A STUDY OF
RACHMANINOFF'S VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY CHOPIN, OP. 22

by

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INTRODUCTION

Sergei Rachmaninoff is remembered as one of the most admired pianists of all time and is truly a great composer in Russian Romantic music. His works are known for expressiveness, lyricism, song-like melodicism and unique pianism. They are respected by musicians and performed all over the world. Among his compositions, Rachmaninoff's Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 is his first extended work for piano solo. Before this piece, his piano solo writings are sets of short pieces, such as Op. 2 and Op. 16. It is interesting to note, however, that not many pianists are familiar with this piece even though many of Rachmaninoff's piano works are very popular. Max Harrison, renowned Rachmaninoff scholar, stated:

> Rachmaninoff's Chopin Variations is a rare bird in recital programs, which is odd considering the opportunities for virtuoso display offered by the later pages, but there is more to this composition than just virtuosity.[1]

Even so, there are not many studies pertaining to this piece. The purpose of this essay is to prompt interest in the work, and to provide insight for its performance. This essay will start by discussing the nature of the composer's works, focusing especially on his variations. The main body will contain detailed examination of Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22. Discussion of form, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and pianism will be the primary focus. There are some interesting influences from other works, which will be also mentioned. The remainder of the essay will discuss the value of this piece in the concert repertoire and the arguments about the piece's value.

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[1] Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (London: Continuum, 2005), 110

Chapter 1: RACHMANINOFF'S PIANO SOLO WORKS AND VARIATIONS

As a great pianist himself, Rachmaninoff used his skills producing works that explore both expressive and technical possibilities of the piano, which is why his music is very respected and admired.

His early works are rather short and show the influences of other composers. It is not difficult to recognize the early forms such as Nocturne, Prelude, Waltz, Barcarolle, Gavotte and Mazurka in his early writings that remind us of Bach and Chopin. Although these are not yet his mature works, they still possess Rachmaninoff's individual style with melodic invention and passionate content. After experiencing his personal depression, he entered the most productive years of his compositional life, which led him to write fruitful mature works. During this time, he produced many of his famous compositions including his ten preludes, sonata and the etudes. Martyn stated:

> This middle period shows the composer's step forward in the quality of musical raw material transcends the development of technique that naturally went with it.[2]

Especially, his preludes and etudes have wider expressiveness, creativity, more depth of feelings with memorable melodies. His powerful Prelude in B-flat major, Op. 23 No. 2 explores the richest pianism while his beautiful D major prelude expresses beautiful nocturne-like lyricism. His innovative Etudes Tableaux, Op. 33 and Op. 39 have the unique title, which means 'pictures'. They are not only technical exercises but also exploring the variety of pianism and creating different moods. Rachmaninoff programmed these etudes as 'Prelude-Pictures' rather than 'Etudes' when he first performed them[3].

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[2] Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990), 23
[3] Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990), 231

The composer's life changed after his self-imposed exile due to the Bolshevik Revolution. After leaving Russia, he only wrote six major pieces in twenty-five years. The only piano solo work he composed during this time is Variations on a theme by Corelli, Op. 42, which will be discussed later.

When it comes to Rachmaninoff's solo piano works (excluding piano concerti), it is natural to mention his short forms such as preludes and etudes, probably because the composer seems to have felt more comfortable with these forms than larger works. He waited until he was thirty years old to write his first variation set, and it was four years later that he wrote his very first piano sonata. For some reason, Rachmaninoff was less satisfied and comfortable with his large forms in his piano music, and they were not always successful. For instance, his first extensive work, Variations on a theme by Chopin, Op. 22, did not impress the audience as his preludes did. A Russian critic Yuli Engel talked about this piece after Rachmaninoff's concert. He said:

> Of his new compositions the most congenial impression was made by three of the preludes, distinct in character–F-sharp minor, D major, and G-flat minor . . . Much less interesting, at least on first acquaintance, seemed the larger work, Variations on a theme by Chopin. The variations, though significant, are not always worthy of the beautiful theme that inspired them.[4]

His first piano sonata also did not satisfy the audience, or the composer himself, which led him to revise it extensively. The same thing happened to his second piano sonata and now we have two different versions of it. Perhaps, Rachmaninoff was feeling insecure about his large-scale work due to the lack of public appreciation. Whatever the actual reason was, it appears that he struggled with the completion of a large work.

He wrote only three piano pieces in variation form. Unlike other composers, he only used borrowed-themes rather than creating his own. His last piano composition, Rhapsody on a theme

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[4] Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (New York, New York University Press, 1956), 100

by Paganini, Op. 43 for piano and orchestra, is in this form. His last piano solo work is also in variation form—Variations on a theme by Corelli, Op. 42. It is interesting that it took him almost thirty years to write another set of variations after Op. 22. And it is also worth noting that variation was the form he eventually went back to at the end of his compositional career. It is known that Rachmaninoff was not happy with Op. 22 when he finished it. Twenty-eight years later, he wrote another variation set, Variations on a theme by Corelli, Op. 42, which is considered to be more creative treatment of the theme than Op. 22. These twenty variations are shorter in performance time than the earlier variation set but contain greater rhythmic and harmonic freedom with more variety of character. Even though Op. 42 is organized into an entirely logical structure with more maturity, people did not appreciate it very much since it was not as 'extroverted' as his other works such as his etudes. He made multiple revisions and added more options in the performance to make it more effective but regretfully, the composer never again wrote a solo piano work. Although the Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini, Op. 43 is for piano and orchestra, it shows the composer's struggle to improve his approach to the compositional challenges of variation form. Op. 43 has a similar formal structure to that of Op. 22, consisting of roughly three sections with fast-slow-fast structure, although with more refined architectural skill. At present, Op. 42 and Op. 43 are considered to be Rachmaninoff's most mature works. But Op. 22 still has not received enough attention since it is considered less interesting. It is perhaps true that Op. 22 lacks the maturity that the other variations demonstrate, but I believe this piece deserves much more consideration than it has received to date.

Chapter 2: THE EXAMINATION OF VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY CHOPIN, OP. 22

Background

Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 was composed between 1902 and 1903 when Rachmaninoff returned to Russia with his newly-wed wife, Natalia. He accepted students to teach from St. Ekaterina Ladies College and at the Elizavetinsky Institute. He also had performances with Safonoff , for which he was well paid.[5] Having settled down in his home and with a stable family, he was musically inspired and started many new projects including Op. 22. The piece was dedicated to Theodore Leschetizky, a Polish-born piano pedagogue at St. Petersburg. It was premiered by Rachmaninoff in 1903 at Princess Lieven's prison charity concert, along with some of his Preludes, Op. 23.

Theme and Structure

The theme is based on Chopin's Prelude in C minor Op. 28, No. 20. Considering the fact that he was also working on his prelude set at the same time, it seems that he had Chopin in mind. As shown in examples 1 and 2, Rachmaninoff omitted mm. 5–8 from the original—a repetition of the next phrase—which resulted in symmetrical 8-bar-theme.

This variation set consists of twenty-two variations. These variations can be divided in three big groups. The first group contains ten variations, which is an elaboration of the theme. In this group, all variations remain in C minor, focusing more on developing the texture and the rhythm of the theme. The second group includes Variations 11 through 18. Rachmaninoff starts to move away from the home key and demonstrates more freedom in tempo and the harmony. Variations in this section are mostly slow and quiet. This group can be divided in two smaller

