Succession of brilliances

Dmitry Rachmanov surveys recordings of Rachmaninov's evergreen *Paganini Rhapsody* – one of the most recorded works for piano and orchestra

Rachmaninov wrote *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* Op 43 between 3 July and 18 August 1934 at his Swiss estate, Villa Senar. The composer announced the new work the day after its completion in a letter to his cousin, Sophia Satina:

From the very day of my return from Lake Como and Monte Carlo on 1 July, I have been busy at work, literally from morning till night, as they say. This work is quite large, and only late last night I finished it . . . This newly completed piece is written for piano and orchestra, and it is about 20-25 minutes in length. But it is not a 'concerto', and it is called Symphonic Variations on a Theme of Paganini.

Not satisfied with the original title, Rachmaninov soon changed it to 'Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra in the Form of Variations', finally settling on the definitive *Rhapsody* by late October.

The new work's motivically and rhythmically stark theme of the Paganini Caprice No 24, with its clear-cut cadential and sequential patterns, perfectly lends itself to varying possibilities. It has attracted many composers before and after Rachmaninov, from Brahms and Liszt to Lutosławski and Muczynski.

Rachmaninov had always had a natural affinity with theme and variation form, and had just written *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* for solo piano in 1931. In many ways the new piece was an elaboration on the earlier effort, skilfully using a full gamut of orchestral colours. Like the earlier work, the *Rhapsody* has clear structural subdivisions, following its tonal shifts and resembling three movements of a sonata:

- Variations 1-10: A minor
- Variations 11-18: D minor-F major-B-flat minor-D flat major
- Variations 19-24: D minor

A significant aspect of Rachmaninov's new work was his utilising as a motivic countersubject to the Paganini theme the old ecclesiastical chant ***Dies irae*** (Day of Wrath), the theme Rachmaninov had used throughout his career and which had long become his *idée fixe*.

Rachmaninov gave the world premiere of the *Rhapsody* on 7 November 1934 in Baltimore, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. After several US performances the work was premiered in the UK, first in Manchester on 7 March 1935 and then in London two weeks later with the Royal Philharmonic and Sir Thomas Beecham, followed by other European premieres. The new composition met with resounding public and critical success. A review in the *New Yorker* read:

'The Rachmaninov variations, written with all of the composer's skill, turned out to be the most successful novelty that the Philharmonic Symphony has had since Mr Toscanini overwhelmed the subscribers with Ravel's *Bolero* . . . The succession of brilliances for the piano, dramatic references to the *Dies irae*, wide-open schmaltz for divided strings, and old-fashioned bravura was enough to ensure success.'

Following the four premiere performances, RCA Records decided to record the work, and the recording was completed on Christmas Eve 1934, using the same forces as in the premiere. Of the two full takes recorded

Rachmaninov at his Swiss villa where he composed the Rhapsody

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that night, Rachmaninov and Stokowski chose the first, and it was immediately released on the HMV Red Label.

1930s

Rachmaninov's benchmark inaugural recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski set the standard for generations of pianists and remains essential listening today; for Rachmaninov the composer and pianist are inseparable. So powerful is Rachmaninov's Olympian pianism that his message sounds as though spoken by an oracle in possession of the Truth. He always speaks from the heart, imparting the essential meaning of the work and stripping it of all extraneous elements. Rachmaninov's tightly bound sense of structure, powerful rhythmic impulse, noble reserve and austerity of expression combine with seemingly infinite pianistic powers to make this recording an ineluctable choice for anyone interested in this work.

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Mesmerising: Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890-1963)

Benno Moiseiwitsch's artistic and personal ties with Rachmaninov are well known. He was the first pianist to perform the *Rhapsody* after the composer, first in 1936 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Henry Wood, and then on 5 December 1938, when he recorded the piece with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Basil Cameron. Moiseiwitsch's total identification with the composer's style, his boundless inner freedom and spontaneity of expression – full of dynamic ebb and flow, energy and drive – are unmistakably his. There is an effortless charm to his playing, and he brings myriad shades of colour and inner voicing to his reading – all of which create a mesmerising listening experience. Of his three recordings, the original one with Cameron is by far the most impressive. Of the two 1955 takes, the live one with the BBC Symphony and Malcolm Sargent has a stronger feeling of immediacy.

