

RACHMANINOFF



PAGANINI

& THE PIANO

A CONVERSATION



AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW CREATED FOR THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA

© © 2017 MICHAEL M. CONE

TO BE USED FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

Rachmaninoff, Paganini, & the Piano; a Conversation

Tracks and clips

1. Rachmaninoff in Paris

16:08

- a. Niccolò Paganini, *24 Caprices for Solo Violin*, Op. 1, Michael Rabin, EMI 724356799820, recorded 9/5/1958.
- b. Sergey Rachmaninoff (SR), *Rapsodie sur un theme de Paganini*, Op. 43, SR, Leopold Stokowski, Philadelphia Orchestra (PO), BMG Classics 09026-61658, recorded 12/24/1934 (PR).
- c. Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (FC), *Twelve Études*, Op. 25, Alfred Cortot, Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft (DGG) 456751, recorded 7/1935.
- d. SR, *Piano Concerto No. 3 in d*, Op. 30, SR, Eugene Ormandy (EO), PO, Naxos 8.110601, recorded 12/4/1939.*
- e. Carl Maria von Weber, *Rondo Brillante in E b*, J. 252, Julian Jabobson, Meridian CDE 84251, released 1993.†
- f. FC, *Twelve Études*, Op. 25, Ruth Slenczynska (RS), Musical Heritage Society MHS 3798, released 1978.
- g. SR, *Preludes*, Op. 32, RS, Ivory Classics 64405-70902, recorded 4/8/1984.
- h. Georges Enesco, *Cello & Piano Sonata*, Op. 26 No. 2, Alexandre Dmitriev, Alexandre Paley, Saphir Productions LVC1170, released 10/29/2012.†
- i. Claude Debussy, *Children's Corner Suite*, L. 113, Walter Gieseking, Dante 167, recorded 1937.
- j. *Ibid.*, but SR, Victor B-24193, recorded 4/2/1921, TvJ35-zZa-I. ‡
- k. SR, *Piano Concerto No. 3 in d*, Op. 30, Walter Gieseking, John Barbirolli, Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, Music & Arts MACD 1095, recorded 2/1939.†
- l. SR, *Preludes*, Op. 23, RS, Ivory Classics 64405-70902, recorded 4/8/1984.

2. Rachmaninoff & Paganini

6:08

- a. Niccolò Paganini, *op. cit.*
- b. PR.
- c. Arcangelo Corelli, *Violin Sonata in d*, Op. 5 No. 12, Pavlo Beznosiuk, Linn CKD 412, recorded 1/11/2012.◇

- d. Franz Liszt (FL), *Études d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini*, S. 140, Leslie Howard, Hyperion CDA67193, recorded 4/29/1997.[§]
- e. Karol Szymanowski, *Three Paganini Caprices*, Op. 40, Thomas Zehetmair, Silke Avenhaus, Warner Classics 5556072, released 1995.[†]
- f. Johannes Brahms, *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, Op. 35, Julius Katchen, London STS 15551, recorded 3/13/1958.

3. Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody

45:00

- a. Niccolò Paganini, *op. cit.*
- b-d. PR.
- e. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3 in E b*, Op. 55, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, PO, recorded 2/21/2014.
- f-i. PR.
- j. SR, *Caprice bohémienne*, Op. 12, Neeme Järvi, Philharmonia Orchestra, Chandos CHAN 10327, recorded 11/14/1991.◇
- k. SR, *Variations on a Theme by Corelli*, Op. 42, Danil Trifonov, DGG 4794970, recorded 2/21/2014.[†]
- l. FC, *Préludes*, Op. 28, RS, Musical Heritage Society MHS 1841, released 1973.
- m. SR, *Variations on a Theme by Chopin*, Op. 22, Danil Trifonov, DGG4794970, recorded 3/2015.[†]
- n. PR.
- o. *Dies irae*, Schola gregoriana mediolanensis, recorded 2008, aReIFdkvC8A.[‡]
- p-q. PR.
- r. FL, *Totentanz*, S. 126, Arnaldo Cohen, John Neschling, São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, BIS BIS-SACD-1530, recorded 7/2005.*
- v-x. PR.
- y. SR, *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45, Charles Dutoit, PO, London 433 181-2, recorded 11/1990.
- z. PR.
- aa. Sergey Prokofiev, *The Love for Three Oranges Suite*, Op. 33a, EO, PO, Columbia MS-6545, recorded 2/4/1963.
- ab. PR.
- ac. SR, *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29, EO, PO, Philadelphia Orchestra Centennial Collection, recorded 4/22/1977.

ad-am. PR.

Some recordings are available on-line as paid downloads: * eClassical.com, †PrestoClassical.co.uk, ◇ chandos.net, § hyperion-records.co.uk; and free from ‡ youtube.com (add the listed text to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=> to get the URL).

