ASPECTS OF A LATE STYLE IN SERGEI RACHMANINOFF'S VARIATIONS
ON A THEME OF CORELLI, OP. 42: A LECTURE RECITAL, TOGETHER
WITH THREE RECITALS OF SELECTED WORKS OF J. BRAHMS,
L. V. BEETHOVEN, F. CHOPIN, C. DEBUSSY,
ZOLTAN KODALY, M. MOUSSORGSKY, AND
S. PROKOFIEV

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

Mark Ruttle, B.M., M.M.
Denton, Texas
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This document identifies elements of a stylistic change which occurred in several of the pieces Rachmaninoff wrote during the last years of his life. These elements reflect a progressive trend in his music, which certainly maintained in spite of the change, its characteristic sound.

The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42* illustrate these new developments in their lean, angular unison sonorities, stripped of chordal padding and virtuosic display, in their percussive, staccato and incisive ostinato rhythmic figures, astringent chromatic harmony and modern air of detachment.

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43* confirms this stylistic development in its remarkable similarity to the *Corelli Variations*.

In the last twenty-six years of his life in exile from his homeland, making his way around the world as a concert pianist, Rachmaninoff wrote only six major works. Perhaps
his increasing age, separation from homeland, and the musical revolutions surrounding him in the Western world produced this stylistic development.
Tape recordings of all performances submitted as dissertation requirements are on deposit in the University of North Texas Library.
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NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
presents
MARK RUTTLE
in a
DMA PIANO RECITAL
Monday, November 23, 1981 6:30 P.M.  Concert Hall

Program

Sonata in A flat Major, Op. 110  Beethoven
Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
Allegro molto
Adagio ma non troppo; Fuga, Allegro ma non troppo

Barcarolle in F sharp Major, Op. 60  Chopin

Intermission

Pictures at an Exibition  Mussorgsky
Promenade
Gnomus
Il Vecchio Castello
Tuileries (Children Quarreling After Play)
Bydlo
Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells
Two Polish Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor
Promenade
Limoges, The Market Place (Great News!)
Catacombae, Sepulcrum Romanum
Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua
The Hut on Fowl’s Legs (Baba Yaga)
The Great Gate of Kiev

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Doctor of Musical Arts degree
North Texas State University  
School of Music  
presents  

Mark W. Ruttle  
in a  
Graduate Piano Recital  

Sunday, August 7, 1983  
3:00 p.m.  
Concert Hall  

PROGRAM  

Dances of Marosszek  
..............................................  Zoltán Kodály  

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune  
...........................................  Claude Debussy  

La Cathédrale engloutie  

Feux d’Artifice  

Fantaisie, op. 49  
..............................................  Frédéric Chopin  

INTERMISSION  

Sonata No. 6, op. 82  
..............................................  Sergei Prokofiev  

Allegro moderato  

Allegretto  

Tempo di valse lentissimo  

Vivace  

Presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree  
Doctor of Musical Arts  

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Graduate Piano Recital

MARK RUTTLE

Wednesday, July 6, 1988     8:00 p.m.     Recital Hall

Variations on a Theme from
Prometheus Op. 35 .............. Beethoven

Sonata No. 3, Op. 5. ............ Brahms
  Allegro maestoso
  Andante – Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint,
  Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe versint.
  Und halten sich selig umfangen. Sternau

Scherzo
Intermezzo (Rückblick)
Finale

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
Graduate Lecture Recital

MARK RUTTLE, Piano

LATE STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN RACHMANINOFF'S

VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF CORELLI, OPUS 42

Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 . . . Rachmaninoff

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 1988
RECITAL HALL
6:15 P.M.
## List of Examples

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the legacy of Sergei Rachmaninoff rested upon a few popular works comprising a small portion of his total output.

Because his music was primarily performed and recorded by himself, its quick demise upon his death was prophesied by Rosa Newmarch in her *Grove's Dictionary* article of the 1950's. Rachmaninoff's increasing popularity and a careful analysis of his complete works contradicts her estimation that: "As a composer, he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all . . . [his] enormous popular success . . . in his lifetime is not likely to last."¹

While critics were universal in their acclaim of Rachmaninoff's skills as a pianist, they were scathing in characterizing his compositional techniques as derivative and limited in expressive resources.