1940s

The Polish-American pianist **Mieczysław Munz** made the first live recording of the *Rhapsody* in December 1941 with the National Orchestra Association under Léon Barzin. His reading is energetic and often impulsive, offering more of an overview of the work with less concern for the details. His playing often sounds breathless and coarse, rushing ahead of the beat and the orchestra, as in Variations 9 and 23, and earning himself the distinction of producing the fastest performance of this work on record – 19' 50"! Occasionally though, as in Vars 12 and 18, Munz can sound lyrical and casually elegant.

Władysław Szpilman, protagonist of the 2002 Roman Polanski movie *The Pianist*, is heard in a live 1948 performance broadcast subsequently released by Polskie Radio. Szpilman plays with grace, natural fluency and a smooth tone, and there is a relaxed, conversational spontaneity to his lines. But there is also an underlying power to his playing and a constant sense of ongoing momentum, as in Var 18, or accelerated motion and drive, as in Var 22. The orchestra is the Warsaw Symphony Orchestra conducted by Witold Rowicki.

The British pianist **Cyril Smith** gives a highly engaging performance with the Philharmonia and Malcolm Sargent, showing a strong stylistic identification with the music. His vivid sense of rhythmic pulse, controlled yet free, and his long arching phrases produce a sense of inevitable continuity, as in the gracefully rocking Vars 12 and 16; the overflowing yet firmly grounded Vars 15 and 22, or the impassioned and subtle Var 18.

The earliest of **Artur Rubinstein**'s three recordings of the *Rhapsody*, with Walter Susskind and the Philharmonia Orchestra, shows the pianist in his element – full of flair and fervent expression, and in command of the larger picture with long, eloquently spoken sentences, noble phrasing (Var 18), bold, dramatic gestures and plenty of drive. His playing is even freer and wilder in his live recording with the New York Philharmonic led by Victor de Sabata, where all the forces are unleashed with unstoppable and fluid energy and a sense of grand pathos. The recording quality, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired. Rubinstein's collaboration with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony, by far the best known of the three, is also the least successful musically. The playing sounds constrained, technically laboured (Vars 15 and 21) and without subtlety or tonal variety. There are also some clearly audible edits (Var 15).

In his studio recording with Fritz Reiner and the Robin Hood Dell Orchestra from 1951, **William Kapell** navigates his way through the piece with the cool confidence of a young Olympian, displaying lightness of touch, dry and crisp articulation and forward momentum. It's a somewhat emotionally composed reading, too, with rather calculated gestures; his earlier live version with Artur Rodziński sounds more organic and Kapell's imaginative playing more convincing. Here, the elegance and subtlety of his phrasing and the disarming ease with which he handles the most intricate textures and passages come to the fore.

1950s

Romanian pianist **Valentin Gheorghiu** shows emotional reserve and refinement of phrasing and tone in his recording with the Czech Philharmonic and George Georgescu. His tempos can be spacious (Var 12) or dragging (Var 16), and it takes him a while to get things underway. But when he finally does he can sound uninhibited and spontaneous, as in the spirited Var 8, the liquid-like Var 15 and the animated final set.

In his 1954 recording **Julius Katchen** is full of unstoppable inner impulse, improvisatory spontaneity and natural ease in every gesture. His virtuosity is so effortless (listen to Vars 15, 23 and 24) that he tends to surge ahead with an impatience of a young stallion, leaving the orchestra (the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Adrian Boult) in the dust trying to catch up. Despite this, Katchen's tone remains mellow and he is capable of dreamy expression, offering delicate vignettes in the cadenzas of Vars 6 and 11, and one of the most spontaneous and passionate soliloquies in Var 18. In the 1959 version, also with the LPO and Boult, Katchen is less impulsive and the recording is more balanced than the earlier version, in which the orchestral sound is confined to the background.

Shura Cherkassky comes across as uncharacteristically mild and cautious in his rendition with the LSO under the baton of Herbert Menges from 1953. His tempos are held back and carefully measured, his tone mellow and his playing has an overall reserved and tamed feel to it.