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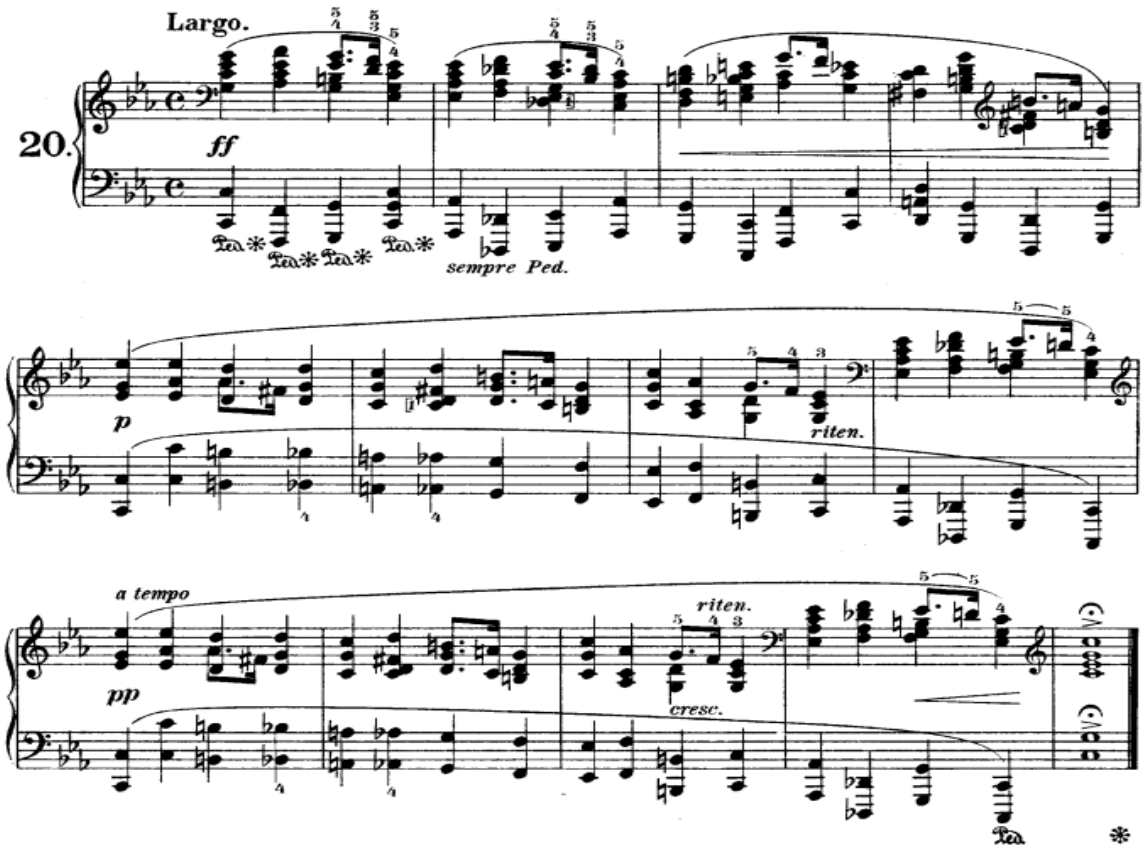
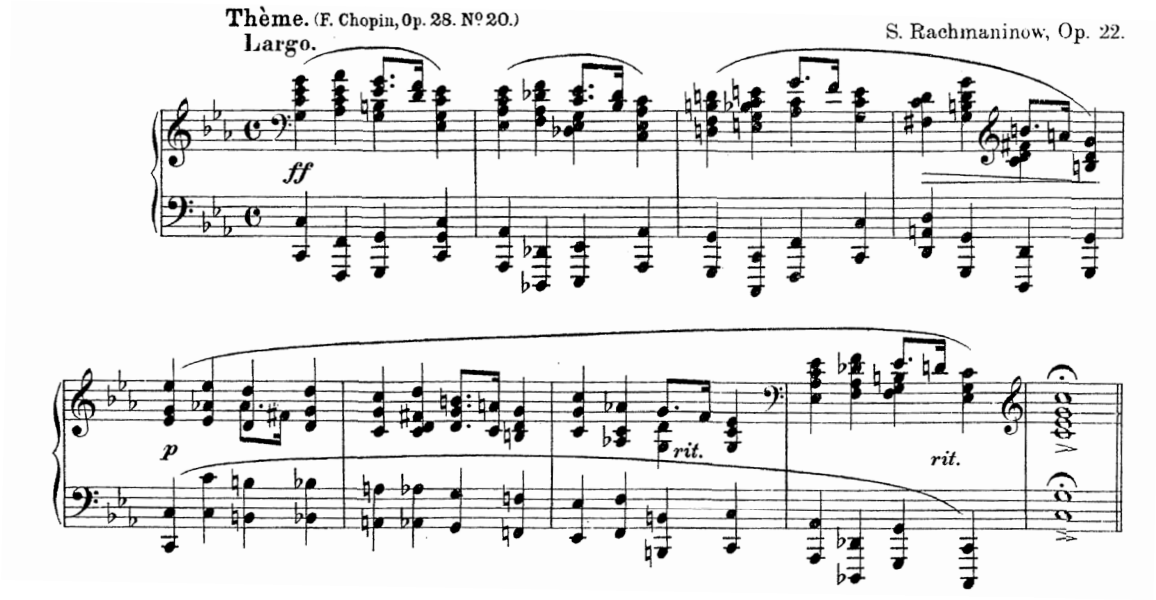
[5] Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (London: Continuum, 2005), 110

sections: Var. 11–14 and Var. 15–18. However, it is more logical to see the group as a whole, since the majority of the variations share the similar moods, with the exception of Variation 15. The final four variations are longer in length and more brilliant. In this group, each variation has its own individuality so that they could work as independent pieces.



Example 1 Chopin: Prelude No. 20, Op. 28



Example 2 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Theme

Often, Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 is considered to be in a sonata structure, not by the "form" but how it is organized. Based on how the variations are grouped together, the entire work can be structured as below (see Table 1). The first group is organized as a one movement. It has a continuous flow in performance. The second group is mostly slow, as generally would be the case in a sonata. The last four variations would constitute the fast finale of the final sonata movement.[6]

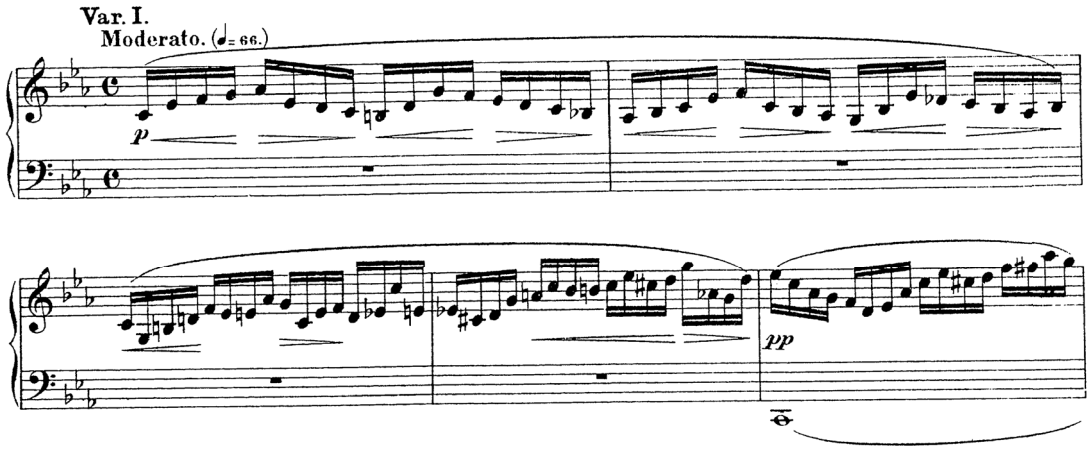
Table 1 Structure of Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22

Group	Variations
1	1–10 (Elaboration of the theme, gradually developing to fast and powerful ending)
2 (a)	11–14 (different key, slow)
2 (b)	15–18 (playful for a short time but back to slow)
3	19–22 (Independent character pieces, longer in length)

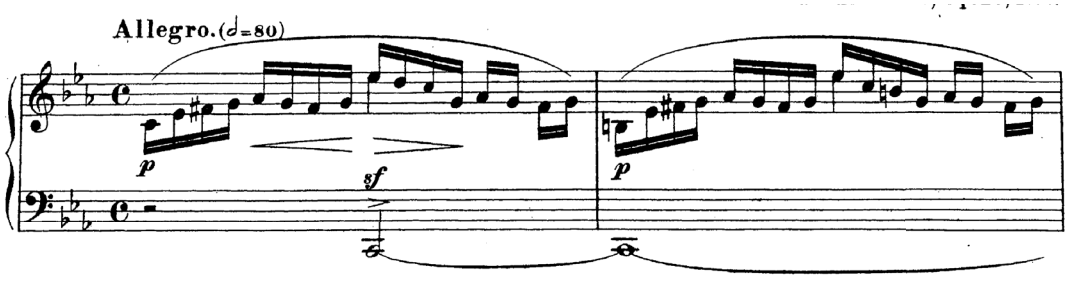
[6] Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990), 146

Group 1—Variation 1

Following the theme, Variation 1 starts with a soft single line in sixteenth notes, strikingly similar to J. S. Bach. The first four bars are right hand alone, simply elaborating on the theme. A long pedal point of low C occurs in measure 5 to add the support. But rather than giving a strong cadence at the end, the bass serves as a hint of the tonic in the background. His Prelude in C minor, Op. 23, No. 7, shares a similarity with this variation, which he was working on around the same time. The right hand texture, use of the pedal point, and dynamics of this prelude demonstrate their striking resemblance.



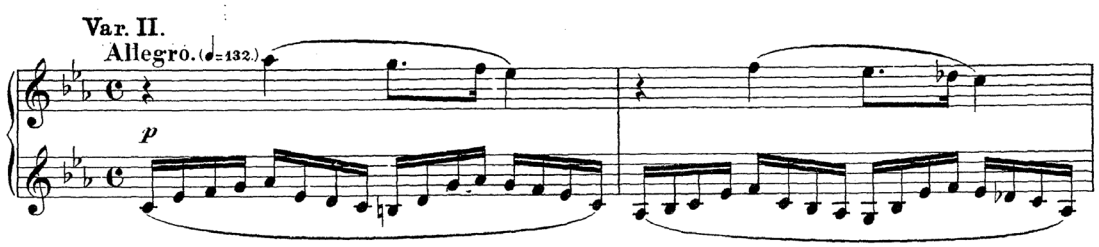
Example 3 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 1, mm. 1–5



Example 4 Rachmaninoff: Prelude Op. 23, No. 7: mm. 1–2

Group 1—Variation 2

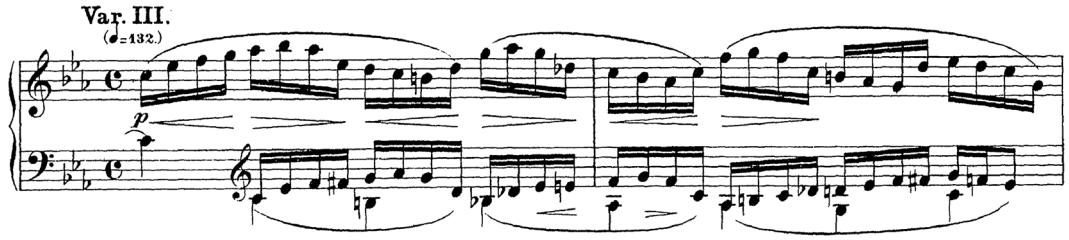
The single line in the right hand now goes to the left hand in the next variation when the right hand starts to add descending line like a counter melody derived from the theme. The tempo marking directs the performer to play twice as fast as the first variation. At the end of the second variation, the right hand melody leads straight into the third variation, where both hands transition to sixteenth notes—similar to the variation procedure of the Classical period.



