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# RACHMANINOFF

(1873–1943)

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

**R**achmaninoff wrote *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* op.43 between 3 July and 18 August 1934, in 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 July 1, 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, Rachmaninoff 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 24th caprice, with its clear-cut cadential and sequential patterns, perfectly lends itself to varying possibilities. It has attracted many composers before and after Rachmaninoff, from Brahms and Liszt to Lutoslawski and Muczynski. Rachmaninoff 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 Rachmaninoff'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 Rachmaninoff had used throughout his career and which had long become his *idée fixe*.

Rachmaninoff 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 Rachmaninoff 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 Schmalz for divided strings, and old-fashioned bravura was enough to insure 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 that night, Rachmaninoff and Stokowski\* chose the first, and it was immediately released on the HMV Red Label.

## 1930s

**Rachmaninoff's** benchmark inaugural recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski set the standard for generations of pianists, and remains essential listening today, for Rachmaninoff the composer and pianist are inseparable. So powerful is Rachmaninoff's Olympian pianism that his message sounds as though spoken by an oracle in possession of the secret to the truth. He always speaks from the heart, imparting the essential meaning of the work and stripping it of all extraneous elements. Rachmaninoff'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.

**Benno Moiseiwitsch's** artistic and personal ties with Rachmaninoff 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 **Mieczyslaw Munz** is heard here in an historic first live recording from December 1941 with National Orchestra Association under Leon 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.

**Wladyslaw 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 Schnabel'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. Schnabel'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 Rodzinski 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 production in his recording with the Czech Philharmonic and 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 his every gesture. His virtuosity is so effortless (listen to Vars. 15, 23 and 24) that he has a tendency 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 Variation 6 and 11 cadenzas 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, as it were, with buoyant fluency and fluidity and a view of the longer lines in his 1957 recording with the LA Philharmonic conducted by E. 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 ▶



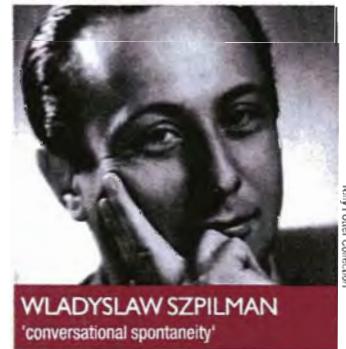
**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**  
'Set the standard'

Tilly Porter Collection



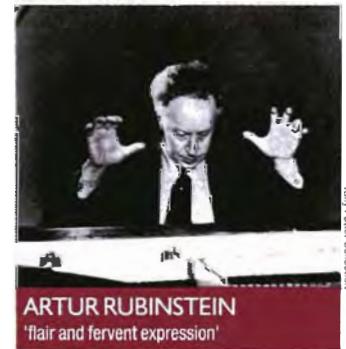
**BENNO MOISEWITSCH**  
'boundless inner freedom'

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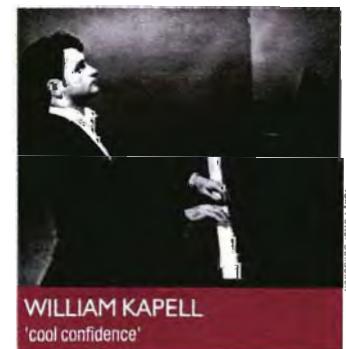
**WLADYSLAW SZPILMAN**  
'conversational spontaneity'

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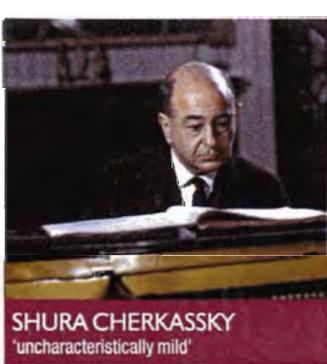
**ARTUR RUBINSTEIN**  
'flair and fervent expression'

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**WILLIAM KAPELL**  
'cool confidence'

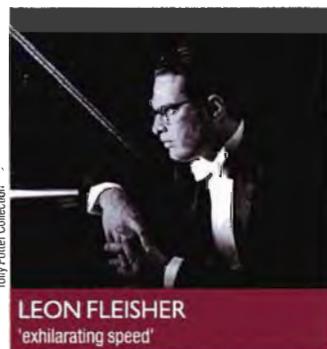
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**SHURA CHERKASSKY**  
'uncharacteristically mild'



**LEONARD PENNARIO**  
'fluency and fluidity'



**LEON FLEISHER**  
'exhilarating speed'



**BRUCHOLLERIE**  
'noble reserve'



**PHILIPPE ENTREMONT**  
'pianistic prime'

pathetic 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.

