

Hough Plays Rachmaninoff

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Rachmaninoff: *Vocalise*: Originally a wordless song for voice and piano, *Vocalise* has been arranged for numerous other instrumental combinations. In the composer's orchestration, violins deliver the ravishing soprano melody.

Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. *Rhapsody* is a 20th-century work, but its theme is one of the Romantic era's best known: Paganini's 24th Violin Caprice. Rachmaninoff's variations celebrate virtuoso pianism and the lush sound of full orchestra. The irresistible 18th variation alone is worth the price of admission.

Prokofiev's *Sixth Symphony*. The trajectory of this rarely heard wartime work moves gradually from darkness, through lyricism, to affirmation. A march frames the first-movement development. The eloquent central *Largo* is warm and expressive, while a Haydnesque motor rhythm propels the finale.

RACHMANINOFF: *Vocalise*

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born: April 1, 1873, in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: 1912; revised 1915

World Premiere: April 20, 1929, in Philadelphia; the composer led the Philadelphia Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1988–89 season; Hugh Wolff conducted.

Duration: 6 minutes

As its title implies, *Vocalise* has its origins in vocal music. In the catalogue of Rachmaninoff's works, this beloved piece originated as part of Opus 34, the last in a collection of 14 songs. As symphony patrons, we associate Rachmaninoff almost exclusively with his magnificent piano concertos, symphonies and orchestral tone poems. Most music lovers—especially those who are pianists—have some acquaintance with his extensive solo piano compositions. In fact, he also composed for solo voice through much of his early career. Between 1890 and 1916, Rachmaninoff produced some 80 songs for voice and piano, many of which set texts by Russia's great authors, including Pushkin, Tolstoi and Lermontov.

Vocalise is unlike any of them, simply because it has no text. There is only one known precedent for this concept, and it came from the pen one of Rachmaninoff's countrymen: Igor Stravinsky's *Pastorale* of 1907. *Vocalise*, of course, has become much more widely known than the Stravinsky work, and it served as a model for another Russian composer, Reinhold Glière, in his Concerto for Coloratura and Orchestra, Op. 82 (1943).

Although it was published as part of the Op. 34 songs, *Vocalise* was written in April 1912, some three years after any of the other 13 songs in that group, and fully 10 years after the earliest. The song is dedicated to Antonina Nezhdanova, a soprano Rachmaninoff accompanied during the 1912–13 season. Initially, she questioned why it had no words. "What need is there of words," Rachmaninoff asked her,

“when you will be able to convey everything better and more expressively by your voice and interpretation than anyone could with words?” Evidently this compliment to her artistry satisfied her, for *Vocalise* remained textless.

Rachmaninoff is said to have liked the idea that the piece would be performed like a Bach aria. Nikolai Struve, a composer who was also on the editorial board of Editions Russes de Musique publishing company, recommended that he do the orchestral version. While the mournful substance of the music, including its references to the *Dies irae* chant, remained unchanged, the texture inevitably changes. Violins play the solo line originally assigned to soprano; the balance of the orchestra accompanies.

Instrumentation: two flutes, three oboes (third doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns and strings.

RACHMANINOFF: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Composed: July–August 1934

World Premiere: 7 November 1934 in Baltimore. The composer was the soloist; Leopold Stokowski conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra

NJSO Premiere: 1955–56 season. Leon Fleisher was the soloist; Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 22 minutes

Niccolò Paganini’s greatest musical legacy has been the apparently unstoppable fount of works inspired by his 24th Violin Caprice, drawn from the collection that constitutes a cornerstone of the virtuoso violinist’s repertoire. Two 19th-century masters, Brahms and Liszt, were caught by the spell of the finale Caprice; each composed a major work based on the sprightly melody. Rachmaninoff was similarly lured in the early 1930s. With the Brahms and Liszt works looming as models, he wrote his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* during the summer of 1934, while vacationing with his family in Lucerne, Switzerland. The piece was an immediate success at its premiere and has been an audience

favorite ever since.