Example 5 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 2, mm. 1–2

Group 1—Variation 3

The third variation combines the first two variations together in canon, which suggests that Rachmaninoff is starting with the influence of early traditional style in this piece. This 'fast right-hand→fast left-hand→fast both-hands' structure was a very common Baroque and Classical period.



Example 6 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 3, mm.1–2

Group 1—Variation 4

The fourth variation still has the running passages with sixteenth notes but with more voices. A hidden line in the inner voice recalls the theme while the texture thickens and begins to

move away from the Baroque sound. This variation uses wider range and fuller sound, indicating Rachmaninoff-like style.

Group 1—Variation 5

Recalling the theme to the left hand, this variation reduces the built-up energy to *meno mosso* with soft dynamics. This variation is very simple, just like the first three. However, this is more linear and melodic, which works as a transition to the following variation.

Group 1—Variation 6

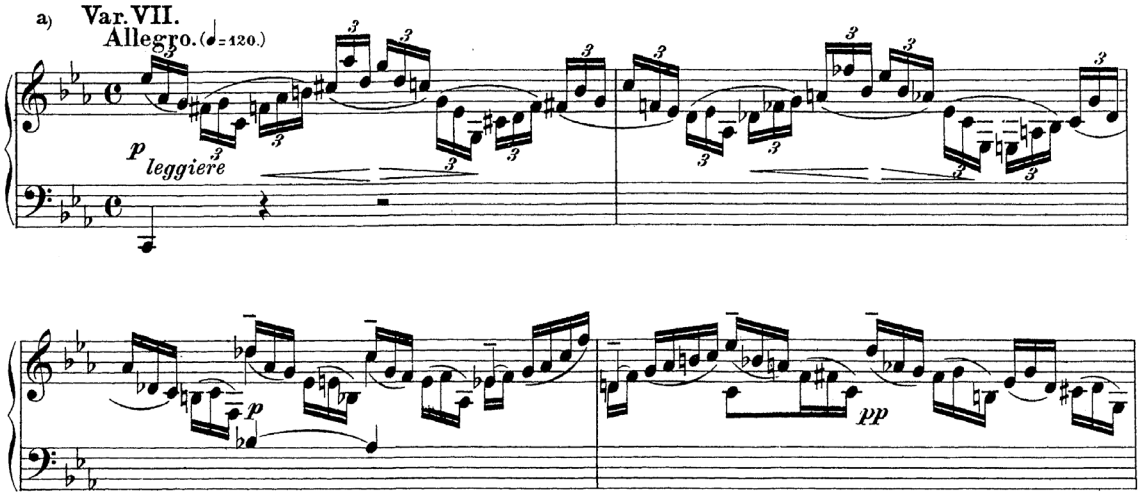
Variation 6 is the first one to hear Rachmaninoff's full lyricism with more rhythmic complexity. The beautiful melody in the right hand is accompanied by the left hand accompanied in polyrhythm (9:6). After the first phrase, the countermelody is added in the inner voice that is mostly played with the right hand or left hand thumb–-similar to the middle section of Prelude in G minor, Op. 23, No. 5. The last phrase includes rolls of tenths in the left hand and the melody in octaves in the right hand. This typical 'Rachmaninoff' texture requires carefully planned pedaling to produce a clear melody. Perhaps, this is the most challenging variation to play in the first group, not for the speed, but for the coordination of the hands for the flow.

Group 1—Variation 7

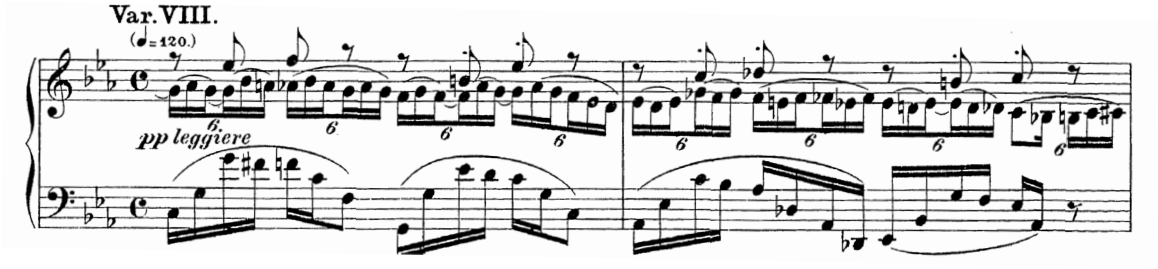
Variations 7 and 8 are connected as a paired variation. After the lyricism from the previous variation, it shifts to fast moving triplets in both hands, creating a dialogue between them. Embedded in the texture, Rachmaninoff adds tenuto markings on the interval of descending minor second, which is the inverted interval from the theme (see Example 7, page 11).

Group 1—Variation 8

Variation 8 continues the same idea but enhances the rhythmic complexity with a more elaborated right hand. The inner voice of the right hand is having triplets perpetually while top voice plays the melody (see Example 8, page 11).



Example 7 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 7, mm. 1–4



Example 8 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 8, mm. 1–2

Group 1—Variation 9

Variation 9 provides full-bodied chords that form a satisfactory conclusion to the first group, if the performer chooses to omit the optional Variation 10. By this point, the tempo of the variation is up to allegro and the dynamic is fortissimo. Marked *marcato*, this march-like variation covers the widest range so far. Having strong accented beats followed by the echoing chords, this variation shares a similarity with Prelude in G minor, Op. 23 No. 5.

Group 1—Variation 10

Following Variation 9, last variation from the first group is the fastest and most energetic one. The right hand starts with the strong descending staccato, immediately followed by left hand in canon. This serves as a perfect conclusion of the first group as it is the fastest, the strongest and

has the most driving energy towards the end. The canon also brings the influence of Bach back, as seen at the beginning.

Group 1—Summary

Table 2 Overview of Group 1

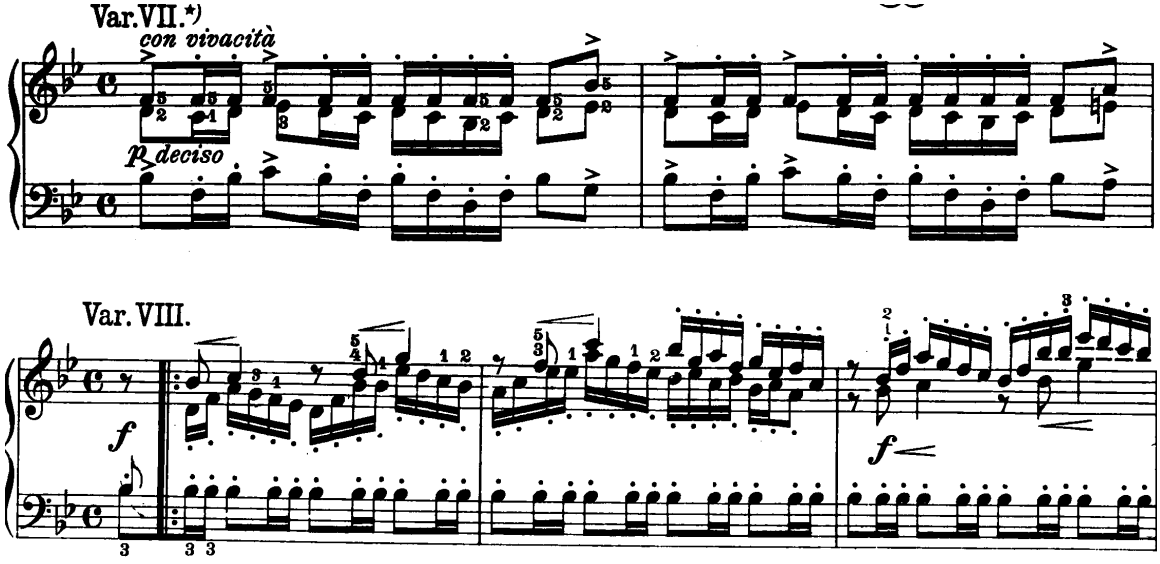
	Key	Tempo	Texture	Dynamic
Var.1	C minor	*Moderato*	Single-line, 16th notes	P
Var.2	C minor	*Allegro*	16th notes Developed from Var.1	P
Var.3	C minor	*Allegro*	Developed from Var.2 Thicker texture	Mostly P
Var.4	C minor	*Allegro*	More active rhythm	ff for a short time
Var.5	C minor	*Meno Mosso*	6notes in a beat	p
Var.6	C minor	*Meno Mosso Slower than Var.5*	6.vs.8 rhythm thicker texture	pp
Var.7	C minor	*Allegro*	6notes in a beat thin texture but faster	p
Var.8	C minor	*Allegro*	Developed from Var.7 Thicker texture complex	pp
Var.9	C minor	*Allegro*	Strong chords Magestic	ff
Var.10	C minor	*Piu Vivo*	The fastest tempo Energetic	ff

It is very clear that Rachmaninoff thought of this group as one unit. Once the first variation starts, there is no perfect cadence between the variations until later in the group so that it continues leading naturally to the next one. The first time that we really hear the strong cadence is at the end of the Variation 9, which could serve as a finale of the first group. Rachmaninoff also planned thoughtfully on how to build up from the beginning to the end by developing the

dynamics, rhythm, tempo and texture. The first group is juxtaposed in a measured way that it creates very effective momentum. After the theme in *Largo* and simple quarter note rhythm, Variation 1 starts with *moderato*, piano and single line of sixteenth notes. As the variations progress, they advance to more complex rhythms, faster tempi, thicker textures and louder dynamics (see Table 2, page 12).

As mentioned before, the influence of Bach is especially evident in this group. The way he handles the first three variations are rather too traditional and too predictable. However, Both Chopin and Rachmaninoff admired Bach and studied his music thoroughly. Considering the fact that this is based on one of Chopin's pieces, which shows a strong influence of Bach, this seems to be quite a logical beginning.

