he had not time for the necessary research. He also asked about the significance of the original Latin text of this chant...without offering a word of explanation for his interest in this.17

The explanation of Rachmaninoff’s keen interest came with the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and the *Symphonic Dances*.18

The first introduction of *Dies Irae* in the *Rhapsody* is in Variation 7, where Rachmaninoff actually uses it as the main subject of the piano. However, Rachmaninoff seems to have discovered the emotional affinity between the Paganini theme and *Dies Irae*.19

The following illustrates the *Dies Irae* theme in the piano part of Variation 7: mm 1 – 7. The theme follows the C-B-C-A-B-G which is simply a fifth above the F-E-F-D-E-C-D-D example on pg. 8.

Illustration 2: Variation 7 Measures 1 - 7

Variation 8 is less recognized for having the *Dies Irae* theme because the melody is not played in the same melodic outline and has a variation on the last interval which is stretched to a fourth. The intervals here are A-G#-A-E. Variation 8: mm 1 – 6 is shown below:

Illustration 3: Variation 8 Measures 1 - 6

After *Dies Irae* in Variation 8, No. 9 builds upon the mood, although never introducing the theme, in an angry, off-beat variation leading into the *Dies Irae* melody becoming prominent again in the piano part of Variation 10. The octaves, proclaiming the Day of Judgment, are solemn and rebellious. Shown is Variation 10: mm 1 – 3

Illustration 4: Variation 10 Measures 1 - 3
Dies Irae remains veiled until the cadenza and finale in Variation 24. As the last section of the Rhapsody builds to a massive climax, the Dies Irae theme is shouted out by the brass. However Paganini gets the last word with a humorous, quiet piano finale. Variation 24: mm 39 – 44, the final outburst of Dies Irae is shown:

Illustration 5: Variation 24 Measures 39 - 44

Although it is not certain whether Rachmaninoff had any personal meaning attached to Dies Irae, what is known is that he used it specifically as a counter-melody to the Paganini theme. Perhaps it had no emotional attachment to Rachmaninoff but was instead merely a theme which fascinated him analytically (though he did admittedly perform in-depth research into the historical value of the theme). The Paganini variations somehow “work” with Dies Irae and the introduction of it does not seem shoved into the music, but Rachmaninoff carefully planned the meshing of the two as can be clearly seen in Variation 7. The way the Dies Irae theme is the main melodic material in Variation 7 with the Paganini theme following underneath shows the genius Rachmaninoff employed to make everything “line up.”

Recordings

When Rachmaninoff recorded his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini in 1934, he left a valuable resource for interpreting the piece and understanding the composer’s intentions. For comparison, the original recording, with Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra, will be set next to the 1956 recording by Artur Rubinstein with Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This gives some insight to Rachmaninoff as a pianist, as well as how the interpretation of the Rhapsody has changed over time. The method used to compare the two recordings was as follows: listen to the Rubinstein recording of a variation at least twice, looking for key aspects of the recording related to performance. The same was done with the Rachmaninoff recording after listening to Rubinstein. This time however, the focus was different. Because key areas and “layers” of the performance had already been picked out from the Rubinstein recording, the focus was on these parts and how the two recordings are relatively the same in certain parts and different in others.

Rachmaninoff and Rubinstein play the introduction through Variation 5 in roughly similar fashions (the differences are not significant enough to mention here). In Variation 6 however, a noticeable deviation between the recordings occurs. Rachmaninoff plays Variation 6 faster and with less rubato than Rubinstein. Although Rachmaninoff notated a poco rit. at the end of measure 5, he makes less use of this than Rubinstein. Variation 7 is an important point in the recording because it introduces the Dies Irae theme. With a substantial decrescendo, Rachmaninoff states Dies Irae with the mezzo-forte marking but it becomes less with every chord until it is very quiet (pp). The end of the first Dies Irae statement is at measure 8 and a dim. marking is not found until near the end of the second Dies Irae repetition. Rubinstein is faithful to the markings found in the score but the difference is how
Rachmaninoff shapes the volume of the Dies Irae theme even though he did not explicitly mark to do so. Rubinstein begins Variation 7 slightly quieter than Rachmaninoff with respect to the orchestra but maintains the volume until the diminuendo is marked.

Variation 8 presents some differences as well. This movement builds on the dark mood set up in Variation 7, but is fast paced with an ever growing excitement. Rachmaninoff begins this section much slower than Rubinstein with a tempo where the 8th note = 160bpm. Rubinstein takes the tempo to about 174bpm. Aside from the tempo, a different feel and flavor is presented. Rachmaninoff begins with a slower, deliberate feel and builds the excitement through layering. Rubinstein however, has extreme excitement and enthusiasm from the start which goes far beyond the methodical, almost tired feel of Rachmaninoff's recording. With Variation 9, a sense of Rachmaninoff's texture versus Rubinstein's is obtained. Rachmaninoff has thick chords where every note in the massive chords sound equal, specifically beginning in measure 13. Rubinstein gives emphasis to the “tops” of the chords and tries to bring out the melody in the highest note.