Leonard Pennario provides a bird's-eye view of the score, with buoyant fluency and fluidity and a view of the longer lines in his 1957 recording with the LA Philharmonic conducted by Erich Leinsdorf. At 20'32" it is the second fastest version on record. His music-making is organic and stylish and his tone never percussive, even in the most powerful climaxes. Pennario's 1963 recording with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops retains some of the same qualities but the playing sounds more tired, the pianism more sluggish.

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Cool confidence: William Kapell (1922-1953)

Orchestra and soloist sound entirely at one in the exemplary collaboration of **Leon Fleisher** and the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell (1957). Moving at an exhilarating pace, they play the piece as if in one breath, never sounding forced or strained. Every gesture fulfils a larger musical purpose and every detail binds together to create a unified structural canvas.

Raymond Lewenthal's unaffected playing is confident and stylish on his recording with the Vienna Symphony and Maurice Abravanel. The recorded sound, however, is too boomy and the orchestral accompaniment far from foolproof.

There is a clarity of touch and crisp *jeu perlé* glitter to **Monique de la Bruchollerie**'s reading with the Colonne Orchestra under Jonel Perlea. Her finely shaped lines and sense of continuity and flow combine with a touch of noble reserve. Unfortunately, the orchestral performance is uninspired and the recorded sound is flat, rendering this version somewhat two-dimensional.

Philippe Entremont can be heard in his pianistic prime in an exciting reading with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy from 1958. Tempos are taken at a brisk pace, yet no detail is lost or unclear. It is a well-balanced recording with a warm ambience, and the orchestra provides vivid and articulate support. Curiously, the last eight bars of the theme have been accidentally edited out.

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Buoyant fluency: Leonard Pennario (1924-2008)

The first two Russian recordings come from behind the Iron Curtain: **Yakov Zak** with the USSR State Symphony and Kirill Kondrashin go for a sweeping gesture in their reading, and there is plenty of power and fluent virtuosity on display. At times Zak sounds almost nonchalant, as in the first *Dies irae* variation (7), and he is capable of exquisite lyrical subtlety, as in Var 18, with its delicately flowing melody full of dynamic shadings and rubato. The recording's dry acoustical quality and thin orchestral sonority unfortunately restricts this recording's appeal.
Victor Merzhanov appears in a live recording with the USSR State Symphony under Gennady Rozhdestvensky from 1959. His rhetorical narrative is expansive and full-blooded, and while his tempos are not so fast as Zak's (some surprises here include a sudden *meno mosso* in Var 5), Merzhanov's fluency is never in question. The orchestral accompaniment, while not perfect, is far more engaging than in the Zak recording, and provides sympathetic support to the soloist.

1960s

There is an ingenuous quality to **John Ogdon**'s unassuming way with Rachmaninov's score in his rendition with the Philharmonia Orchestra led by Sir John Pritchard (1963). His touch is gentle, phrasing is relaxed, at times spacious (listen to the cadenzas in Var 11 or the simple style of Var 18), playful (Vars 5 and 15), and throughout every gesture is unforced and unaffected. The recorded sound is warm and brings out the lively orchestral colours.

Earl Wild stays right on top of the beat throughout his captivating performance from 1965 with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Jascha Horenstein. There is a sense of urgency to this reading, produced by high energy levels, overflowing, bubbly drive and clear direction. All these elements, combined with a bright-sounding instrument, add up to truly three-dimensional interpretation.

Gary Graffman brings his own brand of balanced and sophisticated music-making to his reading from 1964, sympathetically supported by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. Graffman's ability to turn an elegant phrase and his refined palette of colours and touches, all unobtrusively rendered, are entirely in stylistic accord with the music.

Byron Janis, filmed in concert in 1968 in Paris with Louis de Froment leading the Orchestre Philharmonique de l'ORTF, offers an emotionally involved, sensitive performance. Phrasing is subtle and rhythms bounce along – with verve and a certain dose of nervous energy – at times making it hard for him to retain control, as in the rhythmically rocky Vars 19-21 and 23.

