

VARIATIONS

“Ch-ch-ch-changes...”



Variations

- ◆ More properly, “**Theme and variations**”
- ◆ Pieces will have a version of **a theme**—a melody with accompaniment that is usually **quite short**
- ◆ Followed by a set a variations, a **series of adaptations**, mutations, “disguises” of the original theme
- ◆ Writing variations is a **test of skill** for the composer

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini



Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
- ◆ Born to a **Russian aristocratic family** that was poor
- ◆ **Parents** both good amateur pianists
- ◆ **Grandfather** encouraged his piano playing

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Rachmaninoff's father **loses estates** to mismanagement: family moves to **St. Petersburg**
- ◆ Rachmaninoff studies at **St. Petersburg Conservatory** and studies with **Tchaikovsky**

Pytor Tchaikovsky



Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Builds career as **virtuoso pianist**, but also **composes** works for both piano and orchestra
- ◆ Becomes famous for the **large span of his hands**



Rachmaninoff's hands

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Tchaikovsky dies in 1893—a big blow to Rachmaninoff
- ◆ Falls into a serious depression for three years and writes nothing
- ◆ Begins therapy with psychologist Nikolai Dahl, and begins to write again.

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ **Russian revolution** occurs in 1917
- ◆ **Rachmaninoff emigrates to the United States**, and gets deals with the Steinway piano company and the Victor record company
- ◆ Due to busy **concertizing career**—and continuing episodes of **depression**—Rachmaninoff writes **only 6 compositions** after his emigration to the U.S.

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ One of these 6 compositions is the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, for piano and orchestra
- ◆ Based on the violin **Caprice No. 24** by Niccolò Paganini (which is in itself an **étude written as a theme with variations**)



Niccolò Paganini

Tema.
Quasi Presto.



The theme of Paganini's Caprice No. 24

Rachmaninoff particularly focuses on this melodic bit throughout the variations

Tema.
Quasi Presto.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the theme of Paganini's Caprice No. 24. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Tema. Quasi Presto.'. The music starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first staff contains several measures of music, including a double bar line with repeat dots. The second staff continues the melody with various fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) and slurs. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

The theme of Paganini's Caprice No. 24

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Written in 1934
- ◆ Premiered with the **Philadelphia Symphony** conducted by **Leopold Stokowski**, with Rachmaninoff at the piano

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Titled a “rhapsody” but written as a **set of variations**, but arranged in **three broad sections**—fast, slow, fast—like a concerto

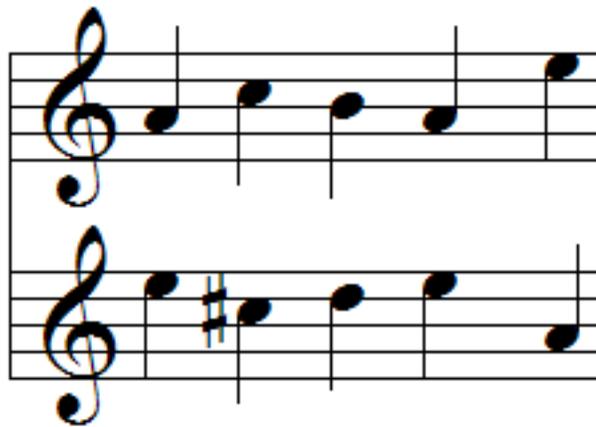
1 “Fast”	2 “Slow”	3 “Fast”
Introduction Theme Variations 1-10	Variations 11-18	Variations 19-24

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ The opening of the piece is **unusual**
- ◆ Starts with an **introduction** (not unusual), but...
- ◆ Then goes to the **first variation** before stating the theme
- ◆ The first variation is a **stripped-down “skeleton”** of the theme, that shows the theme’s structure

Paganini's melody appears throughout the piece in various forms including in "inversion" (upside down)



Simplified version of theme

Inversion of theme (Var. 18)

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Rachmaninoff quotes the “**Dies irae**” chant from the Gregorian chant Requiem mass several times

1810 Masses for the Dead.

Seq.
1.



D I-es írae, dí-es ílla, Sólvét saéclum in favílla :

Téste Dávid cum Sibýlla. Quántus trémor est futúrus,

Quando jú-dex est ventúrus, Cúncta stricte discussúrus!



