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NAXOS

# RACHMANINOV

## Piano Concerto No. 3

### Variations on a Theme of Corelli

**Boris Giltburg, Piano**

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Carlos Miguel Prieto

## Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

### Piano Concerto No. 3 • Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

Rachmaninov's gift as a storyteller extends to a large spectrum of musical forms, from powerful, gripping, cinematic short stories, such as many of his piano miniatures, through to longer compositions (his *Isle of the Dead* is among the most evocative tone poems I know) and up to the large-scale canvases of his symphonies. In his concertos, I feel that the element of storytelling reaches a unique high point in *Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 30* – a narrative tapestry of such richness and variety that it seems to me to rival that of a great novel. The concerto's length and scope allow it to explore a broad musical terrain, with many digressions and subplots woven into the main narrative.

This could have led to a fragmented, episodic composition, but Rachmaninov, possessing also the sure hand of an architectural master, unifies the concerto into a single overarching storyline, from the simple melody which opens the work to the triumphant apotheosis at its end. He ingeniously links motifs, melodies and at times whole sections between the movements, creating a strong mesh of connections – some obvious, some almost hidden in the score – to hold the composition together.

The opening melody forms one of the strongest links in this mesh, appearing multiple times in all three movements. Sincere and very personal, with a strong emotional core, it sets the tone of the narrative – with its unhurried character, which suggests a long journey ahead, and also by reining in the drama, for the moment (in contrast, for example, to the pain and turbulence we are plunged into right from the opening bars of *Piano Concerto No. 2*). Rachmaninov plans several shattering climaxes later on, and farsightedly leaves room for the musical tension to build.

This melody, with its singing character and limited range (less than an octave, and mostly moving in single-tone steps) resembles a church chant in many ways. Rachmaninov, when asked whether an Orthodox Church chant had indeed served as his inspiration, denied the connection and said that the melody simply played or

sung itself on the piano. But possibly the inspiration was subconscious – in his *All-Night Vigil, Op. 37*, written six years after the concerto, he used a church chant of which the concerto's opening phrase is almost a note-by-note copy. (This is in the tenth movement, *Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ*; the only change is the fifth note, which is a C natural in the chant, instead of a C sharp in the concerto.)

After the opening, the melody returns three more times in the first movement: at the beginning of the development (I 7:05), where it forms the first step of a tense build-up which ultimately leads to one of the great climaxes of the movement; after the main cadenza (13:34) played by the woodwind instruments in succession, where it comes as a soothing balm after the tumult of the cadenza's end; and finally at the end of the movement, a repeat of the opening but this time in *pianissimo*, where it has a strong psychological effect – so much has occurred over the course of the movement that we hear the melody very differently now.

The theme then makes two appearances in the second movement – first, as an unexpected outburst in the violins (II 4:52), and then, almost unrecognisably, with shifted rhythm and in triple time, as the melody of a hushed waltz towards the end of the movement (8:15), to which the piano provides a scintillating counterpoint. It also comes back in the middle of the last movement, as a warm, full-voiced reminiscence played by the cellos (III 6:35). This is followed by yet another link in the mesh – a repeat of the first movement's second theme, dreamy and soft (12:16). And the last link comes towards the end of the *Finale*, where a driven hunt-like section (7:03) closely mirrors a similar progression in the first movement's cadenza. Together, these links organically connect the movements, helping the listener consciously or subconsciously to perceive the concerto as a single whole.

The link between the *Finale* and the first movement cadenza deserves further explanation. By Rachmaninov's time, the cadenza – the moment when the orchestra falls

silent and the soloist remains alone – had come a long way from the improvisatory, often fragmentary character it had in Mozart's concertos. First in Beethoven's hands and later in the Romantic tradition, the cadenza became a complete, almost stand-alone piece of music, often with build-ups and climaxes of its own. Rachmaninov, going even further in this concerto, offered the performer two different cadenzas, the choice of which significantly alters the structure of the movement. The original, heavy, chordal cadenza contains a truly epic build-up, culminating in a climax which overshadows everything which preceded it and effectively serves as the high point of the entire movement. And it is this cadenza which contains the section which will recur in the *Finale* (I 11:17). The alternative cadenza, light-fingered and slightly humorous, carries much less weight and leaves the high point of the movement to the development; the link to the *Finale* is missing as well.

