

ROCKFORD SYMPHONY

2007-8

Classics 4 (Feb 9)

LISZT

Spanish Rhapsody

RACHMANINOFF

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43

TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64

Andante; Allegro con anima

Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza

Valse: Allegro moderato

Finale: Andante maestoso; Allegro vivace

PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

FRANZ LISZT (arr. FERRUCCIO BUSONI)
Spanish Rhapsody (LW A195, Q11)

Franz (in Hungarian Ferenc) Liszt was born in Raiding, near Sopron, Hungary, on October 22, 1811, and died in Bayreuth, Germany, on July 31, 1886. He composed the Rhapsodie d'Espagne (Spanish Rhapsody) in 1858. The arrangement as a concert piece with orchestra was made by Ferruccio Busoni, who added an orchestra of three flutes (third doubling piccolo), pairs of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, castanets, and strings. Duration is about 14 minutes.

In 1845, while undertaking a hugely successful concert tour in Spain (as the first great virtuoso pianist of the romantic era to travel to the Iberian peninsula), Liszt wrote a brilliant piano piece based on Spanish themes, one that was bound to arouse nationalistic enthusiasm from his audiences. This was the Grand Concert Fantasy on Spanish Tunes, containing a fandango, a jota, and a cachuca. This was not published until after Liszt's death—perhaps because he realized that it he had overwritten the work and that the virtuosity had become empty show.

Just over a dozen years later, though, he turned to Spain again for inspiration, reusing the Jota Aragonesa as one of his tunes and opening with the Folies d'Espagne in a far stronger piece, the Rhapsody d'Espagne. The opening *Folies* is a melody already known in Spain for two centuries and made famous as *La folia* in the Baroque era by Lully, Corelli and others, and revisited again after Liszt's time by Rachmaninoff.

One of the features of romantic music was a passion for travel to exotic places, whether near or far. For a musician, "exotic" normally meant tunes that were striking enough to evoke another place and culture in rhythm and melodic shape. While Spanish composers did not really develop their own nationalistic style until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, composers from France and Russia eagerly embraced Spanish music for its evocative qualities in works by Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakoff, Bizet, Lalo, Liszt (an honorary Frenchman for his long residence there in the first part of his career), Chabrier, Debussy, and Ravel.

Many of these Spanish works—and certainly Liszt's—were designed to be virtuosic showpieces that introduced an ingratiating melody or two, then made them more and more brilliant at each return, with the aim of leaving the listening agape at the brilliance of their playing.

One later composer who matched Liszt's virtuosity at the keyboard and played his music regularly was the Italian-Austrian Ferruccio Busoni, who decided that he wanted to play Liszt's piece as if it were a small concerto. Like Liszt himself, Busoni frequently made new arrangements of many older pieces (notably, J.S. Bach)—including a number of Liszt's virtuosic solo piano works in versions that were even more brilliant and challenging.

The piece opens with a slow passacaglia familiar from many earlier usages, and proceeds to the brilliant second part, which draws upon Liszt's earlier Spanish medley, but far more effectively.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43

Sergey Vasilievich Rachmaninoff was born in Semyonovo, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini in July and August 1934 and gave the first performance, in Baltimore, on November 7 that year with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, side drum, triangle, cymbals and bass drum, harp, and strings.

Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is one of those rare works that impresses even the snobbish types who customarily turn up their noses at the compositions of this Russian émigré who wrote such unabashedly romantic, heart-on-sleeve music. Generally regarded as a reactionary in a world dominated by the new ideas of Stravinsky's neo-Classicism on the one hand and Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique on the other, Rachmaninoff has, until recent years, been largely written off by the musical intelligentsia. Times have changed, though, and his star has risen again.

The variation form was not one to which Rachmaninoff had shown any particular predilection, though he had in 1931 written a set of variations on a theme of Corelli for solo piano. But the idea of variations was clearly churning in his mind when he arrived at his Swiss summer residence in 1934, because he began to compose with extraordinary energy and imagination the work that is surely his finest essay in the medium of piano and orchestra.

It was a bold step to choose a theme so thoroughly treated by earlier composers. Paganini himself had started the tradition by varying the theme of his twenty-fourth caprice for solo violin eleven times; later in the nineteenth century both Liszt and Brahms had a go at it. And in our own century, following Rachmaninoff, Witold Lutoslawski and Boris Blacher have continued the tradition. Yet Rachmaninoff came up with fresh treatments presented in a score that is dashing, brilliant, romantic, and witty by turns.

The first variation actually precedes the formal statement of the full theme; it is a kind of bare-bones, stripped-down version, tense, bony, hushed, but with a sardonic touch of wit. The theme itself is first given (appropriately) to the violins, immediately evoking echoes of Paganini's original.

