

RAKHMANINOV'S "CORELLI" VARIATIONS: NEW DIRECTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

Only a few of Rakhmaninov's compositions were popular with audiences during the lifetime of this Titan of the piano. Such youthful works as the *Prélude* in c[#] minor, op. 3, no. 2 and the *Piano Concerto no. 2*, op. 18 demonstrated only one facet of a creative process that evolved throughout his life. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to consider the extent of Rakhmaninov's stylistic evolution, especially the changes embodied in the large scale piano solo, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, written in the last decade of the composer's life.

In the discussion of Rakhmaninov's lifelong stylistic development the author considers three distinct stages in his life as important landmarks. The first stage shows certain early influences upon the composer's creative powers, whether conscious, such as his acknowledged sensitivity to melody, or unconscious, such as medieval chant (*Dies Irae*), the sound of church bells, poetry and painting.

The second addresses the question of the mixed legacy of Rakhmaninov's break with the past, when he left Russia in 1917 to re-settle in the United States the next year. On the one hand he never entirely broke his links with "Mother Russia," his fascination with the sounds

of bells and chants, in his last decade of musical composition. For example, a comparison of the ancient *Dies Irae* theme with the *La Folia* tune that Corelli had used reveals striking similarities that Rakhmaninov undoubtedly found attractive, albeit unconsciously. On the other hand, he was inspired to seek a new conciseness of style and form in composition.

The third stage relates to trends nurtured perhaps by his friendship with eminent string players and performers in America such as Fritz Kreisler. It is not surprising that Rakhmaninov's last two important works owe their themes to famous violin pieces: the *Folia* tune used by Arcangelo Corelli in the *Corelli Variations* and Paganini's well known 24th Caprice in the *Paganini Rhapsody*. These new directions in Rakhmaninov's music are most clearly present in the *Corelli Variations*, which are examined in terms of: (a) a new keyboard style; (b) string influenced variations; (c) elements of American jazz; and (d) a new clarity of structure.

Finally, the writer examines similarities between the *Corelli Variations* and the *Paganini Rhapsody* that writers have sometimes touched upon.

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INTRODUCTION

Sergey Rakhmaninov's compositions for piano have assumed an increasingly important role in the vast solo repertoire for the instrument in the forty-six years since his death.¹ Posterity may well adjudge him the greatest composer/pianist of the century, as Liszt was before him.² These two giants have a common link in Alexander Siloti, a favourite pupil of Liszt, who taught Rakhmaninov at the Conservatory in Moscow. Siloti fostered an appreciation of all that Liszt's piano technique embodied: tone painting, exquisite chiaroscuro, and agogic contrast. These qualities became integral to Rakhmaninov's own style, but it must be emphasized that in his piano writing Rakhmaninov was no mere imitator. Throughout his life Rakhmaninov displayed a singular musical style.

Until the Russian revolution of 1917, Rakhmaninov was a Russian citizen, acclaimed first as a composer, then as a conductor, and finally as a pianist. It was not until his voluntary exile to the United States in 1918 that his career underwent a transformation. Financial

¹This English phonetic spelling of his name, as in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, has been adopted in this thesis, rather than one of the German phonetic versions.

²Béla Bartók, although an impressive pianist in his time, is now internationally acclaimed more as a major twentieth-century composer rather than as a touring concert virtuoso.

necessity dictated the pre-eminent role of concert pianist and Rakhmaninov was obliged to prepare vast amounts of new repertoire. So from 1917 Rakhmaninov established a reputation for himself as the greatest pianist of his time and until about 1927 he wrote virtually no new works.

Yet these exhausting concert tours were only partly to blame for this lack of new works. His heartfelt homesickness for Russia must be acknowledged as another factor. In retrospect it is perhaps just as well that Rakhmaninov was occupied with these ten years of touring³, for in the prevailing age of Modernism, when the excesses of Romanticism were discarded, when daring experimentalism was embraced, he felt

like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. . . . I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. . . it may be, too, that the spirit of the times does not call for expression in music.⁴

The *Piano Concerto* no. 4 in g minor, op. 40, a work that Rakhmaninov had begun earlier in Russia, and the *Three Russian Songs* for chorus and orchestra, op. 41, written in 1928, gave notice that the composer's vein of composition had not dried up. Then, after long years of continual touring, his purchase of a European retreat gave him the essential peace of mind to take up composition with renewed energies between seasons of concertizing. It bore first fruit in the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Rakhmaninov's most extended

³His concert career, of course, continued beyond this period. In fact, he played his last recital in Knoxville, Kentucky, a mere five weeks before his death.

⁴Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 351.

work for solo piano thus far. The *Corelli Variations* were dedicated to his friend the eminent violinist, Fritz Kreisler.

The composer gave the première in Montréal, 12 October 1931. In a generous review of more than a column's length the Canadian critic, Thomas Archer, devoted almost half of his remarks to another work, Schumann's *Symphonic Studies*, op. 13, and then concluded:

After considering the Schumann item, there is not much left to say of the rest of the programme. . . . Rachmaninoff, the composer, appeared on the programme proper with a set of variations on a theme by Corelli (the well-known "La Folia" theme), which was given last night for the first time. . . . In content, they struck one as being Lisztian minus the romantic proclivities of that famous man.⁵

Without realizing it, the critic perceived new trends at work when he mentioned the lack of "romantic proclivities." But had Archer greater insight, he would have discerned the importance of this new work's astringent style and well balanced structure.

In the 1940's and 1950's a reaction against Rakhmaninov's music set in. Aaron Copland's remark was typical of many: "All these notes, think I, and to what end? To me Rachmaninoff's characteristic tone is one of self-pity and self-indulgence tinged with . . . melancholia."⁶ Eric Blom, the distinguished English writer and critic, was even more scathing:

⁵"Rachmaninoff in Superb Programme(sic)," *The Montreal Gazette*, 13 October 1931, p. 6.

⁶Aaron Copland, *Copland on Music* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1960), p. 34. It may well be that Copland's attitude was shaped as early as during his studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, who disliked Rakhmaninov's music.

as a composer he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time. His music is. . . monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios. . . . It is not likely to last.⁷

A critical reassessment was not long in coming, however.⁸ By the mid-1960s Rakhmaninov's music, nurtured by such pianists as Horowitz and Ashkenazy, was not only still popular with the music-loving public, but had been embraced by a new generation of scholars and artists who did not find it incongruous to admire the work of one whose style was so obviously *passé*.⁹

⁷*Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., s.v. "Rachmaninoff, Sergei."

⁸See, for example, W.R. Anderson, *Rachmaninov and His Concertos* (London: Hinrichsen, 1946); Joseph Yasser, "Progressive Tendencies in Rachmaninoff's Music," *Tempo* 22 (Winter 1951 - 52): 11 - 25.

⁹John Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), p. 77.

CHAPTER ONE

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCES

Before one can discuss the new tendencies at work in the *Corelli Variations* and appreciate Rakhmaninov's stylistic evolution, one must reflect a moment upon vital elements that consciously or unconsciously affected his compositions before 1917. Only in this way can the originality of the *Corelli Variations* be put into perspective.

The earliest influences upon Rakhmaninov are those of the chant used in the Russian Orthodox liturgy and the sound of church bells. Although Rakhmaninov was reticent in discussing his methods of composition, his biographers make clear that the sound of the church bells of St Petersburg was impressed upon his childhood memories.¹ Even in today's socialist Russia the cathedral bells of the Kremlin make an indelible imprint on the fabric of Moscow's soundscape. After Rakhmaninov's parents separated, one of his few remaining pleasures was to visit churches and cathedrals with his adored grandmother. At home, the nine-year-old tried to recapture the magnificent sounds of the bells on the family piano.

¹Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, p. 317. Not surprisingly, one of Rakhmaninov's finest works, the choral symphony op. 35, is entitled *The Bells*.

Much later, he would confide to a reporter, "Whenever I hear deep throated bells, I think of Russia."²

Early in his career liturgical melody found its way into his compositions: the outer movements of the *First Symphony*, op. 13, of 1895 are based largely on Russian Orthodox chants.³ Ten of the fifteen chants that make up the *Vespers*, op. 37 of 1915 are founded on various versions of *znamenny* chant.⁴

Rakhmaninov was also fascinated by the medieval sequence, *Dies Irae*, a chant of the Western Church (not of Rakhmaninov's Eastern Russian Orthodox heritage) used by other composers before him. The example by Berlioz in the finale of his *Symphonie fantastique* was no doubt the earliest stimulus for many other composers to use the melody in secular compositions.⁵ Since the restricted range of the tune at first glance seems to offer limited scope, Romantic composers must have been more preoccupied with the text (retribution, the Day of Judgement) than with this portion of music for the Mass for the Dead. By musical inference this mood of foreboding has been extended into the realm of witchcraft, devilry

²Ibid.