Thanks, Bibliography, Comments

There is no way that I can adequately thank Ruth Slenczynska and Stéphane Denève. I know Stéphane, but Ms. Slenczynska allowed me and an engineer into her apartment to record the interview on the basis of a telephone call. Her great artistry, her willingness to totally commit when performing — abundantly displayed in the piano recordings in this program — are perhaps manifestations of that attitude. I first became acquainted with her playing over forty years ago when I received her famous Musical Heritage Society recording of the Chopin *Préludes* through the mail. It just blew me away then and has continued to do so through the decades since. She finds the perfect balance between control and freedom. Chopin would not think himself to be pitied were he able to hear them. This is characteristic of all her recordings: find out for yourself.

This is my fourth collaboration with Stéphane. He tolerates my absolutist approach and may even be winning me over to his much more inclusive attitude — well, maybe just a little. You need to realize that when he reels out great chunks of other music at the keyboard he does not have scores in front of him — those pieces are in his head. When he rattles through a piano performance of an orchestral piece, he is not working from a piano reduction thereof, he's doing it at sight from the full score. And he calls himself an ex-pianist!

I was referred to Joe Patrych by Teri Towe, an old, old friend who told me that he was the best audio engineer for piano and chamber music to be found in New York, — that if he didn't know Ruth Slenczynska, he would know who did. It turned out that he knew her. He recorded the interview and asked a critical question about

Walter Giesecking that enabled me to open yet another window onto Rachmaninoff the musician. Thank you.

The interview with Denève was recorded in Milkboy Studios in Philadelphia. They were also recommended by a friend (it seems that I operate from a network). It was the best studio experience that I've had — Emily Tepe was right.

I am not an audio engineer. The editing of this program was the most complex job that I've yet undertaken. My review board, Al, Neal, and Stan, were critical to its completion. They had to advise on whether I had reached a level of audio problems that could be tolerated, while having to work under poor conditions for my deadline was such that I could not provide them with a polished draft. Nevertheless, they did as asked, pointed me in the right direction when I needed it, and generally made what you hear today possible. Flubs are due to me.

Finally, Connie, to whom I am married, provided the graphics and was the listener of first resort. That's critical and she seems to be willing to tolerate my impingements upon her time. That last is more remarkable than usual in this particular case as she was preparing for a one-person show while I was preparing the program. I'm not sure where I'd be without her, but won't bore you with a list of my debts.

Sergei Bertenson and Jay Leyda wrote a remarkable biography: *Sergei Rachmaninoff, A Lifetime in Music*, New York University Press, New York, 1956. They used very brief narrative passages to tie together letters to and from the famous Russian. Reading it, one is inundated in original source material, an unusual experience. That gave me an understanding of his thinking that I might not have otherwise had and was possibly the germ of the idea that led to the format of this program. Interpretation and musical analysis, plus an extraordinary discography was provided by Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*, Continuum, London, 2005. My Boosey & Hawkes study score, *Sergei Rachmanninoff, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, London, 2012, is now much-thumbed and the path across my office to the shelves that hold *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan, New York, 1980 is getting worn. Soon, I'll have to replace the rug. As usual, Wikipedia and imslp.org filled in the gaps.

Rachmaninoff is difficult for me. I'm stuck in the past: still swept away by the Second Viennese School. I find many post-Romantic composers to be incomprehensible. Slenczynska and Denève beat me up pretty well on that in the program — you must have noticed — and I'm grateful to them for doing it: they've modified my outlook a bit. I've never wavered on the *Rhapsody*, though. I thought it was a great masterpiece the first time I heard it and my opinion has never changed. I was blown away by his technical accomplishment. I don't know of any other composer who's succeeded with it. It's just not easy to write a three-movement concerto to be played as if it were one movement (problem number one), that is at the same time a set of variations (problem number two), and that simultaneously conforms to all the technical features of the variation form (problem number three), while still making the result attractive (problem number four) and, finally, having it not be tedious and easily comprehended by the non-technical listener (problem number five). He did it though, and that accomplishment alone makes him a great composer, even ignoring his large quantity of ravishing piano music and beautiful orchestral scores. To do all that and remain at the top of the pianist heap for as long as he did speaks to his mastery and intelligence, as was reflected by Ruth Slenczynska in her account of him.

The thing that sticks in my memory is the musicians of The Philadelphia Orchestra. Listen to their wonderful execution of the *Rhapsody*. The recording was done in one session. That hardly ever happened when working with the perfectionist Rachmaninoff. For instance, the *Golliwog's Cakewalk* recording had to be made five times over a period of months before he was happy with it. The orchestra of today is yet more remarkable and it has opened my ears to hear them for forty years. It is to their powerful and rhapsodic artistry that this program is really due and is actually dedicated.

Mike Cone