SOLUTIONS TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE RHAPSODY ON A THEME

BY PAGANINI, OPUS 43 OF RACHMANINOFF

D.M.A. Document

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by

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ABSTRACT

The motivation for choosing this topic comes directly from Alfred Cortot's edition of the Chopin Etudes, in which he explains the technical difficulties and provides some possible solutions for each of the etudes. This kind of analysis has never been written about Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini. This is a work which one must study extensively and practice accurately in order to give an exquisite performance. Chapter Two explores Rachmaninoff's role as a composer and a pianist. The year 1917 was the turning-point in Rachmaninoff's life, not only causing his exile, but also creating his new pursuit--as a concerto virtuoso in the newland. The discussion mainly focuses on his becoming a concert pianist and on his unique piano mastery.

Chapter Three presents solutions for technical difficulties in each variation of the Paganini Rhapsody, solutions that will help to build piano playing in a natural way. The technical challenges in this composition include:

1. scales
2. staccato passages in single-notes, double-notes, octaves, chordal patterns
3. arpeggio passages
4. rapid sixteenth-note passages
5. *octave and chordal patterns*

6. *alternating patterns in single-notes, double-notes, octaves, chordal patterns*

Because of the wide range of tempi, these technical difficulties appear in diverse combinations, often requiring considerable virtuosity. As a frame of reference for these solutions, I have included principles of playing the piano that are the most useful to me and that form the basic of my piano technique. This will provide the readers with practice methods that will be helpful in this formidable piece as well as others. My belief is that technique functions as a tool and its purpose is to fulfill the musical expression.
To My Parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr. Rosemary Platt, Professor Emeritus, School of Music of The Ohio State University, for her elaborate guidance and unceasing support, inspiring me throughout the whole process of writing this document. My most enjoyable and productive artistic life occurred while studying with her for two years in school. The principal concepts of approaching piano technique in this document are based on what she shared with me about playing the piano.

I am greatly indebted to my advisor Dr. William Conable for his knowledge, direction and counseling and for his expert advice on my document; without his prompt, efficient corrections and guidance, it would not have been possible for me to complete this document. Since my first year of study here, he has enlightened, supported, and encouraged me in many aspects of my academic life.

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I also offer thanks to my former piano teacher Dr. Nelson Harper, for his continuous and patient support, and for guidance in many circumstances.
My deepest gratitude goes to my parents for their endless love and enthusiastic support during my five years of studying abroad.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Alfred Cortot’s edition of the Chopin *Etudes*, in which he explains the technical
difficulties and provides some possible solutions for each of the etudes, served as the model
for this study. In Cortot’s famous pedagogic book *Rational Principles of Pianoforte Playing*,
he indicated: “the mechanical and long-repeated practice of a difficult passage has been
replaced by the reasoned study of the difficulty contained therein, reduced to its elementary
principle.”¹ This concept forms the basis of my technical approach, but the examples in
Cortot’s discourses, the so-called “gymnastic exercises”, are very different from my technical
approach. In a sense, they seem to prevent the fingers from playing in a natural way. In my
experience, the fingers function better in a relaxed, closed hand position; in this way, they can
move efficiently, easily and freely. In Chapter Three, I elaborate the steps to acquiring these
natural positions when playing the piano. Thus, what I present in this document merely adopts
the procedures used in Cortot’s methods, but presents my own concepts of technical
difficulties and solutions. Such an analysis has never been written about the *Rhapsody on a
Theme by Paganini*, a composition that one must study extensively and practice accurately in
order to give an exquisite performance. The process of analyzing the difficulties of this work,
finding technical solutions, and performing with orchestra enabled me to gain insights into this composition.

Rachmaninoff said that:

The study of pure technique includes scales, chords, arpeggios, trills and octaves. How can the student expect to learn difficult pieces without a background of technical forms, well digested and mastered? It is perfectly impossible. And if this technical drill and routine are necessary for the student, shall the concert player cast them aside as useless? Not at all; he would be very foolish to do so. If I wish to keep my playing mechanism in condition, I, too, must practice scales, arpeggios, trills, chords and octaves. There is no other way to keep fit.¹

In the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini, we can see the “pure technique” to which Rachmaninoff refers.

Rachmaninoff had three professions at once: composer, conductor and performer. He admitted that it was not possible for him to hunt three hares at the same time.² After moving abroad in 1917, he devoted most of his time to being a concert virtuoso which brought him enormous fame and stable financial support. On the other hand, he was then not as productive in composition as before. Extensive concert tours and industrious practicing occupied almost all of his time and prevented him from composing. As a spectacular piano virtuoso, he also left numerous precious recordings for later generations, especially for RCA Victor and its English affiliate, HMV, from 1920-1943.³ He embarked on a new career as a concert virtuoso at the age of 45. Relying on his disciplined Russian pianistic training and his marvelous ingenuity, during a very short time after leaving his native land he created a new career for himself. His background and unique piano mastery are discussed in Chapter Two. As a pianist-composer, Rachmaninoff knew exactly how to include virtuosic writing in his works. As a result, his
compositions are pianistic masterworks, reflecting a convincing keyboard idiom and complicated textures that often require incredible stretches of the hand, and florid decoration. His four concertos and *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* are all extraordinarily difficult technically. His premiere performance of each of these left unforgettable impressions.

Technique functions as a tool and the purpose of technique is to fulfill the musical expression. Without musical thought, technique simply cannot convey anything; it is indispensable to balance musical and technical considerations. In Chapter Three, I will present solutions for advanced technical difficulties, solutions in each variation that will help to build piano playing in a natural way. Hopefully, this will provide the readers with practice methods that will be helpful in this formidable piece as well as others.

The discussion of each variation will have several parts: general description, technical difficulties and resolutions. Regarding various technical challenges, I will carefully survey each of these and suggest appropriate solutions. The principle for my approach to technical difficulties and solutions lies in finding natural motions in arms, hands, fingers, and coordination of hands, enhancing performance ability.
Notes


CHAPTER 2
RACHMANINOFF AS COMPOSER AND PIANIST

Historical And Social Background

Born on April 1, 1873, at Oneg, near Novgorod, Russia, Rachmaninoff was the second son of his family. Aristocratic and well-educated, his parents were acceptable amateur musicians. His mother taught him to play the piano, and his father composed the theme that he later adopted for the Polka de V. R. (1911).¹ His paternal grandfather studied piano with John Field, and his sister Helena, who died in adolescence while studying in Moscow Conservatory, was a remarkably talented singer. Later, due to his father’s failure in managing the estate, the family was forced to sell their house at Oneg and move close to St. Petersburg. In 1882, Rachmaninoff’s former teacher Anna Ornatskaya recommended that he enter the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where talented children could acquire a general education as well as specialized training.² However, since he did not pay attention to his school work, his mother took the advice of Alexander Siloti, a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, and sent her son to Siloti’s former teacher, Nikolai Zverev, who was famous for his rigid discipline in teaching the piano. As a result, Rachmaninoff moved into Zverev’s house with two other pupils in 1885. In 1888, when Rachmaninoff was promoted to the senior department, he transferred to study piano with
Siloti. In addition, he started to study counterpoint with Taneyev and harmony with Arensky. When he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892, he was awarded the highest honor, the Great Gold Medal, for the presentation of his one-act opera *Aleko* in his final examination. This medal had been awarded only twice before. Afterwards, he acted as a free-lance composer and conductor and became deeply engrossed in composition, enormously praised and inspired by his idol Tchaikovsky. He finished and premiered the renowned C-sharp minor prelude in Moscow, a work which would eventually become a tiresome encore piece later on in his life. When Tchaikovsky died in November 1893, Rachmaninoff dedicated the D minor *Trio élogiaque* to him. However, shattered by the disastrous premiere of his D minor symphony in 1897, he fell into a deep depression and almost ceased to compose for three years. His energy and self-confidence returned with Dr. Nikolai Dahl’s treatment, and his world-renowned *Piano Concerto No. 2* (1900-01) emerged; he dedicated this spectacular concerto to Dahl.

During the next sixteen years (1901-1917), Rachmaninoff reached a peak in his composing career. Works during this period included the cello sonata (1901), the second suite for two pianos, and the opera *The Miserly Knight*. Also, during these years, he composed more than fifty piano works, including two sets of preludes (1903, 1910) and etudes-tableaux (1911, 1916-17), two piano sonatas (1907, 1913) and the third concerto (1909), a nearly equal number of art songs, the second symphony, *The Isle of the Dead* (1909) and the choral symphony, *The Bells* (1913).

In 1909, he first visited America and gave the premiere of the D minor piano concerto in New York with the New York Symphony Orchestra conducted by Walter
Damrosch. At the same time, Rachmaninoff rejected the invitation to become the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and returned to Moscow. Due to the political environment in Russia, he decided to leave his country for a while and resided in Dresden. However, the Russian Revolution in 1917 lengthened his exile and, moreover, determined the direction of his artistic life. After settling in America, he devoted most of his attention to creating a new career as a piano virtuoso. In February 1943, overworked and exhausted from his concert tour, Rachmaninoff was forced to cancel his remaining engagements. Shortly afterwards, he was diagnosed with cancer and died at his home in Beverly Hills on March 28, 1943.

**Stylistic Characteristics In Rachmaninoff’s Piano Compositions**

Rachmaninoff was a composer who carried the Romantic tradition of lyricism far into the twentieth century. His compositions and piano style stemmed directly from the romantic masters, especially Chopin and Liszt, and occasionally from Schumann and Brahms. However, he focused mainly on the Chopin-Liszt framework of singing melodies and rich sonorities, decorated by elaborate technical embellishments. In spite of his long residence abroad, the music is characterized by a pronounced fatalism—a fervent belief that no struggle against fate can succeed. However, allied with this fatalism, there is still a brighter idea, a longing for peace of mind. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that Rachmaninoff considered himself “a stranger in an alien world,” for he had been out-of-step with the pace of the world since the time of his birth. He shared his thoughts about being a composer:
I am not a composer who produces works to the formulas of preconceived theories. Music, I have always felt, should be the expression of a composer’s complex personality. A composer’s music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books that have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the sum total of a composer’s experiences.⁸

This reflects the typical romantic spirit of his compositions. Confronting the criticism of his old-fashioned musical style, he said of modern music:

The poet Heine once said, ‘What life takes away, music restores.’ He would not be moved to say this if he could hear the music of today. For the most part it gives nothing. Music should bring relief. It should rehabilitate minds and souls, and modern music does not do this. If we are to have great music we must return to the fundamentals which made the music of the past great. Music cannot be just color and rhythm; it must reveal the emotions of the heart.⁹

Among his solo piano works, the preludes Opus 23 and Opus 32 represent the most refined quality. Each prelude is vividly characterized—a portraiture of a particular sentiment or mood, growing from a subtle melodic or rhythmic fragment into an unified tone poem.¹⁰ Each of them, whether introspective, impassioned, or outwardly virtuosic, is a treasure of pianism.¹¹ Among his four concertos, the second and third are the most popular, full of melancholy and passionate melodies. The third concerto is even more ingenious and mature than the second.