As a composer whose music began deep in the nineteenth century, he continued in its Romantic tradition throughout

the first half of the twentieth century alongside many musical revolutionaries.

During the last twenty-six years of his life, in dramatic contrast with the first half of his life, however, Rachmaninoff wrote only six major works.

This lecture presents one of these, the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, as a representative of progressive tendencies emerging late in his life.

These tendencies were already emerging in the music of his last years in Russia, 1916 and 1917. The Etudes Tableaux, Op. 39 the Songs, Op. 38 and the Fourth Piano Concerto illustrate his emerging stylistic development in their growing reliance on color and texture over melody and in their increasingly chromatic harmony.

In the Corelli Variations of 1931, a significant change of style has taken place. Reliance on melody has now been entirely replaced by interest in color, texture, and incisive rhythmic contrasts. Virtuosic display and pianistic padding have been eliminated entirely. Although still expressive with the suppression of melody and virtuosic display, overt emotional outpourings have disappeared.

Written off by many as an anachronism whose inspiration had dried up, Rachmaninoff proved in these last few pieces that his power and sensitivity as a composer still held true. In the progressive stylistic features of the Corelli
Variations, Rachmaninoff revealed his response to the many changes in the modern world surrounding him.
CHAPTER II

RACHMANINOFF'S MATURE PIANO STYLE

Beginning with the Second Piano Concerto of 1900, Rachmaninoff entered a period of great productivity and maturity, quickly becoming the reigning musical leader of all Russia. An understanding of Rachmaninoff's mature style during this period facilitates an appreciation of the changes which took place in the music of his later Western exile.

With the exception of the Paganini Rhapsody, virtually all the music popularly associated with Rachmaninoff dates from this period, 1900-1917. An analysis of this music, the Second and Third Piano Concertos, the Preludes and the Etudes Tableaux, clearly reveals his uniquely personal style.

Rachmaninoff felt that "Melody is music--the integral foundation of all music." His melodic style illustrates more clearly than any other feature the legacy of Tchaikowsky.

Rachmaninoff creates the effect of seemingly endless melody through a continuously elided and open-ended phrase structure. Scalar, stepwise motion within a limited range

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and a marked avoidance of large intervals prevails. Melodic sequences permeate Rachmaninoff's lyric style.

John Culshaw has categorized Rachmaninoff's melodies into two types, "... long flowing melodies with a tendency to progress by intervals of a third" (Example 1), and "... short, tight melodies which hover continually around one note" (Example 2).³

The former type frequently begin with a long dramatic note, often as the rhetorical climax of the phrase and producing a declamatory impact with each statement. These melodies tend to contain rapid, folk-like ornamental graces.

The latter type consistently show a distinct resemblance to the sacred chant melodies of the "Oktoekhos."


![Example 2](image)

Slow lyric passages frequently feature a uniquely personal type of multi-layered texture in which the primary melodic material has one or more quasi-contrapuntal counter-melodies, known as the "podgolosky" (Example 3, circled notes).⁴


![Example 3](image)

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A similar type of polyphonic texture—the imitative weaving of thematic fragments in many voices—characterizes much of Rachmaninoff's music (Example 4). The long broad arches of melody are energized by this intricate web which often uses augmentation, diminution and stretto devices.


Another persistent feature of his music is the use of an ascending or descending chromatic figure, frequently in the bass (Example 5). John Culshaw claims, "If ever Rachmaninoff revealed a true 'fingerprint,' this must be it."\(^5\)

Rachmaninoff's harmonic approach can be divided into three types: first, the accompaniment of lyric passages by static chord progressions and movement to closely related keys (Example 4); second, highly chromatic colorations and

\(^5\) Culshaw, op. cit., 105.
digressions within a functional, diatonic structure (Example 6); and third, a tonally ambiguous texture of extremely rapid and abrupt shifts to remote keys (Example 7).


Rachmaninoff's chromaticism always functions as a result of natural stepwise voice leading. As a consequence, common-tone and enharmonic chord changes become a virtual stereotype of his harmonic language (Example 8).
The progression tonic to mediant in both major and minor modes stands out "as an earmark of Rachmaninoff’s harmonic style" (Example 9). Furthermore, a constant hovering

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between the two modes for long periods of time often obscures the tonal center.