In **Agustin Anievas**' collaboration with the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Moshe Atzmon from 1968, the vivid orchestral colours have a tendency to obscure the piano, which is recorded too distantly. What we do hear from Anievas is chamber-like and full of grace and dynamic light and shadow. His fingers are capable of taking flight, so to speak, as in the feather-light Var 15 or one of the fastest, Var 24 (this despite the composer's tempo indication: *a tempo un poco meno mosso*).
The overall impression is of a sensitive, if somewhat fragmentary, performance.

André De Groote, captured live at the finals of the 1968 Queen Elisabeth Competition with the Belgian National Orchestra conducted by René Defossez, produces a highly energetic reading with a sense of continuity and compactness of structure, keeping things tightly held together. His seemingly contradictory combination of risk-taking and cool self-assuredness provides contrast and poise.

1970s

Van Cliburn's two recordings, made two years apart, are similar in concept: he prefers stately tempos and broadly spaced gestures, spelling out his narrative and making sure nothing sounds rushed or unclear. Some of it works well, as in the feeling of gravitas in Var 7 or the declamatory tone and clearly enunciated melodic lines of Var 18. But more often than not this approach sounds ponderous, lukewarm, devoid of risk-taking and fails to create a binding interpretation. Of the two recordings, the earlier one with the Philadelphia and Eugene Ormandy from 1970 is superior in orchestral sound and pianistic detail compared to the version recorded in Moscow with the Moscow Philharmonic under Kirill Kondrashin two years later.

In **Rafael Orozco**'s honest rendition every phrase sounds well thought out, every chord well placed and every note clearly audible. His meticulous approach is coupled with virtuosity – listen to the ease with which he handles Vars 15 and 24. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra headed by Edo de Waart provide able support.

Daniel Wayenberg's involved music-making has a sense of immediacy about it, and there is both a fervent temperament and sensitivity to his playing, with buoyant dynamic shifts. At times one feels that he borders on overemphasis or is too deliberate in his execution of some details, but he never loses the listener's interest. Karel Ančerl conducts the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Recorded with the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse and Michel Plasson, **Jean-Philippe Collard**'s interpretation sounds planned and airtight secure. He has an efficient and powerful approach to the piano, with a clear, metallic tone, firm tempos and articulate textures. However, the reading is emotionally impenetrable and his playing sounds objective and sober with little sense of spontaneity.

Abbey Simon possesses an air of gentle elegance in his reading with the St Louis Symphony under Leonard Slatkin. His touch is light, the generous amount of time he allows himself to round off phrases is comfortable, yet he can also be rhythmically incisive, as in his double-dotting of the rhythm in the opening cadenzas in Var 6. Throughout he comes across as relaxed and at ease.

Tamás Vásáry renders the characterisation of each variation with care and imagination, be it hushed and suspenseful (Var 17), expressively emphatic (Var 18), or whimsical (Vars 6, 12 and 15). Yuri Ahronovitch and the LSO provide colourful and engaging accompaniment.

Vladimir Ashkenazy recorded the *Rhapsody* twice, 16 years apart: in 1970 with LSO and André Previn and in 1986 with Bernard Haitink and the Philharmonia Orchestra. His insightful concept and masterful execution are evident in both recordings. In the first the contrasts are more clearly etched, with the fast variations driven with incisive virtuosity (Vars 8, 15, 24, etc), the slower ones contemplative, showing thoughtfulness and imagination (the rhythmic line in Var 12, spacious give-and-take in Var 18). In the second recording the contrasts are smoothed out with some variations even more introspective and held back (Var 18), and some of the fast variations not quite so daring. The overall concept remains as convincing, if not more so.

1980s

Bella Davidovich calculates her tempos well so that all the textures come out clearly and articulately in her recording with the Royal Concertgebouw and Neeme Järvi. Her phrasing is smooth, with voluptuous rubatos, and there is an overall sense of security and comfortable elegance in everything she does.

Recorded in 1989 with the Israel Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta, **Vladimir Feltsman**'s assured playing is safe, efficient and comfortable. His way with Var 18 has a contemplative, introspective air about it; at times he brings out unusual voicing (Var 17), and when virtuosity is called upon, as in Var 15, his mastery is never in question. Yet he seems to avoid extreme tempos or risk-taking of any kind. The recording's miking often brings the winds to the foreground (Vars 7 and 16). Curiously, in Var 22 there are 13 bars missing from the music (between rehearsal numbers 64 and 66), most likely an editing mishap.