**Rachmaninoff As a Pianist**

1917 was a crucial turning point for Rachmaninoff. Not only did he bid farewell to his beloved country, he also at the age of 45 embarked on a new career. He stopped devoting most of his time to composition and, instead, turned to the role of concert soloist. With his tremendous gifts and diligence, he soon built up a powerful and
overwhelming reputation in America. His name became a synonym for piano virtuoso. Nevertheless, since he was not trained to be a concert virtuoso, he had to strive to build up his repertoire and confidence in this new role. Considering his introverted personality, constant apprehensions, recurrent moodiness and near-depression, it is amazing that he retained his remarkable prowess at the keyboard right up to the end of his life. 12

His Studies of Piano

Like most Russian pianists, Rachmaninoff received thorough instruction in the fundamentals of music and the technique of piano-playing at an early age. In his life, two important teachers cultivated his pianism—Nikolai Zverev and Alexander Siloti. Zverev was especially influential and was famous for strict discipline with his students. Rachmaninoff studied with him almost three years. Although Zverev had a distinguished reputation as a pedagogue, few people could claim to have heard him play. 13 He seems to have been one of those teachers who can achieve splendid results by explanation and criticism, without resorting to demonstrations. 14 Often, his young pupils would gather together on Sunday afternoons and perform before the leading musicians of Moscow. Their teacher would encourage them to attend many important musical events, further nurturing their musical growth. As a result, Rachmaninoff became acquainted with prominent musicians, such as Tchaikovsky and Anton Rubinstein. However, his relationship with Zverev ended with a tempestuous argument and finally he moved from Zverev’s house to live with his uncle, Alexander Satin.

Before leaving Russia, Rachmaninoff was better-known as a composer and conductor than as a piano soloist. When he performed his C-sharp minor prelude in
Moscow in 1892, it was his first professional engagement as a pianist; apart from this
prelude, he also played one movement of Rubinstein's Fourth Piano Concerto and a short
group of solos by Chopin, Liszt and himself.\textsuperscript{15} However, not until embarking for America
had he been engaged as a piano performer. The probable reasons for his becoming a
concert pianist are emigration, economic considerations and personal desire.

First of all, when he decided to emigrate to America, he was immediately
confronted by the financial pressure of supporting his whole family. Taking his colleague
and good friend Josef Hoffmann's advice, he determined to make a living playing concerts.
It was not easy for him to embark on a new career at the age of 45; he had to undertake
the considerable task of acquiring a repertoire suitable for the standards set by
contemporary virtuosos.\textsuperscript{16} However, endowed with a phenomenal memory and sight-
reading ability, he accomplished this in a remarkably short time. The seemingly endless
concert tours were soon to alleviate his financial situation. Though he regarded his new
life as a heavy burden and frequently complained about the tension and strain of playing in
public day after day, it brought him prosperity as well as considerable artistic
satisfaction.\textsuperscript{17}

He once told his friend Alfred Swan:

With all my travels and the absence of a permanent abode, I really have no time to
compose, and, when I now sit down to write, it does not come to me very easily.
Not as in former years.\textsuperscript{18}

He said he never tried to compose during the periods that he was giving
recitals. He was preoccupied with concert tours in America and Europe and the
industrious daily practice that dominated most of his time. Only during his summer vacations in the country could he concentrate on composition. Also, being separated from his native land always made him feel nostalgic.

There is another important aspect of his decision to pursue a concert career. Even in 1918, his music was already out of step with current trends in art, and sometimes he felt intense pressure from severe critics. The performance of *The Bell* in 1919 reinforced this feeling. However, when he was asked if being a pianist hurt his role as a composer, he answered:

Yes, very much. I never could do two things at the same time. I either played only, or conducted only, or composed only. Now there’s no opportunity to think of composition. And somehow, since leaving Russia, I don’t feel like composing. Change of air, perhaps. Forever traveling, working. Instead of hunting three hares at once, I’m sticking to one. No. I do not regret it. I love to play. I have a powerful craving for the concert platform. When there are no concerts to give I rest poorly.

The great piano virtuoso Josef Hofmann gave a remarkable commentary about the art of Rachmaninoff’s performance:

Rachmaninoff! The man whose art is as pure gold; the sincere artist, equally admired by musicians and the public. He is indeed simple, unassuming, truthful, generous.

These words are high praise of one artist by another artist of great renown. More effusive admiration came from Nikolai Medtner, also a great composer and pianist:

Rachmaninoff strikes us chiefly by the spiritualization of sound, the bringing to life of the elements of music. The simplest scale, the simplest cadence—in short, any formula—when “recited” by his fingers acquires its primary meaning. We are struck not by his memory, not by his fingers, which do not allow a single
detail in the whole to slip by, but just by that whole; by the inspired images that he reconstructs before us. His gigantic technique, his virtuosity, serve merely for the clarification of these images. His rhythms, the movement of sounds, betray the same expressive declamation and relief as each separate sound of his touch. Not all have understood and appreciated the Rachmaninoff rubato and espressivo, and yet they are always in an equilibrium with the fundamental rhythm and tempo, in contact with the fundamental sense of the music. His rhythm, like his sound, is always included in his musical soul—it is, as it were, the beating of his living pulse.22

In 1920, Rachmaninoff became an exclusive RCA Victor recording artist and made numerous recordings. One critic in the Recording Review described Rachmaninoff’s performance:

He is somewhat dour—an image that was accentuated by his gaunt frame, chiseled face and cropped hair. With no outward show he would address himself to the works of the masters he so revered. Only when he had reached the end of his program would the tension ease, and he would smile and “play to the galleries.” Invariably, his last encore would be his Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, which had become synonymous with the name “Rachmaninoff.”23

His performance demeanor is revealed in a description by the author of Modern Masters of The Keyboard:

His tall figure bends over the keyboard, as he sits a few seconds in utter stillness before beginning. Then his large hands, with their long, shapely fingers, find the desired keys with no perceptible effort, and weave for the listener enchanting pictures, now bright, now sad and filled with longing. Yet Rachmaninoff is not a pianist who wears his heart upon his sleeve; he is always reserved, self-contained, wrapt in serious thought, or so it seems.24

Rachmaninoff showed two totally different personalities, one with the public and the other with his family. His concert manner was austere, contrasting sharply with the warmth and generosity he revealed in the company of his family and close friends.25 His austerity affected almost every aspect of his life and offered insights into the precision and
control with which he approached both composition and performance. His formidable pianistic technique was marked by rhythmic drive, a refined legato and an ability for complete clarity in complex textures—qualities that he applied with sublime effect in his performances of Chopin. These pianistic techniques are also characteristic of his writing in the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*.

*His Interpretations*

As to his viewpoints on how to make music, he once said: "You must take the work apart, peer into every corner, before you can assemble the whole." He often determined the climax or "point" for each piece. Once done with that, the structure of the piece would proceed with a kind of impervious logic. No matter what kind of music he approached, it was always with an overwhelming conviction. Whatever music he was playing, his performances were always carefully planned, and based on this "culminating point", as he told the poet Marietta Shaginian,

...Maybe at the end or in the middle, it may be loud or soft; but the performer must know how to approach it with absolute calculation, absolute precision, because, if it slips by, then the whole construction crumbles, and the piece becomes disjointed and scrappy and does not convey to the listener what must be conveyed."

The critic Rafael Kammerer thought that somehow Rachmaninoff’s playing was similar to Anton Rubinstein’s. Comparing them, he was surprised to find that Rachmaninoff followed Rubinstein’s indications for highlighting inner melodies, special accentuations, and even phrasing. This is probably because that Rubinstein was Rachmaninoff’s youthful idol."
His Repertoire

Rachmaninoff often played the standard nineteenth century virtuoso pieces and music by Beethoven, Borodin, Chopin, Debussy, Grieg, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann and Tchaikovsky.\textsuperscript{31} Among them, the works of Chopin, Liszt, Beethoven and Schumann dominated. His repertoire also included early works of Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc, his favorite modern composers, and the music of his compatriots Medtner and Scriabin. Also, he usually offered his own compositions in recital. According to his sister-in-law Sophie Satin’s descriptions, Rachmaninoff always began his daily practice with one hour of exercises, generally scales and digital exercises for the individual fingers; usually, he practiced four to five hours a day.\textsuperscript{32}

Accomplishments As a Piano Virtuoso

As the scholar John Gillespie confirmed: “he was a spectacular pianist equal to any of the leading twentieth-century virtuosos.”\textsuperscript{33} Critics always used superlatives in reviewing his recitals. Becoming a piano virtuoso at the age of 45 was a marvelous accomplishment. He said on his sixtieth birthday:

For the past fifteen seasons I have played about 750 concerts. Before I became a person of jubilees I played 70 or 80 concerts a year. But as I approach the age of jubilees, I’ve had to scale down a little. Concerts require very serious preparation. I work with pleasure on the compositions of other composers. When I work on my own--it is more difficult. Only a month, a month and a half, is left for rest.\textsuperscript{34}

Of equal achievement and reputation, Rachmaninoff has often been compared to Josef Hofmann, also one of the greatest modern piano virtuosos. Although the two artists were close friends and traced their interpretative tradition to Anton Rubinstein, they
were very different pianists. Unlike Hofmann, Rachmaninoff had not studied with Rubinstein; however, while he was a student of Zverev, he attended a considerable number of the elder pianist’s “historical recitals”. This experience nourished his pianism as much as the thorough technical education he received from Zverev and Siloti.\textsuperscript{35} However, since Rachmaninoff did very little teaching, no school of pianism can be traced to his pedagogical influence.

\textbf{Works after exile}

Rachmaninoff composed only six original works in his life abroad, including three Russian songs for chorus and orchestra (1926), the fourth piano concerto (1926), \textit{Variations on a Theme of Corelli}, (1931), the \textit{Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini} (1934), the third symphony (1935-36) and the \textit{Symphonic Dances} (1940). In his last compositions, his writing grew more concise, especially in the \textit{Variations on a Theme of Corelli}, the \textit{Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini} and the revised fourth concerto, (1941) all of which are indicative of a kind of personal neo-classicism\textsuperscript{36} His last piano solo work, the \textit{Corelli Variations}, shows a great clarity in texture, combined with biting chromatic harmony and a new rhythmic incisiveness.\textsuperscript{37} These twenty variations are equal to the best compositions of his pre-exile days.

\textbf{Background of the \textit{Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini}}

After returning to Senar, his house in Switzerland, from his vacation on July 1, 1934, Rachmaninoff wrote a letter to his sister-in-law Sophia on August 19:

...I’ve kept myself at work, working literally from morn to night, as they say. This work is rather a large one, and only yesterday, late at night, I finished it. Since morning my chief aim has been to write you. This piece is written for piano and orchestra, about 20-25 minutes in length. But it is no
“concerto”! It is called Symphonic Variations on a theme by Paganini... I am happy that I managed to write this piece during my first year in the new Senar... 38

Within only one more month, he had finished this stupendous Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini. He gave the premiere in November of the same year with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski. The audiences were extraordinarily impressed by the composer’s performance of his own music as something almost superhuman; and few who were present at that concert would ever forget the control and ease with which he played an extremely formidable work. 39 It was the last of his major works for piano and orchestra. Probably aware of his lessened spontaneity in the Fourth Piano Concerto, he tried to restore vitality in his composition in another form: theme and variation. As a result, two compositions emerged: the Corelli Variations, and the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini. This piece instantaneously achieved success and gained immense popularity. It is a composition for piano and orchestra yet different from his concertos in that it is not based on a standard three-movement concerto form; instead, it is a piano-orchestra piece with twenty-four variations. Scored for piano and orchestra with almost the dimensions of a concerto, it includes a central variation in D-flat major, nearly corresponding to the slow movement of the concerto. This eighteenth variation has become one of Rachmaninoff’s best-known melodies and has even been played alone occasionally. Its lyrical theme is actually an inversion of the Paganini theme.