I can't think of another instance of a Romantic composer allowing the interpreter to participate to such an extent in the process of composition. My own preference lies strongly with the original cadenza, not only because of its role in strengthening the connection between the movements or its seamless integration with the rest of the first movement, but mostly because of its incredible dramatic and expressive power.

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The *Third Piano Concerto* does not possess as strong a personal backstory as the *Second*. Rachmaninov completed it in early autumn 1909 in preparation for his first tour in the US. He gave the premiere in New York under Walter Damrosch, though it was a repeat performance in January 1910, under none other than Gustav Mahler, which Rachmaninov particularly treasured (for Mahler's meticulous work in preparing the orchestra). Despite the success of the tour, the concerto's technical challenge seemed to deter performers, and it was only in the 1930s, with Vladimir Horowitz championing the concerto, that it began to attain its current exposure and popularity.

It is unfortunate that the concerto's sheer length and technical difficulties seem sometimes to overshadow its musical content. It is often referred to as the 'Mount Everest' of piano concertos, is alleged to have more notes than all the Mozart piano concertos combined, and is supposed to have been written 'for elephants' (this last comment coming from Rachmaninov himself). It's a concerto one has to master at a young age when 'still too young to know fear' (Gary Graffman), and which could bring the performer to a complete mental breakdown, as was memorably depicted in the film *Shine* (1996), narrating the young years of the Australian pianist David Helfgott.

The concerto is undoubtedly difficult, though not super-humanly so (Rachmaninov himself, at another time, commented that he had found the *Second Concerto* to be less comfortable to play). I, too, feel that this concerto is one of the highest summits of the pianistic landscape, but believe that its true greatness lies in its architecture and narrative, in its scope, and in the aforementioned novelistic complexity of the material, which is rare in a piano concerto. Performing it can seem like experiencing a whole life during these 45 minutes, and together with the two Brahms piano concertos it is for me one of the most rewarding and fulfilling pieces of the entire piano repertoire – the closest a solo pianist can get to performing a large-scale symphonic work.

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A somewhat less obvious link exists between the *Third Piano Concerto* and the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42* – the second movement of the concerto is itself a set of variations. It's the only movement in the concerto to bear a subtitle – *Intermezzo* – not an evident name, perhaps, for a movement over ten minutes long. But we can see it as a digression from the narrative of the concerto, an intermediate link between the expansive outer movements. Its single-minded exploration of the opening four-note motif, and the strong feeling of unity within the movement (the music unfolds in a single line, as if written with a single brushstroke) make it an

enclosed, stand-alone musical world. (Rachmaninov then links it with the rest of the concerto through the recurrences of the main theme which I mentioned earlier.)

In the second movement of the concerto, the variations are all part of a continuous flow of music, as opposed to the *Corelli Variations*, where each variation forms a separate unit. The movement starts and ends with a long orchestral *tutti* – in the two sections the material is the same, yet it's orchestrated much more darkly the second time around (2:9:18), mirroring the framing effect of the two, differently shaded appearances of the first movement's main theme, at the beginning and the end of that movement. Between the two comes a series of five variations on the main motif, ranging from sunny and calm (2:33) through turbulent (3:46) and passionate (5:50), the latter growing into a hugely satisfying double culmination: first an energetic, sweeping climax in D major (6:25) leading immediately into a second, broader one in D flat major (6:52) in which the horizon seems to open up – both climaxes being variations on the theme as well.

Apart from this link – and the connection through the key of D minor – yet another, utterly non-musical link connects the *Third Piano Concerto* and the *Corelli Variations*: cuts. Whether under pressure from conductors or performers or because of his own self-doubts, Rachmaninov authorised several cuts in the *Third Piano Concerto*, same as he did in the *Second Symphony*. He used them even in his own recording of the concerto, though it's hard to say how much that had to do with the physical limitation of the 78 RPM records. As for cuts in the *Corelli Variations*, here is his own, somewhat painful to read account of performing the piece on another, much later tour in the US:

'I've played the Variations about 15 times, but of these 15 performances only one was good. The others were sloppy. I can't play my own compositions! And it's so boring! Not once have I played these all in continuity. I was guided by the coughing of the audience. Whenever the coughing would increase, I would skip the next variation. Whenever there was no coughing, I would play them in proper order. In one concert, I don't remember where – some small town – the coughing was so violent

that I played only ten variations (out of 20). My best record was set in New York, where I played 18 variations. However, I hope that *you* will play all of them, and won't "cough".'

