

For Falla to gain the freedom of harmonic thinking to become the twentieth century's best-known and most effective author of Spanish music, he paradoxically had to leave Spain and study in Paris, principally with Paul Dukas. By absorbing the free harmonic approach and rich orchestral effects of the likes of Debussy and Ravel, Falla found the vocabulary he need for his own expressions of his native land. Nights in the Gardens of Spain, the most shimmeringly Impressionistic of Falla's major works, is a wistful, sultry triptych for piano and orchestra. It begins with a depiction of the gardens of the Generalife near the Alhambra, evoking Granada's Moorish history. Falla's use of the orchestra is colorful but delicate, including distant horn calls and sul ponticello effects in the strings to embellish a quivering piano line.

The second movement, "Danza lejana" (Distant Dance), moves to some unspecified, perhaps imaginary garden. Although the dance fragments do indeed begin as if from a distance, they soon come to the forefront, the piano sometimes accompanied by aggressive strumming effects in the strings, and sometimes quietly playing agitated passages over delicate, dark little woodwind solos. Without a pause, this leads into the fast final movement, "In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba." Here the strumming effects become even more prominent, with both orchestra and piano engaging in heavily rhythmic passages inspired by gypsy and flamenco music. But a slower, mysterious Andalusian tune also insinuates itself into the movement, and has the last say as the strings take control of the quiet, soaring melody.



Arthur Rubinstein

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini

Fritz Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Falla

Nights In The Gardens Of Spain

Enrique Jordá / San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

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.

Arthur Rubinstein, piano

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini

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Nights In The Gardens Of Spain

Enrique Jordá / San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

- 1 Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini, Op. 43 23:03
Nights In The Garden Of Spain
- 2 First Movement: En El Generalife 9:28
- 3 Second Movement: Danza Lejana 5:00
- 4 Third Movement: En Los Jardines De La Sierra De Córdoba 7:38

Recorded by RCA Rachmaninoff: Recorded January 16, 1956, Orchestra Hall, Chicago

Falla: Recorded May 25, 1957, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco



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