³Stephen Walsh, "Sergei Rachmaninoff," *Tempo* 105 (June 1973): 16.

⁴Anonymous sleeve note to the *Melodiya* recording, A10 00261 009. *Znamenny* chant originated in Russia in the 15th century. See *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 940.

⁵Malcolm Boyd, "Dies Irae": Some Recent Manifestations," *Music and Letters* 49 (October 1968): 348.

and, with Respighi, even snakes.⁶ Rakhmaninov's interest in this chant, it should be emphasized, was similarly extramusical. It had nothing to do with the funeral masses sung upon the early deaths of his sisters, for the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church is much older than this 13th-century melody and does not include it.

Since Rakhmaninov's mentor, Tschaikowsky, seems to have been the first Russian composer to have used the theme, it is not surprising that his disciple would also weave it into the texture of numerous works: the *Symphony no. 1*, op. 13, the *Piano Sonata no. 1*, op. 28, the choral symphony *The Bells*, the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, op. 29 and the *Paganini Rhapsody*. Rakhmaninov also used it in the *Corelli Variations* and around the time of its première conveyed his continuing interest in the *Dies Irae* motive in the following questions he put to his friend Joseph Yasser:

He wished to obtain the whole music of this funeral chant. . . . He also asked about the significance of the original Latin text of this chant, and asked some questions as to its history - particularly as to fixing an approximate period for its origin - without offering a word of explanation for his keen interest in this.⁷

Rakhmaninov seems to have known only the opening motive of the chant (Ex. 1):

Example 1: *Dies Irae*: opening motive



Di - es ir - ae, di - es il - la

⁶Ibid, p. 351.

⁷Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, p. 278.

or perhaps only the first four notes. The complete sequence, *Dies Irae*, is too long to quote in full, but it begins (Ex. 2):

Example 2: Gregorian Sequence *Dies Irae*, *Liber Usualis*, p. 1810.



If bells and chant were primary stimuli for Rakhmaninov, then poetry and painting ranked next. Just as early 19th-century Romantic poets such as Goethe and Heine had stimulated Schubert and Schumann, Russian authors of his own day inspired Rakhmaninov enormously. For example, the texts of the remarkable set of *Fourteen Songs*, op. 34, are selected from the foremost representatives of Russian Romanticism: Pushkin, Tyutchev, Polonsky, and Balmont. Other contemporary poets, among whom were Blok, Brynsov, Biely and Sologub, inspired Rakhmaninov's last song cycle, the *Six Songs*, op. 38.⁸

As for painting, certain canvasses by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin⁹ are credited with having stimulated Rakhmaninov's creative powers. In 1907, Rakhmaninov saw a black and white reproduction of Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*, a painting that depicts a boatman

⁸In all, Rakhmaninov wrote some seventy songs for voice and piano.

⁹Born Basle 1827; died Fiesole 1901. The majority of his works are housed in Basle's Öffentliche Kunstsammlung.

approaching a solitary island shrouded by cypresses. In the prow stands a solitary figure draped in white. The boat carries a coffin destined for the mortuary caves cut into the rock of the island.¹⁰ The composer was so impressed with such ghostly tranquillity that not long afterwards it inspired his superb symphonic poem of the same title.

A more unconscious influence from another of Böcklin's paintings permeates the b minor *Prélude* op. 32, no. 10 (Ex. 3). When the concert pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch asked Rakhmaninov if this piece conveyed a certain pictorial image, they discovered to their complete amazement that they both had in mind the same painting, Böcklin's *The Return*.¹¹

Example 3: *Prélude*, op. 32, no. 10, mm. 1 - 3.



According to von Rieseemann, Rakhmaninov's first biographer, Böcklin's painting *The Waves*¹² inspired the *Étude-Tableau*, op. 39, no. 1.¹³ The canvas depicts waves crashing

¹⁰This painting, of which Böcklin essayed five versions between 1880 and 1886 (Andree Catalogue nos. 343 - 347) was, and is, his best known.

¹¹Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, p. 296.

¹²Andree Catalogue no. 401.

¹³Oscar Rieseemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections Told to Oskar von Rieseemann* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1934), p. 236. The actual title of the painting (Andree Catalogue no. 401) is *Naiads Playing* (*Das Spiel der Najaden*).

against a rocky outcropping in the sea. Voluptuous mermaids and mer-children frolic in this wild surf, while two male tritons, almost submerged, look on. The artist has captured most successfully in visual terms the roaring of the sea and screams of the women.¹⁴ The piano work begins as follows (Ex. 4):

Example 4: *Étude-Tableau*, op. 39, no. 1, mm. 1 - 2.



The mythological nature of the scene, familiar ground with Böcklin, does not disguise a scarcely hidden 19th-century eroticism that some may find difficult to translate into Rakhmaninov's musical terms.

¹⁴ Andree, *Böcklin*, p. 472.

CHAPTER TWO

BREAK WITH THE PAST

When Rakhmaninov settled in America, he left far behind the great art galleries of Dresden and Leipzig, places where he had first seen Böcklin's work. But not only painting ceased to provide an inspiration. Isolation from his language and literature seems also to have broken the spirit of song in the composer's heart: one rarely finds the great paragraphs of Romantic rhetoric in Rakhmaninov's post-1927 compositions that painting and poetry had previously inspired.

"How can I compose without melody?" he replied to a questioner in 1924.¹ Certainly some of his critics concede that his music is distinguished by inspired melodic gifts. One has only to think of the XVIIIth Variation of the famous *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* (Ex. 5):

¹Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, p. 235.

Example 5: Variation XVIII, Paganini Rhapsody, mm. 1 - 3.

Andante cantabile

The musical score is written for Piano solo and Orchestra. The tempo is marked 'Andante cantabile'. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The Piano solo part begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic, followed by a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic, and ends with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The melody is characterized by triplets and flowing lines. The Orchestra part is mostly silent, with a few notes in the first measure.

Even in his youth, melody and song had been deeply impressed upon him because of his attachment to Elena, his older sister and a talented singer.

I have to thank my sister for the most beautiful and profound musical impressions. . . . She was gifted with a glorious voice, which even now seems to me the most beautiful I have ever heard. . . . She could sing everything, for nature herself had seen to the training of her wonderful contralto voice.²

After the enforced severance of friendships with Russian singers such as Nina Koshetz and Theodore Chaliapin he never again composed for solo voice. Fortunately, in America Sergey Rakhmaninov made important new friendships with other great performers, especially Fritz Kreisler and other eminent string players.

²Victor Seroff, *Rachmaninov* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 8.

During the 1920's and 30's, Rakhmaninov collaborated with this great violinist in recitals and recordings and came to know his technique and style. His transcription for piano of two of Kreisler's pieces, the *Liebesleid* and the *Liebesfreude*, was a natural consequence of their friendship. In his turn, Kreisler reciprocated with arrangements for violin of some of Rakhmaninov's works, including the well known *Prélude in g minor*, op. 23, no. 5.³ The relationship of Kreisler and Rakhmaninov extended beyond their professional work to pleasant musical evenings in each others' homes, as well as social contact at *The Bohemians* club in New York with other members such as the pianist Joseph Hofmann, the violinists Jascha Heifetz and Albert Spalding, and the cellist Pablo Casals.⁴

Thus the past inspiration of eminent Russian singers gave way to the friendship and stimulus of string players, an impact that was to become apparent in the two fine works of Rakhmaninov's last decade, *The Variations on a Theme of Corelli* and the *Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43. In the former, one is struck by the fact that Rakhmaninov, one of the great melodists of the piano, chooses as the basis of his new piano work a borrowed theme, *La Folia*, one that has been used many times before, and one whose rigid phrase structure contributes towards a strict compositional framework.⁵

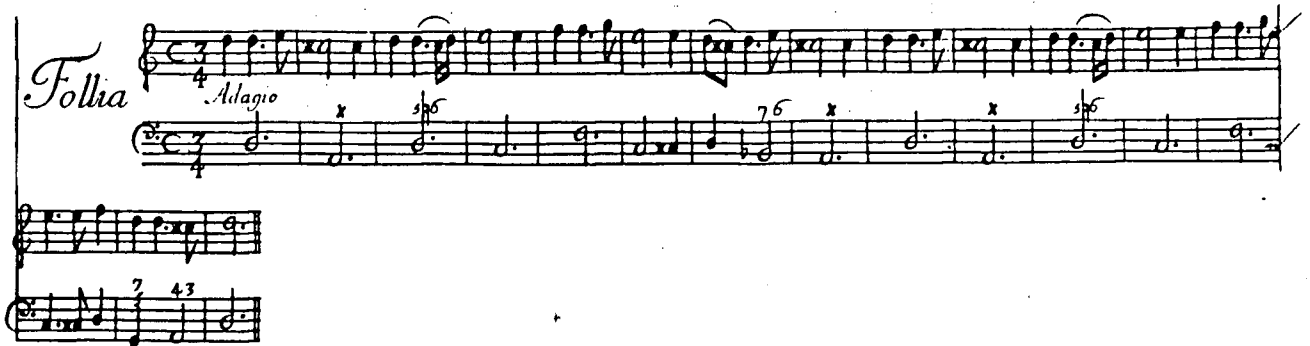
³Louis P. Lochner, *Kreisler*, (Neptune City, N.J.: Paganiniana Publications), p. 178.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Kenwyn G. Boldt, ("The Solo Piano Variations of Rachmaninoff," D.Mus. Document, Indiana University, 1967) considers the *Corelli Variations* to be a hybrid of strict variation form and 18th-century ornamental variation form. Rakhmaninov's *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, op. 22, written some 30 years earlier, also uses a borrowed theme of periodic phrase structure, but the composer treats the work generally in free variation form.