...thus, in a letter to his close friend, the composer Nikolay Medtner in late 1931.

The theme of the *Corelli Variations*, which were composed earlier that year, was not actually invented by the Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) – it came from an old dance tune, *La Folia*, traceable to 15th-century Portugal, and very popular as a basis for variations in the Baroque period – by Corelli, among many others. This popularity persisted into the Romantic period: Liszt used the tune in his *Rhapsodie espagnole*.

In Rachmaninov's hands the tune loses its dance-like quality and becomes more stately and grave on the one hand, but also much more lyrical and personal. It's presented simply, without embellishments, over a clean, transparent, almost austere harmonic accompaniment. And once the variations begin, there's no trace left of the Baroque or Renaissance origin of the theme – Rachmaninov takes over, re-working the melody through his imagination and using his unique harmonic language. The resulting piece, like the *Third Piano Concerto*, contains a strong storytelling element – resembling a dark fairy tale in some of the variations (for example, *Variations I, VIII and XIX* – a folk tale, a ballad or an epic tale in others (*Variation IV*, the *Intermezzo*, and *Variation XVIII*, as one example of each). But at the same time, a personal, emotional undercurrent is constantly present, as if the fate of the tale's heroes meant a great deal to the storyteller, or as if he were one of the protagonists himself.

At first the variations fail to coalesce into a large whole; *Variations I–IV* are small stand-alone scenes, each with its own character and colour. Then small cells begin to emerge: after the frozen landscape of *Variation IV*, *Variations V–VII* burst into activity, followed by *Variations VIII and IX*, a separate pair, slow and mysterious. *Variations X–XIII* form a *scherzo*-like group, with a particularly rowdy *Variation XII* and a gallop in *Variation XIII*, after which comes an improvisatory *Intermezzo* (its

short length a better fit for the name, perhaps, than the concerto's second movement!).

The *Intermezzo* shifts the music into a major key – D flat major – in which two variations are written. *Variation XIV* is a rich, chorale-like re-harmonisation of the theme, containing some truly exotic harmonies towards the end. It's followed by the gently lilting *Variation XV*, ranging from artless innocence to phrases that are almost erotic in their melodic inflections.

Following this lyrical intermission, *Variation XVI* brings us back into D minor. Theatrical and surprising, it effectively contrasts a lighter opening phrase with aggressive snarling passages in the lower register of the keyboard. Its bite is followed by another change of scene in *Variation XVII*, with a Spanish character, where fragments of the theme are accompanied by guitar-like strums in the left hand. The last variations, *XVIII–XX*, form the finale – a continuously driven, exhilarating build-up of tempo and energy which comes to a crash at the end of *Variation XX*, where multiple low D notes are repeated, fate-like, as the energy slowly dissipates.

The closing *Coda*, flowing out of the preceding energy and passion is once again lyrical and very personal. Its melody climbs up one last time, and in a magical moment (the momentary D major at 17:04) the clouds seem to part on a starry or moonlit sky. It then gradually descends, in slow, seemingly reluctant steps. The last chords echo those of the opening theme, becoming increasingly more formal – I can imagine us being reminded it was only a tale after all, with Rachmaninov leading us out of the events which he so vividly depicted.

The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42* were followed in a few years by another set of variations – the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43*. The two are a wonderful pair of late masterpieces by Rachmaninov – the excitement and electricity of the later work, its sense of danger, its larger-than-life extrovert character finding a counterbalance in the *Corelli Variations*, with their intense interest in the inner world, their depth, and the dark colours of their narrative.