For all its wanderings, chromatic colorings and episodes of ambiguity, "a firm sense of tonality is central to the composer's style."⁷

Rachmaninoff's manner of playing the piano and his music share a strong sense of rhythmic vitality and drive. A complex web of sound created by the elaborate rhythmic intricacy of many constantly moving voices and frequent contrasts of various rhythmic patterns within a short span of time serve to propel the music forward (Example 10).

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Syncopation often plays an important rhythmic role, clarifying the many layers of countermelodies and imitative fragments.

From early in his life, Rachmaninoff's music employed frequent meter changes to provide diversity. These meter changes may be due in part to the influence of chant melody and Russian folk song which also feature complex metric combinations.8

Rachmaninoff had a distinct preference for dotted rhythmic figures (Example 11) and the pattern of an eighth and two sixteenths (Example 12), which appear constantly in his music.


Rachmaninoff has had no successor in his ability to create uniquely colorful, pianistic effects. He uses many large stretches, massive sonorities and unusual positions to exploit the entire range of pianistic skill (Example 13).

Rachmaninoff's pianistic heritage descends from a direct line of nineteenth-century interpreters—-a youthful exposure to Anton Rubenstein's performances and to Alexander Siloti,

his cousin, piano teacher, and favored pupil of Liszt. Rachmaninoff regarded Chopin and his music as "the greatest of the greats, a kind of Bible for the pianist."\(^9\)

Among many Chopinesque features are his left hand accompaniment figures supporting nocturne melodies or étude style figurations. These accompaniment figures contribute great variety in their support of the melody, constantly adding color and motion to the composition (Example 14).

Equally indebted to Chopin is his style of melodic *fioritura*—ornamental swirls full of harmonic intent, vocal style melodic decoration and extensive double note passagework.

The constant technical difficulty of his piano writing, use of orchestral sonorities, massive repeated chords and brilliant use of the keyboard’s entire range amply illustrate his debt to Liszt.


The interpolation of rhetorical cadenzas, passages of alternating third or octaves and his frequent use of a three-hand texture (Example 16) also reveal Liszt’s influence.
Unique textural features of Rachmaninoff's piano style include a scintillating exploitation of the extreme upper range in rapid, glittery effects and the "Russian" bells sonority which receives so much notice (Example 17).

Rachmaninoff himself said,

If I have been at all successful in making bells vibrate with human emotion in my works, it is largely due to the fact that most of my life was lived amid vibrations of the bells of Moscow...10

Rachmaninoff's mature style drew upon his Russian heritage, the influence of his mentor Tchaikovsky, and a deep admiration of the music of Chopin and Liszt.

Example 17. S. Rachmaninoff, Prelude, Op. 23, No. 4,
measures 53-57.
CHAPTER III

THE CORELLI VARIATIONS

In his letter to Rachmaninoff of 1934, Vladimir Wilshaw compares the Corelli Variations with his earlier music:

The [Corelli] Variations, or as much as I could grasp of them, seem not at all like your previous Variations of Op. 22... the new ones surpass those in complexity and profundity... I suddenly thought what a long way you have come from the past... you have definitely departed from your saintly hierarchy... 11

Although the variations received lukewarm critical and public reaction, Rachmaninoff continued to play them in recitals. He placed enough confidence in their worth to send them to his good friend and fellow composer, Nicholas Medtner.12

The theme is the well-known La Folia as used by Corelli in his Violin Sonata, Op. 5, No. 12. Rachmaninoff dedicated these Variations to his friend Fritz Kreisler, with whom he often performed and recorded and who wrote his own version of the La Folia Corelli Variations.

The name La Folia comes from an ancient Portuguese dance and fertility rite during which men dressed as women and


12. Ibid., 281.
behaved so foolishly that they appeared to be out of their senses—hence, the name folly. Originating in the fifteenth-century vocal music, the first of many *folia* lute transcriptions appear in the sixteenth century.

The Portuguese name, *folia*, originally referred to a manner of singing and dancing, not to the tune itself. The two were not connected until early in the seventeenth century when the tune emerged as a typical counterpoint to a *basso ostinato* pattern belonging to the same family as the *passamezzo antico* and *Romanesca*.

For over 350 years, this theme has fascinated composers. It is almost always set in variations form, usually as a dignified sarabande, and invariably on the same bass line. A brief list of the notable composers who used this theme includes Girolamo Frescobaldi, Jean-Baptiste Lully, Antonio Vivaldi, J. S. and C. P. E. Bach, Giovanni Pergolesi, Luigi Cherubini, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, and Franz Liszt.