Two recordings of note come from well-known Hungarian sources: **Jenõ Jandó** presents a clearly etched performance where tempos are slightly held for extra clarity and emphasis. His touch is lively, with spoken articulation, and his phrasing maintains rhythmic verve, making his performance stylistically comparable to that of Emil Gilels.

Zoltán Kocsis has a certain panache – he is equally comfortable playing at exhilarating speed as in ruminative rubato (Var 17) or crisply pronounced lines (Vars 12 and 16). At times his playing verges on being too fast to allow him to execute the prescribed *più vivo*, as in Vars 4 and 21. His touch is light and rhythmically incisive, with chiselled phrasing, tightly supported by Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony.

Cécile Ousset stamps her own interpretive mark with held-back tempos, featuring some of the slowest variations on record (Vars 12 and 16, for example), but this by no means renders the music sluggish or laboured; rather, it allows for a more panoramic view with a sharper attention to detail. All in all Ousset succeeds in creating a personal view of this work.

Another vivid account comes from **Philip Fowke**, sensitively supported by Yuri Temirkanov and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Fowke is not afraid to speak his mind and be different, shaping his lines with vibrant, dynamic inflections or with a sophisticated, if at times unconventional, articulation (detached ending to Var 11 or non-legato touch in Var 16, etc). He brings out unusual

Masterful execution: Vladimir Ashkenazy (b 1937)

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voices (Var 24) and provides the narrative with a subtle and whimsical outline (Var 12). No matter what he does, the listener is left with a memorable, interesting and personal interpretation.

In **Andrei Gavrilov**'s even-tempered, assured performance his flawless ease of execution comes with utmost clarity, lightness of touch and uninhibited fluidity of lines. There are some subtle rubatos even in virtuosic variations, such as Var 15, and his Var 18 is lyrical, showing comfortable poise. Yet Gavrilov's interpretation comes across as conventional and lacking a strong personal identification with the music.

Mikhail Pletnev's personal history with this piece dates back to his high school years: this author saw him perform it in the summer of 1974. His three recordings – two live and one studio – are all entirely unalike; what unifies them is a powerful identification with the music combined with a sense of freedom and individualism. Despite his imperious declamatory gesture (Var 18) and vividly imaginative playing, Pletnev never crosses the stylistic line, always remaining artistically convincing in his own way. He brings out the inner voices, superimposes new rhythms (hemiolas in Var 21 in the early live version) or infuses a phrase with a sudden dynamic wave. His lines often start with a singular impulse imparting a spark of energy, continuing with a subtle elastic flow. There is a raw spontaneity in the early live version with Temirkanov and the Kirov Orchestra; the audio quality of his studio collaboration with Libor Pešek and the Philharmonia Orchestra is better balanced and refined, its ensemble impeccable. The later version with Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic (also available on video) captures him in a more mature live context.

Exhilarating: Jean-Yves Thibaudet (b 1961)

1990s

Horacio Gutiérrez is even-tempered throughout his recording, his tone smooth and relaxed, showing a range of sonorities without ever being forced, the phrasing well rounded with genuine lyricism and effortless virtuosity. Everything feels natural and organic in Gutiérrez' performance, yet he never shows strong commitment to any particular interpretive idea.

Howard Shelley's sensitive approach is akin to chamber music. His elegant phrasing allows for elasticity, inner freedom and refinement, his articulation is light and crystal clear. Shelley displays a range of characters, from lyrical and spacious in Var 18 to fleetingly light and crisp in Var 15 (allowing room for some delectable rubato), at times adding certain inflections to shape a phrase in an interesting way, as in Var 24.

Dmitri Alexeev offers a convincing rendition where tempos are slightly held back, rhythmic control tight and well-focused, and articulation lightly detached. Every note is clearly delineated and textures are never over-pedalled. Alexeev's emotional content is intense yet reserved, with a sharp focus on every detail. Together with the St Petersburg Philharmonic and Temirkanov, he creates a masterfully shaped overall structure.