La Folia is a 15th-century dance tune that spread from Portugal into Spain, owing its great popularity to its "mad" or frenzied character. By the time it had gained respectability in the courts of France and England a century later, the *Folia* dance was slower and much more dignified⁶, as we hear it in Corelli's *Sonata for Violin and Continuo*, op. 5, no. 12 (Ex. 6) or, indeed, in Rakhmaninov's piece.

Example 6: Arcangelo Corelli: Sonata for violin and continuo, op. 5, no. 12, mm. 1 - 16.⁷



Between these masters of the 17th and 20th centuries many others had used the *Folia* theme: Domenico Scarlatti as well as J.S. and C. P. E. Bach. In one of Lizst's most famous works, the *Spanish Rhapsody*, the theme crops up yet again.

It is surprising that previous writers have not discerned the close relationship between the *Folia* and the *Dies Irae* themes, perhaps an unconscious attraction for Rakhmaninov's choice in the first instance. A comparison of their melodic content follows (Ex. 7):

⁶The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "Folia," by Richard Hudson.

⁷Facsimile of the original edition, Rome, 1700, *Archivum Musicum* 21 (Florence: Studio per Edizioni Scelti, 1979).

Example 7: Comparison of the *Folia* and *Dies Irae* themes.

Phrase 1 Phrase 2

a. *Dies Irae*

b. *Folia*

Note how the majority of pitch sounds in the two phrases coincide perfectly (if one temporarily removes the C[#] accidental of the *Folia* tune.⁸ A closer look reveals that these important pitches, represented as whole notes, are responsible for the overall melodic contour, both in the *Dies Irae* and the *Folia* tune. In other words, the matching pitches D - E - C - D of Phrase 1 (a) and (b) clearly provide their own "signature": namely, a conjunct, stepwise motion up, a third down and a step up (Ex. 8):

Example 8: Phrase 1, *Dies Irae* and *La Folia*.

a.

b.

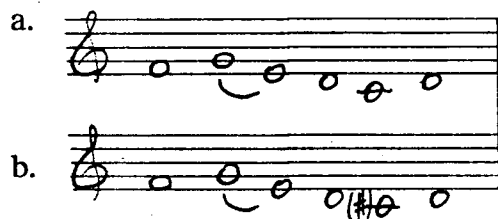
The importance of the falling third in Phrase 1 cannot be overemphasized. It is the interval that the ear particularly distinguishes in the *Dies Irae* theme. Some composers need only

⁸Rakhmaninov uses both the original C sharp and a modal C natural in the *Corelli Variations*.

quote the first four notes which include the falling third, to establish the theme's identity. Rakhmaninov himself in the *Intermezzo* of the *Corelli Variations*, the unnumbered variation between nos. XIII and XIV, alludes to this four-note melodic cell from the *Dies Irae* chant in the bass line, first on *D*: *D - C# - D - (C# - C) - B*, and then on *F*.

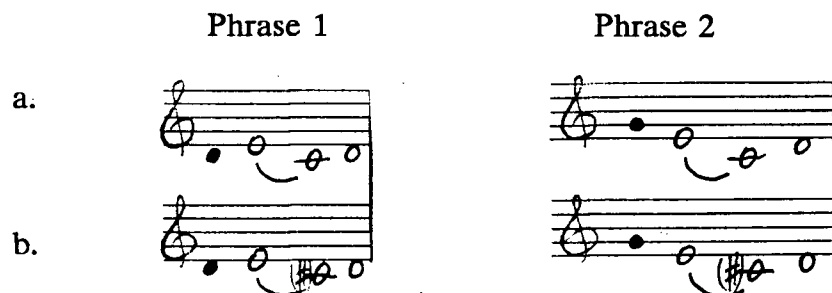
Phrase 2 of (a) and (b) also follows a similar pattern: namely, conjunct, stepwise motion up and a third down, followed by stepwise motion down a third, and ending a step up (Ex. 9):

Example 9: Phrase 2, *Dies Irae* and *La Folia*.



Reduced to even simpler form, the two melodies (a) and (b) possess identical melodic cells, or "signatures" both in Phrase 1 and Phrase 2 (Ex. 10):

Example 10: Identical melodic cells of *Dies Irae* and *La Folia*.



Note the presence of the falling third in both cases. These cells can be thought of as the underlying melodic structures for both the *Dies Irae* and *Folia* tunes.

CHAPTER THREE

NEW DIRECTIONS

The writer will now consider new directions in the *Corelli Variations* as (a) aspects of textural innovations and (b) structural clarity. Although some writers view the development of Rakhmaninov's harmonic language also as signs of progressive tendencies, the scope of this thesis cannot include such a wide digression. However, the progressive refinement of Rakhmaninov's harmonic language is nonetheless an important factor.¹

Joseph Yasser points out that Rakhmaninov's harmonic style was evolving conspicuously already in the *Études-Tableaux*, op. 33 and op. 39, as well as in the op. 38 *Songs* of 1916. This, he concludes, is due to Rakhmaninov's "persistent chromaticizing of his tonal fabric - and his eventual intra-tonal chromaticism."² That Rakhmaninov did refine his tonal fabric throughout his career is probable, but the *Corelli Variations* are not a landmark in this respect.

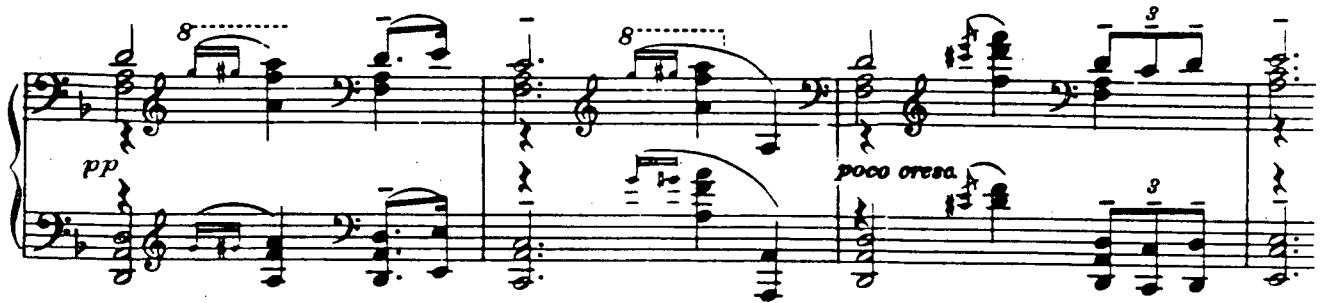
¹Joseph Yasser's article "Progressive Tendencies": 11 - 25 offers valuable insights. Kenwyn Boldt's dissertation, alluded to earlier, "The Solo Piano Variations of Rachmaninoff" also provides detailed harmonic analysis.

²*Ibid*, p. 21.

Upon closer inspection of the *Corelli Variations* it becomes apparent that, rather than harmonic innovations, two other forces are at work, and these in opposition to each other: the first is Rakhmaninov's need to retain the essential Russian character of his music in the form of bell sounds and old melodies, while the second is his exploration of new directions. Following the discussion of bell influences and old melodies, the writer will describe Rakhmaninov's new tendencies: (a) a sparse, new keyboard style; (b) an avoidance of Romantic rhetoric; (c) the incorporation of string influenced figuration; (d) elements of American jazz and (e) a well balanced structure.