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 pieces 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 Abravanel. The recording 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 Concert 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 recording 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.

The first two Russian recordings come from behind the Iron Curtain: **Yakov Zak** with USSR State Symphony and 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 as 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 sym-

pathetic support to the soloist.

There is an ingenuous quality to **John Ogdon's** unassuming way with Rachmaninoff'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 recording 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's** collaboration with the New Philharmonia Orchestra led 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 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 over-emphasis or is too deliberate in his execution of some details, but he never loses the listener's interest. Karel Ancerl conducts the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

**Werner Haas's** very capable and fluent performance is too even-tempered in his version with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and Eliahu Inbal from 1974. His tone colours are too monochromatic to enliven the music or add anything personal to it.

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.

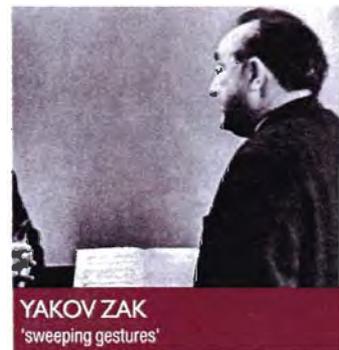
**Vladimir Ashkenazy** recorded the Rhapsody twice, 16 years apart: in 1970 with LSO and André Previn and in 1986 with Bernard Haitink and the Philharmonia Orchestra. His insightful concept and masterful execution are evident in both recordings. In the first the contrasts are more clearly etched, with the fast variations driven with incisive virtuosity (8, 15, 24, et cetera) while the slower ones are 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 as daring. But 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 nos. 64 and 66), most likely an editing mishap.

Two recordings of note come from well-known Hungarian sources: **Jenő Jandó** presents a clearly etched performance ▶



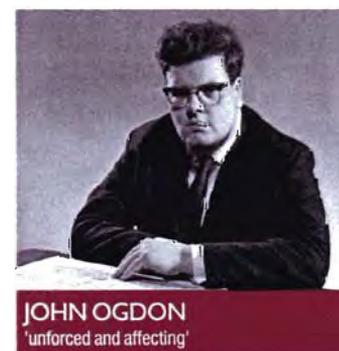
**YAKOV ZAK**  
'sweeping gestures'

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**VICTOR MERZHANOV**  
'full-blooded'

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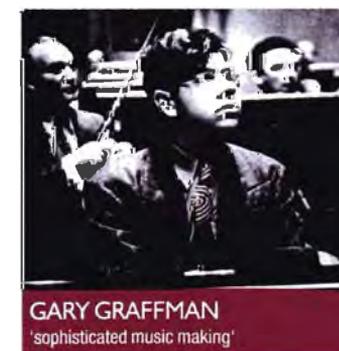


**JOHN OGDON**  
'unforced and affecting'



**EARL WILD**  
'captivating performance'

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**GARY GRAFFMAN**  
'sophisticated music making'

Tully Potter Collection



**BYRON JANIS**  
'emotionally involved'



**AGUSTIN ANIEVAS**  
'chamber-like and full of grace'



**TAMÁS VÁSÁRY**  
'hushed and suspenseful'



**BELLA DAVIDOVICH**  
'voluptuous rubatos'



**JENŐ JANDÓ**  
'clearly etched'

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 *piu 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.

**Peter Rösel** chooses deliberate tempos, playing with a robust tone and bright dynamics to ensure that every detail of the score is pronounced in a clear, methodical manner. In the final analysis, however, this approach comes across as addressing the music's letter more than its spirit.

