

# philharmonia orchestra

## Listening guide to Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini with Nikolai Lugansky

### Nikolai Lugansky – Piano

*Musical excerpt*

They call it a piano concerto, but the name is *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. It was completely written abroad, I think in the USA, completed in 1932 or 1933 [sic]. The work became very popular and very famous. It's the only work of Rachmaninov which became also a ballet. A Russian choreographer, Fokine [Michel Fokine, 1880-1942], made a ballet called *Paganini* on the music of Rachmaninov.

This is a cycle of variations – 25 variations of the theme of Paganini, the very famous theme of Caprice No. 24:

*Musical excerpt*

This is the main theme, but actually we could call it also variations on two themes because from the second variation comes the second theme, the theme of Dies Irae, which became for Rachmaninov also a very important symbol, at the end of his life, a symbol of death.

The piece starts not with the theme, if you look at the score. The piece starts with an introduction:

*Musical excerpt*

And then comes the first variation – only orchestra.

*Musical excerpt*

And after the first variation comes the theme.

*Musical excerpt*

And then comes the second variation. It's quite original. I don't remember any examples like this.

The popularity of this work is of course connected with variation number 18.

*Musical excerpt*

*Des-dur* [D-flat major] is the tonality of happiness, of love, of passion. In every concerto there is a *des-dur* episode like in the reprise of the finale in the second concerto.

*Musical excerpt*

The slow movement of the Third Concerto is mostly in *des-dur*.

*Musical excerpt*

And this small episode, which I called just Souvenir de [...] in the Fourth Concerto, in the finale, is also in *des-dur*.

*Musical excerpt*

So this 18<sup>th</sup> variation is in *des-dur*. I don't know if many listeners know what the music is. It's just the same theme [plays] but like a mirror [plays].

*Musical excerpt*

Niccolò Paganini comes back with his pizzicato, his famous pizzicato which was impossible for other violinists [to play] many years after him.

*Musical excerpt*

At the very end, this material of Dies Irae sounds.

*Musical excerpt*

And here the orchestra plays the Dies Irae.

*Musical excerpt*

The very last bar is still Paganini.

*Musical excerpt*