The fact that the ancient *Folia* melody was chosen for the theme of the *Corelli Variations* has been discussed earlier. A few examples from his frequent use of bell sounds in the score will now be given, illustrating Rakhmaninov's continued dependency upon such a device to impart a "Russian" flavour (Exx. 11a, b and c):

Example 11(a): "Bell" sounds in Variation IV, Corelli Variations, mm. 9 - 12.



Example 11(b): "Bell" sounds in Variation VII, Corelli Variations, m. 1.



Example 11(c): "Bell" sounds in Variation XX, Corelli Variations, mm. 18 - 19 and 25.



The second force at work in the *Corelli Variations*, Rakhmaninov's preoccupation with new tendencies, may in fact have already begun to gestate even before the period of compositional void. In his last two important piano works written before the American exile of 1917, the *Études-Tableau*, op. 39, the composer clearly was wrestling with style: "When I write a short piece for the piano I am at the mercy of my thematic idea which must be presented concisely and without digression."³

One indeed glimpses new trends at work in some of the *Études-Tableaux*, dissonance, motor rhythms and linear writing, for example, but their occurrence is rare and generally of short duration (Ex. 12):

Example 12: Étude-Tableau, op. 39, no. 6, mm. 45 - 47.



Although Rakhmaninov "breaks away boldly from the dogma of vertical euphony and in Prokofieff fashion robustly enfolds melodic lines,"⁴ it was not until the creation of the *Corelli Variations* in 1931 that these modernizing trends were fully sustained. It is tempting to speculate that such progressive ideas had occupied the composer's mind during the previous

³Israel Citkowitz, "Orpheus With His Lute," *Tempo* 22 (Winter 1951-52): 10.

⁴Yasser, "Progressive Tendencies": 23.

decade in America, but the absence of new works for solo piano or pronouncements from Rakhmaninov himself must relegate such ideas to the realm of conjecture.

It was in the midst of the gathering momentum of Neo-Classicism that Rakhmaninov (who could surely have sympathized with it in a way that he never could have done with the seeming disorder that preceded it) returned to composing music.⁵

Rakhmaninov's compositional silence ended in 1926 with the *Piano Concerto no. 4 in g minor*, op. 40⁶, which he had sketched out in Russia several years before. Unfamiliar aspects of its style led some writers to call it incoherent; certainly its bitterness and sharpness contrast greatly with the romantic nostalgia of the earlier concertos. But it is precisely such astringency that marks this Concerto as pivotal in Rakhmaninov's stylistic evolution. Along with the *Three Russian Songs* for chorus and orchestra, op. 41, written in 1928, the Concerto foreshadows the great works that would emerge in Rakhmaninov's final decade of composition, 1931 - 1941.

New keyboard style

Without a doubt, the first feature that strikes the ear of the listener is the new astringency in the *Corelli Variations*. This sparseness of texture is especially "new," a quality that imparts to the overall keyboard texture a lightness and clarity hinted at, but never before so completely sustained, in Rakhmaninov's past works. For this reason, thinning out of texture

⁵William Flanagan, "Sergei Rachmaninoff, a Twentieth-Century Composer," *Tempo* 22 (Winter 1951 - 52): 7.

⁶It was first performed by the composer in March of the following year.

may be viewed as one of the most progressive tendencies in the *Corelli Variations*. The whirlwind arpeggiated figures and bravura passages are much less prominent. In their place are lean lines, many unison passages and several interjections of sparkling figures evoking dry wit and gaiety. Examples of the latter may be seen in Variations II, VIII and XII, to name a few.

Many variations are unusual in their economy of texture. In Variation V, for example, the writing is entirely linear. Open chords at each down beat serve to punctuate an otherwise unison passage (Ex. 13):

Example 13: Variation V, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 3.



The lightness of the last four measures in Variation VI is typical of the scherzo-like character so evident in this work. Although the harmonic changes are now more frequent than in earlier variations, the texture remains clear and robust because of the high register and the rhythmic drive (Ex. 14):

Example 14: Variation VI, Corelli Variations, mm. 14 - 16.

Much the same can be said of measures 16ff. of Variation X. The cascading chromatic passage is idiomatic keyboard writing at its best, but again the texture remains clear. In the following excerpt Rakhmaninov discontinues the double thirds in the left hand and double fourths of the right hand to thin the texture at the 3/4 measure (Ex. 15):

Example 15: Variation X, Corelli Variations, mm. 16 - 17.

Rakhmaninov enjoyed contrasting higher registers with lower in order to create variety of texture. To avoid a muddled sound, he writes for the left hand light "pizzicato" octaves in place of thicker chords (Exx. 16a and b):

Example 16(a): Variation VIII, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 3.

Adagio misterioso

p

poco rit.

a tempo

Example 16(b): Variation XII, Corelli Variations, mm. 10 - 14.

f sempre marcato

A brief comparison will outline the difference between this new clarity in low registers and what Rakhmaninov wrote in 1917. The following, from one of the many *Études-Tableaux*, sounds thick because of the many right-hand accompanimental figures (Ex. 17):

Example 17: Étude-Tableau, op. 39, no. 9, mm. 18 - 21.

molto marcato



In Variation XII of the *Corelli* set Rachmaninov thinned out a similar texture by restricting the R.H. chords to offbeat punctuations (Ex. 18):

Example 18: Variation XII, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 4.



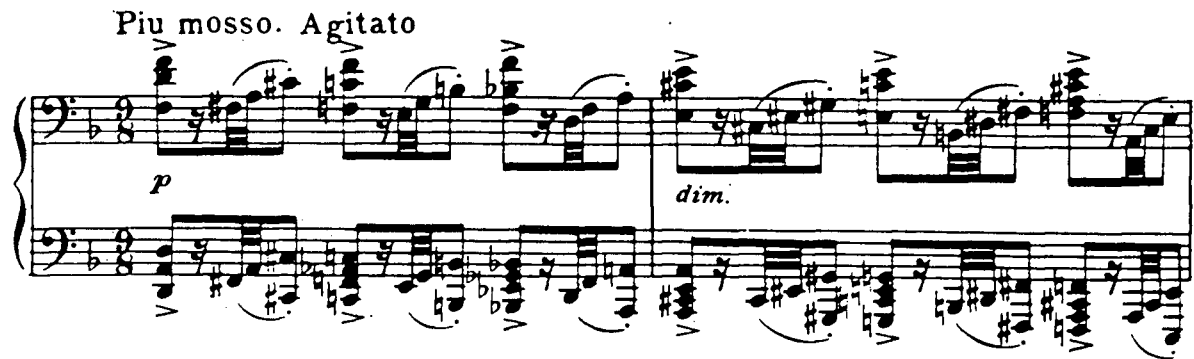
Sometimes an unusual texture arises through a combination of rhythmic and registral devices. The motoric rhythm of Variation XIII imparts a telling "agitato" character (Ex. 19):

Example 19: Variation XIII, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 3.



At times the music sounds strikingly progressive. The opening of Variation XIX retains its sparse, almost sharp-edged texture by means of light, soft staccatos within a descending register. Again, the motor-rhythmic drive resembles techniques of other 20th-century composers such as Bartók or Prokofiev (Ex. 20):

Example 20: Variation XIX, Corelli Variations, mm.1 - 2.⁷



As one contemporary Russian expressed it:

Rachmaninoff strives quite evidently for linear constructions reminiscent of those resorted to by the Russian and western neo-classicists. Sometimes he breaks away boldly from the dogma of vertical euphony and in Prokofieff fashion, robustly unfolds melodic lines⁸

⁷Rachmaninov's score also provides a simplified *ossia*.

⁸Daniel Zhitomirskii, "Fortepianooe Tvorchestvo Rakhmaninova (Rakhmaninov's Piano Works)," cited in Yasser, "Progressive Tendencies"

Avoidance of Romantic rhetoric

In the *Corelli Variations* and, later, the *Paganini Rhapsody* there is an avoidance of Romantic rhetoric, a result of Rakhmaninov's "re-appraisal of Romantic musical values, in a greater integration of line, texture and form in a cleansing of ornamental and rhetorical superfluities."⁹ For example, the bravura writing in the final measures of Variation XIX is "cleansed" by the acerbity of the dissonant offbeat major 7ths, etc. in the L.H., while the R.H. figuration nevertheless retains an economy of texture (Ex. 21):

Example 21: Variation XIX, Corelli Variations, mm. 9 - 14.



⁹Israel Citowitz, "Orpheus With His Lute," *Tempo* 22 (Winter 1951-52): 10.

If one compares this with an example from an earlier work, op. 39, no. 5, one will observe that the latter depends upon fuller chords which inevitably thicken the texture (Ex. 22):

Example 22: *Étude-Tableau*, op. 39, no. 5, mm. 53 - 4.