Use of the paired variations was very prominent in the first group. The first three variations develop one after another, as one larger unit. Variation 5 sets the *meno mosso* up before Variation 6. Variations 7 and 8 are very clearly paired, which is similar to Brahms' treatment of Variations 7 and 8 in his Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24 (see Example 9).

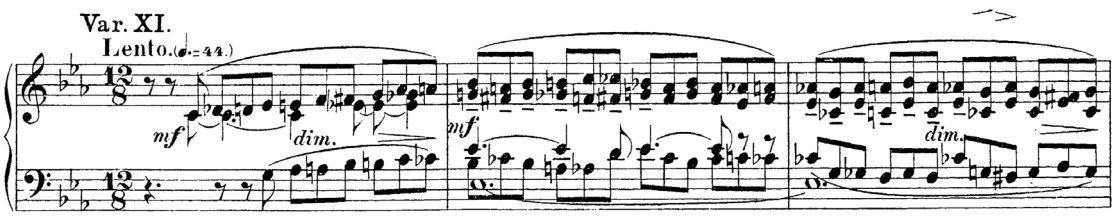


Example 9 Brahms: Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel Op. 24: Variation 7, mm. 1–2 and Variation 8, mm. 1–3

In summary, the group 1 is considered to be rather ‘traditional’ and presents few surprises. However, Rachmaninoff becomes more experimental as he moves through the second group of ten variations.

Group 2—Variation 11

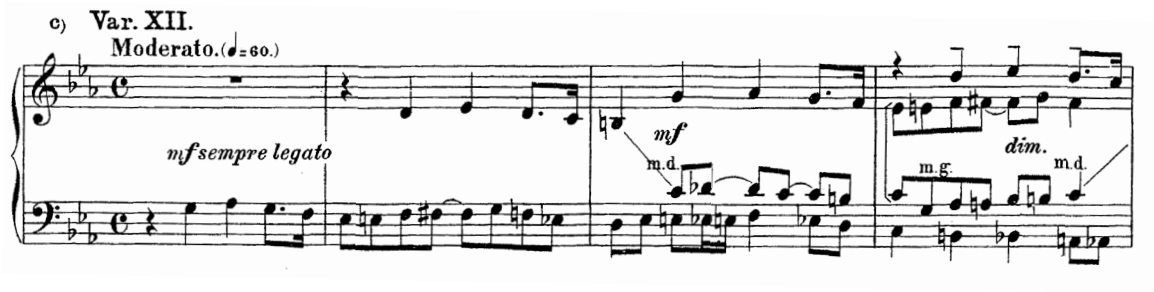
After the brilliant ending of the first group, the second group creates a completely contrasting mood. In *Lento*, the beginning of Variation 11 starts with an off beat and is chromatic throughout. It appears to be searching for something. The key of this variation is ambiguous due to the wandering harmonies. A long sustaining E-flat gives the hint of where it is leading, but there is no clear sense of the tonic until the the end of the variation. It is also the first one that is not in 4-bar phrase structure: Pick up+4+4+4+3+3



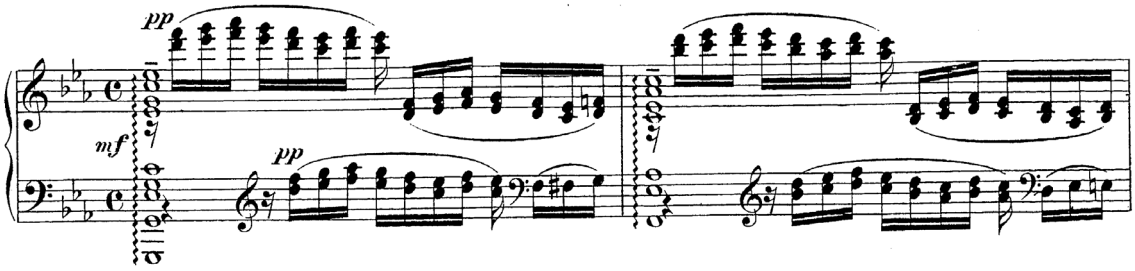
Example 10 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 11, mm. 1–3

Group 2—Variation 12

The influence of Bach in this piece has been already discussed (see discussion of Variation 1), yet it continues here in Variation 12 with a four-part fugue (see Example 11, page 15). Staring with the tenor, the subject is short and chromatic. The four voices are introduced repidly, followed by a loose developmet. Rather than a typical fugue, Rachmaninoff suddenly transforms the entire variation to an unexpected imitative organ texture and cadenza-like passages. This variation is one of the composer’s innovative aspects that comes as a surprise to the listener (see Example 12, page 15).



Example 11 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 12, mm. 1–4

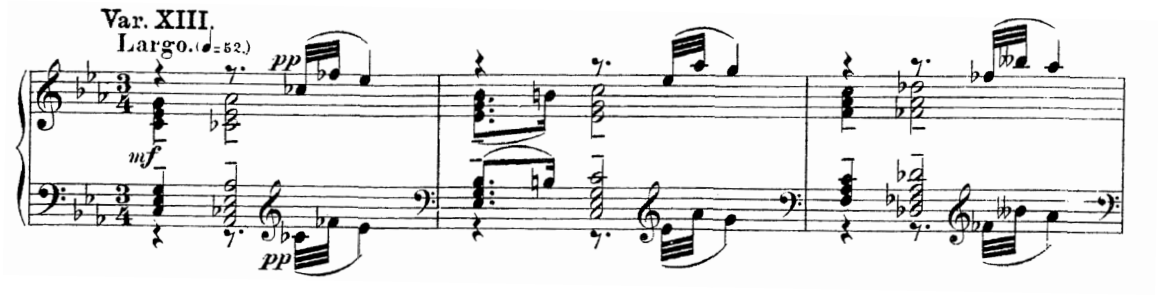


Example 12 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 12, mm. 24–25

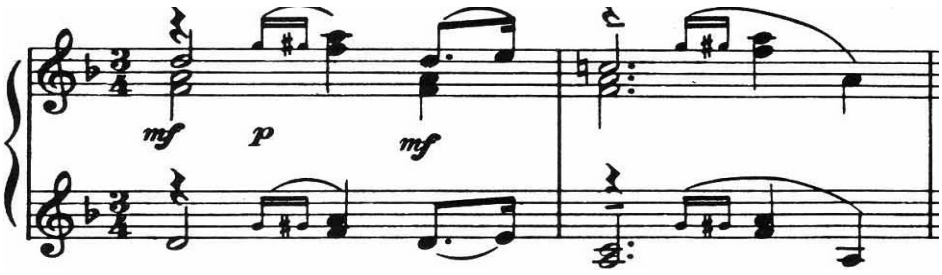
Group 2—Variation 13

Rachmaninoff once stated that the bells accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave and no composer could escape their influence.[7] Therefore, the sound of bells apprears in many of his compositions. Like his first piano prelude, Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 3 No. 2, Rachmaninoff devotes an entire variation evoking the sound of bells—an affect which he uses in a similar way later in Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42 (see Example. 14, page 16). This creates a very special moment in this piece, with a sense of mystery and the sound of distant bell echoing from far away.

[7] Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (New York, New York University Press, 1956), 184



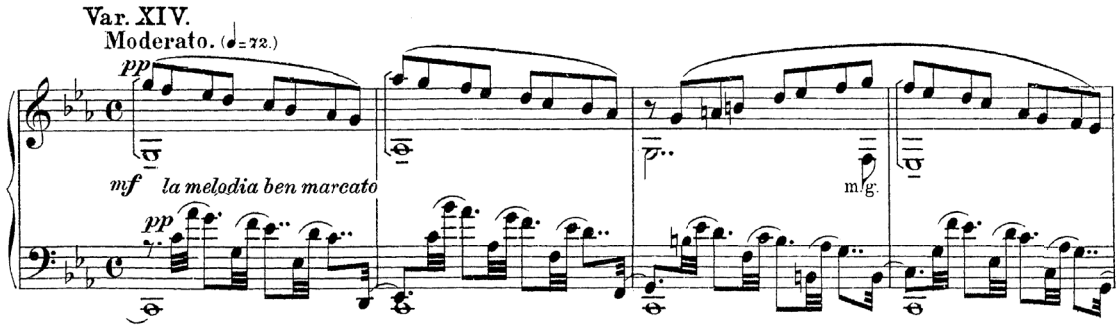
Example 13 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 13, mm. 1–3



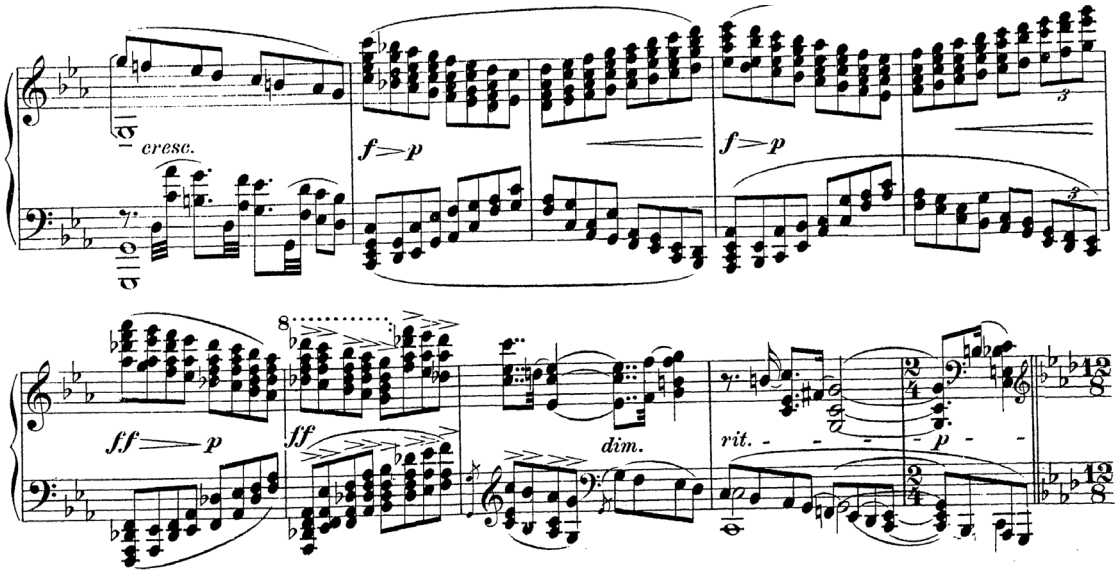
Example 14 Variations on a Theme by Corelli Op. 42: Variation 4, mm. 1–2