Rhapsody is related conceptually to his popular piano concertos, but it is actually an extended set of variations on Paganini's theme. Broadly speaking, it divides into three principal sections with the central D-flat-major variation (No. XVIII in the score) functioning as the center of the "slow movement." That famous theme, which is an inversion of Paganini's, constitutes the emotional crux of the piece, and it is the melody echoing in listeners' ears as they leave the concert hall.

Rachmaninoff also incorporated the Gregorian chant *Dies Irae* in three of the variations, including the finale. He was fascinated with the ancient melody, also using it in his symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (1909), and choral symphony *The Bells*, Op. 35 (1913). He would return to the medieval theme for his final orchestral work, the *Symphonic Dances* (1940), which the NJSO performs during the 2018 Winter Festival in January.

Instrumentation: piccolo; flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs; English horn; four horns; two trumpets; three trombones; tuba; timpani; snare drum; bass drum; triangle; cymbals; glockenspiel; harp; strings and solo piano.

FROM SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS TO REPERTOIRE STAPLE

Rachmaninoff's original title for this extraordinarily popular composition was *Symphonic Variations*. As work progressed on the piece, the title was altered to *Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra in form of Variations*. That Rachmaninoff eventually settled on *Rhapsody* as the key word in the work's title tells us something about the direction the music took, and about his perception of variation form.

Paganini's 24th Caprice has proven to be among the most durable works in the literature. In addition to the romantics Schumann, Brahms and Liszt, many composers have been drawn to this sprightly tune. Rachmaninoff fell under its spell in the early 1930s. In the mid-20th century, Boris Blacher, Alfredo Casella, Luigi Dallapiccola and Witold Lutoslawski also composed works based on the Paganini. George Rochberg's more recent *Caprice Variations* (1973) stands as another major achievement engendered

by Paganini's theme.

Rachmaninoff surely knew that his composition risked being compared unfavorably with earlier works, especially those by Brahms and Liszt. The pressure on him was heightened by the lack of critical and popular acclaim for his Third and Fourth Piano Concertos (1909 and 1926, respectively). Neither concerto had yet come near achieving the popularity of his first two, and Rachmaninoff's confidence in his creative ability was severely shaken.

He composed the Rhapsody during summer 1934, while vacationing with his family in their new villa outside Lucerne. Writing to his friend Vladimir Vilshau, he noted: "It is a very long piece, about 20–25 minutes. That is the size of a piano concerto ... I am going to try it out in New York and London, so that I can make the necessary corrections. The composition is very difficult and I should start practicing it, but with every year I become more and more lazy about this finger work. I try to shirk practicing by playing something old, something that already sits firmly in my fingers."

Evidently he regained his technique satisfactorily, for the premiere in November 1934 was a great success. It has become firmly entrenched in the repertoire, enjoying equal popularity with his Second and Third Piano Concertos.

PROKOFIEV: Symphony No. 6 in E-flat Minor, Op. 111

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontzovka, Ukraine, Russia

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, Russia, USSR

Composed: 1945-47

World Premiere: October 11, 1947, in Leningrad. Yevgeny Mravinsky led the Leningrad Philharmonic.

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 43 minutes

Sergei Prokofiev led one of the most geographically and culturally diverse careers of any 20th-century composer. Reared in the privileged world of upper-class Czarist Russia, he fled his homeland at the time of the Revolution, traveling east across Asia to Vladivostok and Tokyo, and thence to the United States. Before returning to his homeland, he encircled the globe. From 1918 to 1922, he lived primarily in this country, concertizing as a pianist and trying to establish a reputation as an opera composer. In spring 1922 he moved to Paris, and he remained based in France for the next 14 years. By 1927, the pull of his native land had become irresistible, and he returned to Russia—by then the Soviet Union—for the first of many visits. Ultimately, he resettled in the USSR, and by 1938 he had been officially endorsed as a Soviet composer. The classification is ironic because Prokofiev was essentially apolitical. Nevertheless, from the late 1930s on, the Stalinist regime considered his works to be Soviet music.