This melody must have had a powerful attraction for Rachmaninoff. It not only lies in his favorite key, d minor, it could also easily have been one of his own, sharing with his melodic style a limited range, hovering around one note, and a sequential tendency of two bar segments. Each eight bar phrase of the original harmonization moves from tonic to mediant in the second half of the phrase—as noted earlier, a
significant feature of Rachmaninoff's harmonic style (Example 18).

Example 18. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Theme.

In the Corelli Variations, many of the elements of Rachmaninoff's mature styles have evolved into a consistently more progressive sonority.

The most conspicuous change in his later music centers around his use of melody. He no longer relies on long, lyric melodic lines or even a texture of right hand figuration over left hand accompaniment figures. Short melodic fragments or passages based upon rhythmic and textural color for their shape now prevail (Example 19).

In spite of the theme's inherent melodic qualities, only four of the variations and the coda use the former style of broad legato phrases. Only Variations One, Two, and Fifteen make direct melodic elaboration of the theme.

Thirteen of the twenty variations use a percussive staccato articulation in complete contrast with the prior reliance on legato phrasing.

Right and left hand now work together in a unison sonority which dominates ten of the variations. This modern, linear constructed type of melody breaks away from the dominance of vertical concord (Examples 20 and 21).

None of the variations use the Chopinesque arpeggiated left hand or etude style right hand figurations. Rachmaninoff greatly reduced the role of running figuration and completely removed melodic fioritura. Complex left hand accompaniments and the multi-layered texture of many inner contrapuntal and rhythmic voices which so predominated in his earlier style have entirely disappeared. The music now has become stripped of all padding and extraneous voice motion, using in contemporary fashion only the barest essentials.
This leaner texture shows a noticeable lack of virtuosic display as Rachmaninoff avoids the strained rhetorical climaxes of his earlier style.

His use of chords now shows careful attention to doubling. In many of the variations he omits one of the triad chord tones (Example 20).


A new angular and athletic pianism of rapid and extreme changes in register surfaces everywhere (Example 21). In contrast to Rachmaninoff's earlier melodies, large leaps become common. Variation XX illustrates a modern type of wide-ranging octave displacement which breaks up the smooth flow of the melodic line (Example 21).

The predominance of this unison, staccato texture, stripped of chordal padding, chromatic inner voices and
Example 21. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Var. XX, measures 1-3.

accompaniment figures, produces a new sonority of lightness and clarity.

In the absence of melodic domination and chromatic inner voice motion, textural color helps to maintain the music's forward motion. Sudden shifts in register and abrupt changes in dynamics now shape the phrase (Example 19).

The folk-like open fifth accompaniment figure of Variation XVII and the long pedal and unrelieved fortissimo of Variation VII are further examples of Rachmaninoff's heightened interest in textural color.

An ostinato rhythmic character of aggressive agitation also helps to replace the former reliance on lyricism and thematic transformation. Perhaps this was an unconscious result of his exposure to the neo-classic motor rhythms of his contemporaries. This modern rhythmic drive so
reminiscent of early Prokofiev, propels the lean, angular lines forward (Examples 20, 21, and 23).

Forward motion is also provided by the increased rhythmic vitality of constant meter changes which occur in many variations.

In the Corelli Variations, use of dissonance increases significantly. No longer mere colorations of diatonic progressions, altered chords have evolved into a structurally conceived, ambiguous chromatic harmony.

The use of parallel augmented triads, diminished seventh chords and dominant substitutes in Variation VIII is an example of Rachmaninoff's pungent harmony in his late style (Example 22).

Example 22. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Var. VIII, measures 1-4.
Variation XIII uses many seventh, ninth, and added note chords, to the complete exclusion of pure triads in obscuring the harmonic outline of the theme (Example 23).

Example 23. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Var. XIII, measures 1-3.

In his later harmonic style, Rachmaninoff removed many of the inner, stepwise moving voices which formerly smoothed the way between his rapid and distant modulations. This exposes a skeletal framework of colorful, yet often unrelated sonorities.

In the Corelli Variations, Rachmaninoff uses a tight variation procedure in focusing the music on an unfolding and constantly forward-looking motion.

