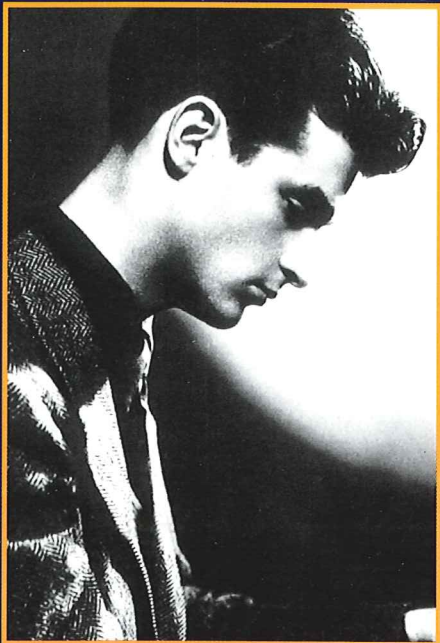




# Great Pianists • Kapell

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## RACHMANINOV

### Piano Concerto No. 2

Rhapsody on a Theme  
of Paganini

**William Kapell**

Robin Hood Dell Orchestra  
of Philadelphia

William Steinberg

Fritz Reiner

(Historical Recordings 1945-1951)

## William Kapell (1922-1953)

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873 - 1943): Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2

When William Kapell was killed in a plane crash at the age of 31 on 29th October 1953 the world was robbed of a great talent. He learnt the piano with Olga Samaroff, one-time wife of Stokowski, at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music and then at the Juilliard School. At the age of nineteen his career took off when he won the Philadelphia Orchestra's Youth Competition. He also won the Naumberg Award which supported his New York debut at Town Hall, where he also gained the award for most outstanding musician under thirty. He then toured America, North and South, Europe and Australia.

With his dynamic performances and Byronic beauty, it is not surprising that RCA Victor signed Kapell in 1944. Although he played a wide repertoire that included Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Copland, Barber, Debussy and more, he became known for his performances of the romantic Russian repertoire, in particular Rachmaninov's *Second and Third Concertos* and the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*, Prokofiev's *Third Concerto* and Khachaturian's *Piano Concerto*. All the most eminent conductors of the day wanted to collaborate with young Willy and he performed concertos with such illustrious names as Eugene Ormandy, Leopold Stokowski, Leonard Bernstein, Fritz Reiner and Serge Koussevitzky.

Whereas Rachmaninov was austere in countenance, outwardly appearing the opposite of the emotional music he wrote, Kapell seemed to epitomize the heart and soul of Rachmaninov's music with his romantic and rhapsodic persona. He had already played the first movement of the *Second Concerto* in a radio broadcast of 1944 when he was twenty. Two

years later he chose the work to make his Chicago debut. The critic Claudia Cassidy, wrote that "The C minor Concerto covers a huge Russian canvas and Mr Kapell lacks the pianistic maturity to fill in all its splendours. The great sweep of the score eludes him, and the titanic fury of its climaxes. But in the smaller scale of his own performance he played superbly, with incisive brilliance and complete musical security, and when it came to the poetry, ah, that was when Mr Kapell shone. Here he had the dreamy, nostalgic languor that is the very essence of the music, an almost liquid lyricism that gave the *Adagio* the undulating cadence that is uniquely Rachmaninov, and uniquely satisfying, if you happen to find Rachmaninov, as some of us do, and not merely an outmoded decadent, as others do. Although there was never a time when Kapell's hands did not seem utterly at home on the keys, in the slow movement they lived there, and the music seemed to flower beneath them. We can all wait for a talent like that to reach its full realization." The wait was not a long one. By 1947 Kapell was playing both the *Second Concerto* and the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* in one programme and Cassidy realised that already the 25-year-old Kapell had matured into the artist she hoped he would. "It was quite an extraordinary performance, because it was Rachmaninov as it should be and seldom is since the departure of the tall Russian of the hooded eyes and the fine hands, who wrote it. Nowadays his music is exploited for ruthless rape of its curving tunes or colossal assault on its towering climaxes. Too many have forgotten that in its way it is music in the grand manner.....Age has nothing to do with talent, but plenty to do with opportunity to develop talent. So

while it was provocative a year or two ago to discover that Mr Kapell had a rare gift for Rachmaninov, it was astonishing to discover what strides he has taken to bring that gift to maturity.”

Although RCA had signed Kapell in 1944 it was not until 1950 that they recorded him in this most popular of concertos. Of course, RCA had the composers' own recording in their catalogue, but this had been recorded in 1929 in the early days of electrical recording. It is possible that because RCA had recorded another of their pianists, Artur Rubinstein, in the same concerto in August 1945 with Stokowski, that they did not want another performance of the same work in their catalogue. The Rubinstein recording was, in fact, not issued at the time and Rubinstein recorded the work again with Golschmann in May 1946, but Kapell's recording, made in one session at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia on 7th July 1950, surpasses it in many ways. Kapell's keyboard hero was Horowitz and he was determined to have clarity of texture, finger dexterity and velocity, working relentlessly on the most difficult passage in the work (track [3] 0'44”), one which few pianists play with ease. The conductor on this occasion was William Steinberg, born in Germany in 1899, who had studied conducting with Hermann Abendroth and taken American citizenship in 1944. The name of the orchestra may appear unfamiliar to some. In the late 1920s Leopold Stokowski and his orchestra, the Philadelphia, gave summer concerts at Fairmount Park. The success of these led in 1930 to an open-air theatre being built in an area of the park known as Robin Hood Dell and this became the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

If Kapell had lived longer no doubt he would have included more of Rachmaninov's solo piano music in

his repertoire. He did play the popular *Prelude in C sharp minor* and RCA had him record this at one of his first sessions on 11th December 1944 on the same day that the busy recording company were also enshrining in wax such illustrious personalities as Perry Como and Duke Ellington in their New York studios and Leopold Stokowski at Carnegie Hall. Although four takes were made of the *Prelude* on that day it was a fifth take, recorded the following March, that was published.