“Dies irae” chant from the Requiem

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ Several of the variations are famous in-and-of themselves
- ◆ The 18th variation, the most “romantic” of the variations, is the most well-known

Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ The **last variation (24)** is extremely difficult to play. Rachmaninoff nervous about his ability to play it at premiere
- ◆ His friend Benno Moiseiwitsch suggests he drink a glass of **crème de menthe** (Rachmaninoff did not drink alcohol)

Benno Moiseiwitsch



Crème de Menthe

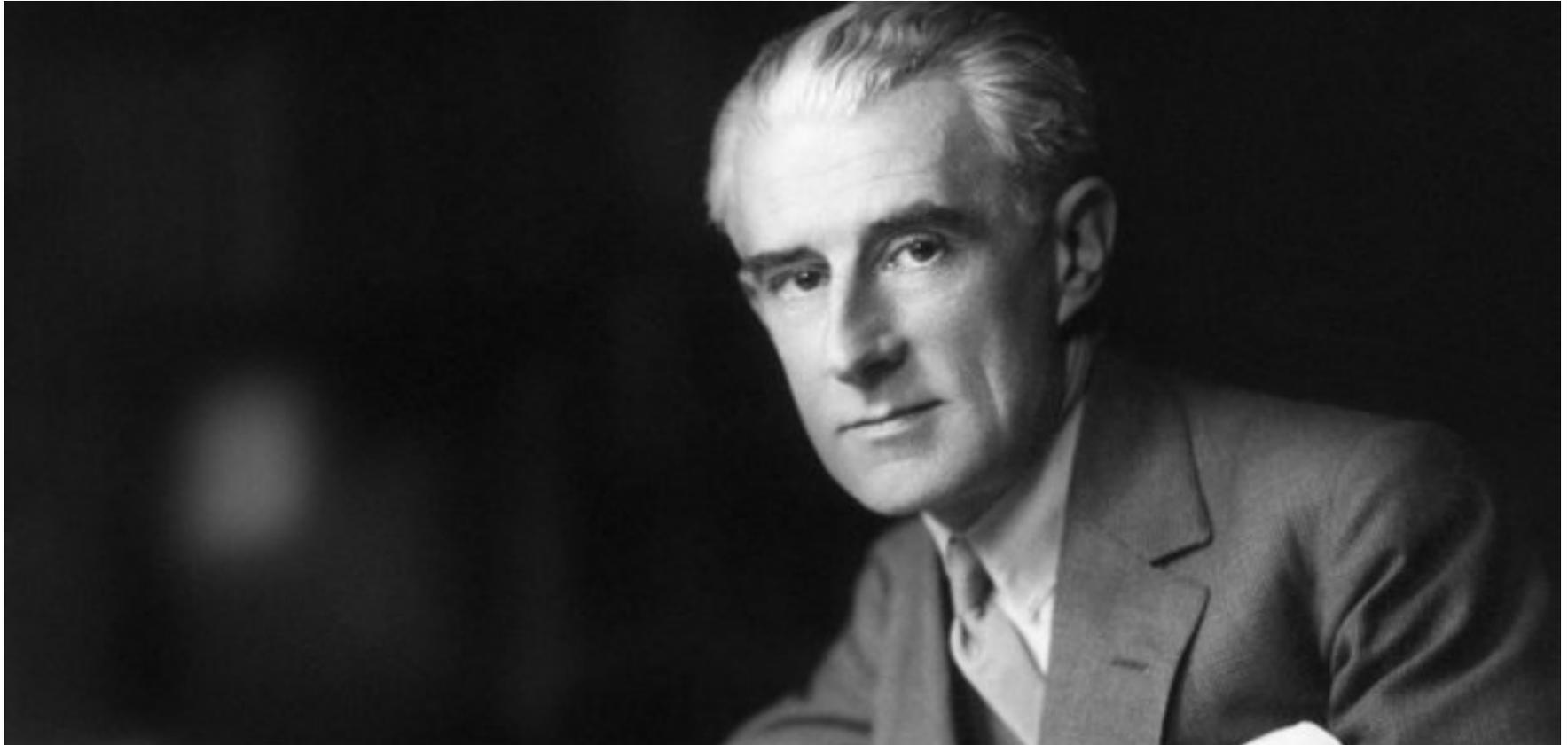
Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