He uses several types of contemporary variation procedures in establishing the Variations' concise formal balance. For instance, the unequal length of four of the variations, numbers XX, XII, XVII, and XX extends far beyond
the theme's sixteen bar format which the others follow closely.

The wide-ranging harmonic independence of Variations VIII, IX, and XII and the free variation form of number IX are further examples of his use of contemporary variation techniques.

Rachmaninoff's brilliant array of variational procedures and his concise grouping of the individual variations creates a new "sense of assured formal balance." It is this feature, in comparison with the structural imbalance of the earlier sonatas, which supports the claim for the Corelli Variations as his most successful extended work for solo piano.

In their lean, angular unison textures, stripped of virtuosic display, chordal padding and accompaniment figures, in their percussive, staccato, unison sonorities, their incisive, ostinato rhythmic figures, astringent chromatic harmony and modern air of detachment, the Corelli Variations amply demonstrate the progressive elements in Rachmaninoff's new sound.

The variations do, however, retain much of Rachmaninoff's earlier stylistic features. Variation XV and

XIX contain the familiar chromatically descending figure in
the bass.

The lyricism, accompaniment and harmony of the D flat
Variations XIV and XV clearly show that Rachmaninoff retained
his deep roots in Romantic tradition. Variations XIII,
XVIII, XIX and XX use his favorite dotted rhythmic pattern.

Variation IV recalls Rachmaninoff's earlier life in its
distinctly colorful use of the "Russian bells" sonority.

An accurate estimation of Rachmaninoff's stylistic
development is complicated by the limited number and type of
pieces he wrote in later life. The Three Russian Folksongs
are merely arrangements for voice and orchestra, the Third
Symphony, an exercise in nostalgia. Only the Symphonic
Dances and the Paganini Rhapsody continue this new
progressive trend.

Rachmaninoff's last two works for the piano, the Corelli
Variations and the Paganini Rhapsody naturally reveal his
latest developments in the medium in which he was most
comfortable.

All the features of his new progressive sound also
appear in the Paganini Rhapsody, confirming the new stylistic
development which surfaced in the Corelli Variations. The
Paganini Variations show the same angular, unison textures as
the Corelli Variations. They also demonstrate the incisive
rhythmic figures and percussive, staccato articulation which typifies this new sonority (Example 24).

Example 24. S. Rachmaninoff, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Var. XX, measures 2-3, and Var. XXI, measures 1-3.

Perhaps the leaner sonorities and compact textures of these last two works for piano stem from his advancing age and maturity, lacking the emotional energy or aesthetic desire for the rhetorical excess of earlier years. Rachmaninoff himself commented, "I look at my early work and see how much there is that is superfluous . . . so many voices moving simultaneously . . . ."14

As Rachmaninoff takes his place in music history, it becomes easier to judge his work. At a closer historical perspective, his contemporaries tended to misunderstand him.

In 1893 Tchaikovsky's Symphony "Pathétique" and Verdi's Falstaff each received their premiere while Brahms composed his Klavierstucke Op. 118 and 119. By the same year, the twenty-year-old Rachmaninoff had written works in all the major genres--opera, concerto, symphonic, chamber music, solo voice, and piano. His personal style and musical aesthetic as a conservative Russian composer with roots deep in nineteenth-century tradition were well-formed at this time.

When forced to leave the security and support of his homeland at the age of forty-five, he encountered the rapid musical changes in the Western world and the critics' demeaning label of traditionalist.

Although halting, the musical output of his last years shows a sensitivity to the changing modern world in which he now lived, a world dramatically different from the aristocratic Tsarist Russia he had left behind. As he said, "I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien."15

While others overturned tradition, Rachmaninoff chose the humble and simple craftsman-like advance so well-suited

to his personality. As Richard Coolidge notes, "He chose to allow some compatible idioms gently to infiltrate his already mature and viable style in such a way as to irradiate that style with a new and strangely glowing aura [much the way Puccini did in Turandot]."\textsuperscript{16}

While his slow and discreet evolution of style pales beside the revolutionary innovations of his younger contemporaries, we may now classify him as a moderate progressive. In his later stylistic development as seen in the Corelli Variations, Rachmaninoff proves to be much more than a man born out of his time.


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Karatygin, V. "To the Memory of S. I. Taneev," *The Musical Quarterly* XIII (October 1927), 540.


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