The title "Rhapsody" might lead us to expect great freedom in the treatment of the Paganini material, but ironically Rachmaninoff here gives us the most classically shaped of all his compositions. Each variation is complete in itself, each has a marked, evident connection to the Paganini theme. As a whole, the treatment becomes freer as the work progresses, but that is entirely normal in classical practice. The first six variations maintain strict tempo, stay in the same key (A minor) as Paganini's caprice, and even hint at Paganini's own variations. The first major change in character comes with the seventh variation, in which Rachmaninoff introduces one of his favorite musical ideas as a second thematic idea. This is the old plainchant melody *Dies irae* from the Mass for the Dead, a tune widely used by romantic composers since Berlioz. We hear it first in sustained chords in the piano against thematic segments in bassoon and cellos. It will play a large role in the score, possibly designed to suggest Paganini's supposed bargain with the devil (just as it was used to suggest diabolical activities in the "Dream of the Witch's Sabbath")

in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*). Rachmaninoff plans its several reappearances in his Rhapsody with a keen sense of telling effect.

By the ninth variation, Rachmaninoff is no longer so much playing with the thematic outline or its harmonic pattern as he is exploiting the colors and the rhythms of its diabolic character with special coloristic effects in the orchestration. A grotesque march presents the *Dies irae* like a slow tolling of funeral bells.

The eleventh variation, a reflective solo cadenza with a mysterious accompaniment, leads off to a new key and the beginning of a middle part in which the tonality is freer. The modulations end in the lush, romantic key of D-flat major for the most famous variation in the set, the eighteenth. This sounds, at first hearing, as if Rachmaninoff had thrown Paganini to the winds and invented the kind of rich Russian melody that had made his Second and Third piano concertos so popular. And yet this theme, in Rachmaninoff's most popular style, is derived from Paganini by the simple device of turning the notes upside-down and playing them more slowly and lyrically. The result is an outpouring of lyric melody that soars climactically and then dies gently away.

The remaining five variations return to the home key to provide a finale of great brilliance à la Paganini, then turning to intimations of the satanic, with a dark march erupting in a piano cadenza and a variation (No. 23) in which the soloist begins in the unlikely key of A-flat; the orchestra promptly takes matters into its own hands by jerking the soloist up to A and continuing into the last variation, with a kaleidoscopic outburst of fireworks and a final reference in the brass to the *Dies irae*. Finally, just as Rachmaninoff seems to be building up to his mightiest peroration, the score ends with the wittiest touch of all—one last quiet reference to Paganini.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He began his Fifth Symphony in May 1888 and completed it on August 26. Tchaikovsky himself conducted the premiere in St. Petersburg on November 26, 1888. The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, three timpani, and strings.

By 1888, when Tchaikovsky composed the Fifth Symphony, he was far from being the hypersensitive artist—virtually a neurotic cripple—of popular accounts. To be sure, ten years earlier he had gone through a major emotional crisis, brought on by his ill-advised, catastrophic marriage (undertaken partly in an attempt to “overcome” his homosexuality) and a series of artistic setbacks. But his own brother declared that he “seemed a new man” by 1885. The masterly achievement of the Fourth Symphony (premiered in 1878) had marked the end of the real crisis.

Tchaikovsky's decision to write a symphony again after ten years was an overt expression of his willingness to tackle once more the largest and most demanding musical form. He began it in May 1888, completing the full score by mid-August. The premiere, which took place in St. Petersburg that November, was a success, though critics questioned whether the Fifth Symphony was of the same caliber as the Second and Fourth. Tchaikovsky himself ran hot and cold in his reactions to the new work. In March 1889 he went to Hamburg for the German premiere, where Brahms, visiting from Vienna,

stayed over just to hear the first rehearsal. The two composers had lunch afterwards. Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother, “Neither he nor the players liked the Finale, which I also think rather horrible.” But later he wrote, “I have started to love it again.”

Certainly listeners have long loved the Fifth for its warmth, its color, its rich fund of melody. Tchaikovsky always wrote music with “heart,” music with an underlying emotional significance, though he was wary of revealing that meaning publicly, preferring to let the listener seek it personally.

The Fifth Symphony is dominated by a motto theme that might be identified with “the inscrutable predestination of Providence” mentioned in a memo of the composer’s. The motto recurs in each of the four movements. We first hear hushed and mysterious at the very beginning. The movement is expressive, but it is misleading to try to read too much beyond a certain emotional quality.

The second movement contains one of the most famous instrumental solos ever written, an ardent song for the horn, of great emotional intensity. The contrasting middle section builds to a feverish climax dramatically interrupted by the motto theme blared out by the full orchestra. The opening melody restores calm and seems to be dying away, when the motto theme bursts in again, pounding all to silence and closing with only a few broken phrases, devoid of energy.

Few composers have written a full-scale waltz for the third movement and even fewer have managed one of such grace. At the end the waltz is undercut by a ghostly reminder of the motto theme in the clarinets and bassoons.

Brahms’s doubts regarding the finale no doubt had to do with what many have considered the least convincing gesture in the symphony: having just heard the motto in a threatening form at the end of the waltz movement, it opens the finale blazing firmly in the major. The victory seems too easily won, accomplished without even a pitched battle. Following the recapitulation, the rhythm of the motto builds to a massive climax and a grand pause. This sounds dangerously like the end of the piece, but there is more struggle to come. A presto section restates thematic materials from earlier in the finale, while the close of the coda is a new statement of that nervously syncopated little tune from the very beginning of the symphony, now ringing out with the most glorious assurance as a majestic trumpet fanfare in the major key—a triumph of sorts, if only by sheer assertion. Tchaikovsky puts on a bold front to conceal what might seem like whistling in the dark—but it is a brave whistle for all that.