Group 2—Variation 14

Variation 14 is more challenging to play than it first appears. Rachmaninoff places the first half of the expanded theme in the alto voice, while the other three voices feature different rhythmic material. The difficulty in this variation is that every voice has its own singing line but they are about two octaves apart from the theme and the bass. It gets especially tricky to make it flow within the tempo when each downbeat chord is about four octaves away. In sustaining the bass, the sostenuto pedal can save time when executing the leaps, if necessary. This variation seems to be continuing from the previous "bell" variation, except with more voices, and Rachmaninoff further develops the texture until the grand arrival of bells at the end (see Example 16, page 17).



Example 15 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 14, mm. 1–4

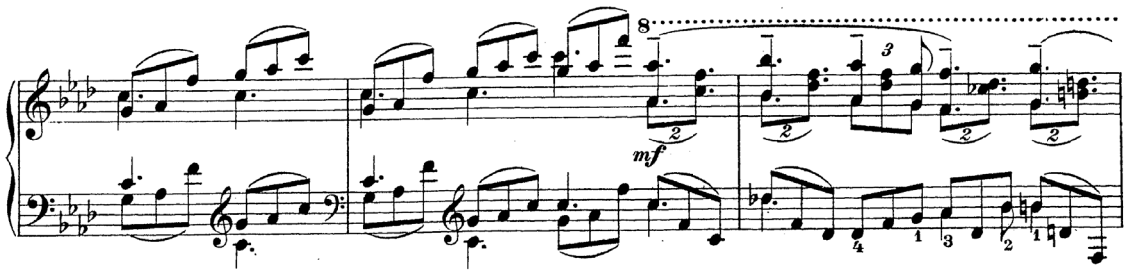


Example 16 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 14, mm. 16–25

Group 2—Variation 15

Variation 15 is the only rhythmic variation from this group. Using a dotted-triplet motive—a device frequently used by Rachmaninoff—it keeps the lightness and playfulness throughout, which is a refreshing change from the very serious mood of the previous four variations. This enjoyable song is interrupted by rather linear section in the middle, where Rachmaninoff suddenly alters the mood to recall the theme. This interruption to the mood in the middle of the Variation 15 is a small anticipation of Rachmaninoff's treatment of the next group (see Example 17, page 18). The composer inserts the change in the least expected place—the last

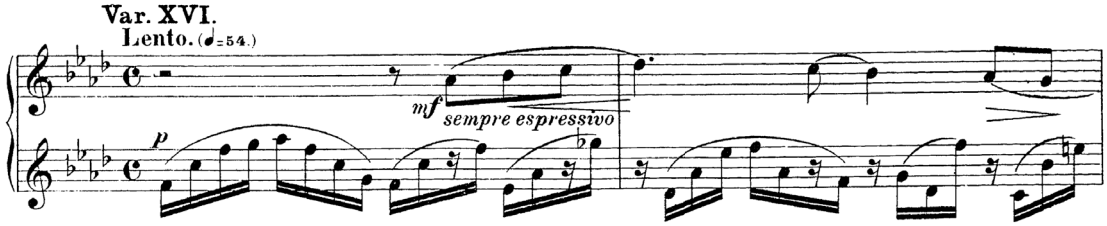
beat of the measure—which interferes with the sense of pulse, in a manner akin to the compositions of Robert Schumann.



Example 17 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 15, mm. 27–30

Group 2—Variation 16

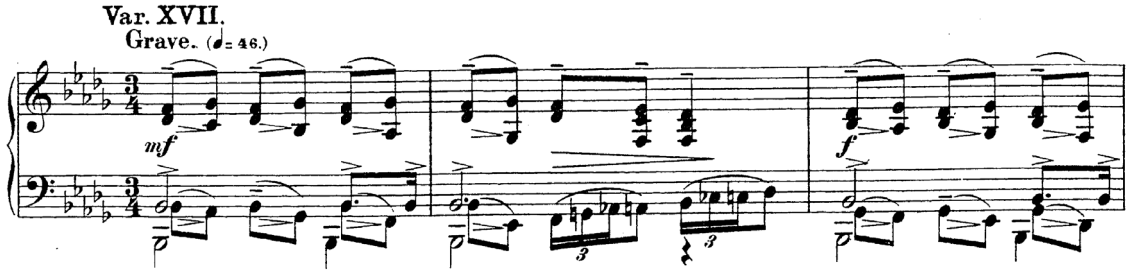
Variation 16, which is considered to be the center piece of this group, introduces flowing lyricism within an interactive cross-hand texture. It is arguably the most beautiful moment in this piece. Starting with F minor arpeggio in the left hand, the right hand starts to sing the main melody. Just like the opening of Prelude in D major, Op. 23 No. 4, the accompaniment surrounds the melody as if handling something very precious. It is unfortunate that he didn't develop this variation like his prelude since it ends too quickly to appreciate the special moment. The lyricism ends with an F major arpeggio, which serves as a half cadence within this leading passage that prepares the variation to follow.



Example 18 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 16, mm. 1–2

Group 2—Variation 17

At first, Variation 17 seems to be just a simple one using the minor second interval from the theme. However, this variation supplies the quote from Chopin's funeral march in the tenor voice. The famous tune starting with repeated B-flats, is placed in the left hand with the accent mark. As the variation progresses, the motive becomes more prominent, further emphasizing the quote. Since it could be very easily buried in the texture, it is important to bring it out in the beginning.



Example 19 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 17, mm. 1–3

Group 2—Variation 18

This group is finished with a texture of thick chords and polyrhythms in Variation 18. Marked *Piu mosso*, the enhanced rhythmic complexity of this variation provides variety from the previous slow-moving group.

Group 2—Summary

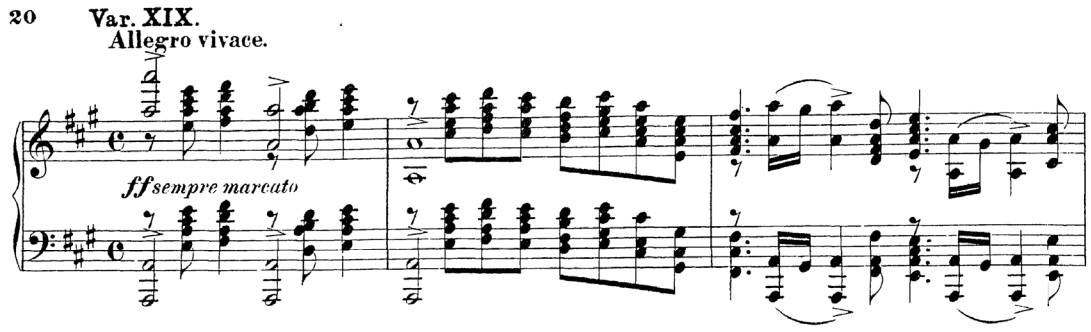
This is a group in which Rachmaninoff becomes more experimental. The changes in the key area are noticeable, especially in his use of B-flat minor (see Table 3, page 20). The tempo is mostly slow-—with the exception of Variation 15—which makes the entire group appear calm. Yet, the mysterious mood and the beautiful lyricism make this group attractive. The phrases are not in symmetrical four-bar phrases anymore, and Rachmaninoff expands or shortens them in unexpected places. Some of the variations have contrasting sections within themselves, providing an early clue to the way the last group of variations will develop and expand.

Table 3 Overview of Group 2

	Key	Tempo	Texture	Dynamic
Var.11	E-flat major	*Lento*	Chromatic	Mostly pp and mf
Var.12	C minor	*Moderato*	Fugue and Organ	Mostly mf, Short ff
Var.13	C minor	*Largo*	Bells	Mostly mf, pp echo
Var.14	C minor	*Moderato*	Bells, more elaborated	Mostly mf, Short ff
Var.15	F minor	*Allegro Scherzando*	Scherzo	pp-p
Var.16	F minor	*Lento*	Aria	p
Var.17	B-flat minor	*Grave*	Funeral Bells	p-mf Short ff
Var.18	B-flat minor	*Piu mosso*	Prelude	p

Group 3—Variation 19

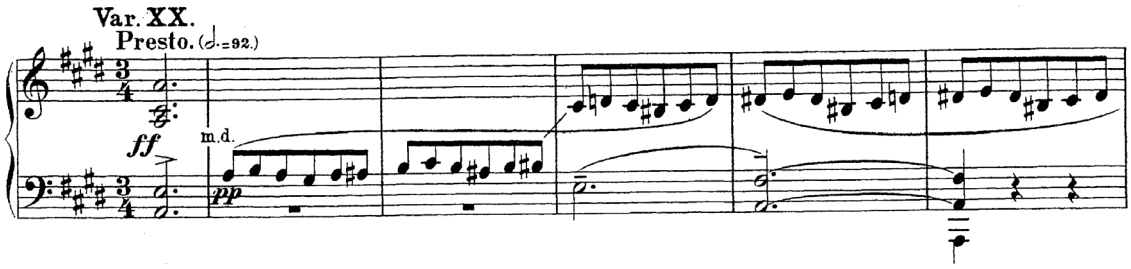
The last four variations are much longer in length and each has its own individuality. Variation 19 starts with striking A major, which is an unexpected key following B-flat minor. As if beginning a brand new movement, the opening of the last group presents a festive overture, which shares a similar texture with that of Variation 9. Unlike previous ones, this variation's length and structure could potentially work as a short prelude by itself. After its initial chordal progression, it transitions to a thinner texture, starting new sequences with which to rebuild. Those passages continue wandering through different keys until finally returning to A major. Once the opening material resurfaces, the variation ends with a triumphant cadence, which leads straight to the next variation. Rachmaninoff places the final chord in the first bar of the next variation instead of the last measure of this one, indicating that Variation 19 and 20 should be played without a break.