In the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* recorded in June 1951, Kapell is partnered with the strong-willed Fritz Reiner, who two years later would begin his nine year reign over the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, drilling them into one of the best orchestras in the world. Kapell, however, makes the performance his own, with the tempo of each variation relating to the previous one giving the performance a cohesion and unity; the famous eighteenth variation emerges naturally from the end of the preceding one with no 'change of gear' noticeable, while sentimentality is kept to a minimum. There is also a sense of the music being pushed forward, yet it never sounds driven or frantic.

Kapell also played the *Third Concerto* of Rachmaninov and recorded the *Cello Sonata* with Edmund Kurtz in 1947. His natural affinity with the music of Rachmaninov made the death of the composer seem like a personal loss. On the day Rachmaninov died in 1943 Kapell was working on the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* and was moved to write “I am comforted that every day I can open the covers of some wonderful and magic world that he expressed in music. He shall never die for those who can play his works or for those fortunate enough to want to hear them.”

Jonathan Summers

## Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

Also available:

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**PROKOFIEV**  
Piano Concerto No. 3

**KHACHATURIAN**  
Piano Concerto

**SHOSTAKOVICH**  
Three Preludes

**William Kapell**  
Dallas Symphony Orchestra  
Antal Dorati  
Boston Symphony Orchestra  
Serge Koussevitzky  
Historical Recordings 1944-1949

8.110673

**Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)**  
**Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18**

- 1 Moderato - Allegro
- 2 Adagio sostenuto
- 3 Allegro scherzando

Robin Hood Dell Orchestra of Philadelphia, William Steinberg  
Recorded 7th July, 1950 in the Academy of Music, Philadelphia.

Matrix numbers: E0-RC-1223 through 1232 (all Take 1). First released on RCA Victor LM-1097.  
**Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43**

- 4 Introduction: Allegro vivace; Variation I: (Precedente)

5 Tema: L'istesso tempo

6 Variation II: L'istesso tempo

7 Variation III: L'istesso tempo

8 Variation IV: Più vivo

9 Variation V: Tempo precedente

10 Variation VI: L'istesso tempo

11 Variation VII: Meno mosso, a tempo moderato

12 Variation VIII: Tempo I

13 Variation IX: L'istesso tempo

14 Variation X: Poco marcato

15 Variation XI: Moderato

16 Variation XII: Tempo di minuetto

17 Variation XIII: Allegro

18 Variation XIV: L'istesso tempo

19 Variation XV: Più vivo scherzando

20 Variation XVI: Allegretto

21 Variation XVII: [Allegretto]

22 Variation XVIII: Andante cantabile

23 Variation XIX: A tempo vivace

24 Variation XX: Un poco più vivo

25 Variation XXI: Un poco più vivo

26 Variation XXII: Un poco più vivo (Alla breve)

27 Variation XXIII: L'istesso tempo

28 Variation XXIV: A tempo un poco meno mosso

Robin Hood Dell Orchestra of Philadelphia, Fritz Reiner  
Recorded 27th June, 1951 in the Academy of Music, Philadelphia

Matrix numbers: E1-RC-3789 through 3794 (all Take 1). First issued on RCA Victor LM-126.

- 29 **Prelude in C sharp Minor, Op. 3, No. 2**

Recorded 19th March, 1945 in RCA Studio No. 2, New York City.

Matrix number: D4-RC-0544-5. First issued on RCA Victor 11-8824.



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RACHMANINOV

Playing Time  
57:20

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William Kapell (1922 -1953)  
Robin Hood Dell Orchestra of Philadelphia,  
William Steinberg \* • Fritz Reiner †

**Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18\*** 31:12

- 1 Moderato - Allegro 9:31
- 2 Adagio sostenuto 10:47
- 3 Allegro scherzando 10:49

Recorded on 7th July 1950 in the Academy of Music, Philadelphia  
Matrices: E0-RC-1223 through 1232 (all Take 1)  
First issued on RCA Victor LM-1097

**Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 †** 22:08

- 4 Introduction; Variation I 0:29
- 5 Theme 0:18
- 6-28 Variations II - XXIV 21:20

Recorded on 27th June 1951 in the Academy of Music, Philadelphia  
Matrices: E1-RC-3789 through 3794 (all Take 1)  
First issued on RCA Victor LM-126

**29 Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2** 3:59

Recorded on 19th March 1945 in RCA Studio No. 2, New York City  
Matrix D4-RC-0544-5  
First issued on RCA Victor 11-8824

American pianist William Kapell is one of music's lost treasures. He died in a plane crash at the age of 33, his star still very much in the ascendant, leaving behind a tragically small recorded legacy. Famed chiefly for bringing the music of Aram Khachaturian to public consciousness through his championing of the composer's Piano Concerto, Kapell was equally inspired by the works of Sergey Rachmaninov, whose fiery Romantic temperament Kapell shared. This disc includes two of the composer's most enduringly popular works, the glorious *Piano Concerto No. 2* and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Kapell's playing is simply electric, combining blistering intensity with astounding technical security, giving us that rare treat of bringing all the excitement of a live performance to the recording studio.

MADE IN  
E.C.



Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

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A complete tracklist can be found on page 6 of the booklet.  
Cover Photograph: William Kapell, mid 1940s (Private Collection)