**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 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, et cetera). He brings out unusual 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 unlike, 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 wildly 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 (hemioas 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 Pesek and the Philharmonia Orchestra is better balanced and refined, its ensemble impeccable. The later version with Abbado and Berlin Philharmonic (also available on video) captures him in a more mature live context.

## 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's performance, yet he never shows strong commitment to any particular interpretive idea.

**Howard Shelley**'s sensitive, musical approach is akin to chamber music making. 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 non-sense 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 Liege Philharmonic Orchestra under Pierre Bartholomee. 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's well supported by Philharmonia Orchestra, with Julius Rudel displaying 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 buildup 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.

**Eliso 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.

The main problem with **Arthur Ozolins's** performance is his consistently laidback approach. Expressions are bland, rhythms sluggish, phrasing passive and overall the

reading suffers from a lacklustre tone. Among the brighter moments is the piano statement of Var. 18, which is delivered in a clear voice. Incidentally, Joyce Hatto's purported recording of the Rhapsody is in fact a copy of the aforementioned version by Ozolins with the Toronto Symphony under Mario Bernardi.

## 2000s

**Jon Nakamatsu** does not try to dazzle or overwhelm his 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 here 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 annunciated and spelled out. He is the most successful at allowing the music to blossom and reach high climaxes, as in Var. 22.

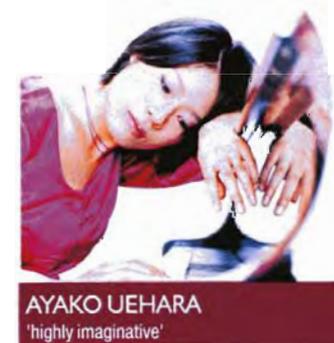
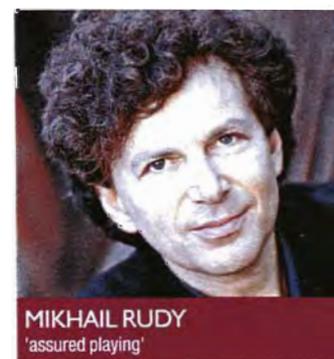
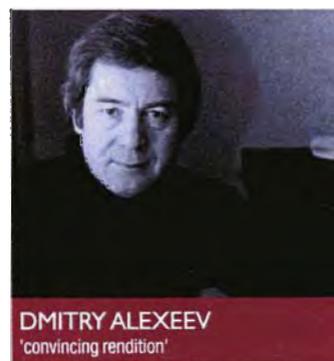
**Elena Caldine's** performance in her recording with the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Yablonsky is articulate and energetic, if musically conservative. At times she holds tempos back, as in Var. 5 or midway through Var. 15, for emphasis and clarity.

**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**, heard here 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 unorientated, serious and honest. ▶



Eric Richmond



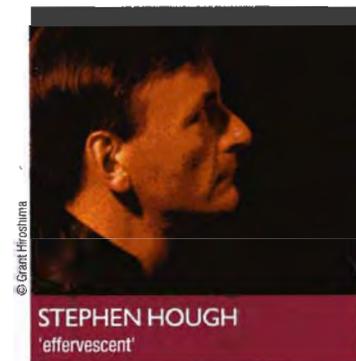
Kahtaro Nakama



**ALEXANDER KOBRIN**  
'thorough and articulate'



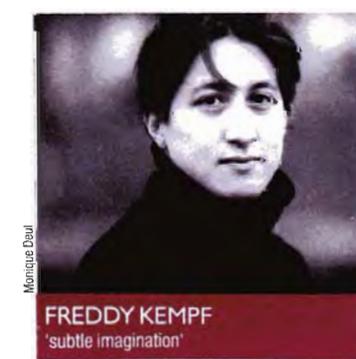
**NIKOLAI LUGANSKY**  
'interpretive integrity'



**STEPHEN HOUGH**  
'effervescent'



**LANG LANG**  
'overly immersed in detail'



**FREDDY KEMPF**  
'subtle imagination'

◀ **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.

