

ASO Program Notes

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943)

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* brings together the music of two giants, one from the 19th century and one from the 20th. Rachmaninoff was not born until 33 years after Paganini's death but was a student of Paganini's music, as were so many other composers of his day. The Italian composer Niccolò Paganini was a fascinating character in the 19th century musical world. Stories of his life read like sensational adventure tales, portraying him at various times as a sorcerer, a seducer, a murderer and even a Goethe-like figure who sold his soul to the devil for fame and glory. He composed and played a large body of music for the solo violin, developing techniques which are devilishly difficult to play, but which nevertheless have become staples in the recital repertoire of modern virtuosos. One such work was called *Twenty-Four Caprices for Unaccompanied Violin, Op. 1*. He used the twenty-fourth caprice several years later as the basis for a set of variations, and this same caprice then inspired other composers, such as Brahms, Schuman, and Liszt to create their own variations.

Along came Rachmaninoff, who was not convinced that the possibilities for these variations had been exhausted, and in 1934 he composed his own set of twenty-four variations, calling it "a rhapsody". This designation probably refers to the fact that each of the variations does not have a clear beginning and ending. Each new variation actually flows out of the one before it so that a continuous flow of music is presented, covering a range of musical emotions, from truly rhapsodic to "devilish" in character. Besides Paganini's caprices, Rachmaninoff introduces the *Dies Irae* theme from the Catholic Mass for the Dead in the seventh, tenth and last variations. The *Dies Irae* motif is meant to represent the devil - and Paganini's darker side. It supports the legend that Paganini got his superhuman abilities on the violin through a pact with the devil, giving his soul in return. In 1934 the *Rhapsody* became part of his American concert tour, with the composer playing the solo at its premier in Philadelphia, and it was a great success.

As a Russian, Rachmaninoff was possessed of a Russian temperament and outlook. His music was a product of that temperament and as such was certainly Russian music. On the other hand, he refused to produce works to any formula or preconceived theory. "Music," he said, "should be the expression of a composer's complex personality." He was therefore a perfect candidate to expand upon the work of another composer by applying his own unique treatments to that work.

Beryl McHenry