

BRAHMS

Paganini Variations • Handel Variations

Egon Petri, piano



Historical Recordings 1937-1940

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

**Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op.35 • Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op.24
Rhapsody in B minor, Op.79, No.1 • Rhapsody in G minor, Op.79, No.2
Rhapsody in E flat major, Op.119, No.4**

The pianist Egon Petri was born in Hanover in 1881 and had his first violin lessons at the age of five from his father, the Dutch-born violinist Henri Petri, a favourite pupil of Joseph Joachim. Henri Petri had become *Konzertmeister* at the Royal Theatre in Hanover in 1881 and two years later took up a similar position with the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, before moving in 1889 to lead the Royal Chapel Orchestra in Dresden. Egon Petri started his study of the piano in 1888, going on to further work under Richard Buchmayer, a musician and scholar with a strong interest in earlier music, and with Teresa Carreño. He also studied the organ, the French horn and composition, while completing his general education at the Dresden Kreuzschule in 1899. His first employment was as second violin in his father's quartet and as a member of the Royal Orchestra in Dresden, but by 1901 it had become apparent to him that his true vocation was that of a pianist, a decision in which he was encouraged by Ferruccio Busoni, a friend of the family.

Petri went on to take lessons with Busoni in Berlin, where he also studied philosophy, continuing his studies under Busoni in Weimar and Dresden, before embarking on a concert career, at first in Holland and Germany, then throughout Europe and in the United States. One of the first foreign musicians of stature to visit the Soviet Union, he won considerable and continuing success there. His association with Busoni, with whom he appeared in London in 1921 in two-piano recitals, remained of importance, influencing his style of performance and making him one of the foremost interpreters of Busoni's work.

Enjoying, at the same time, a very considerable reputation as a teacher, Petri served as a professor at the then Royal Manchester College of Music from 1905 to 1911, following this with similar work in Basle and at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. In 1927 he had made his home at Zakopane in Poland, but in 1938 he moved to America, spending the war years as pianist-in-residence at Cornell University and becoming an American citizen. In 1947 he moved to Mills College in California, holding a similar position there and only interrupting his stay to teach briefly in Basle. He died in 1962.

Brahms had written his first set of variations for piano in 1853, the year in which, in the course of a concert tour with the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi, he had visited and failed to impress Liszt in Weimar and started his long friendship with another Hungarian violinist, Henri Petri's later teacher, Joseph Joachim. His *Variations on a Hungarian Theme* were followed in 1854 by the first of his *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, after his first meeting with that composer. The later years of the decade saw the composition of further variations, but it was in 1861 that he wrote his well-known *Variations on a Theme by Handel, Opus 24*, a work that he first performed in his native Hamburg. A second performance was given by the now widowed Clara Schumann, to whom the variations were seemingly dedicated. In 1862 Brahms included the *Handel Variations* in his first recital in Vienna, where he was later to settle. The critic Eduard Hanslick welcomed the work as particularly well suited to the composer's gifts, combining richness of formal outline

and consistency of mood. The variations are based on an air from one of Handel's keyboard suites and the whole set seems admirably suited to Petri's remarkable gifts of clarity, with the slight rubato in the third variation, the bold vigour of the fourth, the subtle variations of tempo in the repeated sections of the fifth, the muted tones of the sixth variations in octaves, contrasted with the French horn timbres of the variation that follows. The performance gives the clearest example of Egon Petri's combination of absolute technical command with the deepest understanding of the music, the whole culminating in a masterly interpretation of the final fugue.