**Freddy Kempf** plays with subtle imagination in this 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 and 23).

### CONCLUSION

Rachmaninoff'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 a hundred versions on disc. Of the over 70 recordings surveyed for this article, an unusually high percentage merit distinction. Each of the eight decades has produced noteworthy interpretations: from the 1930s Rachmaninoff 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, Vasary, 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, Thibaudet recordings are particularly outstanding, and the most significant

versions from the 2000s are those by Lugansky, Hough and Kempf. From these recommended recordings I would choose the Rachmaninoff, Moiseiwitsch, Ashkenazy, Pletnev and Lugansky readings, and if I had to choose just one version, it would have to be Moiseiwitsch's. ■

*The author wishes to thank Farhan Malik for kindly lending recordings from his collection, and for his assistance with the compilation of the listening list.*

## RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS



RCA 09026-61265-2 (1934)



Naxos Historical 8.110676 (1938)



London 455 237-2 (1970)



Melodiya LP C10 25999 (1983)  
Virgin 90724 (1987)



Warner Classics  
p2564 60613-2 (2004)

## HAVE YOUR SAY

Disagree with our choices?  
Write to us about your favourite recording of this work

The list details recordings discussed in this article. It is not intended to be a complete discography of the work. Recordings selected for inclusion are predominantly based on current CD listings, subject to availability.