Jean-Yves Thibaudet's touch is as crystal clear as it is exhilarating in his performance with Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Cleveland Orchestra. Tempos are taken at daredevil speeds, with no apparent strain. Yet Thibaudet is equally comfortable in reflective and lyrical mood, as in Vars 11, 16 and 18, where his playing is full of grace and refinement. Orchestra and conductor provide meticulous accompaniment.

John Lill brings a sense of continuity and structural cohesiveness to his rhythmically tight and articulate performance with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Tadaaki Otaka. Characters are clear, at times dark and epic (Var 17), with firm, steady build-ups (Var 22). However, some variations requiring lighter filigree (Vars 15 and 19) tend to come off slightly heavy-handed.

There is integrity and substance to **Bernd Glemser**'s rendition with the Polish National Radio Symphony and Antoni Wit. His no-nonsense pianism brings energy and drive to his performance. Every phrase is well thought through, every note clearly articulated, planned and executed.

Seiko Tsukamoto shows ease and digital facility in her clean live performance with the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège under Pierre Bartholomée. Tempos are brisk, the tone is never too deep, characteristic contrasts are smoothed out, and there is an overall sense of seamless continuity to the whole approach.

In two recordings by Korean pianists, **Hae Jung Kim** is musical, her light touch crisp and well-articulated, and her phrasing is meaningful and imaginative. She is well supported by the Philharmonia Orchestra, with Julius Rudel contributing clear orchestral colours. Her compatriot **Kun-Woo Paik**'s intelligent playing, with the Moscow Radio Symphony and Vladimir Fedoseyev, keeps tight control over the shape of the rhythmic lines, creating a feeling of tension and excitement by stretching phrases and holding them back (as in the crescendo build-up of Var 18). At other times one feels that she is holding the music back, as in Var 9 or in the climactic Var 22.

Mikhail Rudy's assured playing at times comes across as less inspired than industrious. His attention to detail does not always add up to a cohesive larger picture. The recording features a couple of editing mishaps, such as in Var 13, where bits of the music have been clipped off. The orchestra is the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Mariss Jansons.

Martino Tirimo's organically flowing interpretation, deftly partnered by the London Philharmonic under Yoel Levi's direction, sounds a touch reserved, emphasising the work's more reflective and lyrical side, showing consummate musicianship and impeccable taste throughout.

Elisso Bolkvadze brings a limpid, cultivated and even-tempered approach to the piece, supported by the Tbilisi Symphony and Jansug Kakhidze. She allows enough time to round off each phrase and to clearly place every note for a lucid delivery.

2000s

Jon Nakamatsu does not try to dazzle or overwhelm the listener with power or high speeds; rather, he presents an integral and intelligent picture through playing that expresses clearly. His interpretation is distinguished by pliantly rendered melodic lines, a delicate touch, rhythmic continuity with flexible rubatos, and sincerity and simplicity.

Ayako Uehara, heard live at the 2000 Sydney Competition with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edvard Tchivzhel, produces a highly imaginative reading in which she exploits contrasts, for example plunging into Var 8 at breakneck speed after a broad Var 7. Her performance is punctuated with unexpected accents and she plays around the beat with extreme rubato in Var 12.

In several recordings by the younger generation of Russian pianists in the past decade, **Oleg Marshev**'s spacious version (surely the longest, at 26'34") features broad tempos, at times to the extreme (Var 17), with every phrase clearly enunciated and spelt out. He is the most successful at allowing the music to blossom and reach high climaxes, as in Var 22.

Elena Ulianova-Caldine's performance in her recording with the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Yablonsky is articulate and energetic, if musically conservative. At times she holds tempos back, as in Var 5 or midway through Var 15, for emphasis and clarity.

Alexander Gavrylyuk, recorded live with the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra conducted by Naoto Otomo, plays with lightly inflected and delicately spoken lines, imbued with rhythmic impulse and understated expression.