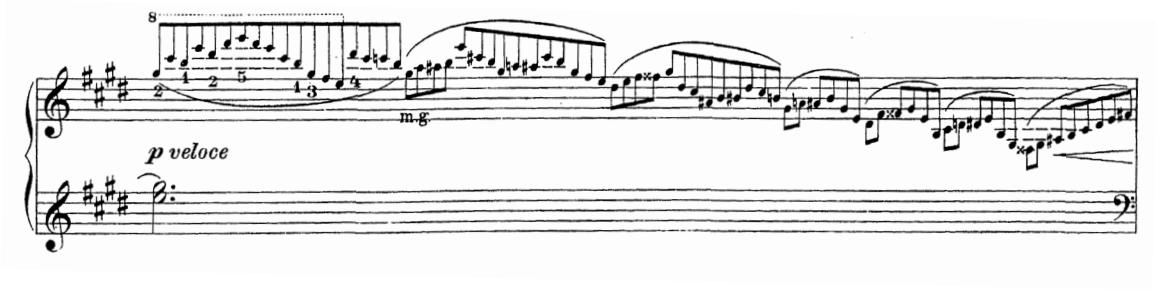
Example 20 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 19, mm. 1–3

Group 3—Variation 20

Variation 20 is an etude. Marked *presto*, the fast figurations of the right hand passages continue throughout as in Rachmaninoff's The Flight of the Bumblebee. The first sixteen bars are the introduction of the main body. It starts with A major but immediately leads to the G-sharp seventh chord in the left hand which serves as a dominant of C-sharp minor. When the left hand joins in with the melody in duple rhythm, it immediately creates a hemiola. While the right hand is moving perpetually, the left hand sings the melody in a long phrase until it shifts to the right hand. This is followed by a passage creating rhythmic acceleration to reach the cadenza section in bar 53. The inclusion of cadenza writing also appears in more extended form in the Intermezzo from Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42. With the left hand sustaining an E major chord minus the root, the right hand plays the improvisatory passage. The entire first section is repeated after the cadenza and finishes in C-sharp minor. This variation is the most technically challenging of the set and it could be played alone as an etude.



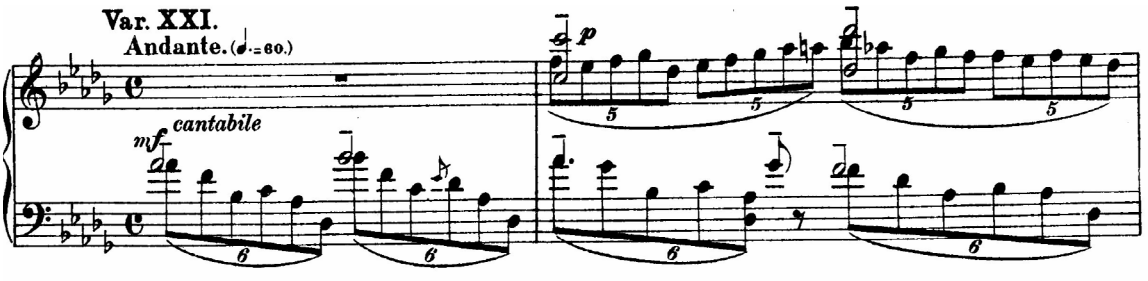
Example 21 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 20, mm. 1–6



Example 22 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op.22: Variation 20, mm. 53

Group 3—Variation 21

If Variation 20 is considered to be the most technical one, Variation 21 is the most sophisticated and musically complex of the set. Moving enharmonically, Variation 21 starts in D-flat major with the theme reintroduced in canon—the left hand at first plays the sextuplet with the theme on every down beat. The right hand joins in in the second measure with the theme starting on C, which creates a major third between the two hands.

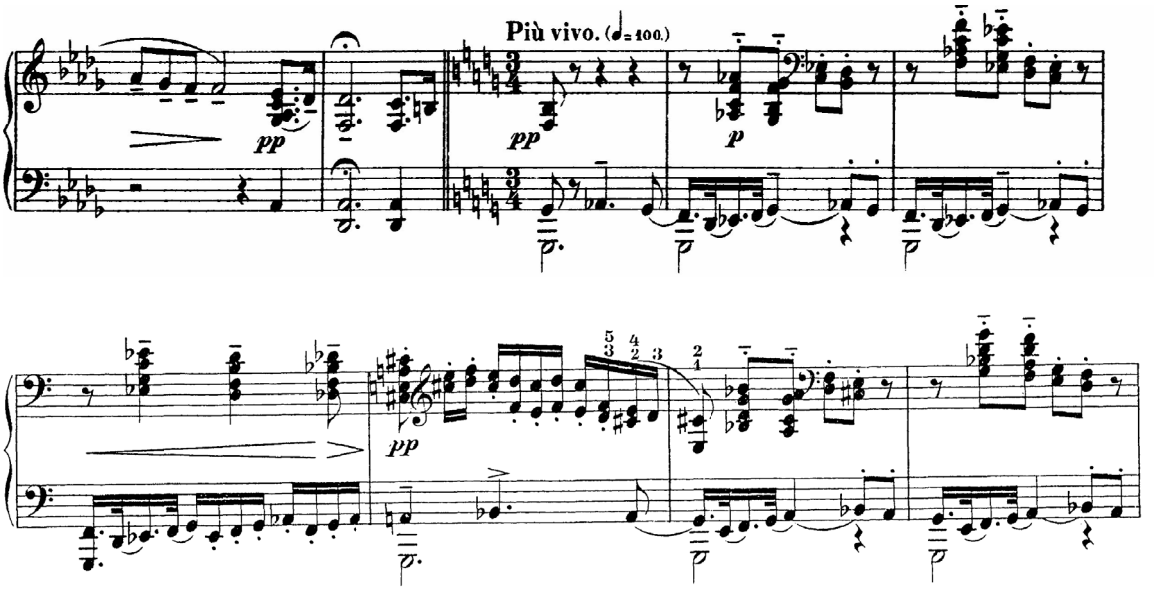


Example 23 Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22: Variation 21, mm. 1–2

While the theme is played in canon, the right hand plays two quintuplets along with the left hand's sextuplets. After the theme has been introduced in both hands, the variation enters the next section with different rhythms in the right hand including quadruplets, quintuplets, sextuplets and octuplets. Meantime, the supporting chords expand to more than two octaves so the whole texture gets thicker as it proceeds. When the melody reaches the peak, it gradually becomes simplified until it becomes triplets in the right hand only, creating a big arch phrase. This variation is supposed to be lyrical (marked *cantabile*), but it is extremely challenging to keep all

rhythmic and harmonic elements together and make it coherent. The theme can be lost in the complex rhythmic changes. The flow of the melody can be obscured while playing the chords and octave passages that continue expanding and developing.

When the intricate canon finishes in a perfect cadence, Rachmaninoff inserts a transitional section before the finale. By this point, the primary key of the piece, C minor, has been forgotten temporarily since the previous variations have been visiting many different keys that are not directly related to C minor. As Variation 21 is in D-flat major, this transition is necessary to convincingly return to C minor (or related key). In bar 25, along with the tempo change, the D-flat major key signature goes away and the time signature changes to 3/4, which signifies a new section. Visiting different keys via sequences, the transition finally arrives in C major—an arrival that was already indicated by the new key signature in the transition (see m. 25 from Example 24). Once the C major is settled, the music accelerates to the mighty finale.