Brahms chose the title *Studien* for the work now known generally as *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, *Opus 35*, and dedicated to the virtuoso Carl Tausig. The theme is that of the 24th *Caprice* of Paganini for solo violin, which is also subjected to variations in that work and has provided later composers with an equally fertile source of inspiration. The two books of variations, fourteen in each, were completed in 1863 and described by Clara Schumann as *Hexenvariationen* (Witch

Variations), when she first saw the manuscript. The work makes much greater technical demands on a performer than the *Handel Variations*, from the rapid sixths of the first and second, the violinistic texture of the third, the awkward trills of the fourth and subtle cross-rhythms of the fifth. The challenges continue, with a relaxation of tension in the charm of the eleventh version of the material, linked by the twelfth to the thirteenth, with its effortless glissando octaves. The book follows the virtuoso fourteenth variation with a coda. Although the technical demands of the second book are no less, the set has a clearer general musical shape, superbly presented in a superlative performance.

The three *Rhapsodies* are later works, the first two, *Opus 79*, completed in 1879, and the third, *Opus 119, No.4*, in 1893, the last of Brahms' piano compositions. These were recorded by Egon Petri in 1940, formidable works that make a suitable conclusion to the present release, testimony to one of the greatest and most interesting pianists of the twentieth century.

Keith Anderson

Marina and Victor Ledin

Co-founders and principals of Encore Consultants, a highly regarded firm specializing in musical research, production and restoration work, Marina and Victor Ledin bring to the Naxos Historic series many years of broadcasting, archiving, preservation, research, restoration and publishing experience. Their archive includes extensive collections of one-of-a-kind photos of composers and performers, over 25,000 musical scores, and a similar quantity of rare 78rpm recordings. Their restoration philosophy is to present the great artists of the past in as clean sound as possible, utilizing the latest technology (CEDAR and SonicSolutions) in order to maximize the musical information and minimize the noise.

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.

Producers' Note

After Egon Petri's 1932 New York debut, Lawrence Gilman wrote: "Mr. Petri showed himself to be a musician of taste and skill and understanding, admirably modest and self-effacing, wholly absorbed in his task of recreation... He is a virtuoso by reason of his abilities and attainments, but he makes that tarnished word seem curiously unsuited to musicianship so genuine, and sincere and fine." The astonishing performances on this disc were all recording-session first takes — an amazing feat considering the difficulty and complexity of the music. In order to transfer the best sounding discs, we assembled pressings of the same discs issued in England, Canada, Japan and the United States. The English and American pressings proved to possess the quietest surfaces. Unlike previous commercial transfers of these discs, we also opted to provide tracks for each of the variations, in case collectors and listeners wish to access the specific variations. The detailed matrix and label data are provided in this booklet. The numbers or letters following the matrix numbers indicate which session takes were actually released. Petri was clearly in astounding form since the recordings are all first takes.

The two sets of variations were recorded in England at the favoured recording venue (Studio No.3, Abbey Road), while the three rhapsodies were recorded in a lifeless environment in New York. The spontaneity, rhythmic drive and ease with which Petri plays the *Paganini Variations* make this performance one of the great monuments of recorded pianism. Equally wonderful is Petri's grasp of contrapuntal textures as evidenced in his extraordinary performance of the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*. Petri's exuberant interpretation of this formidable piano work is a joy to hear. The three rhapsodies, recorded upon his arrival in the United States show a more subdued interpreter who brings out some of the darker elements of these Brahms masterpieces. Fleeing Europe, the impending war, and being forced to forge a career in a new land, clearly weighed on Egon Petri during the recording sessions in New York. The claustrophobic room in which Petri recorded these works did not allow his usual exuberance to be as evident. We restored the 78rpm discs and attempted to "mine" as much musical information as possible without tampering with the room sound. Using minimal analog circuitry and utilizing the CEDAR® system, we were sensitive on the declicking and the noise removal, always attempting to bring out the warmth and clarity of the original piano sound, while taking into consideration the inherent surface noise on the discs and other deficiencies of the original recordings.

Egon Petri left an enormous legacy as a teacher. His students included Earl Wild, Ruth Slenczynska, John Ogdon, Eugene Istomin, Karol Szreter, and Lee Hoiby. We hope that this first volume dedicated to Petri's recorded legacy enthralls and inspires (notwithstanding the limitations of the technology of the time) a new generation of pianists and music lovers.