There are two external influences revealed in Rachmaninoff’s music. The first is the sound of bells, which fascinated the composer from his early years in St. Petersburg;
the other one is Russian Orthodox choral music.\textsuperscript{40} In addition, the Western Church’s plainchant \textit{Dies Irae} has been found in more than twenty of his compositions, such as \textit{The Isle of The Dead} and \textit{The Bell}.\textsuperscript{41} In the \textit{Paganini Rhapsody}, we can observe many examples of these influences, especially the \textit{Dies Irae} theme.

The famous Paganini theme, borrowed from Paganini’s Violin Caprice no. 24 in A minor, was also used by Brahms and Schumann, but in totally different types of compositions. \textit{Variations on a Theme of Paganini}, Books I and II, of Brahms--based on the 24\textsuperscript{th} Caprice of Paganini--are a collection of etudes that focus on twenty-four different technical challenges. Each book is an independent composition. Schumann, however, in his \textit{Studies for the Pianoforte on Caprices of Paganini}, wrote simple transcriptions for solo piano of six caprices of Paganini.

Among the compositions finished during Rachmaninoff’s life abroad, this piece represents the best quality. The success of this work greatly increased his self-confidence and inspired him to embark on the next challenge--symphonic form. He had every reason to expect that the audiences which had greeted his Rhapsody with such enthusiasm would welcome his new symphony with equal warmth.\textsuperscript{42}

When Fokine wanted to create a ballet on his work in 1937, Rachmaninoff strongly recommended the Rhapsody, even providing him with a detailed scenario: “a legend about Paganini, who, for perfection in his art and for a woman, sold his soul to an evil spirit….” He even imagined that the \textit{Dies Irae} theme represented the evil spirit.\textsuperscript{43} Thus, according to the composer’s indications, this piece should be explored with an expanded imagination.
Notes


2. Ibid., p. 16.


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid., p. 48.


11. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 83.


18. Piggott, *op. cit.*, p. 84.


20. Piggott, *op. cit.*, p. 84.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.


37. Norris, op. cit., p. 556.


42. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

CHAPTER 3

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES AND PERFORMANCE SOLUTIONS IN

RHAPSODY ON A THEME BY PAGANINI

Introduction: Technical Concepts

Positions

My belief is that one should play the piano in a natural way. By "natural" I mean in a way in which the body can move efficiently, easily and freely—in ways that are physiologically correct. In order to find the natural positions of the body in relation to the keys, I suggest several steps. When sitting at the piano, the upper body should be erect but not stiff, and the arms should hang freely from the shoulders. Think about the alignment from the shoulder to the end of the little finger. Observe the relationships of the upper arm, forearm, wrist, hand, and fingers. Also observe that the outside of the forearm is perfectly aligned with the fifth-finger side of the hand; that the top of the forearm, the wrist and hand are level; and that the fingers are moderately curved. (This is the closed position of the hand.) Bring the hand to the piano by bending the elbow, taking care to maintain the same relationships of forearm, wrist, hand, and fingers. This is the natural position of the hand. The knowledge of how to find these natural positions of the body
will help the pianist to move with fluidity and flexibility. In Chopin’s definition of pianistic technique, he said that:

One needs only to study a certain positioning of the hand in relation to the keys to obtain with ease the most beautiful quality of sound, to know how to play long notes and short notes, and [to attain] unlimited dexterity. ²

**Movement (within one position)**

In order to move easily and with control, one must, as much as possible, keep the hand in a relaxed and closed position (described above), making sure that the fingers retain the same curved, in relationship to each other. Center the fingers over the keys. The fingers should move freely from the “bridge”--the third joints from the fingertip. The fingertips are the direct tools and the most important units in the production of the sound.

**Movement (from one position to another)**

In moving the hand from one position to another on the keys, the arm must be, as Chopin said, “the slave of the fingers.”³ The hand leads, and the relaxed arm follows. The hand and the arm retain an ideal relationship to each other, maintaining the perfect alignment of forearm to fifth finger described above.

**Rotation**

Rotation of the playing unit, most especially from the elbow to the fingertip, is helpful in playing in a natural way. In this action, the forearm and hand move back and forth on an axis, in this case the ulna in alignment with the outside of the hand and the fifth finger. ⁴ While useful with all of the fingers in single-note passages, it is especially
beneficial to the shorter thumb and fifth finger, helping these fingers to match the weight and energy of the longer fingers.

Choosing of fingerings

My justification for the fingerings in the following examples is to maintain a relaxed, closed hand position, to enable the pianist to use rotation, and to allow the efficient use of the fingers.

The Paganini Variations

The works as a whole

This work corresponds to a four-movement concerto, and the first movement is the longest one. The Paganini theme consists of two repeated four-measure phrases ( | | : a: | | and | |: b: | |). Harmonically, part a is simply built on the tonic (A minor) and dominant; part b is i-iv-V/III-III-ii-i-iv-V-i. The energetic character of the theme is created in part with the punctuation of each main beat. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine each variation systematically, focusing especially on the unique technical and musical difficulties and the solutions of problems.

Introduction, Variation 1 and TEMA

General description

After a brief nine-bar introduction for piano and orchestra containing fragments of the Paganini theme, the orchestra presents Variation 1, with the rhythmic and melodic contours of the Paganini TEMA. Then the complete Paganini theme is introduced in the
strings accompanied by the key notes in the piano part. The music here is simple but playful.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

The piano part is not very difficult in these three sections (Introduction, Variation 1 and TEMA). However, strength and clarity are particularly important in the projection of these chords and key notes and this is achieved with the correct touch. Together, the orchestra and piano present a fanfare. (see Figure 1) Also, in mm. 51 and 53, the double-note passages embellish the theme and need careful preparation.

**Touch**

**Solidity of chords**

In the introduction, although the piano part plays no more than a series of chords, it creates a heroic opening and declares the glorious character of this piece, so these chords need to be conveyed solidly. For better sound projection, depress the pedal before playing the octaves and chords, releasing the hands immediately after playing these notes; focusing on the fingertip will ensure a splendid tone quality.
Double-note patterns

In mm. 51 and 53, there is a one-bar double-note pattern which creates slight problems in evenness of sound. The clue in practicing is to make sure that the second finger secures the motion in the pattern. Practice the second finger first; at the same time, keep a stable rhythmic pulse; then gradually add the other fingers using a slight rotation of the hand. Thus, the passage will be easier.
Variation 2

General description

In this variation, the piano presents the *Paganini* theme for the first time and uses the same phrase structure as the TEMA, simply divided into a-a'-b-b'. However, here the roles are reversed: the piano starts the theme and the orchestra presents the key notes. As a result, the pianist and orchestra exchange functions. The undulation in the right hand part makes the music sound joyful and this becomes the most exciting passage in this variation.

Main difficulties and solutions

The primary technical difficulty in this variation is in the execution of the sixteenth note passages of the right hand. Technically, the pianist must play with rhythmic precision and flawless articulation to accomplish a perfect and cheerful performance. This articulation is accomplished through evenness in spacing and intensity of the tone quality.
in the sixteenth notes. The function of the dissonant grace notes is to create accents in the music, producing rhythmic excitement. This variation is actually a piano solo since the orchestra plays no more than a simple accompanimental role; therefore, the pianist must convey this variation strongly and clearly.

Articulation of the sixteenth notes—evenness

In this passage, it is very important to feel the beat physically to improve the articulation of the sixteenth notes. In this variation especially, it is easier to keep the beat with a smaller unit, the eighth note; so, set the metronome with the eighth note as the basic pulse of the rhythm. This helps to clarify the beat. As seen in the beginning passage, if the beat is not subdivided constantly, it will be difficult to keep the beat stable, largely due to the rest after the down beat. Also, I suggest some beneficial fingerings for the beginning passage.

Figure 3. Fingering suggestions for the opening passage, mm. 58-61, Var. 2.

Regardless of the fingerings chosen, it is important in the beginning to practice slowly, carefully and with a detached touch to acquire evenness of tone quality for each
individual finger. Articulation can be improved by practicing the passage in various rhythmic patterns. The benefit of this kind of practicing is in working on a small unit instead of the whole passage.

*Grace notes*

Because of the joyful musical character of this passage, the grace note here should be played as short as possible; in fact, the two notes should sound almost together and should provide a lively accent on the down-beat. Comical dissonance combined with rhythmic precision endows the music with a fresh and sparkling character. A slight accent should be given on the down-beat, always approaching it with the thumb since it is the most natural finger to do the job. The sound of the grace note should be the same in both hands.

*Chordal patterns of the left hand*

Starting at m. 74, chordal patterns of the left hand effectively support the sixteenth note passages of the right hand, strengthening and invigorating the whole passage with a strong regular rhythm. Thus, they deserve careful attention. Especially starting from m. 78, the down-beat chords need to be emphasized and sustained. Through this, one can naturally feel the rhythmic impulse. This will alleviate the difficulty in coordination of hands would be facilitated.
Variation 3

General description

The perpetual motion in the orchestra part creates excitement and energy throughout this variation; in contrast, the piano part presents a simple melody. It is the texture of the perpetual motion that connects these three variations (Vars.2, 3 and 4) uninterruptedly. Basically, this variation can be separated into two parts sharing a similar phrase structure with the previous one.

Main difficulties and solutions

This writing is not particularly difficult from a technical aspect. However, a persistent steady beat is of primary importance for ensemble playing. Also, choosing a suitable fingering greatly helps to improve the legato in the following two phrases (mm. 99-102, 108-111).
(a) Fingering suggestions for mm. 99-102, Var. 3.

(b) Fingering suggestions for mm. 108-111, Var. 3.

Figure 4. Fingering suggestions for mm. 99-102, 108-111, Var. 3.

The piano part must maintain a stable tempo in order to follow the orchestra part. The pianist must be careful not to hurry the tempo when shaping the phrases, especially in the rising phrase. Also, care must be taken not to create an unnecessary accent on the first note of each phrase; this misplaced accent would give the listener the impression that the
down-beat is in the wrong place. To avoid this, the hand should be prepared on the
keyboard calmly and naturally.

**Variation 4**

**General description**

In this variation, both the piano and the orchestra parts vigorously present the
perpetual motion idea and outline of the *Paganini* theme. Structurally, it is divided into
two main parts, the A section (mm. 113-128) and the B section (mm. 129-148) as well as
a four-bar codetta. The orchestra joins in the liveliness of the piano part. In the second
part, however, a countermelody appears in the orchestra, providing contrast with the
continual, recurring piano line. Eventually, the codetta helps to create musical cohesion
through a series of percussive, alternating chords. This codetta provides connection to the
next, more exciting, variation.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

This variation offers more technical challenges for the performer. Consisting of
a series of sixteenth notes, it requires an abundant technique to achieve brilliant, virtuosic
requirements. The first technical challenge is to play these sixteenth notes evenly and
brilliantly. The second is the coordination of hands in mm. 121-128, 141-148, when the
left hand joins the brilliant writing in the right hand. It is in the last four measures that we
encounter, for the first time, the alternating sixteenth-note chordal pattern that will recur
so many times in this work.
Tempo velocity and evenness of sixteenth notes

It is often helpful to practice sixteenth-note passages in a variety of rhythms; first in small units and then gradually expanding the range to cover a complete phrase. The benefit here lies in starting the articulation from the smallest part (the last joint) of the finger. This allows one to build the passage one step at a time.