Variation XX, the last, exhibits perhaps the most strikingly sparse texture of the entire *Variations*, yet it is no less effective than the fuller textures of earlier works. Here is an example of how Rakhmaninov concluded a work in bravura style from 1917 (Ex. 23):

Example 23: *Étude-Tableau*, op. 39, no. 9, last 5 mm.

The following, written in 1931, contrasts greatly with the previous example because of its direct, sparse keyboard writing. It is as if Rakhmaninov had consciously decided to do away with unnecessary rhetorical "frills." In other words, four-note chords used to fill out the octave melody have clearly been avoided (Ex. 24):

Example 24: Variation XX, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 3.



String influenced variations

The *Corelli Variations* is the first of Rakhmaninov's solo works for piano to incorporate string influenced figurations.¹⁰ Because for many *La Folia* is associated with Corelli, to say nothing of the dedication of the *Corelli Variations* to Fritz Kreisler, the appearance of many violinistic figurations seems a natural consequence. Constantin Kuznetsoff writes, "These variations, particularly the amazing fourth, are really a transformation into piano technique of Kreisler's violin technique, his ornamentation, his flageolets."¹¹ It is surprising that he

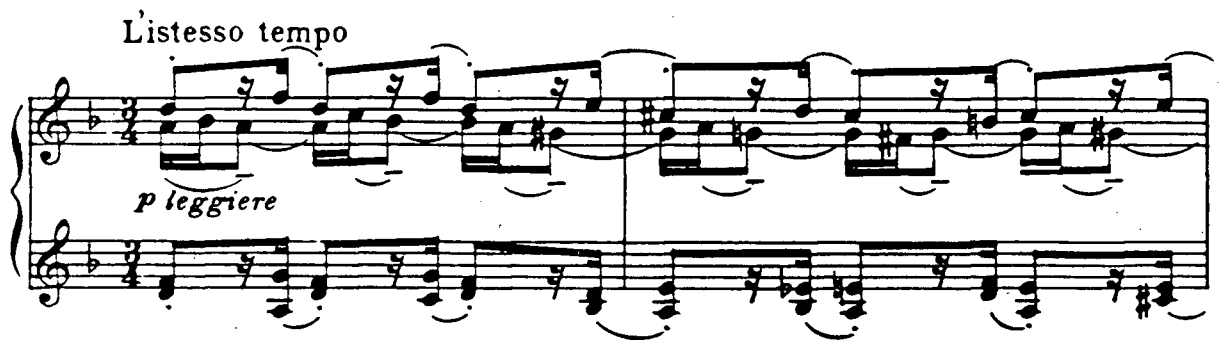
¹⁰Constantin Kuznetsoff, "Serge Rachmaninoff's Musical Life," *VOKS Bulletin* 6 (1945): 41.

¹¹Ibid.

seems to have been the only commentator to have touched upon this matter, albeit in a superficial manner. Unlike Rakhmaninov's fairly literal transcriptions for piano of pieces by Kreisler,¹² the *Corelli Variations* show Rakhmaninov carefully adapting violinistic figurations with instinctive pianistic skill, thereby preserving a true keyboard idiom. The variations that possess string-like figures are nos. II, IV, VII, XVI and XVII, the central Intermezzo and the Coda. An outline of these various string-influenced passages follows.

The soprano and bass parts of Variation II are written in a style that recalls slurred bowing (Ex. 25):

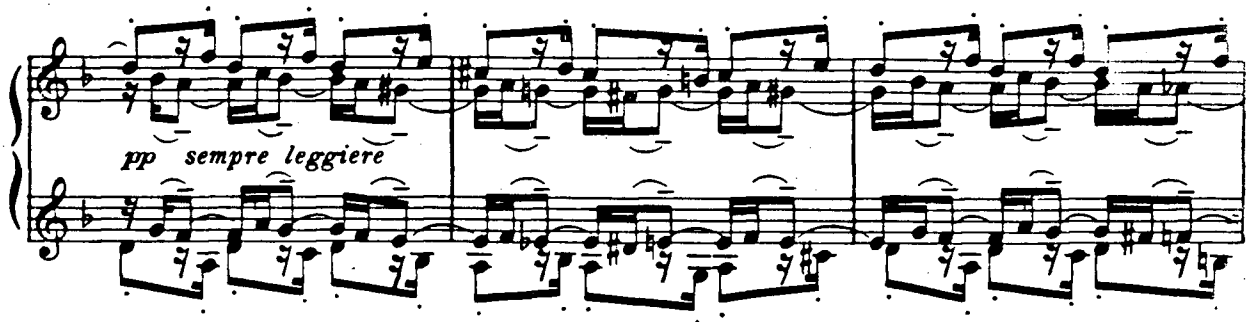
Example 25: Variation II, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.



Later, these parts are written in an extremely dry spiccato idiom (Ex. 26):

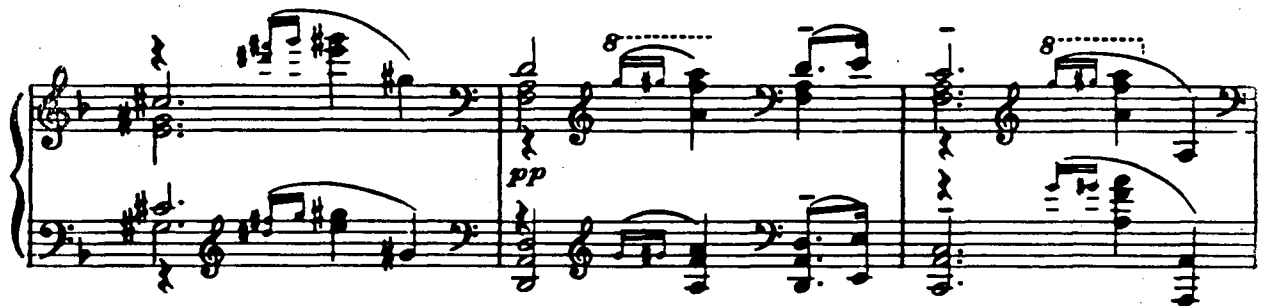
¹²See p. 14.

Example 26: Variation II, Corelli Variations, mm. 9 - 11.



Much of the beauty of Variation IV lies in its registral differences between the low "bells" and the high pitch of the string-like embellishments. These figurations are called *chiaroscuro* by violinists, a term that means the play between light and shadow (Ex. 27):

Example 27: Variation IV, Corelli Variations, mm. 8 - 10.



Variation VII mimics string crossing, a very effective device in the literature for violin. Kreisler, for example, employed it in the famous *Praeludium and Allegro* for violin and piano that for many years he ascribed to the fictitious composer Pugnani. Although the sound is rich, again bell-like in sonority, the octave writing in Variation VII is economical (Exx. 28a and b):

Example 28(a): Praeludium and Allegro by Pugnani [Kreisler], mm. 68 - 75.



Example 28(b): Variation VII, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.

Vivace

Laissez vibrer

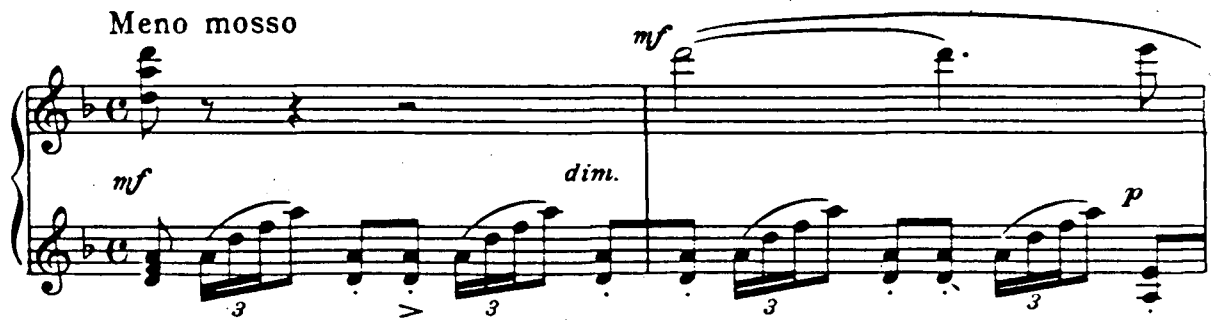
String sonorities of open 4ths and 5ths dominate two successive variations, providing a buoyant effect in Variation XVI (Ex. 29):

Example 29: Variation XVI, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.