- ◆ The premiere performance was a success, and Rachmaninoff **drank crème de menthe every time** he played the piece, and called the last variation the “**Crème de menthe**” variation

Maurice Ravel

Boléro



Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

- ◆ Along with Debussy, **considered one of the greatest of French composers**, and one of the great composers to the 20th century
- ◆ If Debussy is “impressionistic,” **Ravel is a “classicist,”** interested in forms and techniques from the **past**

Maurice Ravel 1875-1937)

- ◆ Conversely, Ravel is very interested in the **current music** of his time—such as **American jazz**—and incorporates it into his own works
- ◆ His jazz-style works are an important model for **George Gershwin** when he writes the *Rhapsody in Blue*

Maurice Ravel

- ◆ Ravel is considered one of the great orchestrators in classical music
- ◆ Is commissioned to **write a ballet** by Russian ballerina **Ida Rubenstein**

Ida Rubenstein
in *Boléro*

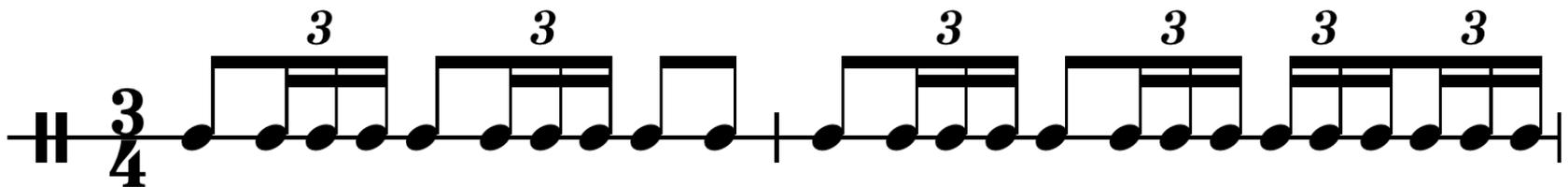


Maurice Ravel

- ◆ Ravel considers himself **Basque**, and is fascinated by **Spanish culture**, and writes many Spanish-themed pieces
- ◆ Rubenstein originally asks him to orchestrate some piano pieces by Spanish composer **Isaac Albéniz**, but Ravel finds out that another composer has the orchestration rights
- ◆ He decides to write an **original piece** based around the **bolero dance**

Maurice Ravel

- ◆ The Bolero is a **slow triple-meter** dance originating in Spain
- ◆ Music for boleros were songs accompanied by the guitar and castanets
- ◆ Typical **Bolero rhythm**



Maurice Ravel

- ◆ While on vacation he comes up with what he calls an “insistent tune” and decides to try an experiment:
- ◆ “I’m going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can”

Maurice Ravel

- ◆ Piece structured over the **Bolero rhythm**, that plays continuously as an unchanging *ostinato* throughout the piece in the percussion section
- ◆ Ravel uses **two melodies** that alternate back and forth: the first a more traditional bolero-style melody; the second a jazz-inflected tune

Maurice Ravel

- ◆ The ballet, *Boléro*, premieres in 1928 and instantly becomes a *success de scandale*
- ◆ According to stories, one audience member shouted out that *Ravel was crazy*
- ◆ Audience members were said to have *twisted their paper programs into pulp* from the tension created by the piece

Maurice Ravel

- ◆ While not strictly a variation in the tradition sense, Ravel writes a piece that **explores variation in timbre**
- ◆ The main interest of the piece are the changing the **tone colors of the orchestration**, and **gradual crescendo** as instruments are added over the course of the piece

Pieces to Know

- ◆ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, Track 49, *50 Most Essential Classical Piano Pieces*
- ◆ Maurice Ravel, *Boléro*, Track 96, *The 99 Most Essential Pieces of Classical Music*

Terms to Know

- ◆ Theme and Variations
- ◆ Étude, Caprice
- ◆ Inversion
- ◆ “Skeleton” variation
- ◆ “Dies irae”
- ◆ Crème de Menthe variation
- ◆ Bolero rhythm
- ◆ Ostinato
- ◆ Development
- ◆ Timbre, Crescendo