Accented notes

Starting from m. 121, the accent marks on each second beat are important, filling the passage with brightness and vigor. These distinct accents and the overall articulation are the primary technical considerations in this passage. A common mistake is giving too much emphasis on the first beat, leaving too little sound for the second beat. When done correctly, the music radiates power and splendor.

Coordination of hands

At m. 141, the difficulties of coordination of the hands are increased. Use a detached touch for the arpeggios of the left hand, thus avoiding stretching the hand. Let the slower-moving hand lead the faster one. At the same time, thinking about going to the top of each phrase will help to shape the phrases and facilitate the coordination of hands. Because of the fast tempo, some note reassignment is recommended. For example, in m. 144, the last note of the left hand can be taken over by the right hand, thus enabling the left hand to return to the original position faster. Similar alternation could be made in measures 508, 522, 685. Fingerings are also provided.
Figure 5. Coordination of hands, mm. 141-144, Var. 4.

*Alternating chordal patterns*

The most complicated technical problem in the whole variation results from the pattern of alternating chords. Several technical approaches will facilitate the passage:

1) beginning practice with the thumbs alone; the thumb notes are circled in Fig. 6.

2) always thinking about going into the key; 3) balancing the volume in both hands, not allowing the right hand to sound too small.

Figure 6. Alternating chordal patterns, mm. 149-152, Var. 4.
**Variation 5**

**General description**

This is a variation of forcefulness and energy in which the piano and orchestra parts interact tightly with each other. In fact, it is more like chamber music in which both parts are bound together, displaying a cooperative relationship. The piano part has such a striking rhythmic impulse that it animates the entire interaction. This is the basic rhythmic motive in this variation:

![Musical notation](image)

**Figure 7. Basic rhythmic motive of the variation, mm. 153-154, Var. 5.**

The phrase structure in this variation is a four-bar group, a (four measures), a' (four measures), b (fourteen measures=4+4+6), b' (fourteen measures), the same scheme as the theme. Although we do not see the prototype of the *Paganini* theme here, one can see the figurations of the "b" section of the original theme, starting in mm. 167-174:
Figure 8. Figurations of *Paganini* theme, mm. 167-174, Var. 5.

Since the piano part constantly plays an upbeat rhythm, it is the orchestra’s responsibility to give a strong down-beat. Besides giving beats and accents, the orchestra part also gives the melodic contour of the theme and provides harmonic support.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

Here, the first challenge is rhythmic precision. This is particularly important in this variation, bound as it is by strict rhythm and a steady beat. It is almost impossible to play *tempo rubato* in either part. Evenness in spacing and tone quality of the sixteenth notes are other concerns. In the whole variation, the alternating patterns of the sixteenth
notes require a very even touch and a strong sense of the down-beat, as well as the ability to play with intensity and velocity.

*Rhythmic precision*

*Shifting positions*

For cultivating a stable beat consistently, one can be directly helped by using the metronome. However, the pianist needs to cultivate the rhythmic impulse as a spontaneous beat within himself in the end. Especially in this variation, always make sure to go into the long note for musical direction. It is critical to emphasize the strong beat in this kind of alternating rhythm. By slightly accenting the long note, the beat can be pointed out easily. Regarding the constant shifting of positions in this variation, be careful not to let such quick shifting affect your stable tempo. Keeping relaxed in the wrist and firm on the fingertips will help one to use the hands in the best way possible. The idea of "moving the hand for groups" will help one to shift smoothly and not to tense the muscles while playing such a fast and difficult passage.

*Sixteenth alternating chordal patterns*

There are several ways to facilitate the execution of the alternating sixteenth-note figures. One is to practice at first with the thumbs only, a technical suggestion first offered for mm. 149-152, in variation 4. Once getting used to playing with the thumbs alone, the other fingers can be fitted in naturally. There is an underlying technical principle behind this. For any passage, one must choose the most efficient playing unit. One can play with the fingertip alone, the entire finger, the hand, the forearm, or the whole arm. In this passage, the thumb actually acts as an extension of the arm; consequently, by letting
the thumb lead in the action, one will have isolated the most efficient unit in playing the alternating rhythm. Practice the thumb first instead of the whole chord because, if we can master this and keep rhythmically steadily, the rest of the playing unit will simply follow. By identifying the thumb, the pianist will find the easiest and most efficient way to solve the problem.

*Off-beat rhythm*

At m. 179, the second sixteenth note often causes a problem:

![Figure 9. Sixteenth-note off-beat rhythm, mm. 175-179, Var. 5.](image)

A common mistake is to arrive at the beat too late. Here are some suggestions: first, be careful not to put an accent on the first note because it would sound like a triplet instead of sixteenth notes; secondly, feeling a subdivided beat will help one to come in at the right time; more importantly, always keep the hand prepared on the surface of the keys; do not lift the hands out the keys especially when one has to prepare to play immediately afterwards. Lifting takes extra time, creating the problem of playing late. It
sometimes impedes the right rhythm, but one does not sense it. Technically, it stops the motion and wastes energy.

_Fingering suggestions_

Finally, there is a special fingering suggestion for m.167 (Figure 10) where both hands are playing the same rhythm swiftly. In the last beat of the right hand, the performer with a smaller hand can substitute 1,2 for 3,2. Meanwhile, due to the amount of shifting and stretching in this passage, and for the nimbleness and relaxation of the hand, I suggest, whenever the stretch is finished, that the fingers come back to the five-finger position immediately, returning them to the most natural and relaxed hand position.

![Figure 10. Fingering suggestion for mm. 167-168, Var. 5.](image)

_Variation 6_

_General description_

This variation functions as an intermezzo between the intense fifth variation and the gloomy seventh variation. The texture is different from Variation 5 with its
intricate interaction between piano and orchestra; this variation displays cadenza-like writing, anticipating the numerous other cadenza passages occurring throughout the piece. Except for some allusions to the Paganini theme in the woodwinds, the orchestra part simply produces a harmonic support for the piano solo. The glistening passages in the piano create a rhapsodic and improvisatory character. The cadenza passages always start from the fermatas in the orchestra part. The fantastic, imaginative and sparkling segments all contribute to the character of this variation and these are exactly what the performer appreciates and enjoys.

Main difficulties and solutions

This variation contains a series of technically difficult passages, including quick scales, arpeggios, and dotted double notes. For all of these, a virtuoso performance is required. The first concern for gaining technical control in this variation arises in the dotted double-note passages. Secondly, the double-third passage, simplified by the composer in both mm. 195 and 202, requires considerable technique. For that, I will provide a fingering suggestion. For the arpeggio passages, I will suggest divisions between hands that will diminish the difficulties of coordination between the hands. Another difficult spot, seen twice in mm. 207-210 and 215-218, is a chromatic scale with another top voice added for the right hand alone. Finally, there is a sparkling chromatic passage of an alternating pattern that not only brings amusement to the listeners but also requires the most exquisite playing of the performer.
Dotted double-notes

Specifically referring to the difficulties of the double-note passage in mm. 193 and 200, unevenness is a common problem. The first goal is to cultivate a strong sense of the down-beat; that is, always go to the long note since it is actually the main thing we need to hear. However, people often make the mistake of emphasizing the short note instead of the long note. Also, to eliminate the problem of unevenness, think about practicing non-legato instead of legato. One might think that playing legato is the simplest motion for the fingers to play the double notes. But that is not true. Using a detached touch will make it much easier to prepare for each new position and thus will make it easier to control the hand. Otherwise, our hands will feel locked.

Figure 11. Dotted rhythm in third patterns, mm. 189-193, Var. 6.

Double-third passages

In the double-third scale passage in mm. 195 and 202, a fingering suggestion will be provided. In m.195, the right hand might be approached as 34345. As we know, this
passage is in fact a double-third phrase that the composer simplified. In this passage, the thumb actually acts as a stabilizing unit. At first, play every note detached and make sure all notes are even. After familiarizing oneself with the positions, then one could accelerate the tempo gradually.

![Music notation](image)

Figure 12. Fingering suggestions for the double-third pattern, mm. 194-198, Var. 6.

Coordination of hands in arpeggio passages

For all of the arpeggio passages, the basic technical principle is to keep the hand in a closed position whenever possible. That is why I try to adjust the position to fit my smaller hand and, as a result, feel more comfortable.
Figure 13. Division of hands in arpeggio passages, mm. 203-206, 211-214,

Var. 6.

*Alternating chords and single notes*

The passages in mm. 207-210 and 215-218 can be facilitated by using two steps in practice. At first, look at the three different levels of melodic lines. Both the top and bottom voices contain descending staccato passages with a chromatic scale inserted in between. For best results, play the chords first, for they are the main body of the whole passage:
Figure 14. Alternating chords and single notes, mm. 215-218, Var. 6.

The advantage of this kind of practice lies in familiarizing oneself with the primary positions of the hands first; afterwards, one can easily fit in the other notes. One must first identify and practice all of the positions one needs in the passage every time.

*Alternating arpeggio pattern*

In mm. 239-240, near the end of this variation, there is a alternating arpeggio passage that is similar to the alternating pattern in Figure 6. In this split arpeggio passage, one must always play into the keys, avoiding quick motions out of the keys, and releasing the weight as playing. Good fingerings are essential.
Variation 7

General description

With the famous “Dies Irae” theme, the music finally arrives at a more tranquil moment. This theme actually originated in the Catholic Requiem Mass for the Dead, in which a gloomy and dark mood was conveyed. Rachmaninoff liked this theme so much that he used it often in his other compositions. In this piece, it appears in the seventh, tenth, and final variations. The “Dies Irae” theme is an eight-bar phrase with a melancholy character. To heighten the emotion in Variation 7, the theme moves to its final destination through progressively higher registers. In contrast to the “Dies Irae” theme in the piano, the orchestra displays segments of the Paganini theme. Then, starting from m. 270, the brass play the “Dies Irae” theme while others still play the same pattern as before. In contrast to the piano’s prolonged melody, the orchestra keeps at a low dynamic level with pizzicato sounds.

Main difficulties and solutions
There are fewer technical difficulties in this variation than musical ones. However, conveying the mood and projecting the sound need detailed work. The first challenge that we encounter in this variation is touch. This is an important tool in conveying musical meaning, especially in expressing the character of this section. Besides the touch, the widely-spaced chords in the left hand deserve special attention. (mm. 251-256) The interval of a tenth is easy to reach for pianists with large hands like Rachmaninoff, but not for many people. For the following, I will discuss some possibilities to improve tone quality through touch.

Musical character and touch

Widely-spaced chords

To sustain the sound, one has to stay physically on the key as long as possible. If one cannot reach the widely-spaced chords, make sure that rotation is used carefully to arpeggiate the chords evenly; at the same time, using an overlapping pedal helps to maintain the same tone quality and sonority. To listen carefully is always wise advice for everyone, especially in a passage like this.
Figure 16. Pedaling suggestion in the chordal patterns, mm. 250-256, Var. 7.

Variation 8

General description

After the sad character of the preceding variation, the music here resumes its original vitality and intensity with rhythmic impact, musical excitement, and a march-like beat in both parts. Structurally, three distinct writing styles divide this variation into sections. In the piano part, the first section (mm. 285-300) adopts the melodic outline of part a in the Paganini theme; the second and third sections portray part b of the theme. In the first section, the vigorous rhythm announces a march; in the second section (mm. 301-314), the music proceeds with an even more exciting and boisterous display of alternating sixteenth notes; in the third part (mm. 315-328), the march from the beginning returns but with a thicker texture. The technical difficulty builds gradually. Very often, both parts coordinate and interact closely and thus the intensity of the music increases significantly. The eighth note is the basic rhythmic pulse in the whole variation, creating excitement for the listeners.