Allegro vivace

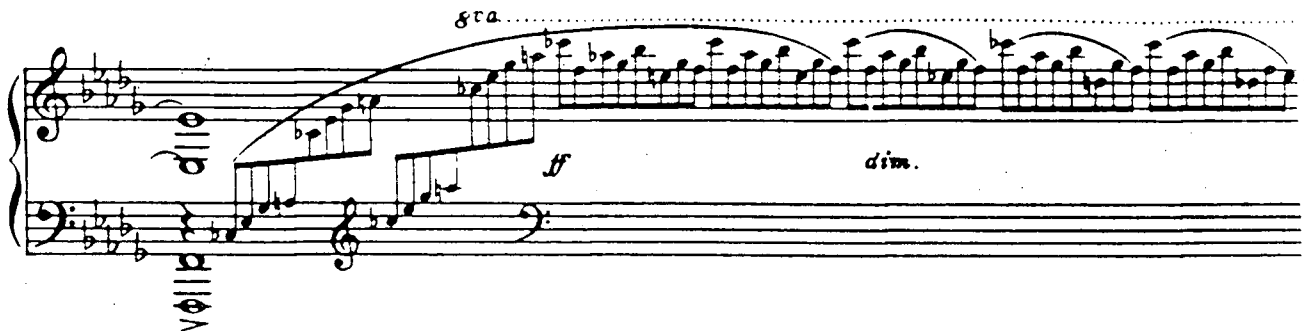
and a "Spanish Guitar" effect in Variation XVII (Ex. 30):

Example 30: Variation XVII, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.



The central Intermezzo also mirrors the type of cadenza found in gypsy-styled repertoire for the violin (Exx. 31a and b):

Example 31(a): Intermezzo, Corelli Variations, m. 13.



Example 31(b): F. Kreisler: La Gitane, m. 7.

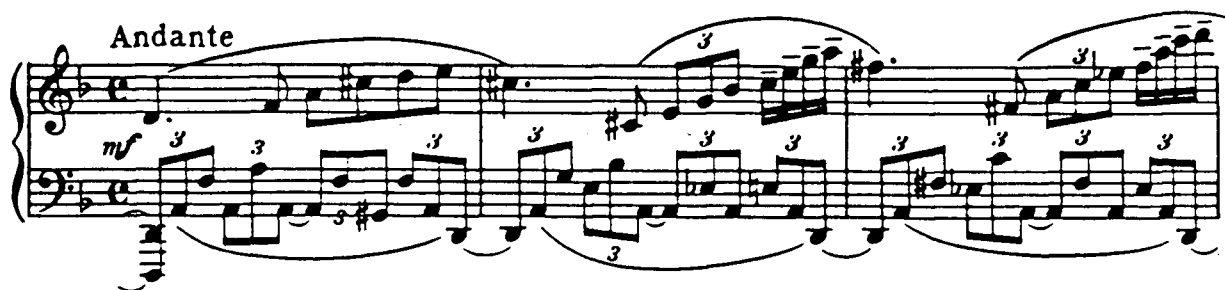


The most striking example of the influence of string music on the *Corelli Variations* may be found at the Coda. Here the single, soaring melodic line pays allegiance to the Coda that Rakhmaninov's friend, Albert Spalding, wrote for his own free arrangement of *La Folia* (Exx. 32a and b):

Example 32(a): Albert Spalding's free transcription of Corelli's *La Folia* Sonata, Coda, mm. 1 - 3.



Example 32(b): Coda, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 3.



Elements of American jazz

American jazz affected many composers in the earlier twentieth century, Debussy, Ravel, Milhaud, Walton, Hindemith and Stravinsky, to name only a few. Rakhmaninov was no exception. He greatly appreciated American jazz, especially the orchestral arrangements of Paul Whiteman. After hearing a performance of his in 1924 Rakhmaninov praised Whiteman's compositions as excellent short pieces "crisply told, with all the human breeziness and snap that are so characteristic of the American people."¹³

¹³Bertenson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, p. 237.

While at least one commentator has made general reference to the influence of jazz in the later *Paganini Variations*, it is surprising that no one has made mention of elements of jazz in the *Corelli Variations*, its progenitor. Variation VIII of the *Corelli Variations* displays a certain "blues" element in the gesture of the falling triplets. Combined with the syncopated rhythm and a slight "snap" in the bass, the overall effect is jazzy. Variation XIII possesses a singular rhythmic motive combined with added 7th, 9th and 13th chords which some may find reminiscent of jazz.

New clarity of structure

William Flanagan states, "Note in the *Corelli Variations* the enormously tightened variational procedure; an inter-dependence of the separate variations not attempted in the *Chopin Variations*; the more disciplined application of the elements of the Corelli theme."¹⁴ Despite such positive critical appraisal, perhaps the most frequently heard charge against Rakhmaninov is his lack of developmental technique, his weak sense of form.¹⁵ Others believe that Rakhmaninov could only excel in shorter, so-called "easy" pieces.¹⁶ He himself is partly to blame for fostering this opinion, because of his sensitive nature and legendary

¹⁴Flanagan, "A Twentieth-Century Composer": 7

¹⁵Richard Coolidge, "Architectonic Technique and Innovations in the Rakhmaninov Piano Concertos," *The Music Review* 40 (August 1979): 183.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

modesty. At the age of 50, the greatest living pianist, Rakhmaninov, would state: " I am making progress. . . but the more I play the more I see my shortcomings."¹⁷

It is perhaps easy to overlook the progressive growth in Rakhmaninov's music because of the slenderness of his output in later years. Yet it must be acknowledged that the composer continued to seek new paths. One writer states that in Rakhmaninov's case:

quiet progress takes place beneath the surface, not so much in a direct repudiation and reversal of early idiom, as in a quiet re-appraisal of their musical values, in a greater integration of line, texture, and form.¹⁸

Therefore, just as clarity of keyboard texture in the *Corelli Variations* marked a new tendency in Rakhmaninov's stylistic evolution, clarity of structure attests to the composer's concern with overall design. Not only is the general structure a neatly conceived ternary form; the internal structure is skillfully woven by means of inter-dependent, unifying devices, wherein material of earlier variations is quoted later. In the *Corelli Variations* Rakhmaninov took great care to relate variations to one another throughout by the use of melodic and rhythmic fragments, thus providing logical cohesion. The following Chart illustrates Rakhmaninov's treatment of melodically related motives:

¹⁷Seroff, *Rachmaninoff*, p.117.

¹⁸Citkowitz, "Orpheus With His Lute": 10.

CHART I

Melodically Related Devices

FIRST INSTANCE

Variation I: mm. 8 and 16



SUBSEQUENT DERIVATIONS

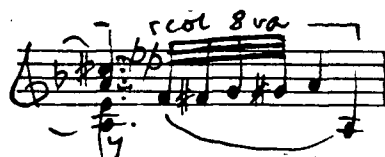
Variation VII: mm. 15 - 17

Variation IX: mm. 1 - 8, 11 - 16
(inversion)

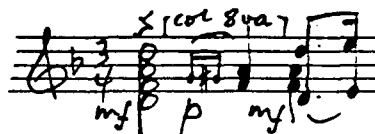
Variation II: mm. 8 and 16



Variation III: mm. 8 and 16



Variation IV: m. 1 etc.



Variation X: mm. 3, 6, 24 and 25



Variation XI: mm. 7, 10, 12 and 15



Variation XVI: mm. 2, 4, 8, 10 and 12



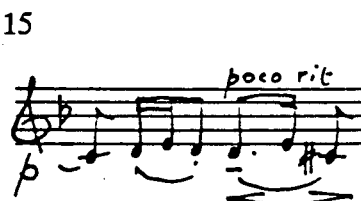
Variation III: mm. 1 - 2 (16th-note fragments)



Variation IV: mm. 1, 5, 7, 9

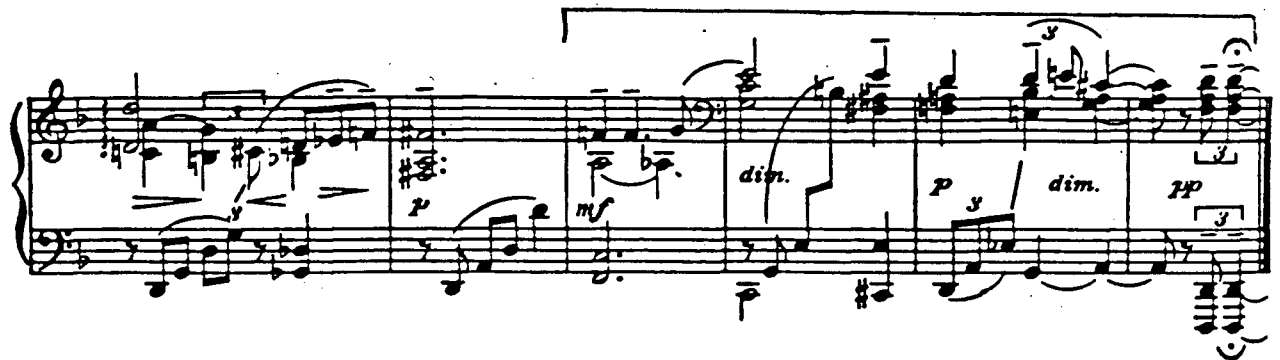


Variation VIII: mm. 2, 4, 7, 9, 11 and 15



In general, the use of melodically related fragments is the predominant device that binds the first part of the variation set, that is, from Variations I to XI.¹⁷ Note that some of the variations are linked to each other, as in Variations III and IV, and X and XI; note as well the subtle relationship that binds the theme's opening phrase to fragments of Variations III and IV. Sometimes an entire variation can derive from a previously stated melodic fragment: Variation IX, for example, inverts the interjections of mm. 8 and 16 in Variation I. The Coda's final phrase quotes material derived directly from the Theme but from its last phrase rather than the first, thus drawing the *Variations* to a logical close by means of recapitulatory material (Ex. 33):

Example 33: Corelli Variations, Coda, last 6 mm.