**Boris Giltburg**

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8.573629

## Royal Scottish National Orchestra



Photo: Drew Farrell

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO) was formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra and became the Scottish National Orchestra in 1950. It was awarded Royal Patronage in 1977. Throughout its history the orchestra has played an integral part in Scotland's musical life, including performing at the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament building in 2004. Many renowned conductors have contributed to its success, including George Szell, Sir John Barbirolli, Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, Neeme Järvi, Walter Weller, Alexander Lazarev and Stéphane Denève. In 2017 it was announced that the Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård, formerly principal guest conductor, will succeed Peter Oundjian as music director. The RSNO has a worldwide reputation for the quality of its recordings, receiving two Diapason d'or de l'année awards for Symphonic Music (Denève/Roussel 2007; Denève/Debussy 2012) and eight GRAMMY® Award nominations over the last decade. Over 200 releases are available, including the complete symphonies of Sibelius (Gibson), Prokofiev (Järvi), Glazunov (Serebrier), Nielsen and Martinů (Thomson), Roussel (Denève) and the major orchestral works of Debussy (Denève). The RSNO is one of Scotland's National Performing Companies, supported by the Scottish Government.

For more information, please visit [www.rsno.org.uk](http://www.rsno.org.uk)

## Carlos Miguel Prieto



Photo: Benjamin Ealovega

The conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto is renowned for his dynamic, expressive interpretations. He is music director of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, where he has led the cultural renewal of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. In 2007, he was appointed music director of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México (OSN), and of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería in 2008. As a guest conductor, Prieto has led many of the world's leading orchestras in the US and Europe. A highly influential cultural leader, Prieto has conducted over 100 world premieres of works by Mexican and American composers and is renowned for championing and commissioning the music of Latin American composers. In November 2016, he led the OSN on a critically acclaimed nine-concert tour of Germany and Austria, performing the works of Mexican and Latin American composers in halls such as the Wiener Musikverein.

[www.carlosmiguelprieto.com](http://www.carlosmiguelprieto.com)

## Boris Giltburg



Photo: Oliver Binns

The pianist Boris Giltburg was born in 1984 in Moscow and has lived in Tel Aviv since early childhood. He began lessons with his mother at the age of five and went on to study with Arie Vardi. In 2013 he took first prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition, catapulting his career to a new level. He has appeared with many leading orchestras such as the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Oslo Philharmonic, the Danish Radio Symphony, the St Petersburg Philharmonic, the Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse and the Baltimore Symphony. He made his BBC Proms debut in 2010 and has

toured yearly to South America and China. He has played recitals in leading venues such as the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Tokyo's Toppan Hall, Carnegie Hall, London's Southbank Centre, Bozar, Brussels, the Louvre, the Elbphilharmonie and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. In 2014 Giltburg began a long-term recording plan with Naxos, releasing solo works by Schumann (8.573399) and Beethoven (8.573400) to critical acclaim. His solo Rachmaninov recording (8.573469) was *Gramophone's* CD of the Month in June 2016, and most recently Giltburg's first concerto CD (8.573666) won a Diapason d'or for his account of the Shostakovich concertos with Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, coupled with his own arrangement of Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8*. His 2012 Orchid release of the Prokofiev *Sonatas* was shortlisted for the critics' award at the Classical Brits, and was closely followed by a Romantic sonatas disc (Rachmaninov, Liszt, Grieg). Giltburg is an avid amateur photographer and blogger, writing about classical music for a non-specialist audience.

[www.borisgiltburg.com](http://www.borisgiltburg.com)

Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 3* is a complex, epic narrative that moves from a simple opening melody to the triumphant apotheosis at its conclusion. The composer ingeniously links motifs, melodies and at times whole sections between the movements, unifying the concerto into a single overarching storyline. In the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Rachmaninov reworks the original theme using his unique harmonic language until there is no trace left of its Baroque or Renaissance origins.



Sergey  
**RACHMANINOV**  
(1873–1943)

<b>Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 30 (1909)</b>	<b>43:40</b>
<b>1 I. Allegro ma non tanto</b>	<b>17:39</b>
<b>2 II. Intermezzo: Adagio – Un poco più mosso</b>	<b>11:09</b>
<b>3 III. Finale: Alla breve</b>	<b>14:46</b>
<b>4 Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 (1931)</b>	<b>18:11</b>

**Boris Giltburg, Piano**

**Royal Scottish National Orchestra 1–3**

**Carlos Miguel Prieto 1–3**

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