Marina and Victor Ledin

Egon Petri, piano

Paganini and Handel Recordings

Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op.35 18:03

Recorded March 4, 1937, Studio No.3, Abbey Road,
London, Columbia Set X-80, 69027-D (CAX-7959-1 and
CAX-7960-1), 69028-D (CAX-7961-1 and CAX-7962-1)

Book I

9:09

- 1 Theme 0:25
- 2 Variation I 0:25
- 3 Variation II 0:27
- 4 Variation III 0:31
- 5 Variation IV 0:45
- 6 Variation V 0:22
- 7 Variation VI 0:28
- 8 Variation VII 0:15
- 9 Variation VIII 0:18
- 10 Variation IX 0:36
- 11 Variation X 0:40
- 12 Variation XI 1:13
- 13 Variation XII 0:31
- 14 Variation XIII 0:32
- 15 Variation XIV 1:41

Book II

8:54

- 16 Theme 0:24
- 17 Variation I 0:41
- 18 Variation II 0:29
- 19 Variation III 0:29
- 20 Variation IV 0:42
- 21 Variation V 0:23
- 22 Variation VI 0:20
- 23 Variation VII 0:22
- 24 Variation VIII 0:31
- 25 Variation IX 0:37

- 26 Variation X 0:39
- 27 Variation XI 0:26
- 28 Variation XII 0:57
- 29 Variation XIII 0:43
- 30 Variation XIV 1:11

Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op.24 23:49

Recorded June 3, 1938, Studio No.3, Abbey Road,
London, Columbia Set M/MM-345, 70280-D (CAX-
8236-1 and CAX-8241-1), 70281-D (CAX-8237-1 and
CAX-8240-1), 70282-D (CAX-8238-1 and CAX-8239-1)

- 31 Theme 0:57
- 32 Variation I 0:42
- 33 Variation II 0:38
- 34 Variation III 0:44
- 35 Variation IV 0:44
- 36 Variation V 0:55
- 37 Variation VI 0:59
- 38 Variation VII 0:32
- 39 Variation VIII 0:35
- 40 Variation IX 1:02
- 41 Variation X 0:32
- 42 Variation XI 0:41
- 43 Variation XII 0:49
- 44 Variation XIII 1:34
- 45 Variation XIV 0:37
- 46 Variation XV 0:37
- 47 Variation XVI 0:29
- 48 Variation XVII 0:26
- 49 Variation XVIII 0:39
- 50 Variation XIX 0:55

[51]	Variation XX	1:07
[52]	Variation XXI	0:46
[53]	Variation XXII	1:01
[54]	Variation XXIII and XXIV (alternating)	0:30
[55]	Variation XXV	0:35
[56]	Fugue	4:43

Rhapsody in B minor, Op.79, No.1 7:59

Recorded May 9, 1940, New York, included in Columbia Set X/MX-183, 70681-D (WXCO-26816A and WXCO-26817A)

[57]	Agitato	7:59
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Rhapsody in G minor, Op.79, No.2 4:16

Recorded May 9, 1940, New York, included in Columbia Set X/MX-183, 70682-D (WXCO-26818A)

[58]	Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro	4:16
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Rhapsody in E flat major, Op.119, No. 4 4:40

Recorded May 27, 1940, New York, included in Columbia Set X/MX-183, 70682-D (WXCO-26850A)

[59]	Allegro risoluto	4:40
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PETRI: Brahms - Paganini Variations

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ADD

BRAHMS

Paganini Variations • Handel Variations

Egon Petri

 Playing
Time
58:49

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Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35

18:03

1-15 Book I

9:09

16-30 Book II

8:54

31-56 Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

23:49

57 Rhapsody in B minor, Op. 79, No. 1: Agitato

7:59

58 Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79, No. 2:

4:16

Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro

59 Rhapsody in E flat major, Op. 119, No. 4: Allegro risoluto

4:40

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HONG KONG

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