Main difficulties and solutions
Each eighth note in this variation needs to be played evenly and powerfully with weight to convey a strong musical impact. Throughout, the performer must release arm weight into the keys. There are special challenges for the small hand in mm. 297-300. Furthermore, starting in m. 301, the alternating chords in sixteenth-notes require detailed practice. At last, starting in m. 315, there is a difficult passage with fast, consecutive, punctuated chords.

Evenness of successive chordal patterns

The most important technical approach to the opening chords is to think about the arm weight going into each key instead of away from the key. Any jerky, unnecessary motion out of the keys will impede motion into the keys. Also, emphasize especially the top voice of the right hand and the bass line of the left hand, highlighting both the melody and the harmonic support. In the rapidly changing chords, preparation is important. After playing one chord, preparing the next one without making sound is a good way to learn the movement of the hand.

Alternating sixteenth chordal patterns

In mm. 301-312, as discussed before in variation 4 and 5, use the thumb to guide the playing unit. The function of the thumb is to lead the hand and the whole arm. After having practiced the thumb alone, one can easily add the other fingers. Meanwhile, do not worry about playing notes staccato; it is better to play these longer and to make the motion into the keys. Also, the rhythmic motion of the hand must match the beat exactly. One will then play with precision, and a large, rich sound.
Figure 17. Alternating sixteenth-note chordal patterns, mm. 301-302, Var. 8.

Shifts of chordal patterns

In mm. 303-304 and 307-308, the shifting of the chordal patterns in dotted rhythms creates a considerable difficulty. (Figure 18) Practice the chords first and feel each down-beat strongly. This will provide the framework for the pattern, after which you can then loosely insert the sixteenth notes. Besides, in this passage, using the fingering 3-5 on the top notes will make you feel secure.

Figure 18. Shifts of chordal patterns, mm. 303-304, Var. 8.

Consecutive chordal progression
In the third part (mm. 315-328), the consecutive chordal pattern calls for detailed practice. (Figure 19) Practice the octaves first and be careful not to play them stiffly. Afterwards, pick up the other notes of the chord only with the fingertips and without any effort. Let these fingers relax as naturally as if they were in a state of rest. One does not even need to think about the spacing of the notes since the fingers are already there. While playing the octaves, let the other fingers rest lightly on the keys. These fingers should find the other notes of the chords without tension; that is, without reaching for the notes. If one is slow to go to the next key, the movement will be restrained if one hand is quicker than the other. The faster hand must follow the slower one; otherwise, the motions will not be coordinated.

The second step to improve the articulation of the chordal pattern is to play evenly, being sure to play each chord with the same length and intensity. Also, in order to achieve the required velocity, one might approach the passage by practicing various rhythms. In the beginning of these chordal passages, the tempo can be broadened a bit to benefit both the musical interpretation and technical control.
Variation 9

General description

This variation is characterized by a constantly punctuated triplet in the orchestra part and a response in an off-beat rhythm in the piano part, which delineates the contour of the Paganini theme. (Figure 20) The rhythmic complexity of the relationship between orchestra and piano brings vitality to the variation. Structurally, it can be separated roughly into two parts; the A B format is the same as that of the Paganini theme, with each part repeated.
Figure 20. Contour of the *Paganini* theme, mm. 329-333, 344-351, Var. 9.

**Main difficulties and resolutions**

This variation calls for an absolutely steady tempo, which is the only possible way to achieve excellent ensemble. If one side—orchestra or piano—loses the steady beat, then the ensemble will promptly crumble. Moreover, the two bravura passages in the B part (mm. 352-356, 364-368) challenge the performer to play an extended octave passage in a fast tempo.
Complexity of off-beat rhythm

Rhythmic stability in both parts

Obviously, the off-beat rhythm in the piano part creates an enormous challenge for the pianist. To eliminate the problem, the performer should follow several steps. Keep the hand as still as possible in order to avoid delays in the beats, undisturbed by any unnecessary motion of the hand. Very often, the extra motion will greatly affect the precision of the beat. Practice with the metronome in the beginning, cultivating a sense of a constantly stable beat. Try different ways of practicing to respond to the off-beat rhythm spontaneously. For example, practice one hand with the down beat and the other on the off-beat, or practice playing the orchestra part forte in one hand and the solo part piano in the other. In this way, one hand keeps steady, and the other one just fits in. Such practice will ensure that one eliminates any extra motion that takes time from the main beats.

Besides, in an ensemble situation, it is easy for the orchestra and piano to affect each other rhythmically, one waiting for the other, thus causing a tempo delay. Try not to rely solely on hearing the beat from the orchestra; just follow the beat of the conductor.
Figure 21. Off-beat rhythmic patterns, mm. 329-333, Var. 9.

Chords and octaves

In mm. 352-356 and 364-370, the successive chord progressions make shifting even harder. (Figure 22) Slowly play only the octaves in the beginning, looking to see if the other fingers fall naturally on the other notes of the chords. Do not reach with the fingers; simply make the necessary slight adjustments of the fingers to play the omitted notes of the chords. This will make one feel more secure both mentally and physically. Carefully avoid any jerky motions or any preparatory tension before playing since this will make one lose sensitivity in the fingers and hands. It is always good advice to stay on the surface of the keys and to start playing naturally and without extra motion. The way to alleviate the difficulty of the chords and octaves in mm. 352-353 is to play the accent with renewed energy. There are two reasons for this renewal: physically, the energy will be revitalized for the longer passage; psychologically, it allows one to start again as well.
Figure 22. Shifting chords, mm. 352-355, Var. 9.

Variation 10

General description

In this variation, the "Dies Irae" theme is presented marcato, portraying a distinctive character that obviously contrasts with Variation 9. Also, two individual lines of music are shaped and characterized by both parts simultaneously, achieving great vigor and excitement. In particular, starting from m. 377, the doubling in the piano of the orchestral tutti conveys a victorious musical climax. Subsequently, the Dies Irae theme in both piano and orchestra parts conveys a totally divergent character from Variation 7. Variation 10 is majestic and energetic. After a highly embellished passage, it ends with two short notes--sparkling, soft and full of imagination. These two notes anticipate passages that follow.
Main difficulties and solutions

In mm. 377-383, as mentioned above, the piano doubles the orchestra part, sharing the rhythmic intricacy and technical difficulties. (Figure 23) In mm. 384-391, the texture thins and the volume suddenly decreases, forming a marked contrast with the preceding passage. (Figure 24) There is a unique technical challenge here: the coordination of the left hand cross-over in an off-beat rhythm with the quick sixteenth notes in the right hand. It is the left hand that doubles the orchestra and imitates the bell sound. Afterward, in mm. 392-393, the chromatic scales in seconds and double-thirds passage demand a solid technique from the pianist.

Chordal patterns

Rachmaninoff writes mm. 377-383 ad libitum. Although the sound of the piano adds only a barely audible texture, most performers choose to join the orchestra here.

Figure 23. Chordal patterns, mm. 378-381, Var. 10.
Be careful of the changing meter in each measure. However, when playing with orchestra, the timpani gives clear rhythmic cues for the pianist to follow.

*Coordination—left hand crossing over in an off-beat rhythm*

![Musical notation](image)

Figure 24. Sixteenth notes with off-beat chordal patterns, mm. 384-386, Var. 10.

In the above passage, the first concern for conquering technical challenges is to play the right hand rhythmically and with stability; in other words, work in detail on the sound, tempo, and articulation. Also, do not worry about finger-legato; instead, just think of articulating each finger well while practicing slowly. Then, keep a steady beat in the right hand while the left hand joins it, playing the off-beat rhythm while crossing over. One suggestion is to practice the right hand while playing only the top note of the left hand,
outlining the melody of the "Dies Irae" theme. It is particularly important for the left hand to play rhythmically, reacting to the accent of the down-beat in the right hand. Finally, start to speed up the tempo a bit, always being careful to keep the rhythmic motion in the left hand and to maintain a steady tempo while shaping the phrase.

**Chromatic scale in seconds**

The chromatic scale in seconds creates considerable difficulty for most pianists. (Figure 25) The efficient solution lies in the approach of "finding the position first." That is, secure the seconds first, then simply add the thumb in between. Slightly lengthening the seconds will greatly increase the stability; this lengthening helps to bring out the important note and to prevent rushing the tempo.

![Chromatic scale in seconds, m. 393, Var. 10.](image)

**Double-third passages**

Here are some fingering suggestions for the double-third passage in mm. 394-395:
Figure 26. Fingering suggestions for double-third patterns in both hands, mm. 394-395, Var. 10.

Variation 11

General description

The piano solo at the beginning of Variation 11 foreshadows the world-famous melody later found in the 18th variation. The melody is endearing to the listener and forms an obvious contrast with the rest of this work. From a technical perspective, this intermezzo-like variation encompasses numerous virtuosic passages as well as melodic one, calling for superb craftsmanship. Starting from m. 412, there is a series of fantastic and sparkling passages composed mainly of arpeggio passages, repeated patterns, and rhythmic complexities. These technical categories mainly include a series of arpeggio passages, chromatic scales and alternating patterns; and all of these contribute to the success of this variation. By contrast, the orchestra simply plays a harmonically supporting role.
Main difficulties and solutions

Arpeggio passages

The beginning arpeggio passage presents a difficulty in coordinating the hands; especially in the left hand, the main issue is how to play it evenly and meaningfully. In three presentations of a similar pattern, the musical idea gradually expands in increasing intervals in both hands. Therefore, the bass note plays a prominently supportive role in both the harmony and general sonority (Figure 27). This strong bass creates a rich sonority, the perfect background for the arpeggiated passages. Always staying close to the keys gives the pianist better control of the tone quality. Further, referring to the coordination of the hands, be flexible in the rhythm of three against four. (mm. 402, 405, 408) The a capriccio marking allows you to take more time to indulge your imagination in the musical expression.

![Image of a musical notation example](image)

Figure 27. Arpeggio pattern of the left hand, mm. 400-402, Var. 11.
Double chromatic passages

In m. 409, a double chromatic scale accompanies a prolonged woodwind melody, recalling the tune at the beginning of the piano solo. (Figure 28) To alleviate the difficulty of coordination of the hands, make sure to keep the same motion in the finger strokes in both hands and to match the length and weight in each note in both hands. A common mistake occurs when the faster hand leads the slower one. A solution is to let the slower hand lead the faster one, with the upper body following.

Figure 28. Double chromatic scale, m. 409, Var. 11.

Alternating patterns

Rachmaninoff often uses various combinations of alternating patterns to intensify the excitement and splendor of the music as in m. 412 (Figure 29). In this passage, the difficulty lies mainly in playing the notes evenly and quickly. In the beginning practice, play two notes as a group and think only about the motions going into the keys. When shifting positions, do not stop the motion but continue going into the keys.
Remember that it is usually the thumb that causes an uneven quality, so be careful to play with enough weight on the thumb. Also, stay on each note as long as possible in order to concentrate on the tone quality. In other words, play simply and legato at first and this will lead eventually to a rich and brilliant sound.

![Musical notation]

Figure 29. Alternating single-note passage, m. 412, Var. 11.

