

A child prodigy of startling promise, Julius Katchen matured into a solo and chamber music pianist of broad interests and probing artistry. His death from cancer at age 42 denied a discerning public the presence of a pianist especially well-equipped to penetrate to the center-most meanings of those works he favored.

Born to a musical family, Katchen was instructed in the musical arts from his earliest years. His grandmother, formerly a faculty member at the Warsaw Conservatory, was his first piano instructor, while his grandfather taught him theory (his mother, a pianist, had trained at the Fontainebleau School of Music and had made concert appearances in both Europe and America). In 1937, Katchen presented himself to Eugene Ormandy and requested that he be permitted to play for him. Ormandy was sufficiently impressed to engage the lad for an appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The October 21, 1937, concert found Katchen performing Mozart's Concerto in D minor to high praise. Following this glowing reception, the 11-year-old pianist was invited to perform at a pension fund concert with the New York Philharmonic the following month. Critic Lawrence Gilman was moved to recall the debut of Josef Hofmann as a prodigy a half century before. "His fingers are fleet, his conceptions clear and intelligent," wrote Gilman of Katchen. "He has a musicianly feeling for the contour and flow and rhythm of a phrase and a sense of what is meant by Mozartean style." A New York recital a year later brought even more enthusiastic praise for the youth's musical understanding.

Before his career advanced, however, Katchen's parents chose to place a hold on further public appearances and enroll him instead at Haverford College, where he majored in philosophy and English literature. His break, Katchen often insisted, developed in him the intellectual curiosity that fed his interest in the more mentally challenging works in the repertory.

A fellowship extended by the French government permitted Katchen to travel to Paris in 1946; that cosmopolitan city became his home for the remainder of his life and he lost no time in making himself a formidable presence there and in the rest of Europe, respected for his commanding interpretive thoughtfulness and virtuoso technique. He undertook several highly successful tours of the Continent, winning acclaim in each center he visited. Decca Records signed him to an exclusive contract and he began recording a bracing cross-section of the repertory with Brahms always at the core. He presented concert performances of Brahms' complete solo piano works in New York, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Berlin and was heard with major orchestras in the two piano concertos. In addition to solo appearances, Katchen often took part in chamber music performances, again concentrating on Brahms, but certainly not neglecting other aspects of an extensive personal repertory. Ned Rorem and Benjamin Britten were just two contemporary composers to benefit from Katchen's advocacy. To say, as some have, that Katchen never achieved the success in America that was his in Europe fails to account for the far greater portion of his mature years that were spent on the Continent where other cultural stimulations prompted his most involved and productive work. Katchen was also acutely aware of the need to extend the exposure of classical music well beyond its existing ranks -- on December 11, 1968, he was one of a large group of musicians, all but one of them from the rock and blues fields, to perform as part of the Rolling Stones' Rock & Roll Circus, and a segment that was introduced by Brian Jones, no less; alas, due to production and post-production problems, no one got to see any part of Katchen's performance until over three decades later; the pianist himself, terminally ill with cancer, didn't live another six months after this extraordinary event. His tragic death was keenly felt on both sides of the Atlantic.

RACHMANINOV

## Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini

DOHNANYI

## Variations On A Nursery Tune

KATCHEN

London Philharmonic

BOULT



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.

The work opens with an introduction that contains elements of Paganini's melody. There follows the first variation which states the theme, largely in the strings, the piano playing just single notes from the melodic line. The piano takes over in the next variation and shares the spotlight with the orchestra in numbers three through five, all of which are lively and light in mood. With the sixth variation, the tempo slows but the piano remains playful. The seventh brings on a drastic change, introducing what has become a trademark of Rachmaninov's major compositions: the Dies Irae theme, from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead; it appears in the next three variations as well. Some have suggested that this allusion to the biblical "day of wrath," while a feature of many of the composer's works, was here also a nod to the nineteenth century legend that the transcendently gifted Paganini had bargained his soul to the Devil in exchange for his talents.

The 11th variation, as mentioned above, is the beginning of what serves as a slow movement; here the music is ethereal and subdued, remaining so until the fiery 13th,

which is then gives way to a pair of more brilliant variations. The lively 15th variation is followed by a markedly subdued 16th and 17th in order to prepare for the climactic 18th, which offers one of the composer's most memorable themes; Rachmaninov surely could have used it in another work without the least suspicion of its relationship to Paganini.

The final "movement" begins with the 19th variation, which is somewhat academic-sounding. The next variations offer more color, though darker elements begin creeping in again with No. 22, which builds up to its finish in a way not unlike the finales of the Second Symphony and Third Piano Concerto. The next variation recalls parts of the Paganini theme closely and leads to the dramatic conclusion -- a powerful and ominous, if glitzy, restatement of the Dies Irae theme by the piano and orchestra.

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

Dohnányi was one of a trilogy of fine Hungarian composers (the others are Bartók and Kodály) who emerged at about the same time. Unlike the other two, he never took a deep interest in the authentic national folk music or embraced a modernistic twentieth century idiom. He remained in a late-Romantic, post-Brahmsian mode, but composed a considerable amount of fine music in that style. Much of it has been overlooked because the dominant attitude of the twentieth century demanding unceasing "progress" in compositional techniques prompted snap judgments that such music as Dohnányi's was "reactionary." Even so, this piece retained a toe-hold in the repertoire because of its fine workmanship, high entertainment value, and attractive sound. Scored for piano and orchestra, it is nearly a full-fledged piano concerto in single-movement variation form. It is also a musical joke of the highest order. It begins with a lengthy and solemnly important-sounding introduction that could be from a Wagnerian drama. This mighty promise of weighty things to come halts with a drum stroke, at which point the piano enters playing, in the simplest way, the little tune known as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The rest of the work is a set of variations on that tune, each one in a parody of a well-known musical style, including a delicious send-up of The Sorcerer's Apprentice. It ends with a joyous romp. It is similar in style to Rachmaninov's Paganini Rhapsody, but concerned with humor rather than romance.

RACHMANINOV

# Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini

DOHNANYI

## Variations On A Nursery Tune

Piano – Julius Katchen

Adrian Boult / London Philharmonic Orchestra

**1. Rachmaninov Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini, Op.43 22:00**

**2. Dohnanyi Variations On A Nursery Theme, Op.25 23:00**

**Total Time: 45:00**

**Producer: Michael Williamson    Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson**

**Recorded January 12, 1959, Kingsway Hall London by Decca**



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