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by Derek Katz

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 (1902-03)

Rachmaninoff composed three major variation sets, with most famous by far the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 43 for piano and orchestra, followed by the Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42 for solo piano, heard on the Camerata Pacifica concerts of November 2022. Both of those works were written in the 1930s, while The Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22 was begun in 1902, not long after the composition of Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata, presented by Camerata Pacifica last fall. This variation set is Rachmaninoff's first extended work for solo piano. The Chopin Variations came at a happy time for Rachmaninoff, newly married, and freed from debilitating doubts about his compositional abilities by the enormous success of his second piano concerto.

This is the only one of Rachmaninoff's variation sets based on a theme originally composed for the piano (the other two themes were taken from violin works). The work is based on Chopin's Prelude in C Minor, Op. 28, no. 20. Dubbed the "Funeral March" Prelude by pianist Hans von Bülow, the theme moves into stately and solemn block chords. The first phrase of four bars is intoned in a grand double forte, while the answering phrase (also four bars) is soft, with a steadily descending bass line (the second phrase is repeated in the Chopin original, a change made at the behest of his publisher). Listeners who were a certain age in the early 1970s may recognize it as the opening of Barry Manilow's "Could it be Magic," or as the backing for Donna Summer's 1976 disco cover version.

The first variation is a wandering, improvisatory single line over a single bass note that follows Chopin's chords, but that feels very distant from the theme. The next few variations muse on this wandering line, transforming into an accompaniment to fragments from Chopin's theme. The variations run together without pause, and Rachmaninoff changes both the length of the variations and the piece's meter. Both the variation structure and the relationship to Chopin's theme become clearer towards the middle of the piece, as Chopin's theme emerges more prominently, and the variations change character more obviously.

Inevitably, in a piece by one great pianist-composer based on a theme by another, the keyboard styles of both Rachmaninoff and Chopin are topics in the variations, with Rachmaninoff's approach dominating in the slower, more tender variations, and Chopin's most obvious in Variation 20, a clear homage to Chopin's "Minute" Waltz. The set ends with a grand apotheosis of the theme in the major mode, but shifted into triple meter. The accompaniment figures hint at Polonaise rhythms, with this nod to a Polish dance a final tribute to Chopin.

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Franz Schubert (1797-1828) **Piano Trio No. 1 in B-flat Major, D. 898 (ca. 1827)**

Schubert's two piano trios are amongst his very last works, from a time filled with contradictions. The predominant mood of Schubert's last years was colored by tragedy, difficulties and disappointments. Schubert had known since at least 1823 that he had contracted a serious disease (almost certainly syphilis) with painful symptoms and that his future was short. Despite his fame and success as a song composer, his financial situation remained dire. Nor was he making much headway with the more public forms of music, trying and failing until near the end of his life to place an opera with the Court Opera, and having no more success finding a performance or publication for his last symphony (no. 9, the "Great" C Major). The connections between Schubert's sense of his own mortality and late works like the bleak, death-obsessed song cycle *Winterreise* (Winter Journey, 1827) seem almost too obvious to mention.

This, however, is only part of the story. Schubert's syphilis symptoms were in remission for over a year in 1825 and 1826, and, sick and impecunious though he may have been, his letters are filled more with more tales of beer, sausages and games with friends than with gloom and foreboding. Schubert was also becoming a more recognized part of Vienna's public music world, with a string quartet and his octet performed on violinist Ignaz Schuppanizgh's new series of chamber music concerts, election to the steering committee of the Vienna Society of the Friends of Music and even an entire concert devoted to his works in 1828, presented to a full house and resulting in hefty proceeds. Nor are all, or even most, of Schubert's final works

gloomy or portentous. The Piano Trio in B-flat, in particular, is a piece that seems completely free of any intimations of mortality. To quote a famous 1836 review by Robert Schumann, "one glance at this trio by Schubert – and the misery of human activities recedes, and the world shines afresh."

It is not certain exactly when the trio was composed, or whether Schubert ever heard it. He was probably working on it during 1827, shortly before composing his other piano trio (in E-flat Major, D. 929), and it may have been performed at the end of that year, at a December concert of the Society of the Friends of Music. It is an expansive and lyrical piece, in the familiar forms and characters of the time, with those forms broadened through the repetition of its many memorable themes. In general, Schubert treats these themes both as complete units, to be generously shared amongst the players and presented in different keys and moods, and also as collections of small motives to be developed independently.

The opening of the first movement is a typical example. A joyously assertive melody in the strings, moving in triplets, is accompanied by martial dotted rhythms in the piano left hand. The theme is repeated in the minor, then both the triplets and piano march-figures are detached and expanded upon. Long rising chromatic scales then lead to a repetition of the entire complex, with the roles of strings and piano reversed, creating a substantial and unified musical paragraph. This then leads directly and without transition to a second and even more rhapsodic theme, played first by the

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cello, with the violin soon joining in, and then by the piano. The remainder of the movement is transparently constructed from repetitions and manipulations of these themes and their constituent motives. The return of the opening material for the recapitulation is especially clever, with a false return in the wrong key (with the melody in the strings) wending its way back to the home key of B-flat Major for the piano's statement of the theme.

Schumann described the slow movement as "a blessed dream, a rising and falling of beautiful human emotion." Both the dreamy mood and the ebb and flow arise from the interplay of melody and accompaniment. The piano opens with gently rocking figures in the right hand over a static octave in the bass. The cello then enters with an arching and sighing melody, seeming to attempt to coax the bass into motion. The piano left hand grudgingly makes small concessions to the cello before finally releasing into a chromatic descent for the end of the phase. As was the case in the first movement, Schubert builds form through repetition and rescoring, with the blissful melody echoed by the violin and then restated (in a new key) by the piano. The melody moves so slowly that it can be difficult to focus on the piano's rendition, with the new filagree in the strings moving into the foreground. A more rhythmically active middle section features pulsing syncopated accompaniment figures and rushing scale fragments, first in minor from the piano, then in a glowing major for the strings. Again like the first movement, the opening melody returns in the

wrong key in the strings before making its way home for the piano.

The third movement is a gentle scherzo, with theme that balances smooth descending figures with bouncy rising ones and some moments where Schubert temporarily creates some confusion about the location of the downbeat. The central Trio section is songful waltz, with an unexpected turn the minor at the end of the first phrase. The final movement is a lively rondo, with a perky theme filled with drooping sighs. The march-like dotted figures of the first movement also return and play a prominent role. The theme is followed by a magical quiet passage in a distant key, with shimmering repeated notes first in the piano and then in the strings. The other (and more subtle) surprise in the movement is that after many pages of measure being grouped into fours, Schubert presents a contrasting theme in groups of three. While easy to miss, this combination of duple and triple in a single rondo movement is highly unusual, and provides necessary variety, especially in such a long movement.