The only variation that combines melodic elements from one variation with rhythmic elements from another is Variation XVI. The melodic figure in mm. 2, 4, etc. is derived from the chromatic interjection in Variation II, but its triplet rhythm also binds it to the generative figure in Variation V (Ex. 34):

¹⁷The later Variation XVI is a special case (see p.29).

Example 34: Variation XVI, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.



Just as melodic devices had an important role to play in the first part of the variation set, so rhythmic motives predominate in the unification of the latter part of the variation set, that is, from Variations XV - XX.¹⁸

The only exception to this overview is Variation V from the first part of the set, whose triplet motion foreshadows the rhythm of Variation VI and part of the figuration of Variation VIII.

The following Chart illustrates Rakhmaninov's treatment of rhythmically related motives:

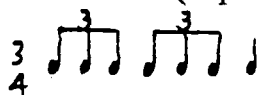
¹⁸The exception to this overview is Variation V from the first part of the set, whose triplet motion foreshadows the rhythm of Variation VI and part of the figuration in Variation VIII.

C H A R T I I

Rhythmically Related Motives

FIRST INSTANCE

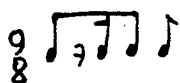
Variation V (triplet 8ths):



Variation VIII (triplet 16ths):




Variation XIII:



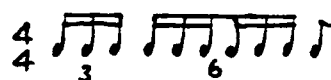
SUBSEQUENT DERIVATIONS

Variation VI:

Variation XV: 

Variation XVI: mm. 2, 4, 8, 10

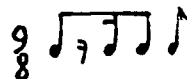
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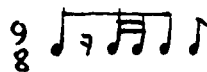
Variation XVII:



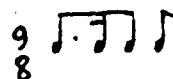
Variation XVIII:



Variation XIX (first half):



Variation XX:



Triplet motion, last used in Variation VIII, reappears in Variation XV, providing an undulating accompaniment to the expressive cantabile melody in D flat. The following Variations, XVI and XVII, exhibit further triplet fragments that relate them rhythmically to each other as well as to earlier ones. Note that the motive in Variation XIII generates three consecutive variations, XVIII - XX. This large cumulative bloc is undoubtedly the rhythmic climax of the work.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMPARISON OF *CORELLI* AND *PAGANINI* VARIATIONS

Structure

While a few modern writers have commented on the fact that the *Corelli Variations* served as a prototype for the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43,¹ a detailed comparison of their overall form and texture is lacking. Though it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a structural analysis of the two works, it is nevertheless worthwhile to comment upon their salient points in common.

Both the *Corelli Variations* and the *Paganini Rhapsody* assume ternary forms resulting from a perceived removal of rigid thematic application in what might be termed their "middle sections". It is also in these latter areas, in keeping with ternary form, that modulation occurs. Chart III compares the three large structural blocks of both works:

¹See, for example, Flanagan's "Sergei Rachmaninoff": 4 - 8 and Stephen Walsh's "Sergei Rachmaninoff": 8.

CHART III

Ternary Structures of Corelli and Paganini Variations

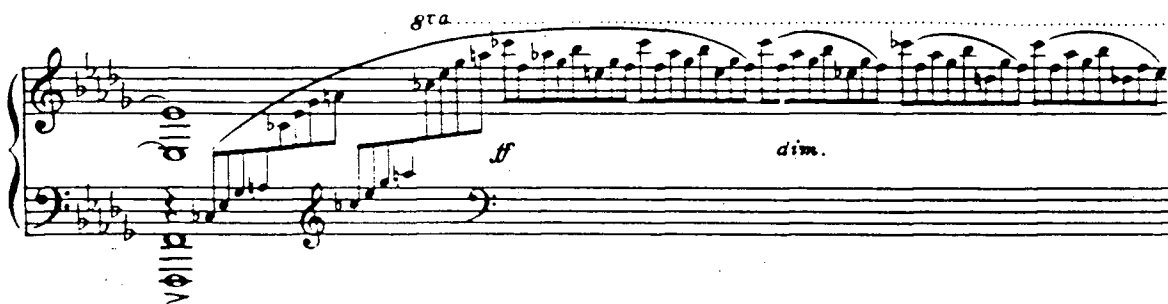
| Corelli Variations | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Theme - Var. XIII | Intermezzo - Var. XV | Var. XVI - Coda |
| Key area: tonic | modulatory | tonic |
| i | i - I ^b - I ^b | i |
| d | d - D ^b - D ^b | d |
| Paganini Rhapsody | | |
| Intro. - Var. X | Var. XI - XVIII | Var. XIX - XXIV |
| Key area: tonic | modulatory | tonic |
| i | iv VI ii ^b IV ^b | i |
| a | d F b ^b D ^b | a |

The first section of each work treats the thematic material according to strict variation form. There is no modulation from the area of the tonic key.

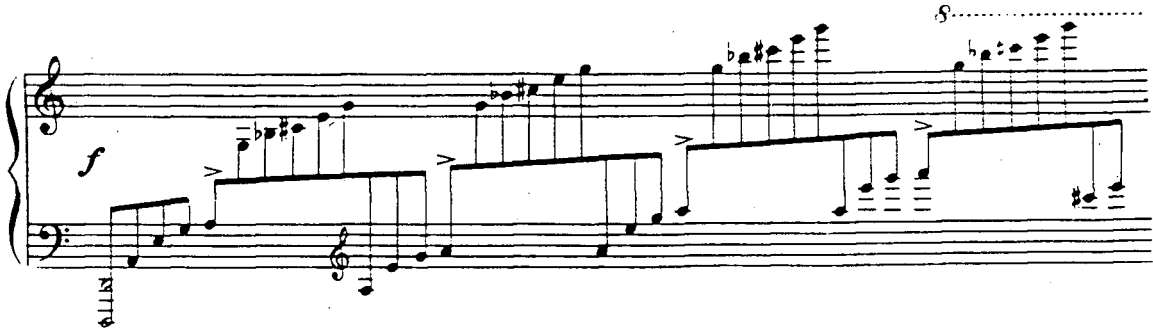
The Intermezzo of the *Corelli Variations* is recognized as the beginning of a central section because of its freer treatment of the theme. It is semi-improvisational, whereas up to this point Rakhmaninov followed a rigid theme structure. It is also evident that the Intermezzo's purpose is to modulate to D^b, a contrasting key area: the cadenza-like flourishes pass through the tonal centres of F⁷, A^{b7}(enh.) and B⁷(enh.). This constant modulation is the second clue that alerts one to the presence of a new section. A similar, but more elaborate, mid-section is announced at m.10 of the *Rhapsody's* Variation XI. As in the *Corelli*, the theme is here treated very freely, so that the Variation is mainly concerned with modulation from the tonic, a minor, to d minor.

The cadenza in Variation XI is also foreshadowed in the *Corelli Variations'* Intermezzo (Exx. 35a and b):

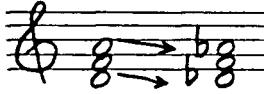
Ex. 35(a): Corelli Intermezzo, m. 13.



Ex. 35(b): Rhapsody, Var.XI, m. 13.



The orchestra abandons the tonal centre of a minor to rest on D^b and D chordal structures, while the piano continues the dissolution of tonal areas with chromatic cadenza flourishes through mm.10-13. Variations XII (d minor), XIII (d minor), XIV (F), XV (F), XVII (b^b minor) and XVIII (b^b minor) all treat the thematic material freely, particularly in the piano writing. Variation XVIII uses the inversion of the theme.

