

adopted as far afield as Ferruccio Busoni's massive five-movement Piano Concerto (1904)

Like Sarasate, Liszt, and the fictional Radetzky of Dangerous Moonlight, Litolff was both virtuoso performer and composer. His career as a pianist took him all over Europe, settling at various times in France, Germany, England, the Netherlands, and finally Brunswick, where he ran music festivals, conducted, and took over the management of his friend's music publishing company. Of all of his compositions, it is the four Concertos Symphoniques that stand out both in terms of formal inventiveness and musical brilliance. These pieces were unique in conception, combining the structure of a symphony with the showmanship of a classical concerto. Unlike earlier concertos, much of the thematic musical material is introduced by the orchestra, with the piano serving as obbligato. Franz Liszt, a contemporary of Litolff, was an admirer of his innovations. Liszt thought so highly of him as a musician that he dedicated his first Piano Concerto to Litolff. The sprightly rhythms and dazzling piano writing of the scherzo movement from his Concerto Symphonique No. 4 leave little doubt why he was admired by audiences and musicians alike. Of particular note is Litolff's prominent use of the piccolo and triangle in this piece, as he was among the first to incorporate these instruments into the instrumentation for a keyboard concerto.



The last of Paganini's 24 Caprices for violin has been the subject of many sets of variations, including the composer's own set of 12, Brahms' brilliant Paganini Variations for piano, those by twentieth century composers Lutoslawski, Blacher, Lloyd-Webber, and others. But the best-known off-shoot of this Caprice is Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, not least because one of its variations -- the 18th -- has become more famous than the Paganini tune it is based on.

The Rhapsody was one of Rachmaninov's last compositions; however, it has little in common with the handful of works from the composer's last two decades. The Corelli Variations (1931), for piano, and the Piano Concerto No. 4 (1926; rev. 1941) display a colder, more modernistic Rachmaninov, while the Rhapsody harkens back to the passionate, post-Romantic world of the 1909 Third Piano Concerto. Also unusual is that, while the composer's output was paltry in his later years, this piece was finished in a mere month and a half, from July 3 to August 18, 1934.

With three discernible sections, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini resembles the fast-slow-fast movement structure of a piano concerto. Variations 11 through 18 serve as the slow movement, with the preceding and following groups representing the outer movements.

A typical performance of the Rhapsody lasts about 25 minutes. Rachmaninov premiered it on November 7, 1934, in Baltimore, with Leopold Stokowski conducting.

One of the glitterati of the French music scene, Louis Diémer (1843-1919)

had taken the piano part in Franck's Victor Hugo-inspired *Les Djinns*, for piano and orchestra, on March 15, 1885; he earned for the composer a rare plaudit from the press: "interesting work... for the direct originality of its thought and the admirable polish of its style." The *Ménestral's* critic continued: "As I listened to the fine logic of these developments and the arresting effects of the blending of the piano with the orchestra, I was struck by the thought of how sad it is that the name of this eminent musician is so rarely seen on programs, too little honored at a time when he is one of the masters of our epoch, and will indubitably remain one."

This proved prophetic. Franck was delighted and credited his success to Diémer's brilliant playing -- *sec, léger*, and articulated with lightning precision -- which he promised to reward with "a little something." Good to his word, Franck dedicated his orchestration of the *Variations symphoniques* to Diémer. He began work in the summer of 1885, and completed it on December 12. In his ultimate, old master phase, Franck transformed everything he touched. The orchestral highlighting of pianistic virtuosity -- heard in such works of his youth as the *Variations brillantes sur l'air du Pré aux clercs* (1834) or the *Variations brillantes sur le ronde favorite de Gustave III* (1834-35) -- or the Lisztian heroics of the soloist locked in combat with the orchestra are left behind in the *Variations symphoniques* in favor of the deft dovetailing of piano and orchestra. This use of the piano as a concertante instrument would be taken up by Vincent d'Indy in his *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard française* (1886) and in turn, be

# Rachmaninoff - Franck - Litloff

## Leonard Pennario, piano

### Arthur Fiedler Boston Pops

- 1 Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini, Op.43 22:15
- 2 Symphonic Variations 15:03
- 3 Scherzo (From "Concerto Symphonique No. 4") 7:02

Recorded by RCA 1963 Engineer - Anthony Salvatore Producer - Peter Dellheim



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