Arpeggio passages in both hands

In m. 412, the division of hands of the arpeggio passage will allow the pianist to play the accent with the thumb naturally. (Figure 30) The brilliance in this passage comes from having the full strength of the hand behind every note. For a satisfying performance, it is important to include rotation in your technique. The principal idea of rotation is to send strength to each finger, which will help one to articulate correctly and comfortably. On the contrary, if one tries to hold the fingers in their positions, the hand will easily become tense. Using rotation encourages each finger to move vigorously. For example,
every time the hand leans over to help the fifth finger, or leans over to help the thumb, rotation is used.

Figure 30. Arpeggio passage, m. 412, Var. 11.

Another main issue is how to make sure that the arpeggio passages are evenly spaced; there are four notes in the left hand and five in the right. The solution is to cultivate a steady pulse for each repeated pattern, playing the accent in a rhythmic way. Do not emphasize the bass note in a way that slows the tempo; instead, go forward to the thumb. The brilliance of these passages comes from the last notes of the right hand, especially in the high treble register. Make sure to finish each group before starting the next one, especially in playing the fourth and fifth fingers.

*Alternating patterns of double-notes*

In m. 413, as in Figure 29, think about going into the keys instead of leaving the keys. For rhythmic security, think and feel the repeated pattern as a group of four beats; this will eliminate the difficulty of thinking twelve beats together. This idea of division also
can be applied beneficially to other similar patterns. However, the effect of the division is not for the audience to hear, but for the pianist to feel. Finally, these fingering suggestions should prove helpful.

![Musical notation](image)

Figure 31. Alternating double-note patterns, m. 413, Var. 11.

*Arpeggiated patterns in the right hand*

This sparkling passage, mainly composed of sequential arpeggiated patterns in the right hand, makes a dazzling effect at the end of this cadenza. It is an excellent example of a passage for rotation, constantly moving among the fingerings 1-3-5. However, the brilliance of the sound does not come from the rotation, but from the fingertips. Rotation only helps you to put the hand in the right place. Virtuosic playing primarily comes from quick and precise movements of the fingertip.
Figure 32. Arpeggiated chordal patterns of the right hand, m. 414, Var. 11.

Repeated sixteenth-note patterns

In m. 414, the composer wisely gives an accent mark for the repeated pattern. This helps to clarify the repetition both physically and mentally. A fingering suggestion follows.
Figure 33. Fingering suggestions for the repeated sixteenth-note patterns, m. 414, Var. 11.

Variation 12

General description

As the tonality moves from A minor to D minor, the music resumes a serene character, in which the marking--Tempo di Minueto--tells us not only about the tempo but also about the stylistic characteristics. This is tranquil and restful music, full of elegance and grace. With sentimental and dignified affection, this passage intimately combines both piano and orchestra parts. In the orchestra, the solo instruments take turns
playing the melodies and accompanying the countermelody in the piano. The main challenge for the performer lies in conveying a profound musical idea.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

This variation is not extremely difficult, technically. The challenge lies in how to express the essence of the music. Specifically, beauty of touch is the main vehicle for expressing the poetry. Besides, the sixteenth-note dotted rhythm helps to keep the rhythmic pulse for the whole section and it must be played consistently and fluently. From m. 442, a series of octave chordal patterns, a doubling of the beginning theme, inevitably stretches the hand and requires attention.

**Touch**

A good way to start practicing is to play the entire variation evenly—that is, omitting the dotted rhythm and playing simple eighth notes instead. (Figure 34) Also, staying longer on the keys will produce a more ringing and sonorous quality. After improving the tone quality, then add the sixteenth-note dotted rhythm.

![Music notation](image)

Figure 34. Dotted-rhythm passages, mm. 425-427, Var. 12.
Dotted rhythms

A common rhythmic mistake in dotted rhythms occurs when the sixteenth note is played incorrectly as a third note of a triplet. Do not accent the sixteenth notes but instead, go into the eighth or quarter note that follows it. (Figure 34) Following the tenuto markings indicated by the composer and using a slightly detached touch on each note will alleviate the difficulties.

The pedaling

In mm. 435-437 and 443-446, one might use longer pedals in order to sustain the inner voice. (Figure 35) Make sure to depress the pedal quickly before leaving the bass note of the left hand. Otherwise, without this bass support, the sound will be changed entirely. The dotted rhythm in the right hand shortens the time for preparing the bass note. This is a difficult passage, demanding careful coordination between hands and foot.

Figure 35. Pedaling suggestion for the left hand, mm. 434-436, Var. 11.
Consecutive chordal patterns

In the third part, the right hand octave chordal patterns are difficult to control. Practice the octaves first, then naturally add the third finger while maintaining the same shape of the hand in the octaves:

Figure 36. Octave chordal patterns, mm. 444-446, Var. 12.

Variation 13

General description

In this variation, the *Paganini* theme is presented by the orchestra as a punctuated, three-beat figure. The piano part plays simple chords. Thus, it functions simply as an accompaniment, rhythmically embellishing the theme in the orchestra. The march-like section in the orchestra becomes a majestic overture to the following variation, in which an identical rhythmic figure appears. It is ingenious of the composer to combine these in this way.
Main difficulties and solutions

Chordal patterns

The intensity of the massive chords requires a forceful use of strength, especially from m. 463, where a sixteenth-note octave is inserted before the chord. Shifting positions in such a fast tempo often exposes a common mistake, that of leaving the key too quickly. We often do not finish the motion of going into the key before we release it and move on. One is unable to get the desired sound because of the unfinished motion. In fact, the difficulty does not lie in the shift itself, but in the motion of going into each key exactly. At mm. 463-470, be careful not to play the added sixteenth-note octave too short, or it will sound like an ornament. (Figure 37) Decide on the length of the note and the tone quality that you want. It would be good to practice this rhythm as a triplet, giving more weight on the short note. Playing longer will make the sound more singing and beautiful.

![Chordal patterns in both hands, mm. 462-466, Var. 13.](image)

Figure 37. Chordal patterns in both hands, mm. 462-466, Var. 13.
Variation 14

General description

In this march section, the orchestra alone has the theme; the massive and repeated chords in the piano are simply decorative, as a dazzling fanfare. The variation also functions as a bridge, connecting the previous variation with the cadenza-like Variation 15. They have the same time signatures and rhythmic elements. The piano enters after the theme finishes for the first time in the orchestra; it appears as a triplet figure and functions as harmonic decoration. In fact, under the powerful impact of the orchestra, the piano can barely be heard. Almost the only thing that the audience can perceive is the motions of the performer, striving to be heard in a difficult section.

Main difficulties and solutions

This section requires a virtuoso technique, even though it is barely heard over the orchestral tutti. At such intensity and velocity, these repeated-chord patterns require physical exertion and rapid shifting. Specifically, there are two different levels of difficulty here: the first is the triplet played by both hands together; and the second is the triplet played in alternating rhythms. The second pattern is more complicated than the first.

Repeated chords

The best approach is to put the body weight on the first chord only, then to “brush” the second one with the fingertips only. (Figure 38) In other words, do not put any extra weight on the second chord; just let it respond naturally. For the chord, practice the octave first and then insert the other notes freely with fingertips.
Figure 38. Repeated chords in both hands, mm. 483-486, Var. 14.

Shifting of chordal patterns

Alternating patterns

To learn the alternating triplet patterns, first simplify the complicated interaction between hands; for example, play only the first chord of the left hand while playing the right hand as written (Figure 39). After getting used to the coordination, one can put in the second beat of the left hand, while still focusing on the first beat. It will be greatly beneficial to focus on the down-beat, playing the second as a response to the first. Find a way to enable one’s body weight to play the accented notes easily; also, utilize different rhythmic combinations in practice. At the same time, match the tone quality and volume for both hands.
Figure 39. Alternating chordal patterns of both hands, mm. 499-501, Var. 14.

Variation 15

General description

This fantastic, facile, and spiritoso cadenza-like variation is one of the most fanciful passages in the whole piece. Musically the uninterrupted line of the right hand and the dialogue of the left hand artfully interact. The variation is separated into the several sections by distinctive writing styles: a (mm. 508-521), a' (mm. 522-534), b (mm. 534-542), b' (mm. 542-550), coda (mm. 550-563). In the a sections, there appears a pearly sixteenth-note passage dancing joyfully in both hands. In the b sections, the sixteenth notes continue in the right hand, accompanied in the left hand by arpeggiated chords. In the coda, the melody of the right hand consists mainly of a series of regularly descending patterns with the chordal pattern in the left hand, gradually relaxing the mood. A sudden ascending arpeggio creates a fiery end. Musically, this cadenza functions as a transition;
after that, the music becomes quieter and slower. In this cadenza, pianistic virtuosity and romantic emotion are fully revealed.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

The first technical concern is to accomplish evenness in these rapid passages. This perpetual motion challenges the soloist, especially in the right hand. In the a sections, when the left hand joins the right hand in the sixteenth notes, coordinating the hands becomes difficult. Besides, voicing in the right hand in the b sections requires careful practice to achieve stability in tempo. To give an exciting performance in the cadenza passage, nimbleness and flexibility of the fingers are crucial.

**Fingering suggestions**

A good choice of fingerings will instantly alleviate many difficulties, especially in irregular scale passages, where a suitable fingering is absolutely required. Although these are differences between hands and habits with everyone, excellent fingerings often make dramatic changes. I suggest these fingerings.
Figure 40. Fingering suggestions, mm.510-512, 542-544, 518, 550, Var. 15.

These fingerings are also suitable for the similar sequences that follow. Generally speaking, the main reason that I choose fingerings like these is that they fit my smaller
hands; thus I must stretch my hand as little as possible. Sometimes, a tense hand will affect other parts of the upper body as well. Keeping a five-finger position on the surface of the keys as much as possible allows me to maintain a relaxed hand.

Articulation of sixteenth notes—quality of evenness and lightness

Touch is another important consideration for a satisfying performance. Find the most comfortable and appropriate position for each finger on the key and listen to the quality of the sound from the beginning of your practice. Only by this means is it possible to improve the tone quality of the sixteenth note passages. (see Figure 41) In addition, practice in various rhythms to improve the evenness in touch and spacing.

Figure 41. sixteenth-note passages, mm. 508-510, Var. 15.

Tempo velocity

It is difficult not to lose control of the tempo when we play faster. In the beginning of practice, it is very important to maintain a stable beat, especially as the tempo
increases. Also, handle the tempo *rubato* passages carefully and do not speed up a single phrase due to excitement and intensity. It is always true that the feeling of the tempo does not lie only in how fast one can play, but also in how evenly one can play.

*Coordination of hands*

In the sixteenth notes in the beginning, bring out the main voice and subdue the other line; also, make sure to practice each hand alone. Then, as in m. 511, when the hands must play together, be sure to feel the same rhythmic pulse. (Figure 42) The characteristic rhythm in this variation is anapestic. As a result, it will be beneficial to think about going into the long beat as the final destination, playing this beat brilliantly with the fingertips.

![Figure 42. sixteenth-note passage, mm. 510-512, Var. 15](image-url)
Voicing

Staring in m. 534, the flowing top line reveals a different musical character, more singing and sweet than before. For a singing voice, lean to the fifth finger and give more weight whenever it needs to be pointed out.

Figure 43. sixteenth-note passage with top line on the right hand, mm. 536-538, Var. 15.