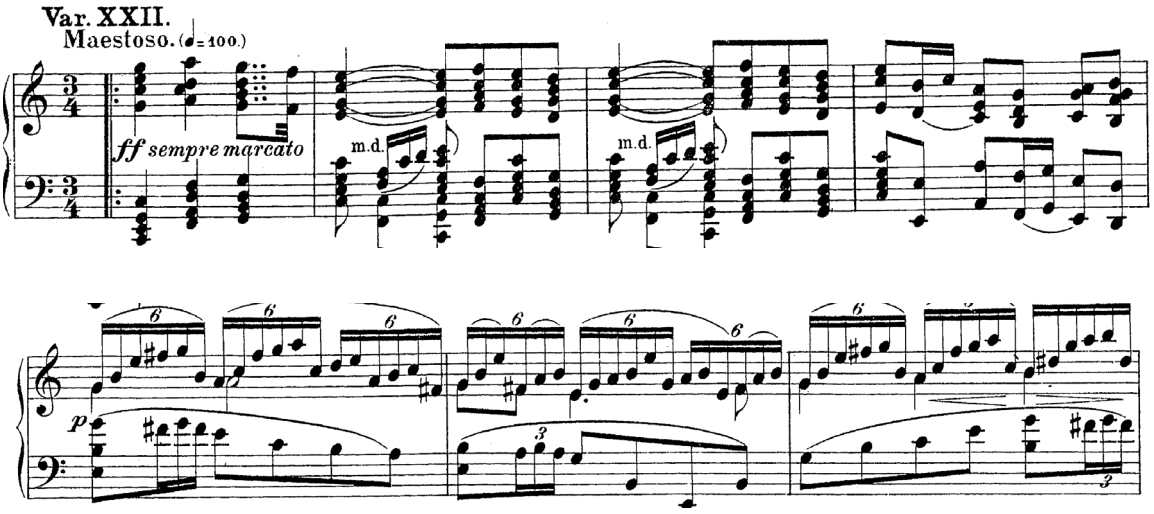


Example 24 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22: Variation 21, mm. 23–31

Group 3—Variation 22, Finale

The finale of this piece is the most extensive variation of the entire set. In ABAB'coda form, the variation starts with C major. The theme is in grand march style in 3/4, announcing the

imperial entrance, which resembles the beginning of Schumann's Carnaval, Op. 9. A contrasting B section is more melodic and linear in E minor with the theme hidden in the inner voice. When the A section returns, the march builds up further to create a huge climax. In the next B section, the left hand keeps the C in the bass as a pedal point for thirty bars, preparing for the end. Similar to the end of Variations on a Theme by Corelli Op.42, Rachmaninoff inserts a *meno mosso* section after the long journey of the finale, which functions as a reminder of the theme. The tempo is slower and the theme is brought back for the last time with the echoing bells. Just when the sound is about to disappear, the brilliant coda interrupts and concludes the piece.



Example 25 Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op.22: Variation 22, mm. 1–4, mm. 17–19

Group 3—Summary

Although not as unified as in Group 1, the last four variations are also connected together as one. Variation 19's last chord is notated in the first measure of Variation 20 so that the music continues naturally. The last C-sharp in Variation 20 also transfers to the next variations in D-flat major, serving as a tonic. Variation 21 pauses at the half cadence, which also functions as a dominant, leading directly into the finale. The key relationship of each variation doesn't seem coherent at first (A major, C-sharp minor, D-flat major, C major). However, Rachmaninoff's skill of handling these keys, and making smooth connections between them is genius. Furthermore,

these variations do not just work as whole, but also present very distinctive characters so that they could potentially work as independent pieces. Variations 20 and 22 share a similarity with Schumann's character pieces, which often have sudden changes of mood. The length of the variations is longer than in previous groups, and each variation increases in length as they proceed toward the end. The final group illustrates the most of Rachmaninoff's mastery compositional skill. It is brilliant, beautiful, rich in expressiveness, cunning and stylistically savvy.

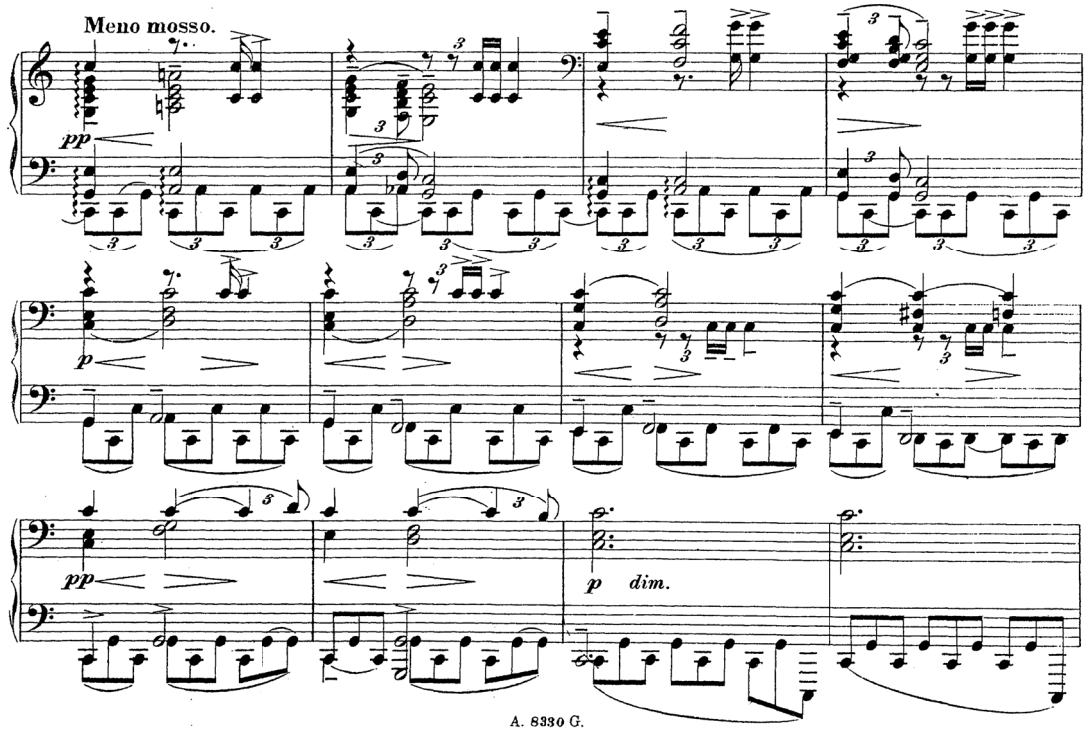
Table 4 Overview of Group 3

	Key	**Tempo**	**Texture**	**Dynamic**
Var.19	A major	*Allegro Vivace*	Overture	f
Var.20	C-sharp minor	*Presto*	Etude	pp-p
Var.21	D-flat major	*Andante*	Canon/Prelude	Mostly mf
Finale	C major	*Maestoso*	March	pp-f

Ending

Rachmaninoff offers two different endings, a meditative one and a brilliant one, from which the performer can choose depending on his/her preference. The meditative ending offers the recollection of the theme like that of Op. 42. After the long marathon of the twenty-two variations, especially after the intense last four, this ending provides a relaxation of the feeling so that the music just settles. Similarly, the coda of Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42 creates a special moment at the end with the sudden change of the mood after the barrage of chords. Rather than having a sudden change, Op. 22 sets it up gradually. From B′ section of Variation 22,

it is already stabilized a calm mood so the *meno mosso* sounds like an extension rather than a separate section, which risks becoming anticlimactic. However, if the performer handles the pace of the last section with care, it could be a breathtaking epilogue. Since the *meno mosso* section continues to the coda, Rachmaninoff notes that the one C minor chord must be included after bar 101 of Variation 22 if the performer chooses the soft ending (see Example 26).

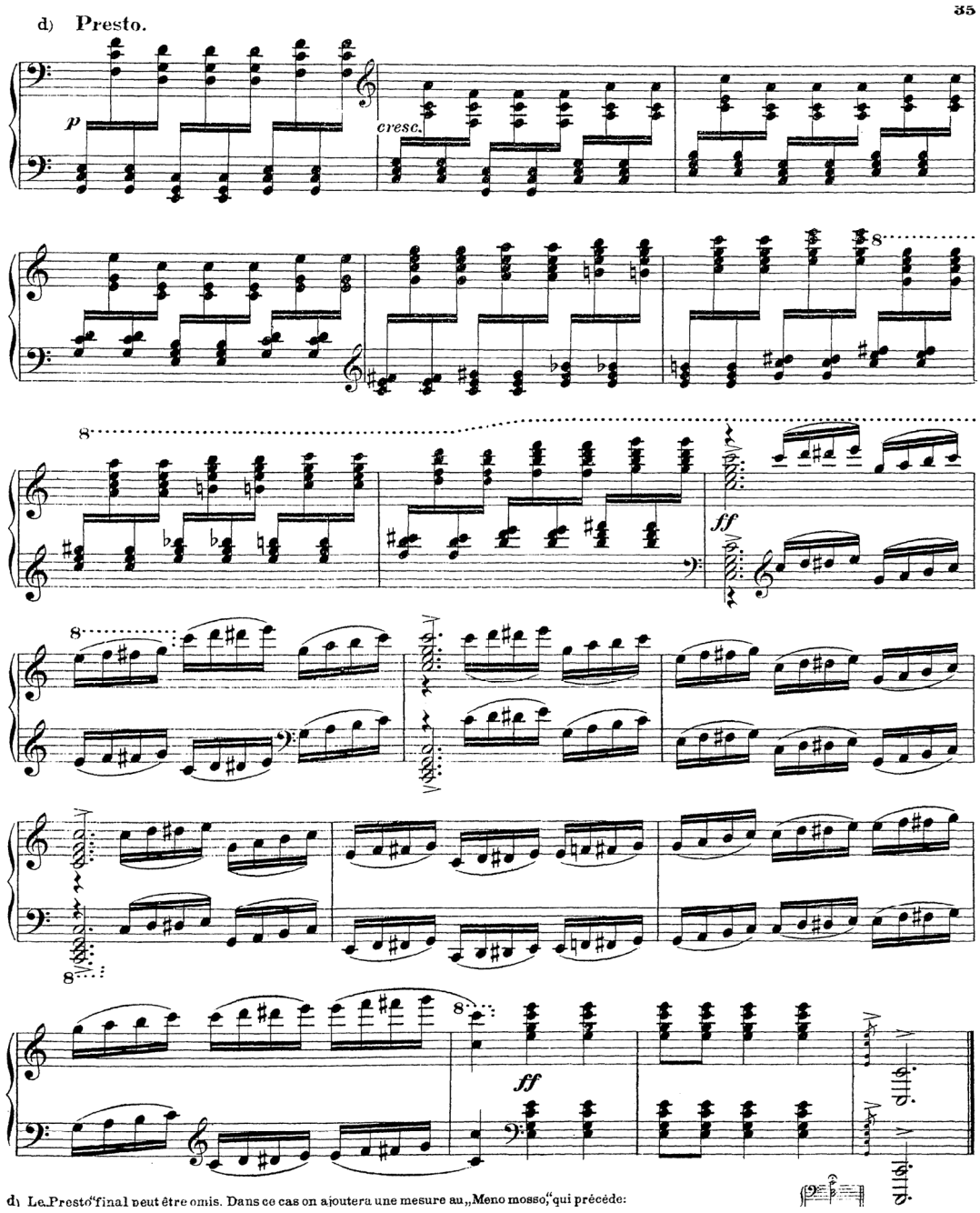


Example 26 *Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op.22*: Variation 22, mm. 99–101