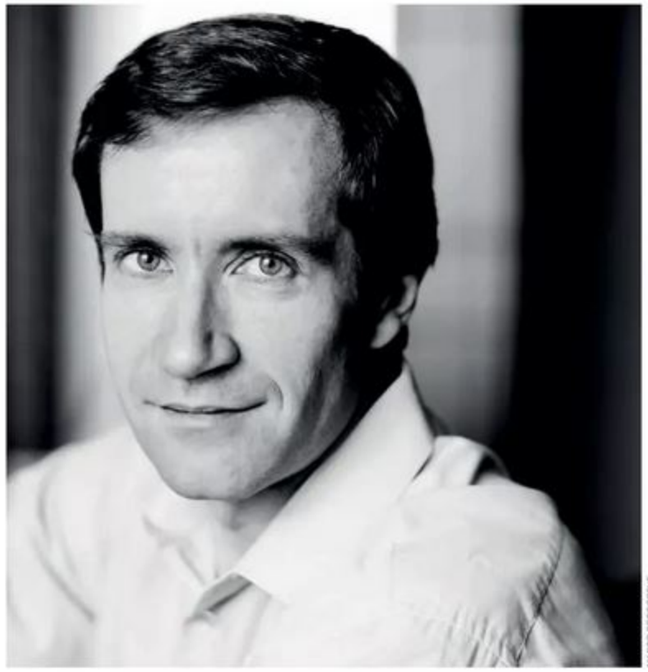
Alexander Kobrin, captured in his winning performance from the 2005 Van Cliburn Competition, is thorough and articulate. Every note is pronounced clearly and there is meaning behind everything he plays. Kobrin holds back tempos and keeps the rhythmic pulse in check, and such tight control does not always allow sufficient room for spontaneity. As such, his music-making comes across as unostentatious, serious and honest.

Nikolai Lugansky has interpretive integrity, sincerity and a clear identification with the music's message in his performance with the City of Birmingham Symphony conducted by Sakari Oramo. His earnest characterisations sound organic and natural, and tempos are just right, with long arching lines and a clear sense of the binding structure. A poised, elegant and honest interpretation.

Recorded with the Dallas Symphony under the baton of Andrew Litton, **Stephen Hough** presents a well-balanced performance with delicately shaped phrasing, an effervescent touch, and moods ranging from lively to contemplative (Vars 17 and 18). A reading of interpretive intelligence and poise.

Lang Lang sounds laid-back with the energy level on the loose side in his performance with the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra and Valery Gergiev. His phrasing is elegant and his touch articulate, and textures come alive with an accent here and an inflection there. On the down side he often sounds overly immersed in detail, at the expense of presenting the larger picture or probing the music's deeper meaning.

Elegant and honest: Nikolai Lugansky (b 1972)



MARCO BORGGREVE

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Vivid palette: Lise de la Salle (b 1988)

Freddy Kempf plays with subtle imagination in his live performance with the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. He allows phrases to breathe with graceful fluidity (Vars 12, 17 and 18), or enlivens them with a sprightly impulse (Vars 15, 19-21 and23).

2010s

Daniil Trifonov and the Philadelphia Orchestra under Yannik Nézet-Séguin bring out a clearly structured and classically poised performance with well-measured tempos and textural clarity. There is lyrical introspection in slower variations, too, with the piano sounding clear and never overpedalled.

Yuja Wang's version, recorded with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra conducted by Claudio Abbado, may not be the most athletic rendition on record but it is refined in detail. Wang's playing is delicate and nuanced, full of exquisite detail and always emotionally connected to the music's spirit. There are touches of spontaneity here and there, as in the flow of inner voices in Var 17, leading up to the warmly inflected Var 18.

In her live performance with the Philharmonia Zurich under the baton of Fabio Luisi, **Lise de la Salle** allows ample time to bring out the score's dynamic and articulate detail, creating a vivid palette of multicoloured sonorities in her convincing reading. Her solo Var 15 is full of playful scherzando qualities, enlivened with glittering passages. The recording quality is bright yet well-balanced.

2020s

Behzod Abduraimov, in a fine partnership with the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra under James Gaffigan, offers a fluent, dynamically cohesive performance, where every detail seems in its right place, sounding sensitive without affectation. The soloist eschews flashy gestures in the interests of musical integrity while allowing the music's exhilarating tempos to flow naturally.

Anna Fedorova's impassionate, spontaneously phrased and radiant reading is deftly supported by the Sinfonieorchester St Gallen with Modestas Pitrėnas at its helm, alternating with some more delicately withdrawn variations (such as 12 and 16) to create a range of characters. Her palette shows colourful overtones in lyrical parts due to bold, generous pedalling.

