VARIATIONS

“Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes…”
Variations

More properly, “Theme and variations”

Pieces will have a version of a theme—a melody with accompaniment that is usually quite short

Followed by a set a variations, a series of adaptations, mutations, “disguises” of the original theme

Writing variations is a test of skill for the composer
Sergei Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Born to a Russian aristocratic family that was poor

Parents both good amateur pianists

Grandfather encouraged his piano playing
Rachmaninoff’s father loses estates to mismanagement: family moves to St. Petersburg

Rachmaninoff studies at St. Petersburg Conservatory and studies with Tchaikovsky
Pytor Tchaikovsky
Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Builds career as *virtuoso pianist*, but also *composes* works for both piano and orchestra
- Becomes famous for the *large span of his hands*
Rachmaninoff’s hands
Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Tchaikovsky dies in 1893—a big blow to Rachmaninoff
- Falls into a *serious depression* for three years and writes nothing
- Begins *therapy* with psychologist Nikolai Dahl, and begins to write again.
Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Russian revolution occurs in 1917
- Rachmaninoff emigrates to the United States, and gets deals with the Steinway piano company and the Victor record company
- Due to busy concertizing career—and continuing episodes of depression—Rachmaninoff writes *only 6 compositions* after his emigration to the U.S.
On of these 6 compositions is the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, for piano and orchestra.

Based on the violin *Caprice No. 24* by Niccolò Paganini (which is in itself an étude written as a theme with variations).
Niccolò Paganini
The theme of Paganini’s Caprice No. 24
The theme of Paganini’s Caprice No. 24

Rachmaninoff particularly focuses on this melodic bit throughout the variations.
Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Written in 1934
- Premiered with the *Philadelphia Symphony* conducted by *Leopold Stokowski*, with Rachmaninoff at the piano
Rachmaninoff

*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Titled a “rhapsody” but written as a set of variations, but arranged in three broad sections—fast, slow, fast—like a concerto

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The opening of the piece is unusual

Starts with an introduction (not unusual), but...

Then goes to the first variation before stating the theme

The first variation is a stripped-down “skeleton” of the theme, that shows the theme’s structure
Paganini’s melody appears throughout the piece in various forms including in “inversion” (upside down)

Simplified version of theme

Inversion of theme (Var. 18)
Rachmaninoff
*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*

- Rachmaninoff quotes the “Dies irae” chant from the Gregorian chant Requiem mass several times.
“Dies irae” chant from the Requiem
Several of the variations are famous in-and-of themselves.

The 18th variation, the most “romantic” of the variations, is the most well-known.
The last variation (24) is extremely difficult to play. Rachmaninoff nervous about his ability to play it at premiere.

His friend Benno Moiseiwitsch suggests he drink a glass of crème de menthe (Rachmaninoff did not drink alcohol).
Benno Moiseiwitsch

Crème de Menthe
The premiere performance was a success, and Rachmaninoff drank crème de menthe every time he played the piece, and called the last variation the “Crème de menthe” variation.
Maurice Ravel

*Boléro*
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

- Along with Debussy, considered one of the greatest of French composers, and one of the great composers to the 20th century.

- If Debussy is “impressionistic,” Ravel is a “classicist,” interested in forms and techniques from the past.
Conversely, Ravel is very interested in the current music of his time—such as American jazz—and incorporates it into his own works.

His jazz-style works are an important model for George Gershwin when he writes the Rhapsody in Blue.
Maurice Ravel

- Ravel is considered one of the great orchestrators in classical music
- Is commissioned to write a ballet by Russian ballerina Ida Rubenstein
Ida Rubenstein
in *Boléro*
Ravel considers himself Basque, and is fascinated by Spanish culture, and writes many Spanish-themed pieces.

Rubenstein originally asks him to orchestrate some piano pieces by Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz, but Ravel finds out that another composer has the orchestration rights.

He decides to write an original piece based around the bolero dance.
Maurice Ravel

- The Bolero is a *slow triple-meter* dance originating in Spain
- Music for boleros were songs accompanied by the guitar and castanets
- Typical *Bolero rhythm*
While on vacation he comes up with what he calls an “insistent tune” and decides to try an experiment:

“I’m going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can”
Maurice Ravel

- Piece structured over the **Bolero rhythm**, that plays continuously as an unchanging **ostinato** throughout the piece in the percussion section.

- Ravel uses **two melodies** that alternate back and form: the first a more traditional bolero-style melody; the second a jazz-inflected tune.
The ballet, *Boléro*, premieres in 1928 and instantly becomes a *success de scandale*.

According to stories, one audience member shouted out that Ravel was crazy.

Audience members were said to have twisted their paper programs into pulp from the tension created by the piece.
Maurice Ravel

- While not strictly a variation in the tradition sense, Ravel writes a piece that explores variation in timbre.

- The main interest of the piece are the changing the tone colors of the orchestration, and gradual crescendo as instruments are added over the course of the piece.
Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, Track 49, *50 Most Essential Classical Piano Pieces*

Terms to Know

- Theme and Variations
- Étude, Caprice
- Inversion
- “Skeleton” variation
- “Dies irae”
- Crème de Menthe variation
- Bolero rhythm
- Ostinato
- Development
- Timbre, Crescendo