Although ternary forms typically have middle sections of contrasting keys, it is worthwhile to point out the different approach used in both works. Whereas the *Corelli Variations* modulate directly to the D^b tonality of Variations XIV and XV by a side-slipping technique  the *Paganini Rhapsody* has a more elaborate scheme, as one would expect in a large work. Modulation from Variations XII - XVIII can be thought of as triadic in nature:

XII / XIII

XIV / XV

XVI / XVII

XVIII

d vii[#] F I^V b^b i⁷ ^bVII⁹_{V⁹} D^b

Note that the central sections of both works are not only modulatory, arriving at remote key areas (ultimately D^b in each work), but that they remove a very strict thematic structure.

Furthermore, the third sections of each work also bear important similarities. First, they announce their return to the tonic with an abrupt change of character, tempo and tonal area (Exx. 36a and b):

Example 36(a): Variation XVIII, mm. 38 - 42 and *A tempo vivace* before Variation XIX, Paganini Variations.

Piano solo

Musical notation for Piano solo, measures 38-42. The notation includes a treble and bass staff with various musical symbols such as *p*, *dim.*, *rit.*, and *pp*.

Orchestra

A tempo vivace

Musical notation for Orchestra, measures 38-42. The notation includes a treble and bass staff with various musical symbols such as *f*, *p*, and *1*.

Example 36(b): Variation XV, Corelli Variations, mm. 22 - 26 and Variation XVI, mm. 1 - 2.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The top system, labeled 'Example 36(b)', shows Variation XV of the Corelli Variations (mm. 22-26) and Variation XVI (mm. 1-2). The notation is in G minor (three flats) and 3/4 time. Variation XV features a crescendo (cresc.) leading to a dynamic shift to piano (p) and a ritardando (rit.). Variation XVI is marked 'Allegro vivace' and 'mf', with complex rhythmic patterns and fingerings indicated by numbers 1-5.

Second, the last sections return to the previous technique of rigid thematic structure found in the first structural blocks.

Style

It is worthwhile to comment upon the stylistic similarities in keyboard writing that relate the *Variations* to the *Paganini Rhapsody*, since the former is considered to be a smaller model of the greater work that followed. Walsh has compared Variation V of the Corelli Variations (see Ex. 13, p. 23) with Variation XXI of the Paganini

Rhapsody.² He states that the brilliant arpeggiated variations of the Corelli Variations appear to anticipate the Paganini theme (Ex. 37):

Example 37: Variation XXI, Paganini Rhapsody mm. 1 - 3.

Piano solo
Un poco più vivo

The musical score for Variation XXI of the Paganini Rhapsody, measures 1-3, is presented in two systems. The top system is for the Piano solo, and the bottom system is for the Orchestra. The Piano part begins with the instruction 'Un poco più vivo' and 'p staccato'. It features a series of arpeggiated figures, primarily triplets, which become more complex and include sixteenth-note patterns in the final measure. A 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking is placed above the Piano part in the third measure. The Orchestra part, marked 'p', provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios, mirroring the Piano's arpeggiated figures.

He might have gone even further to suggest that the linear and astringent writing in Variation XIX of the *Paganini Rhapsody* also bears much in common with the above-mentioned Variation V from the *Corelli* set (Ex. 38):

²Sergei Rachmaninoff: 19.

Example 38: Variation XIX, Paganini Rhapsody, mm. 1 - 4.

Piano solo
L'istesso tempo
quasi pizzicato

Orchestra

A textural similarity can also be drawn between Variation X of the *Corelli Variations* and the *Rhapsody's* Variation XVI (Exx. 39a and b):

Example 39(a): Variation X, Corelli Variations, mm. 1 - 2.

Allegro scherzando

Example 39(b): Variation XVI, Paganini Rhapsody, mm. 5 - 7.

Piano solo

43

Orchestra

p

mf

dolce e grazioso

Although Rakhmaninov was careful to create a fine balance between piano and orchestral texture, he seized opportunities to cast the piano in a very low register, recalling the texture of some of the *Corelli Variations*. Compare, for example, Variation XIX of the latter with Variation XXII of the *Paganini Rhapsody*. The effect is dry and motor-rhythmic, the case also in Variations VIII and IX of the *Rhapsody*. Variation X of the latter also begins in the low register, associating the darkness of the timbre with the resurgent *Dies Irae* theme.

Earlier, the writer drew attention to the importance of "string" devices in the *Corelli Variations*, a stimulus not confined to this work alone: Variation XXIV of the *Paganini Rhapsody* uses a figure possibly inspired by the "Campanella" ("Clochette") theme from

Paganini's Violin Concerto in b minor, op. 7, in Fritz Kreisler's arrangement for violin and piano (Exx. 40a and b):

Example 40(a): Paganini-Kreisler: La Clochette, mm. 76 - 92.

Tempo I.

Example 40(b): Variation XXIV, Paganini Rhapsody, mm. 1 - 2.

A tempo, un poco meno mosso

Piano solo

p staccato

Arpe

Orchestra

p

The elements of American jazz that first appeared in Rakhmaninov's writing with the composition of the *Corelli Variations* are also present in the *Paganini Variations*. The off beats, triplets and ostinato of Variation IX are an example (Ex. 41):³

Example 41: Variation IX, Paganini Rhapsody, mm. 1 - 5.

Piano solo
L'istesso tempo

Orchestra

This brief comparison of Rakhmaninov's two large-scale works for piano indicates there can be little doubt that the *Paganini Rhapsody* is indeed indebted to the *Corelli Variations* for its textural and structural novelties. The following points may serve to sum up the argument:

1. Their themes both derive from well known violin tunes and employ pianistic devices inspired by string figuration.
2. The *Paganini Rhapsody* consciously uses the *Dies Irae* theme (Variations VII, X and XXIV), while the *Corelli Variations* relate to the ancient chant by identical underlying melodic cells.
3. They both fall into three structural blocks.
4. They both have textures that are lean and economic compared with earlier works.

³See also Variation X at figure 28 and the "ragtime" Minuet of Variation XII.

5. They both display a new linear style of piano writing.
6. There is evidence of ostinato-type rhythms, perhaps as a result of contact with Neoclassicism.
7. Both contain new rhythmic elements strongly related to jazz.

CONCLUSION

Rachmaninoff's last works suggest a sincere attempt at stylistic revaluation in terms of an age that was leaving him behind: and, what is more, these works often show the scars of struggle: a tug-of-war between the musical ideals of this century and the last - with the composer squarely in the middle.¹

If Rakhmaninov had ceased composing in 1917 one could justifiably state that his music remained firmly rooted in a deeply personal post-Romantic eclecticism. Without refuting the fact that Rakhmaninov was essentially a conservative within the mainstream of 20th-century music, it is vital to recognize that he was nevertheless progressive in his stylistic tendencies. The *Piano Concerto no. 4* in 1926 may have foreshadowed some new tendencies in the composer's style; the first solo work for piano after this event, the *Corelli Variations*, confirmed the trend five years later. As one writer put it, "Classical influences were loose in the musical world, progressive ones, and these influences, coincidental or no, began to show quite unmistakably in the composer's working method."²

¹Flanagan, "Sergei Rachmaninoff," p. 8.

²Ibid, p. 7.

In summation, the new tendencies of the *Corelli Variations* (evident also in the *Paganini Rhapsody* that followed), may be considered:

1. the sparseness of keyboard texture, and economy of writing;
2. a lesser emphasis on Romantic rhetoric;
3. the incorporation of string-influenced figuration;
4. the vitality of the music, with some influences from American jazz;
5. logical and well balanced structures.

The fact that Rakhmaninov seemed to treat the *Corelli Variations* with a little disdain is indicative of his enormous capacity for self-criticism, as well his hypersensitivity towards public opinion. It can be said that he scarcely gave this last solo work for piano a chance. While performing it in the 1931 - 32 season, he felt obliged to cut out certain variations whenever the audience seemed restless. To a colleague he wrote:

I've played them here about fifteen times, but of these fifteen performances, only one was good. The others were sloppy. I can't play my own compositions! . . . I was guided by the coughing of the audience. Whenever the coughing increased, I would skip the next variation. . . . In one concert, I don't remember where - some small town - the coughing was so violent that I played only 10 variations out of 20.³

It is a pity that Rakhmaninov did not create another work for solo piano after the *Corelli Variations*, for it would have been interesting to see if his stylistic direction continued along the same paths. This turning point came perhaps too late in a long life that would soon pay the physical consequences of many years of arduous touring.

³Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff* pp. 280 - 81.

Yet if there is nothing especially contemporary about the style of the *Corelli Variations* and the *Paganini Rhapsody*, it is certain that the use of clear textures and skilfully constructed structures should undoubtedly be considered as much a characteristic of Rakhmaninov's style as the use of free-soaring melody and technical display for which Sergey Rakhmaninov, this Titan of the piano, has long been celebrated.

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