The Soviet musicologist Boris Yarustovsky, in a 1960s monograph entitled *Symphonies of War and Peace*, singled out Prokofiev's Fifth and Sixth symphonies as works influenced by the Second World War. Another Russian music scholar, Boris Schwarz, styles the Sixth, in particular, as a delayed reaction to the war. Although the two symphonies are vastly different from one another, they must be considered together in historical context. The Sixth dates from 1947; however, it was sketched in 1944 and 1945, and Prokofiev began work on it before completing the Fifth Symphony.

With the exception of his "Classical" and Fifth Symphonies, Prokofiev's seven symphonies are rare birds in the concert hall. The Third and Fourth were not even conceived as symphonies; Prokofiev adapted both from stage works. Undeniably powerful and thought-provoking, the Sixth Symphony was to cause Prokofiev considerable grief, through no fault of his own.

By the end of the war he was in failing health, often in and out of the hospital. Intensive work on the symphony during the winter of 1946–47 took its toll, but he completed the score that summer. Prokofiev's symphony was well received at its premiere, although some of the audience were surprised, having expected a work more in the mold of the popular and affirmative Fifth Symphony. All the same, the Soviet critic Schneerson opined, in his original program note:

It is one of the most beautiful, most exalted of his works, imbued with the creative spirit of

Soviet humanism ... It is a great landmark not only in the art of Prokofiev, but in the whole history of Soviet symphonism ... This great work shows once again how immeasurably superior Soviet music is to the music of the capitalist West, where symphonism has long ceased to be an art of lofty ideas and high emotionalism and is now in a state of profound decadence and degeneration.

Four months and several performances later came official censure. Andrei Zhdanov, the Stalinist authority at the helm of the cultural bureaucracy, cracked down on what he perceived as a dangerous leaning toward “formalism” in music. Along with Shostakovich, Miaskovsky, Khachaturian and other prominent composers, Prokofiev was castigated, with the scores to *War and Peace* and the Sixth Symphony cited as examples of his musical transgressions. Zhdanov demanded a reconsideration of the symphony. Was this appropriate music for the Soviet Union, which had suffered so much and emerged victorious from the conflict? At the suggestion of the government, an official reevaluation of the Sixth Symphony took place. Prokofiev was deemed a prime offender, and the government forbade performances of many of his compositions. Psychologically, as well as physically, he was a broken man. He continued some composing and revision of some earlier works, and managed to complete a seventh and final symphony in 1952. Five months after its premiere, he died of a brain hemorrhage on March 5. In one of those bizarre coincidences of history, Joseph Stalin died the same day.

The symphony consists of three movements that follow a general progression from darkness to light, with the weightiest content in the first movement. Prokofiev explained its mood as “rejoicing in magnificent victory, but thousands of us have been left with wounds that can’t be healed—health ruined for life, dear ones gone forever. We must not forget this.” Musically, he delivers these sobering thoughts with harsh dissonances and arresting rhythms. Brasses often sound strident, woodwinds shrill. The *Allegro moderato* is brittle music, with few washes of the gorgeous sound often encountered in Prokofiev’s ballets.

By contrast, the slow movement is heroic and more ingratiating in its melodic appeal. The chaos of the first movement yields to lyricism. Prokofiev’s second theme, initially entrusted to the oboes, has a

distinctly Russian flavor suggesting folk music. The composer described this movement as “brighter and more songful.”

The concluding Vivace, a playful rondo, harks back to the Prokofiev of *Romeo and Juliet*. Its aim appears to be lighthearted entertainment, with a scherzo-like bounce that is all the more striking in comparison to the first two movements. To conclude, Prokofiev returns to the somber tones of the first movement, reminding the listener that even when relegated to memory, war is daunting and severe.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, piccolo clarinet in E-flat, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, snare drum, wood block, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, celesta, piano and strings.