



AUDIOPHILE EDITION

RACHMANINOV

Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 4
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Abbey Simon, Piano

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

Leonard Slatkin



**Sergey
RACHMANINOV
(1873–1943)**

	Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1 (1890–91, final rev. version 1919)	25:51
1	I. Vivace – Moderato	12:39
2	II. Andante	5:43
3	III. Allegro vivace	7:29
	Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40 (1926, second rev. version 1941)	24:05
4	I. Allegro vivace (alla breve)	9:18
5	II. Largo	5:34
6	III. Allegro vivace	9:13
	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934)	23:28
7	Introduction: Allegro vivace	0:08
8	Variation I: (Precedente)	0:20
9	Tema: L'istesso tempo	0:18
10	Variation II: L'istesso tempo	0:18
11	Variation III: L'istesso tempo	0:24
12	Variation IV: Più vivo	0:30
13	Variation V: Tempo precedente	0:28
14	Variation VI: L'istesso tempo	1:12
15	Variation VII: Meno mosso, a tempo moderato	1:01
16	Variation VIII: Tempo I	0:32
17	Variation IX: L'istesso tempo	0:30
18	Variation X: –	0:52
19	Variation XI: Moderato	1:27
20	Variation XII: Tempo di minuetto	1:16
21	Variation XIII: Allegro	0:30
22	Variation XIV: L'istesso tempo	0:45
23	Variation XV: Più vivo. Scherzando	1:10
24	Variation XVI: Allegretto	1:36
25	Variation XVII: –	1:50
26	Variation XVIII: Andante cantabile	2:51
27	Variation XIX: L'istesso tempo	0:34
28	Variation XX: Un poco più vivo	0:37
29	Variation XXI: Un poco più vivo	0:26
30	Variation XXII: Un poco più vivo (alla breve)	1:44
31	Variation XXIII: L'istesso tempo	0:52
32	Variation XXIV: A tempo un poco meno mosso	1:18

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 4

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

‘A composer’s music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion... It should be the sum total of the composer’s experiences. I compose music because I must give expression to my feelings, just as I talk because I must give utterance to my thoughts... I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has inevitably influenced my temperament and outlook.’ – Sergey Rachmaninov

Sergey Vasilyevich Rachmaninov was one composer who studied neither law nor medicine (as certain of his musical compatriots had done), but grew up in a musical family and never had any sort of career but a musical one in mind for himself. His paternal grandfather studied the piano with no less a teacher than John Field. Alexander Siloti, the pianist, conductor, pedagogue and general activist for new Russian music, was a cousin and took an interest in the young Rachmaninov’s training. In his late teens Rachmaninov had Siloti himself as his piano teacher, and worked with both Taneyev and Arensky in composition. Taneyev, a pupil of Tchaikovsky, brought the young composer to that master’s attention, and the year before his own death Tchaikovsky attended the Moscow premiere of Rachmaninov’s opera *Aleko* and saluted him as an equal; Rachmaninov had just turned 20, but had already performed the first version of his *First Piano Concerto* and had composed numerous other works.

Rachmaninov was born in the village of Semyonovo, in the Novgorod District, on 1 April 1873. After the 1917 Revolution he left his native country and never returned. For nearly 20 years he shuttled between an apartment in New York and a small but comfortable Swiss estate on Lake Lucerne; in 1935 he settled permanently in the United States and made his home in Beverly Hills, California, where he became a citizen shortly before his death on 28 March 1943, just four days short of his 70th birthday.

For many years Rachmaninov’s fame as a pianist, like Mahler’s as a conductor, was allowed to overshadow his stature as a composer. Actually, although he gave recitals and earned recognition as a virtuoso by the time he was 20, he did not focus his attention primarily on that phase of his activity until he was 47 years old and faced with a need to raise money following the loss of his holdings in Russia; he always considered himself first and foremost a composer, and by the time the Rachmaninov centenary rolled around in 1973, the balance had long since been righted. By now several of his lesser-known or forgotten works have come into general circulation, with no diminution of the esteem in which he will always be held as one of the greatest of all master pianists. (It may be remembered, too, that his ability as a conductor was such that he was twice invited to become conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra – in 1909 and 1918 – and both times declined.)