Igor Levit's performance with the Vienna Philharmonic and Daniel Harding, captured in a live performance at a 2021 concert, embarks on a cautious start with somewhat reserved opening variations. As it gradually comes to life it features some eloquent playing, ranging from expressive and spacious to the vigour of the final variations. Sadly there are occasional balance issues, such as the piano being barely audible in the scale passages of Var 22.

Martin James Bartlett, in a fine ensemble with Joshua Weilerstein and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, excels in giving fine attention to textural detail with a range of tonal hues, subtle melodic inflection, graceful rubato or shiny and crisp sonorities. His final variations sound more comfortable than rousingly climactic to these ears.

CONCLUSION

Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* remains one of the most recorded works for piano and orchestra. In my estimation there must be close to 100 versions on disc. Of the 70-plus recordings surveyed for this article, an unusually high percentage merit distinction.

Each of the 10 decades has produced noteworthy interpretations: from the 1930s Rachmaninov and Moiseiwitsch should be at the top of any list; from the 1940s the remarkably individual accounts by Smith, Szpilman, Kapell and Rubinstein; from the 1950s the captivating Pennario, Fleisher, Entremont and Zak recordings, with Katchen and Merzhanov not far behind.

Wild, Graffman, Ogdon and Janis represent the best recordings from the 1960s; from the 1970s the readings by Ashkenazy, Vásáry, Wayenberg and Orozco are particularly worthy of attention; from the 1980s Pletnev, Kocsis and Jandó top the list, although the highly individual Fowke and Ousset readings are also worth hearing.

From the 1990s the Shelley, Alexeev and Thibaudet recordings are particularly outstanding; and the most significant versions from the 2000s are those by Lugansky, Hough and Kempf; Wang, Trifonov and de la Salle from the 2010s; Abduraimov and Fedorova from 2020s.

From these recommended recordings I would choose the Rachmaninov, Moiseiwitsch, Ashkenazy, Pletnev, Lugansky and Abduraimov readings. And if I had to pick just one version, it would have to be Moiseiwitsch's. **IP**

Soul-stirring scores

The works of Rachmaninov are deeply embedded in our concert repertoire but some works feature more prominently than others. Moscow-born Israeli pianist **Boris Giltburg** argues for the underdogs

For all of us who deeply love Rachmaninov, it can be bewildering and almost painful to realise that even today, when his general popularity is more or less assured, some of his major works still require justifying and defending. The Second and Third Piano Concertos are obviously safe and sound, as is the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (a concerto in all but name). But both the First and the Fourth remain questioned – at times it seems that they are primarily viewed through the prism of their siblings' greater popularity. My new album, which includes both these works as well as the *Rhapsody*, reflects my strong belief that both concertos deserve to be loved for their own sake, and their musical worlds explored and enjoyed with our complete attention and passion.

The relative unpopularity of the First Concerto is particularly difficult for me to reconcile with the love I have felt for this piece ever since I first heard it around the age of seven or eight. To my ears and heart, the First Concerto has it all. It contains some of Rachmaninov's most beautiful melodies, from the heart-aching yearning and nostalgia of the main theme, to the lush summer-day laziness of the middle section of the finale, passing through the breathtaking artless beauty of the second movement. It has drama and excitement in abundance from the very beginning, with its turbulent piano entrance – a veritable avalanche of chords and octaves – and the fateful bells that follow.

The piano writing is brilliant and imaginative throughout, the structure clear and uncluttered, the emotions saturated and punchy. And yet, as Rachmaninov himself said to his friend, the composer and musicologist Alfred Swan: 'When I tell [promoters] I will play the First Concerto, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the Second or Third.'

Perhaps, if anything, this is a testament to the incredible impact of his other concertos – the overpowering emotional waves of the Second, the epic narrative of the Third, the sheer coolness and fun of the *Rhapsody*. Or perhaps the First Concerto is still waiting for its champion – in the same way that Vladimir Horowitz championed the Third Concerto in the 1930s. It seems, though, that that over the past decades the other concertos have established themselves sufficiently – and so my hope

Boris Giltburg: 'Rachmaninov's scores are meticulously written, with precisely chiselled attention to every detail'