The *presto* ending provides the shining conclusion, which is an 'applause raiser', according to Culshaw.[8] The coda consists of ascending chords and descending four-note scales in *presto*. One might claim that it seems too predictable and immature for Rachmaninoff's writing. It is true that the passagework looks simple—especially with eleven repetitions of C chords—and does not seem to be related to the theme. However, this coda provides the balance to the mood of Variation 22, which the *meno mosso* section has failed to do. The structure of the finale is 'A (vibrant)–B (calm)–A′ (vibrant)–B′ (calm)–*Meno mosso* (calm)–Coda (vibrant)'. As discussed

[8] John Culshaw, *Sergei Rachmaninoff* (Great Britten: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1949), 104

before, the *meno mosso* section is hard to make effective since the B′ section is already alluding to it. The coda plays an important role in balancing everything out-–a balance, which the *meno mosso* section has disrupted (see Example 27).



Example 27 ***Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22*****: Variation 22, mm. 102–120**

There is also a suggested ending by a Rachmaninoff scholar, Oscar von Riesemann.[9] He suggested that the piece would have been more effective if the theme was presented at the end of the piece (instead of the beginning) in place of the coda. He argues that the theme at last will work as a 'confirmation' of this musical journey. Not presenting the theme in the beginning could be controversial, however, this idea leads to an interesting alternative. Like the ending of Bach's Goldberg Variation, BWV988, repeating the theme after the B' section in Variation 22 would be a clever way of finishing this piece. It really is up to the performer to decide which ending to use and why. Depending on the effect the pianist wants, the set can end in vastly different ways.

Possible Omissions

One of the main reasons that Rachmaninoff was not satisfied with the outcome was the length of the piece, which he thought it was too long. Just as he offered options for the ending, he also suggested possible omissions from the piece. The variations that the composer gave permission to omit were, nos. 7, 10, and 12. It is unclear why he chose these for possible omission, so it is up to later generations to speculate for themselves. Even though it has its unique quality, Variation 12 is probably the most logical one to omit because of the imperfection of the fugue. It is also clear that Variation 8 is more interesting than Variation 7, so deleting it may not be a terrible loss. Variations 9 and 10 both have energetic moods so one understands why Rachmaninoff suggested leaving one of them out. Since Variations 7 and 10 are both fast, their omission only subtracts two minutes from the total duration. With Variation 12 also omitted, the total time saved by these omissions is about five minutes. Of course, the performer does not have to omit all three. There is also the freedom of choosing just one or two.

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[9] Oscar von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections told to Oscar von Riesemann* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 224

Chapter 3: PERFORMING VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY CHOPIN, OP. 22

An ineffective work?

> Despite its obvious pianistic attractions and fine moments, it is musically insufficient to make it a satisfactory center piece. It is thus likely to remain in the shadows.[10]
>
> Barrie Martyn

> The Chopin Variations are less true variations than clever embroideries of the theme.[11]
>
> John Culshaw

Since its birth, Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 was considered to be one of Rachmaninoff's unsuccessful pieces. Rachmaninoff even admitted the weakness of it and attempted to revise the work extensively, which he failed to do. Mainly, there are two general arguments regarding the piece: one regarding the structure, and another the length.

As examined earlier, this piece can be divided in three groups. Even with Rachmaninoff's thoughtful plan, the first group seems to contain too many "typical" devices that are rather uninteresting. The development of the first three variations is too ordinary and even the strong character of Variation 9 is not as effective as similar works like his Prelude in G minor, Op. 23. When the next group starts, there are too many slow and unmoving variations in a row, which perhaps continue for too long. Eventually, it is easy for the execution to get tedious and sound directionless. Even with the special moments in this group, it takes time to get to the exciting part of the music and its variety. Considering the fact that this is a thirty-minute-long piece, it is challenging to keep the listener's interest when performing.

Rachmaninoff clearly noticed these issues, which is why he offered optional variations and endings. His struggle with these issues is also reflected in his late variation works. Both Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42 and Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini, Op. 43 place

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[10] Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990), 148
[11] John Culshaw, *Sergei Rachmaninoff* (Great Britten: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1949), 102

various kinds of rhythmic and harmonic changes immediately after the theme with more frequent contrasts. The length of Op. 42, which is less than twenty minutes, is noticeably shorter compared to Op. 22. Op. 43 is also around twenty-three minutes long.

Performing the Piece

> He created twenty-two variations with a wide diversity of mood and texture, in which the piano is rather more richly colorful than his Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op.43.[12]
>
> Geoffrey Norris

> Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22 is an initial presentation, almost a systematization, of most of his own keyboard discoveries, the pianistic texture that particularly characterize his music for the instrument.[13]
>
> Max Harrison

Despite the shortcomings mentioned before, Variations on a Theme by Chopin Op. 22 does not loose its charm. As Harrison suggested above, this piece presents the composer's knowledge of both pianism and the instrument. The piece exhibits a diversity of moods, great variety of piano sounds, pianistic techniques, dramatic contrasts, and virtuosity with Rachmaninoff's masterful skill as a composer and pianist. Even though some of the variations are surprisingly challenging to play for their technical difficulty, its passagework is a natural fit for the hand—similar to works like the preludes and etudes. Variations 8 and 20, for instance, require fast and even finger work and absolute control of the different voices. With practice, these figurations are revealed as extremely pianistic and comfortable for the hands. In variations like numbers 6 and 16, the melodic flow is beautifully paced, which makes each melody memorable. The coordination between the hands is also very logically organized, and it even supports the phrasing itself. This piece calls for a rich and full sound, and utilizes a wide range of the piano, which results in great virtuosity. Some of the portions of Variations 9, 10, and 19 use the richest sound the piano offers, showing the composer's thoughtful understanding of his instrument.

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[12] Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 86
[13] Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (London: Continuum, 2005), 110-111

During the twenty-two variations, Rachmaninoff establishes various moods by not only presenting textures individually, but also building them cumulatively. As discussed in chapter 2, group 1 begins with the simplest texture, and gradually accelerates in emotion, which makes the listener experience the excitement of this momentum. Because of that, how the pianist paces the first group is vital when performing this piece. The first group is the most effective when presented as one set so that the accumulation of the first ten variations unfolds as the composer planned. The second group, even though there are many interesting compositional devices, is probably the least attractive to the audience, and therefore the hardest one to play convincingly. Since this group has minimal musical contrast, emphasizing special moments and ensuring that the pulse moves forward are the biggest challenges for the performer. These concerns can be reduced if the pianist focuses on creating different colors—which Rachmaninoff has already provided in the score. With the onset of the ambiguous Variation 11, evoking the organ, bells, aria, and the funeral march will demonstrate a variety of colorful sounds to the listener. Although composed for a rather slow tempo, some of them are musically more interesting when played a little faster—for example, Variations 12, 14 or 17. The last group provides a fitting closure to the piece by presenting dramatic contrast that uses the full arsenal of pianistic technique and sound, which is enjoyable for both the pianist and the audience. If the pianist finishes with the *meno mosso* section, the piece concludes with a recollection. If that is not enough, the coda will still provide an adequate grand finale. Depending on what the pianist decides, the piece can leave completely different impressions on the listener. For the pianist, the last group develops more organically when played without breaks between the variations—obeying Rachmaninoff's instructions, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Since this was his first large-scale work, Rachmaninoff was especially considerate of the way in which the piece was constructed. In this one piece, he covers styles ranging from the Baroque period to his own era, tracing the paths of his predecessors. Even though the structure is variation form, he managed to organize the piece in three sonata-like sections. These sections are

not only the expected “Fast–Slow–Fast” construction of a sonata form, but also have a respective ‘Tradition–Transition–Now’ presentation, as far as the stylistic periods he uses. In the performance of this piece, one can detect the progression of music from an earlier time to the contemporary period relative to Rachmaninoff. Perhaps the foremost difficulty in performing this piece is to convey that idea to the audience. Even with various technical difficulties and virtuosic aspects, this piece challenges the intellect most of all. To understand this piece differently is to perform it differently.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that this piece is not performed as much as Rachmaninoff's other works, despite its inherent allure. Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 has a special place in Rachmaninoff's compositional output for its uniqueness of musical ideas and its presentation. It might not be as mature as his late works in some respects, yet, Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 has distinct value as a piano solo work and deserves more attention from pianists than it currently receives.

In fact, some of his other piano works, such as Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42, did not appear as popular concert repertoire until long after their composition. Therefore, their true value to present-day performers is still being discovered. Just like the Chopin Variations, the Corelli Variations did not receive approving reviews when first premiered. Rachmaninoff performed the Corelli Variations in altered form with shortened length, much like the composer fixed the issues he detected in Op. 22. The revision was still not as successful as he hoped. Nowadays, Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42 is one of the most popular Rachmaninoff's solo works for pianists, and is performed all over the world. Perhaps the Chopin Variations will experience a similar revival process now. It seems that more recordings and performances of this piece are gradually taking place. It is time for pianists to end the long hibernation of Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 and reveal the hidden treasures that lie within.

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