Since Rachmaninov did earn such recognition as a pianist it is hardly surprising that his five works for piano and orchestra continued to be his most successful compositions (together with the *Second Symphony*, of course) and that this sequence also includes his finest works in any form. All four concertos, indeed, may be regarded as landmarks in his creative life: the *First*, in its original and final versions, both began and ended his long and fascinating early period; the *Second* marked a decisive spiritual regeneration; the *Third* was created specifically for his first American tour; the *Fourth* signalled the resumption of creative activity after a hiatus of nearly a decade, and the beginning of the rich, final period.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1

Strictly speaking, the *First Concerto* was by no means Rachmaninov's earliest composition, but it was the one he selected, at the age of 18, as the first of his works to be given an opus number. On 20 July 1891, he wrote to his friend Mikhail Slonov to report the completion of the concerto:

'On 6 July I fully completed composing and scoring my piano concerto. I could have finished it much sooner, but after the first movement I idled for a long while and began to write the following movements only on 3 July; composed and scored the last two movements in two-and-a-half days. You can imagine what a job that was. I wrote from five in the morning till eight in the evening, so after finishing the work I was terribly tired.'

The young composer added that he was 'pleased with the concerto', which he dedicated to Siloti (who, incidentally, was less than ten years older than he, and survived him by two-and-a-half years). The next spring Rachmaninov played the premiere of his *First Concerto*. Seven years later (1899) he was a good deal less pleased with the work than he had been – so much so that he declined to perform it in London. Two years later after that he had another concerto which he was very happy to perform, and it was not until 1908 that he decided 'to take my *First Concerto* in hand, look it over, and then decide how much time and work will be required for its new version, and whether it's worth doing, anyway.' His letter of 12 April 1908, to Nikita Morozov continued: 'There are so many requests for this concerto, and it is so terrible in this present form, that I should like to work at it and, if possible, get it into decent shape. Of course it will have to be written all over again, for its orchestration is worse than its music.'

Instead of revising the *First Concerto* at that time, though, Rachmaninov composed his *Third*, for his first American tour. By the time he finally did get round to the revision, during the Russian Revolution of 1917, he was 44 years old and a much more polished craftsman than he had been when he composed the original version 26 years earlier. He was able to preserve the youthful enthusiasm of the work (one of his most extrovert compositions) while tightening its structure, giving a more professional cast to the writing for both piano and orchestra, and replacing the original first-movement cadenza with a longer and more appealing one.

The first movement (*Vivace*) opens in a distinctly Tchaikovskian vein, with a horn proclamation followed immediately by the entrance of the piano. Almost at once, however, the melodic contours take on the Rachmaninov character familiar to us from the *Second Symphony* and the two concertos composed between the first and final versions of this work. A simple four-note motif emerges as the thematic 'germ', not only of this movement, but of the concerto as a whole: no sooner has the first movement come to its rather abrupt end than the second (*Andante*) opens with a variant of this motif, stated by the horn. This luminous nocturne (in the recasting of which Rachmaninov must have been very much aware of the success of the corresponding movement of his *Second Concerto*) gives way to an extremely energetic finale (*Allegro vivace*) surely modelled after Tchaikovsky. The middle section of this movement brings one of Rachmaninov's happiest lyrical inventions, the 'big tune' hinted at in the preceding movements but only now fully unveiled. The end is headlong and boisterous.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40

The *First Concerto* in a sense enwraps Rachmaninov's long and productive first phase as a composer; the *Fourth* may be said to enwrap similarly his shorter but glorious final period of creative activity. As noted in the commentary of the *First Concerto*, that work masks both the beginning and the completion of that first phase, since the final revision of that work, undertaken just before Rachmaninov's permanent departure from Russia in 1917, was one of his last creative efforts for nearly a decade. When he went to the United States in 1918 he concentrated on performing in order to reattain financial solvency, and he was in great demand as both pianist and conductor, having toured there earlier in both capacities. This left him no time for composing, and some members of the musical community simply assumed that his creative period has been terminated and replaced by his performing career. The *Fourth Concerto*, after this long hiatus, must have come as a surprise to such observers, for with it Rachmaninov not only showed that he had not written himself out, but also initiated a remarkable sequence of works in which undimmed vitality is crowned with rich maturity.