Variation 10 is very crucial with respect to the interpretations of the Dies Irae theme. One cannot miss the octaves proclaiming the Day of Judgment. Rachmaninoff plays these half-notes as if they were whole notes, cutting their sound off halfway through each note. The last two notes of the theme (measure 4) are staccato. Rubinstein on the other hand makes full use of the whole-notes and plays the entire theme legato. Each note smoothly transitions into the next and holds after that. This gives it a mood of greater seriousness than the Rachmaninoff recording and a greater, richer sound (although this may partly be due to the differences in recording qualities). Another major difference in Variation 10, although related to the orchestra and not the pianists, also deals with the Dies Irae theme. In measure 24, the pianist has a sparkling, highly ornamented and descending trill in the highest registers of the piano, but the Trombones and Tubas blare out the Dies Irae theme underneath. Rachmaninoff's recording, with Stokowski conducting, brings this theme clearly to the forefront. Rubinstein's recording however, with Reiner conducting, veils this theme. The score notates that the theme be played softly (piano). However, the pianoforte is the main focus in Rubinstein's recording even though it also is marked p. Rachmaninoff apparently wanted this theme to be heard above the piano and violins, but Rubinstein's recording hides it.

There are two main differences between Rachmaninoff and Rubinstein as pianists that can be clearly seen by direct comparison of the recordings. The first is that Rachmaninoff had a much “drier” sound than Rubinstein (though some of this can be attributed to the recording quality). Many places where Rubinstein plays legato, Rachmaninoff does not. Another example of this is Variation 12 where the two-note slurs are played legato by Rubinstein but staccato by Rachmaninoff. The second difference pertains to rhythmic accuracy and the use of rubato, retardandi, etc. Rubinstein takes much more liberty in timing than Rachmaninoff. For example, Variation 8 is exactly rhythmic by Rachmaninoff but is given a very slight accelerando by Rubinstein. Variation 16 is also very rhythmically precise by Rachmaninoff, but Rubinstein takes time to swell with the five-note phrases. Perhaps this observation about Rachmaninoff's playing is not entirely new, for many have said that Rachmaninoff's pianistic technique was marked by precision, rhythmic drive, a refined legato and an ability to maintain complete clarity when playing works with complex textures.20

20 Schonberg, Virtuosi, pg. 315, 317
Conclusion

Although this discussion of Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, is not conclusive or in-depth enough to be a decidedly authoritative and all-encompassing review of Rachmaninoff's work, a few points can be derived with relative ease and certainty. The first, and probably the least dwelt upon point in this review, is the genius that Rachmaninoff showed in his sparkling variations of the Paganini theme. As the name implies, these variations on the theme not only contain great “variety” but the flow from one to the next was carefully planned and the entire composition progresses naturally from beginning to end. A tendency with variations can be to create many variations and then “paste” them together. The individual variations may be quite good, but the composition as a whole lacks the continuity required to make it great. Rachmaninoff avoided this pitfall as his variations form one, continuous thought.

The second is that while Rachmaninoff was writing in an age that tended towards expressionism, he hearkened back to a Romantic style of composing and playing that appeals to the public much more closely than the modern experimentation of the day—though this certainly did not prevent him from employing some new techniques and ideas. Perhaps the immediate popularity of the Rhapsody can be attributed to Rachmaninoff's Neo-Romanticism, not excluding the fact that it is plainly great music.

The third and final major observation that becomes very apparent in the analysis is that Rachmaninoff employed his fascination for the Dies Irae theme in a manner that not only exercised the foreboding nature of the theme to its full extent, but with an intellectual genius, took it to an analytical level when Dies Irae became a counter-melody to the Paganini theme. Although Rachmaninoff worked the analytical end of the composition masterfully as far as Dies Irae is concerned, he also made it aesthetically pleasing and the introduction of the Dies Irae meshes well.

As it stands, Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini remains today one of the masterworks of the Twentieth Century. It has held firm under fine scrutiny both through analytical dissection by intellectuals and through critical aesthetic observations seeking something to truly be called art. The popularity Rachmaninoff enjoyed through his Rhapsody, although not proof, is a testament to its beauty and structure. Some modern rock music is wildly popular today, but it has yet to withstand the test of time. Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody has withstood this test of time since it was popular at its premiere and is still popular today. It is therefore a work of art worth studying, performing, perfecting and enjoying if not for the music itself, then for the emotional kinship it has with every human being.
Bibliography


Bibliography of Scores


Bibliography of Recordings