ARTISTS	RECORD CO. & NUMBER	YEAR
<b>A</b> Alexeev, St Petersburg Philharmonic/Temirkanov Anievas, New Philharmonia O/Atzmon Ashkenazy, Philharmonia O/Haitink Ashkenazy, LSO/Previn	RCA 62710 EMI Classics London 417 613-2 London 455 237-2	1992 1968 1986 1970
<b>B</b> Bolkvadze, Tbilisi Symphony/Kakhidze Bruchollerie, Colonne Concerts O/Perlea	Infinity OK 62294 Giremi 7842/3	1995 1956
<b>C</b> Caldine, Russian Philharmonic O/Yablonsky Cherkassky, LSO/Menges Cliburn, Moscow Philharmonic/Kondrashin Cliburn, Philadelphia O/Ormandy Collard, O du Capitole de Toulouse/Plasson	BAM 2040 HMV ALP 1616 RCA 09026-62695-2 RCA 7945 EMI 7243 5 69677 2 4	2005 1953 1972 1970 1978
<b>D</b> Davidovich, Royal Concertgebouw O/Järvi De Groote, A., Belgian National O/Defossez	Philips 410 052-2 Cypress 9612	1981 1968*
<b>E</b> Entremont, Philadelphia O/Ormandy	Sony 46541	1958
<b>F</b> Feltsman, Israel Philharmonic/Mehta Fleisher, Cleveland O/Szell Fowke, Royal Philharmonic O/Temirkanov	CBS MK 44761 CBS MYK 37812 EMI Classics for Pleasure 7243 5 85623 2 3	1989 1957 1985
<b>G</b> Gavnriov, Philadelphia O/Muti Gavryluk, Tokyo Symphony O/Otomo Gheorghiu, Czech Philharmonic O/Georgescu Glemser, Polish National Radio Symphony/Wit Graffman, NY Philharmonic/Bernstein Gutiérrez, Baltimore Symphony/Zinman	EMI 7243 5 85779 2 1 Fontec 9146/8 Dante LYS 544/5 Naxos 8.550809 CBS MYK 36722 Telarc CD-80193	1989 2000* 1952 1995 1964 1990
<b>H</b> Haas W., Frankfurt Radio Symphony/Inbal Hough, Dallas Symphony/Litton	Philips 6500 920 Hyperion 67501/2	1974 2003*
<b>J</b> Jandó, Budapest Symphony O/Lehel Janis, Orchestre Philharmonique de l'ORTF/de Froment	Naxos 8.550117 EMI DVD DVB 3101999	1988 1968*
<b>K</b> Kapell, Robin Hood Dell O of Philadelphia/Reiner Kapell, /New York PO/Rodzinski Katchen, London Philharmonic O/Boult Katchen, London Philharmonic O/Boult Kempff, National Youth o of Great Britain/Seaman Kim, Philharmonia O/Rudel Kobrin, Fort Worth Symphony/Conlon Kocsis, San Francisco Symphony/de Waart	BMG 09026-68992 Pearl 9194 Decca 475 7221 London 417 880-2 Lloyds Bank 002 Helicon HE 1035 ALM 9052/4 Decca 475 8548	1951 1945* 1954 1959 1992* 1997 2005* c.1983
<b>L</b> Lang Lang, Mariinsky Theatre O/Gergiev Lewenthal, Vienna Symphony O/Abravanel Lill, BBC National O of Wales/Otaka Lugansky, City of Birmingham Symphony O/Oramo	DG B0003902-02 Westminster XWN LP 18884 Nimbus 5478 Warner Classics 2564 60613-2	2004* 1958 1995 2004
<b>M</b> Marshev, Aarhus Symphony O/Loughran Merzhanov, USSR State Symphony/Rozhdestvensky Moiseiwitsch, Liverpool Philharmonic O/Cameron Moiseiwitsch, BBC Symphony O/ Sargent Moiseiwitsch, Philharmonia O/Rignold Munz, National Orchestra Association/Barzin	Danacord 682/3 Revelation 10002 Naxos Historical 8.110676 Guild 2326 Royal 6451 Americus 20021022	2001 1959* 1938 1955* 1955 1941*
<b>N</b> Nakamatsu, Rochester Philharmonic O/Seaman	Harmonia Mundi USA 907286	2001
<b>O</b> Ogdon, Philharmonia O/Pritchard Orozco, Royal Philharmonic O/de Waart Ousset, City of Birmingham Symphony O/Rattle Ozolins, Toronto Symphony/Bernardi	EMI Classics 0946 3 92747 2 7 Philips 438 328-2 EMI 47223 Eloquence EQCBC 5139	1963 1972 1984 1993
<b>P</b> Paik, Moscow Radio Symphony O/Fedoseyev Pennario, Boston Pops/ Fiedler Pennario, Los Angeles Philharmonic O/Leinsdorf Pletnev, Kirov O/Temirkanov Pletnev, Philharmonia O/ Pasek Pletnev, Berlin Philharmonic O/ Abbado	RCA 68867 RCA 6524 Seraphim 7243 5 74522 2 9 Melodiya LP C10 25999 Virgin 90724 DG 457 583	1998 1963 1957 1983* 1987 1997*
<b>R</b> Rachmaninoff, Philadelphia O/Stokowski Rösel, Berlin Symphony O/Sanderling Rubinstein, Chicago Symphony/Reiner Rubinstein, Philharmonia O/ Susskind Rubinstein, NY Philharmonic/ De Sabata Rudy, St. Petersburg Philharmonic/Jansons	RCA 09026-61265-2 Berlin Classics 0032052 BMG 09026-63035-2 BMG 63009 Nuova Era 2232 Brilliant Classics 7794	1934 1982 1956 1947 1950* 1992
<b>S</b> Shelley, Royal Scottish National O/Thomson Simon, St. Louis Symphony O/Slatkin Smith, C, Philharmonia O/Sargent Szpilman, Warsaw Symphony O/Rowicki	Chandos 9192 Vox CDX 5008 Dutton Labs 4004 Polskie Radio 241/5	1990 1975 1948 1948
<b>T</b> Thibaudet, Cleveland O/Ashkenazy Tsukamoto, Liege Philharmonic O/Barthlomee	London 440 653-2 Rene Gailly 90 009	1993 1995*
<b>U</b> Uehara, Sydney Symphony O/Tchivzhel	Romc F0CD 9146/8	2000*
<b>V</b> Vásáry, LSO/Ahranovitch	Giga 457 906-2	1977
<b>W</b> Wayenberg, Royal Concertgebouw O/Ancerl Wild, Royal Philharmonic O/Horenstein	World T 469 Chesky 41	1970 1965
<b>Z</b> Zak, USSR State Symphony/Kondrashin	APR 6005	1952