The *Fourth Concerto* was composed in 1926 and first performed on 18 March of the following year by Rachmaninov himself with The Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. Following this work, in a period of little more than a dozen years, were the enchanting *Three Russian Songs* for chorus and orchestra (*Op. 41*, 1926), the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* for piano solo (*Op. 42*, 1932), the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* for piano and orchestra (*Op. 43*, 1934), the *Third Symphony* (*Op. 44*, 1936) and the brilliant *Symphony Dances* (*Op. 45*, 1940). Then, to round off this cycle as he had the earlier one, Rachmaninov went back to the work with which he had begun it: he revised the *Fourth Concerto* in 1941, touching up the orchestration in the first two movements and substantially rewriting the finale.

In some respects the *Fourth* is a different sort of work from its three predecessors. Rachmaninov in his fifties was absorbing a new culture, a new environment, new musical styles; while his individuality is never in question, his response to these stimuli is apparent in the music he began to compose after that long abstinence from creative effort. In particular, one senses the composer's response to jazz. It is far less overt than that of Milhaud or Ravel, but it is there, and it need not surprise us. After all, Rachmaninov is on record as an admirer of Art Tatum and other jazz pianists (and the 'quasi-jazz' improvisation of Eddy Duchin), and the most talked-about musical figure in America, George Gershwin, had just introduced a piano concerto of his own the year before Rachmaninov composed the *Fourth*. This is not to suggest that Rachmaninov was in any way an imitator, but that, like Bach, Schubert, Shostakovich and dozens of illustrious composers in all periods, he absorbed what he could use profitably and filtered it through his own personality.

In any event, the *Fourth* sounds like music of its own time, and if it lacks the sumptuousness of the earlier works with roots more firmly in the expansive 19th-century tradition, it may be said to mark a new freedom, a new flexibility, a higher level of individuality, as well as a venturesome new mastery in this particular area had already been shown rather spectacularly.

To be sure, the first movement contains two of those broad, yearning themes in which Rachmaninov's particular brand of lyricism is unmistakable – both so infectious, indeed, that on their strength alone one would expect this work to be heard far more frequently than it has been so far. The slow movement, with its blues-like theme, especially suggests parallels with Gershwin, and Rachmaninov's greater subtlety and refinement by no means lessen the vivacity of the superbly coloured finale which follows without pause.

In this rather remarkable concluding movement the crystalline texture of both the piano and orchestral writing give a marvellous vividness to the *diablerie* of the rapid figurations. If the rhythmic activity and exciting colours here seem to substitute for Rachmaninov's customary melodic richness, this very effect only serves to heighten the impact with which the concerto's opening phrases are summoned back fleetingly toward the end. Amid the parallels with Gershwin there are stronger links with Rachmaninov's own earlier works – but only his best and most forward-looking ones – and stronger still are those with the magnificent *Paganini Rhapsody* which crowned his creative output midway between the original version and final version of this concerto.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

In the last of the *24 Caprices* for unaccompanied violin which he published as his *Opus 1*, Niccolò Paganini not only gave his fellow violinists their most famous and probably most demanding display-piece, but provided composers in succeeding generations – and those associated with the piano in particular – with an exceptionally rich source for works in variation form. The *Caprice XXIV* itself is in that form: a theme and eleven unprecedentedly challenging variations demanding such devices as left-hand pizzicato and other feats of violinistic legerdemain which Paganini alone was capable of executing at the time he wrote the piece. Both Schumann and Liszt wrote concert studies (*études*) based on the *Caprice XXIV*, and Brahms, the 'natural variation composer', produced two books of variations for piano solo on Paganini's theme. Dozens of composers since Brahms have been attracted to the theme, among the most recent being Boris Blacher, who composed a set of orchestral variations on it in 1947, and Alberto Ginastera, whose *Violin Concerto* of 1963 concludes with an *Evocación de Paganini* in which the theme of the *Caprice* is heard in varied perspectives. By far the best-known latter-day treatment of this material, though, is the so-called 'Rhapsody' which is the summit of Rachmaninov's final creative period and is generally adjudged his masterpiece.

The intensity of Rachmaninov's inspiration is reflected in the rapidity with which he created this work: the *Rhapsody* was composed in its entirety between 3 July and 18 August 1934. Rachmaninov's original designation for the work was 'Fantasia', but 'Rhapsody' was substituted by the time the first performance was announced. (The premiere took place in Baltimore on 7 November 1934; Rachmaninov was the soloist, partnered, as he had been in the premiere of the *Fourth Concerto*, by Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra). The title suits the spirit of the work superbly – if not its actual form, which is that of a fairly conventional theme-and-variations.