Variation 16

General description

The character of Variation 16 is droll and, after the previous cadenza passage, takes us to a new domain. Also, this one connects with the following two; the 17th and 18th variations form a distinct section in this work. Both the 16th and 17th variations are in the key of B flat minor, leading to the relative major, D-flat major, in the 18th variation. Apart from related tonalities, they are similar in other ways as well, for example, in tempo and musical character. They all express profound emotions, presented in a moderate tempo.
Thus, this group of variations--perhaps functioning like a second movement--contrasts distinctly with the other variations in both tonality and character. Both the 16th and 17th variations sound gloomy and obscure; sunshine returns in the 18th variation.

Structurally, the 16th Variation is divided into three distinct sections; and, toward the end, its opening theme is recalled. In the beginning, the piano part comes in four bars later than the orchestra; after an introduction in the stringed instruments, the piano plays repeated arpeggiated chords, wandering back and forth. In the second section (mm. 582-594), a leisurely meandering chromatic scale appears in the piano part. The third section (mm. 594-605) is mainly constructed of slithering chromatic scales in triplets. Throughout the whole variation, several distinguished solo passages appear in the orchestra part: in the first section (mm. 564-588), the oboe reminds us of the Paganini theme. Then, in the second section, a magnificent violin solo shines through. Finally, a clarinet solo marks the end of this variation.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

Technically, this variation is not demanding. However, in the last section, when the triplet passage ends with a chromatic scale in a vague tonality, it poses some problems in technique as well as in memorization. In addition, in the second section, the voicing of the thumb necessitates careful practice. Further, it is important to avoid false accents due to shifting of the hands in the second section.
Triplet passages

A fingering suggestion is provided.

Figure 44. Fingering suggestions for triplet passages, mm. 594-600, Var. 16.

Shifting positions

The problem of shifting happens in the second section when the violin solo comes in. There are repetitions of this pattern. A hidden melody in the inner voice of the chromatic scales particularly needs to be pointed out clearly. The division of the phrasing can easily interfere with the rhythmic impulse. Thus, it is important not to accent the first note of the phrase, making sure to lead into the down-beat.
Variation 17

General description

This variation has a similar character and the same tonality as Variation 16, a kind of heavy, sluggish sound in triplets. The melody in the orchestra provides a fundamental framework for both parts and creates suspense and tension. This unpredictable quality arouses the curiosity of the audience. Then, it seems as if the sunshine comes through in the ingenious modulation to Variation 18.

Main difficulties and solutions

Memorization

This is similar to Variation 16, in which the difficulties in the memorization are caused by tonal ambiguity and the repetition of similar patterns. For the solution, do not rely on only one means of memorizing. Instead, it is profitable to combine all of them: touch, aural, visual and analytical. Combining these methods will secure and reinforce one’s memorization. Make sure to find distinguishing features among similar patterns, thus avoiding confusion. A helpful way to practice is to play chords instead of arpeggios, bringing out the main voice each time. One might observe that these chords move chromatically. Another way of practicing, from m. 616 (Figure 45), is to play the chords only and to leave out the melody. As one practices, clarify one element at a time.

Voicing

The voicing in both hands also creates a challenge.
Starting in m. 620, the voicing in both hands becomes more complicated. The quarter notes play an important role in the voicing, creating musical intensity with an ascending chromatic scale. First, practice each voice separately, taking care to shape the phrase. Then, play both hands together but with the main melody only. Keep counting when doing so. Once accustomed to the coordination of hands, put the other notes in and still keep the evenness of the voicing between hands.
**Ensemble**

Listen carefully to the prolonged melody created by the brass instruments and sustain the sound as long as possible to match the long line in the orchestra. Keep a flexible but stable beat through the entire variation.

**Variation 18**

**General description**

Variation 18, in D flat major, is the final destination of this set of three variations (16th, 17th, and 18th). Here is the well-known and adored melody that accounts for much of the vast popularity of this work. The melody is constructed of twelve measures, divided into three equal phrases. After the first presentation by the piano, the orchestra takes over the melody with a splendid string tutti. In this beautiful moment, the listener is deeply touched. From m. 664, a calmer melody is resumed by the piano, in an intimate interaction with a cello solo. Finally, the piano goes its own way, vanishing like a memory.

**Main difficulties and solutions**

**Voicing**

Variation 17 flows uninterruptedly into Variation 18. The music moves from tonal ambiguity into a simple but definite D-flat major key, where it seems that the destination has been reached. Afterward, in the prolonged melodious passage, mm. 643-646 and 665-668, there is a flowing countermelody showing the idiomatic writing of the composer. The performer needs to be aware of the complicated voicing to convey suitably
these elaborate musical ideas. The balance between the melody and the accompaniment is very important in such a melodious passage.

*Arpeggio passage in left hand*

How to make the arpeggio passage in the left hand sound legato is a major concern. (Figure 47) It is not necessary or sometimes even possible to use a pure finger legato here; instead, it is much more important to match the tone quality of the notes, creating the impression of legato. Make sure to prepare each note carefully and flawlessly while practicing, shaping a singing legato on the piano in the way that a singer would shape it. Expert pedaling is required. Depress the pedal before both hands come in; listen to the resonant bass note D-flat through the end of each phrase. An effective way in the beginning is to play the accompaniment alone. Especially when adding the second accompanying line, the voicing of the lines needs to be utterly clear. Each bass note of the left hand bears the harmonic support of the phrase, and gives a rich sonority to the music. The supportive bass notes must be pointed out clearly.

![Figure 47. Arpeggio patterns of the left hand, mm. 637-639, Var. 18.](image-url)
Successive chordal patterns

Starting from m. 650, when the tutti comes in and restates the melody, the piano part presents an accompaniment with a successive chordal pattern.

![Musical notation]

Figure 48. Successive chordal patterns in both hands, mm. 649-651, Var. 18.

For the benefit of the sonority and the release of weight into the keys, stay on the chords as long as possible. Particularly from m. 650, two layers of sound occur in the piano part—the long melodic chords and the accompanying chords. This necessitates a more sustained sound for the long chord as well as the quarter note in the left hand, by which a rhythmic intricacy is revealed. Making a good sound is a primary technical consideration. When playing with orchestra, this writing for the piano must not be covered by the orchestra but must produce a particularly wonderful quality of sound as the piano projects over the other parts. Release as much body weight as possible into the keys and stay strong on the fingertips to support this weight. For a longer sound, be careful not to play the accompaniment too softly. Sometimes dynamic marks tell one not only volume
level, but also the mood of a passage. Here, for example, when one sees the mark \textit{mf}, the mood needs to relax. The quality of your sound will greatly affect the musical character, expressing the beauty of this variation.

\textbf{Variation 19}

\textbf{General description}

After the melodious 18\textsuperscript{th} Variation, the music totally changes dimensions to a delicate variation in lively triplets. The lightly percussive sounds project a quality sweetness and tenderness. The 19\textsuperscript{th}, 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} Variations form an inseparable group, bound together by musical character. This set of three variations is reminiscent of the third movement of a traditional four-movement concerto form and is like a scherzo. Frequent hemiola rhythms increase the rhythmic complexity.

\textbf{Main difficulties and solutions}

\textit{Coordination of hands}

Coordination of the hands is a special challenge in these triplets; to facilitate this, I propose several adjustments to the divisions that Rachmaninoff presents.
Figure 49. Opening triplet passage, mm. 685-688, Var. 19.

**Evenness**

At the beginning, one must play evenly without accents. Apply different rhythmic combinations while practicing these passages to get a precise, steady beat and to improve the touch. Gradually, put more weight on the accented note, still keeping the other notes well-articulated. A common mistake in touch is playing staccato notes too short; actually, in contrast with the *pizzicato* of the strings, the piano should be slightly more lyrical.

**Hemiola-tempo stability**

These constant triplets show the composer’s intention to maintain vitality in the music. The tempo must return to the original tempo of the work. It is important not to play too fast in the beginning due to the musical excitement, if you do, there will be no place to accelerate later. Starting from m. 693, (Figure 50) the hemiola figures add complexity to ensemble playing; the conductor facilitates this by giving two main beats
the measure instead of four. The soloist must keep a stable rhythmic pulse, uninfluenced by the hemiola in the orchestra part.

Figure 50. Triplet passage between hands, mm. 693-695, Var. 19.

**Variation 20**

**General description**

The intervals of a traditional heroic horn sound establishes the musical character of this variation. This variation is a study in contrasts between the dotted rhythm in the piano and the perpetual motion in the orchestra. At first, the piano plays a simple line doubled at an octave; gradually, the texture grows thicker and more majestic with the addition of octaves and four-note chords in both hands.
Main difficulties and solutions

_Dotted rhythm_

As in Variation 19, this should be counted in four, using the quarter note as the basic pulse. For consistency of sound, it is necessary to play with quick motions into the keys. Regarding the use of weight, the sixteenth dotted note is played with the fingertip and the longer note with arm weight. Practice to combine the motions completely and naturally.

_Shifting positions_

In shifting to prepare the next position, the motions into the keys are sometimes stopped. A particularly difficult shift happens in m. 726 (Figure 51). The solution lies in finding a corresponding sound and motion for the main beats. First, play the strong beats only and listen to the quality of the sound; then add the sixteenth notes while still retaining the same tone quality of the longer sounds. Do not pull the hands out of the keys; simply stay on the keys and release the tension or exertion. The reason for staying on the keys is to maintain strength and to save time going into the next figuration.

Figure 51. Chordal patterns in dotted rhythm, mm. 724-726, Var. 20.
Variation 21

General description

The perpetual motion here moves from the orchestra to the piano, making it sound busy and complicated. This lively variation is relatively short, with triplets throughout. Here, the orchestra supplies a simple rhythmic support plus occasional interesting hemiola statements.

Main difficulties and solutions

Staccato

The staccato notes should be played into the keys with the fingertips instead of out of the keys; this will prevent tension.

Ascending arpeggios

The ascending staccato arpeggio passages in mm. 735 and 739 are difficult for most pianists. (see Figure 52) When moving up the arpeggio passage, make sure that the whole arm follows and that the shoulder does not rise. Counting a strong four to the measure is a good way to avoid rushing.

Figure 52. Opening triplet passage in both hands, mm.733-735, Var. 21.
Chordal patterns

At m. 735, the hemiola rhythm often causes the performer to slow the tempo. At first, practice only the accented notes; when adding the other notes, play these as a natural response to releasing the accented notes. In the hemiola measures, count two beats to each measure instead of four. Also emphasize the top chromatic line as the leading melody. These solid chords must be very clearly defined with large motions of the arms.

Figure 53. Choral pattern in both hands, m. 735, Var. 21.

Octave passages

Upbeat rhythm

Starting in the second section (m. 741), the simplified octave passage begins first on the beat, then after it. When the figure begins after an eighth rest, the pianist often enters too late. Always put the hands on the keys and prepare to enter almost without rest and with no accent on the first note. One must remember that any additional preparation will cause you to be late. Also, these simplified octaves already help one to play this
passage; it would be significantly more difficult if Rachmaninoff had written octaves throughout. But, in this passage, one has to remember to balance the sound between the single notes and octaves.

![Music notation]

Figure 54. Octave triplet patterns in the right hand, mm.745-747, Var. 21.