There are 24 variations, the first of them stated after the introduction but before the statement of the theme itself. Appearing in the seventh, tenth and last of the variations is the theme of the *Dies irae*, the ancient chant for the dead, which itself had served as the basis for an entire work for piano and orchestra in variation form by Liszt (the *Totentanz*) and had been cited in works of Berlioz (finale of the *Symphonie fantastique*) and Tchaikovsky (*Manfred*, also among the variations in the finale of the *Suite No. 3*). Rachmaninov's lifelong fascination with this theme is reflected in several of his other works, among them the early *Symphony No. 1 (Op. 13)*, the *Tarantelle* of the *Second Suite* for two pianos (*Op. 17*), the tone poem *The Isle of the Dead (Op. 29)*, and his very last composition, the *Symphonic Dances (Op. 45)*. The presence of this ominous motif, in juxtaposition with the *diablerie* of the Paganini theme itself, led many to assume that Rachmaninov must have had a 'programme' for the rhapsody. He had never intimated that the work had any descriptive significance when he introduced it, or in the published score, but he did supply a programme readily enough when he gave the choreographer Michel Fokine his delighted permission to use the music for a ballet. In his letter of 29 August 1937, Rachmaninov wrote to Fokine:

‘About my *Rhapsody* I want to say that I will be very happy if you will do something with it. Why not resurrect the legend about Paganini who, for perfection in his art and for a woman, sold his soul to the Evil One? All the variations which have the theme of the *Dies irae* represent the Evil One. The variations from No. 11 to No. 18 are love episodes, Paganini himself appears in the ‘Theme’ (his first appearance) and again, for the last time, but conquered, in Variation No. 23. The first twelve measures after all the variations to the end represent the triumph of the conquerors. The Evil One appears for the first time in Variation No. 7... and Nos. 8, 9 and 10 are the development of the ‘Evil One’. Variation No. 11 is a turning-point into the domain of love. Variation No. 12 – the *Menuet* – portrays the first appearance of the woman. Variation No. 19 – Paganini’s triumph – his diabolical pizzicato.’

It remains to be noted only that, as in the four concertos which preceded this work, the writing for the orchestra is no less brilliant than that for the solo instrument, and that the variations are grouped in three sections which correspond more or less to the movements of a conventional concerto. The ‘slow movement’, comprising the ‘love episodes’, culminates in one of Rachmaninov’s most exalted outpourings of sheer lyricism (Variation No. 18); following that, the final half-dozen variations, as indicated in the letter to Fokine, focus on a demoniac level of brilliance, and the circle is rounded after the final reference to the *Dies irae* with a ‘shadow’ of the original Paganini theme.

Richard Freed

Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP releases

Abbey Simon

At the age of eight Abbey Simon (1920–2019) began private studies with Josef Hofmann and at ten was awarded a scholarship to study at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He studied with David Saperton, Dora Zaslavsky and Harold Bauer and also with Leopold Godowsky. At 19 he won the Naumberg Award which launched his career.

He made his New York recital debut at the Town Hall and during the 1940s played throughout America with many orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony and the Minneapolis Symphony. In 1949 he made his European debut (with concerts in Rome, Amsterdam, Paris and London) and subsequently toured the world playing in the Middle East, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America.

In the early 1990s Simon was struck by a car in Amsterdam, causing severe injuries to his hands: the first three fingers of the right hand and the thumb of the left were severely damaged. Thanks to reconstructive surgery in Geneva he was playing at Carnegie Hall within only three months.

Simon was a pianist in the great Romantic tradition. His repertoire centred on Chopin, Schumann, Rachmaninov and Ravel, and he had a virtuoso technique which he employed with effortless ease coupled with a smooth, clear sound. The majority of his recorded output is on the Vox label. For Vox Simon recorded the complete works for piano and orchestra by Rachmaninov, the complete piano works of Ravel, and the major piano works of Chopin and Schumann.

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1880, the St. Louis Symphony is the second-oldest orchestra in the United States and is widely considered one of the world's finest. In September 2005, internationally acclaimed conductor David Robertson became the twelfth music director and second American-born conductor in the orchestra's history. The St. Louis Symphony is one of only a handful of major American orchestras invited to perform regularly at the prestigious Carnegie Hall. Recordings by the symphony have been honoured with six GRAMMY Awards and 56 GRAMMY nominations over the years. The orchestra has embraced technological advances in music distribution by offering recordings online. The St. Louis Symphony download initiative includes live recordings of John Adams' *Harmonielehre*, Szymanowski's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, with Christian Tetzlaff, and Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* available exclusively on iTunes and Amazon.com. In 2009, the symphony's Nonesuch recording of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* and *Guide to Strange Places* reached No. 2 on the *Billboard* rankings for classical music, and was named 'Best CD of the Decade' by the *The Times* of London. In September 2012, the St. Louis Symphony embarked on its first European tour with music director David Robertson. The symphony visited international festivals in Berlin and Lucerne, with stops in Paris and London as well, performing works by Beethoven, Brahms, Sibelius, Schoenberg, Gershwin and Elliott Carter. Christian Tetzlaff joined the symphony as featured soloist. In June 2008, the St. Louis Symphony launched *Building Our Business*, which takes a proactive, two-pronged approach: build audiences and re-invigorate the St. Louis brand making the symphony and Powell Hall *the place to be*; and build the donor base for enhanced institutional commitment and donations. This is all part of a larger strategic plan adopted in May 2009 that includes new core ideology and a ten-year strategic vision focusing on artistic and institutional excellence, doubling the existing audience, and revenue growth across all key operating areas.

Leonard Slatkin

Internationally acclaimed conductor Leonard Slatkin is Music Director Laureate of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), Directeur Musical Honoraire of the Orchestre National de Lyon (ONL), and Conductor Laureate of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He maintains a rigorous schedule of guest conducting throughout the world and is active as a composer, author, and educator. Slatkin has received six GRAMMY Awards and 35 nominations.

One of his recent recordings for Naxos is the world premiere of Alexander Kastalsky's *Requiem for Fallen Brothers* commemorating the 100th anniversary of the armistice ending the First World War. Other recent Naxos releases include works by Saint-Saëns, Ravel, and Berlioz (with the ONL) and music by Copland, Rachmaninov, Borzova, McTee, and John Williams (with the DSO). In addition, he has recorded the complete Brahms, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky symphonies with the DSO (available online as digital downloads).

A recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Arts, Slatkin also holds the rank of Chevalier in the French Legion of Honour. He has received the Prix Charbonnier from the Federation of Alliances Françaises, Austria's Decoration of Honour in Silver, the League of American Orchestras' Gold Baton Award, and the 2013 ASCAP Deems Taylor Special Recognition Award for his debut book, *Conducting Business*. A second volume, *Leading Tones: Reflections on Music, Musicians, and the Music Industry*, was published by Amadeus Press in 2017. His most recent book, *Classical Crossroads: The Path Forward for Music in the 21st Century* (2021), is available through Rowman & Littlefield.

Slatkin has conducted virtually all the leading orchestras in the world. As Music Director, he has held posts in New Orleans; St. Louis; Washington, DC; London (with the BBC Symphony Orchestra); Detroit; and Lyon, France. He has also served as Principal Guest Conductor in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Cleveland.

www.leonardslatkin.com



First Released in 1977 as QTV-S 34658 and in 1978 as QSVBX 5149

Sergey Rachmaninov felt compelled to compose ‘because I must give expression to my feelings, just as I talk to give utterance to my thoughts’. His fame as a pianist initially overshadowed his stature as a composer, but it is the emotional intensity and lyrical expressiveness of scores such as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* that we appreciate today. The youthful and sweepingly extrovert *First Piano Concerto* has hints of Tchaikovsky, while the marvellous *Fourth Concerto* is truly emblematic of Rachmaninov’s glorious final creative period.

The Elite Recordings for Vox by legendary producers Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz are considered by audiophiles to be amongst the finest sounding examples of orchestral recordings

**Sergey
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(1873–1943)**

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|-------------|--|--------------|
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**Abbey Simon, Piano
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
Leonard Slatkin**

New 192 kHz / 24-bit high definition transfers of the original Elite Recordings analogue master tapes

Recorded: 30 September 1977 **1–3**, 1 October 1977 **4–6** and 13 August 1976 **7–32**
at Powell Hall, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Producers: Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz • Engineering: Elite Recordings

Tape transfers: Mike Clements • Re-mastering engineer: Andrew Walton

Booklet notes: Richard Freed

Cover photograph: *Goðafoss, Northeastern Region of Iceland* (www.istockphoto.com)

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