**Variation 22**

**General description**

This is the longest variation in this piece, covering 62 measures. It is also the equivalent of the *Finale* of a four-movement concerto form. It can be divided into the following sections: the first part (mm. 753-785) is a march-like passage in which the piano plays chords on each beat; in the second part (mm. 785-798) the piano plays a series of irregular scales; the third part (mm. 798-818) consists entirely of arpeggios which accompany fragments of the TEMA in the orchestra; it concludes with a brilliant piano cadenza in parallel octaves and alternating chords and octaves.
Main difficulties and solutions

Chordal patterns

In the beginning of the march, the chords must be played evenly, both in intensity and spacing. Starting from m. 775, (Figure 54) the chords become more sustained and the texture thicker and more complicated. In the final cadenza section (m. 818), the rhythmic complexities of the triplet chords increase the difficulties of ensemble. It is critical to maintain a steady tempo.

![Chordal patterns in both hands, mm. 775-777, Var. 22.](image)

Figure 55. Successive chordal patterns in both hands, mm. 775-777, Var. 22.

Irregular scales

From m. 785, a series of irregular scales accompany a prolonged melody in the orchestra part. (Here, “irregular scales” refers to those scale passages that are neither diatonic nor chromatic, but some combination of the two.) Since these scales occur in triplets and sixteenth notes, it is important to maintain a steady tempo by following the beat of the conductor, thus ensuring good ensemble playing.
Arpeggio passages

The arpeggios of the piano in the third section accompany fragments of the Paganini theme in the orchestra. In this tempo, articulation is quite difficult. Here is a helpful fingering:

Figure 56. Irregular scales in both hands, mm. 784-786, Var. 22.

Figure 57. Fingering suggestion for arpeggio patterns in both hands, mm. 798-799, Var. 22.
We know that Rachmaninoff had very large hands that could reach the interval of a twelfth, at least. This fingering suits smaller hands. A common problem happens in the fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand, which are difficult to articulate. There are two possible reasons: first, those two fingers are not prepared well; second, the arpeggio begins too slowly, making it necessary to rush at the end. Give a strong bass support and start the passage quickly enough to prepare the final two notes in the right hand.

*Alternating patterns*

There are two different kinds of alternating patterns in this variation: alternating octaves in mm. 811, 813 and in the cadenza (Figures 58, 59); and alternating chords, also in the cadenza (Figure 59). The difficulties in example 58 are heightened by the shifts in the octaves. First practice the octaves, both hands together, to learn the positions of the octaves; then, practice two notes as a group and try a faster tempo. When playing this passage as written, make sure to match the sounds in both hands. Very often, the right hand will sound smaller than the left hand. For the second set of alternating octaves, be careful not to start the *crescendo* too early, assuring that the *ff* will be reached at the right moment.
Octave passage

In the beginning, play the octave passage with 1-5 fingerings. Then, after training the hand to find the correct positions, one might choose to use 1-4 fingerings on some of octaves on the black notes.
Figure 60. Parallel octave passage, m 818, Var. 22.

Variation 23

General description

The *Paganini* theme appears again in both the piano and the orchestra parts. The themes seem to chase each other and the music grows in intensity. Moreover, from m. 839, the intricate interaction between both parts is heightened by means of rhythmic accentuation. A cadenza passage starts in m. 863 with octave passages, arpeggiated chords and a chromatic figure.

Main difficulties and solutions

The complicated rhythms in both the piano and orchestra parts are the primary challenges here and also the source of musical excitement. Especially see mm. 839-859 for one of the most complicated rhythmic interactions in this piece (Figure 61). The final brief cadenza section also requires a virtuoso performance from the soloist.
*Alternating patterns*

Starting from m. 839, make sure that the right hand speaks out in the same dynamic level as the left hand. As mentioned before, never think about coming out of the keys; instead, continue to employ the motion of going into the key. In fact, it is the long sound that secures the motion.

![Musical notation]

Figure 61. Alternating octave patterns, mm. 840-842, Var. 23.

*Octave passages*

Several technical approaches will facilitate the octaves in the final cadenza passage: use forearm drops and rebounds for power in the parallel octaves; give strong impulses on the first beat of each measure; finger all octaves with thumb and fifth finger; and rebound on the second and third eighth notes in the triplets.
Figure 62. Parallel octave passage, mm. 867-870, Var. 23.

Arpeggiated chords

In m. 871, if one understands how to play the first three groups, then one can play the entire passage. Play the outline of the chord first and use the fingertips to make a brilliant sound.

Figure 63. Arpeggiated chords in both hands, m. 871, Var. 23.
*Chromatic scales*

Here is a fingering suggestion for this sparkling passage. Rotation is a main consideration here; ensure that the hand is not locked. Playing lightly with the fingertips is the best tool in this passage.

![Figure 64. Chromatic scale, m. 871, Var. 23.](image)

**Variation 24**

**General description**

The triplet figures here create a new contour and framework for this final variation. It can be divided into three sections, each with a distinctive writing style: the first section (mm. 872-883) reveals a bright and resplendent sound in both piano and orchestra parts; a more vague and flowing sound characterizes the second section (mm. 884-893); the final section resumes a vigorous, animated sound in the piano, with a *pizzicato* punctuation in the orchestra part (mm. 894-897).
Main difficulties and solutions

In this variation, the pianist faces unprecedented difficulties and challenges in the extended jumps between notes and chords in both hands. How to balance and respond to this disjunct writing is a primary technical concern. The technical demands for both hands are quite different: the right hand leaps among single notes, and the left shifts between single notes and chords. Besides, the hemiola rhythm presents considerable complexities, especially of ensemble. At last, starting from m. 884, the voicing causes particular problems in shifting as well as in the coordination between the hands.

Shifting in both hands

For practice, divide the notes into groups as indicated in Figure 65. Then, gradually expand the number of notes in each unit. One crucial concern in this disjunct passage is to keep your elbows as a center for shifting. The strength originates from the upper-arm and is based at the elbow, giving a sense of physical balance. During this kind of motion, the elbow functions as a stable base. The thumb forms part of the foundation of the hand as well. For example, in m. 874, during the extended shifting in the right hand, think of the thumb as the “base”; go to the top notes; and come back to the base. In this way, the thumb will facilitate these difficult jumps. (Figure 66) More importantly, while approaching jumps, make sure that the fingers rest naturally on the keys, avoiding tension; if the fingers are tense, then the hands and arms will be tense as well.
(a) Rhythmic practice in mm. 872-873, Var. 24.

(b) Rhythmic practice in mm. 872-873, Var. 24.

Figure 65. Opening passage, mm. 872-873, Var. 24.
Figure 66. Staccato triplets, mm. 874-875, Var. 24.

In mm. 896-897, shifting in opposite directions causes considerable difficulty. Practice the strong beats first in both hands. Then, play everything within each beat as a chord. Finally, after getting used to the positions, play the passage as written. Further, in the left hand, think about letting the chord act as the base and letting the fifth finger reach the single bass note.

Figure 67. Left-hand chordal patterns, mm. 896-897, Var. 24.

*Voicing*
Starting from m. 884, the melodic line appears in quarter notes creating a hemiola rhythm. Therefore, there is a problem of coordinating different rhythms in each hand—six beats in the right hand and four in the left. The solution is to count the bars in two beats instead of four.

![Figure 68. Triplet patterns of the right hand, mm. 884-885, Var. 24.](image)

Coda

General description

The coda starts at the tempo marking *Più vivo* with an energetic sixteenth-note alternating pattern. This is the culmination of excitement and brilliance in this work. The orchestra energetically punctuates the beats and the piano displays extreme virtuosity. In m. 910, a grandiose *Dies Irae* theme appears in the orchestra, this time presented triumphantly, with a corresponding echo in the piano. (Figure 69) After the pianist’s explosive alternating chords, the composition seems to end at the *sff* in m. 938. However,
Rachmaninoff surprises and pleases his audience by ending this important and virtuosic piano concerto with a humorous V-I cadence. (Figure 70)

Figure 69. *Dies Irae* theme, mm. 910-917, Coda.

Figure 70. Final cadence, mm. 935-940, Coda.
Main difficulties and solutions

Alternating patterns

In this variation, the diverse alternating patterns in the solo part not only display the intensity in the music, but also present arduous technical challenges to the pianist. The alternating four-note chordal pattern in mm. 906-909 (Figure 71) is the most difficult of all, both in the stretch of the hands and intensity of the music. Unevenness resulting from shifting in these alternating patterns is a common problem. The best approach is to practice the thumbs first. Once achieving evenness in touch and spacing is achieved, the other fingers will easily follow. Also, being acutely aware of the fingertips is the cardinal principle of an excellent technique. See Figure 71 for fingerings that will expedite this passage. Starting in m. 918 (Figure 72), practice blocking the chords first, feeling the weight, the rhythmic pulse and the coordination between the hands; then separate the thumbs slightly while still maintaining the same approach. This will eliminate the difficulty here. For the best sonority, use one pedal throughout the whole passage.

Figure 71. Alternating chordal pattern, mm. 906-909, Coda.
Figure 72. Arpeggiated chords in both hands, mm. 916-924, Coda.
Notes

1. Interview with Dr. Rosemary Platt.


CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

It is my strong belief that exquisite performances are achieved through detailed practice. This approach has reinforced my confidence in presenting artistic performances and has motivated me to explore and write this document. Even Rachmaninoff, an extraordinarily gifted pianist, had to spend four to five hours a day in detailed practice. As a piano virtuoso striving to create a new career in his middle age, he stands as an example for all of us. Regarding his practicing, he once said: "You have to peer into every corner, take every screw apart, so that you can then easily put the whole together again."¹ Harold Schonberg, notable critic of the *New York Times*, described his playing:

...He was the pianist of control—a romantic pianist who carefully avoided exaggeration, an extraordinary technician who never went in for mere show, a tempered man and a tempered artist with a naturally big style and a sense of virile, unforced poetry.²

Rachmaninoff's pianistic studies and mastery have been discussed in detail in Chapter Two, providing an historical perspective. Chapter Three has dealt in depth with the remarkable *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*. A detailed analysis of each variation focuses specifically on its intricate technical challenges and offers ways to remedy these difficulties.
This piece is one of powerful strength and vitality and reveals a great diversity of ideas. My own experience performing with orchestra helped me to appreciate the ingenuity of the composer in balancing the sound between piano and orchestra. Although the texture of his writing is less dense than in his concerti, the piano is almost never overshadowed by the sound of the orchestra.

Because of the sectional nature of this work and the orderly presentation of technical difficulties, I found it logical to discuss the variations in order. To summarize the categories of technique found in this piece, they are:

1. *scales*
2. *staccato passage in single-notes, double-notes, octaves, chordal patterns*
3. *arpeggio passages*
4. *rapid sixteenth-note passages*
5. *octave and chordal patterns*
6. *alternating patterns in single-notes, double-notes, octaves, chordal patterns*

Due to the wide range of tempi, these technical difficulties appear in diverse combinations, often requiring considerable virtuosity.

My ultimate goals have been: to discuss the practice process in the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*; to list the difficulties encountered and to offer technical suggestions; and, most importantly, to make suggestions that are so detailed and clear that they can be applied to other works as well. As a frame of reference for these solutions, I have included principles of playing the piano that are the most useful to me and that form the basis of my piano technique. Since my technical concepts are inextricably combined with issues of
musical interpretation, I especially appreciate pianist Leon Fleisher’s viewpoint about piano technique:

Technique is the ability to do what you want to do. Therefore, you must want something, not just to go to the instrument and to put down levers in a certain succession at a certain speed. You must want a musical idea. You must have a certain intention, and the ability to do that is the index of your technique.³
Notes


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