



# RACHMANINOV

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## Piano Sonata No. 2 Variations on a theme by Chopin

Konstantin Scherbakov, Piano



## Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

### Variations on a theme by Frédéric Chopin, Op. 22 • Morceaux de fantaisie, Op. 3 Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 36

Sergey Vasilyevich Rachmaninov was among those Russian composers who chose exile, rather than remain in Russia after the Revolution of 1917, the consequent civil turmoil and, as it turned out, the years of despotic oppression that followed. He was born at Semyonovo in 1873 into a family of strong military traditions on his mother's side and more remotely on his father's. A tendency to extravagance had depleted his father's fortunes, making it necessary to sell off much of their land and dissipating his wife's dowry. As a result of this, the childhood of Rachmaninov was largely spent at the one remaining family estate at Oneg, near Novgorod. The reduction in family circumstances had at least one happier result. When it became necessary to sell this estate and move to St Petersburg, the expense of educating the boy for the Imperial service proved too great. Rachmaninov could make use, instead, of his musical gifts, entering St Petersburg Conservatory at the age of nine with a scholarship. Showing no particular industry as a student and lacking the attention he needed at home, in 1885 Rachmaninov failed all his general subject examinations at the Conservatory and there were threats that his scholarship would be withdrawn. His mother, now separated from her husband and responsible for her son's welfare, arranged, on the advice of one of her relations, the well known pianist Alexander Ziloti, that the boy should move to Moscow to study with Zverev, a teacher known to impose the strictest discipline. In Zverev's house, however uncongenial the rigorous routine, Rachmaninov acquired much of his phenomenal ability as a pianist, while broadening his musical

understanding by attending concerts in the city. At the age of fifteen he became a pupil of Zverev's former student Ziloti, a musician who had also studied with Tchaikovsky, Nikolay Rubinstein and, thereafter, with Liszt. Rachmaninov had lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Sergey Taneyev and Arensky, and his growing interest in composition led to a quarrel with Zverev and removal to the house of his relations, the Satins.

In 1891 Rachmaninov completed his piano studies at the Conservatory and the composition of his first piano concerto. The following year he graduated from the composition class and composed the notorious *Prelude in C sharp minor*, a piece that was to haunt him by its excessive popularity. His early career brought initial success as a composer, halted by the failure of his first symphony at its first performance in 1897, when it was conducted badly by Glazunov, apparently drunk at the time, and then reviewed in the cruelest terms by César Cui, who described it as a student attempt to depict in music the seven plagues of Egypt. Rachmaninov busied himself as a conductor, accepting an engagement in this capacity with Mamontov's Moscow Private Russian Opera Company. He was only able to return to composition after a course of treatment with Dr Nikolay Dahl, a believer in the efficacy of hypnotism. The immediate result was the second of his four piano concertos, a work that has proved to be one of the most immediately popular of all he wrote.

The years before the Russian revolution brought continued successful activity as a composer and as a conductor. In 1902 Rachmaninov married Natalya

Satina and went on to pursue a career that was bringing him increasing international fame. There were journeys abroad and a busy professional life, from which summer holidays at the estate of Ivanovka, which he finally acquired from the Satins in 1910, provided respite. During the war, however depressing the circumstances, he continued his concert engagements, not being required for military service, as he had anticipated. All this was interrupted by the abdication of the Tsar in 1917 and the beginning of the Revolution.

Rachmaninov left Russia in 1917. From then until his death in Beverly Hills in 1943, he was obliged to rely largely on performance for a living. Now there was, in consequence, much less time for composition, as he undertook demanding concert-tours, during which he dazzled audiences in Europe and America with his remarkable powers as a pianist. His house at Ivanovka was destroyed in the Russian civil war and in 1931, the year of his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, his music was banned in Russia, after he had added his signature to a letter to The New York Times drawing attention to the atrocities being committed by the then Russian government. The ban was withdrawn two years later. He spent much time in America, where there were lucrative concert-tours, but established a music publishing-house in Paris and built for himself a villa near Lucerne, where he completed his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in 1934 and his *Third Symphony* a year later. In 1939 he left Europe, to spend his final years in the United States.

Rachmaninov wrote his *Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22*, in 1902 and 1903. For his theme he took Chopin's *Prelude, Op. 28, No. 20, in C minor*, adding a series of 22 variations well suited to his own style of performance. While these include versions of the material of some elaboration and rhythmic

complexity, others, as in the case of the first variations of the set, offer relatively simple textures.

The five *Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3*, were written in the autumn of 1892, when Rachmaninov was nineteen and had just completed his studies in composition at Moscow Conservatory. He gave the first performance at a concert in Kharkov towards the end of the same year. Two of the pieces, including the famous *Prelude*, formed part of his programme in London in 1903, when he conducted his orchestral work, *The Rock*. In 1940 he revised the *Mélodie in E major* and the *Sérénade in B flat minor*. The mood of each piece is generally described in the title, while the second seemed to many to epitomize Rachmaninov's style in its drama and implicit feeling of melancholy.

In 1909 Rachmaninov undertook his first American concert-tour, from which he returned early in the following year, now to assume ownership of the estate at Ivanovka. There followed a further period of intense activity as a performer, conductor and composer. It was in 1913, during a holiday with his wife and children in Rome, that he started work on *The Bells*, inspired by the poem of Edgar Allan Poe, to be completed at Ivanovka and first performed that winter in Moscow. The same period saw the composition of the second of his two piano sonatas and the first performance by the composer of the sonata in Moscow in December. Rachmaninov revised the sonata in 1931, cutting some 120 bars and rewriting and clarifying the texture of several passages, notably in the development sections of the movements. The sonata was dedicated to the pianist Matvey Presman, director of the Rostov Academy, and a fellow-pupil with Rachmaninov in the house of Zverov. Presman's dismissal in 1912 had led Rachmaninov in turn to resign from his position as Vice-President of the Russian Musical Society. It was

to Presman that, as a boy, he had dedicated his first attempt at composition.

The *Piano Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 36*, in its original form makes heavier technical demands on a performer and includes extended passages of virtuoso piano-writing. The first movement opens with a bold assertion of the key of B flat minor and a descending fragment of melody which will appear soon transformed into the major tonality. There is a transition using characteristic dotted rhythms, followed, after a short cadenza, by the second subject, a gentle D flat major theme in a dotted compound rhythm almost suggesting a siciliano. It is in the development that Rachmaninov made the principal changes of the second version, perhaps occasioned by his concern, in 1931, about the state of his fingers, which threatened to make further performance difficult. The original development contains passages calling for considerable virtuosity and leads to an emphatic return of the principal key and of the descending melodic figure, soon to be followed by the return of the second subject in G flat major. It is with the descending melodic figure of the first subject that the movement ends. There is a tenderly descending modulation to open the second movement, leading from

D major to the E minor *Lento*, a tenderly lilting theme based on a descending sequence. This leads to a romantic G major, with a return to the E minor theme bringing a dynamic climax. A place is found, in what follows, for reminiscences of the first movement, with the descending melodic figure of its first subject and an allusion to the gentler secondary theme. The movement ends with a return to the *Non allegro* with which it had opened, modulating now from the E major of the final section of the *Lento* to C major, and thence to the B flat major that starts the final *Allegro molto*. Here, as in all three movements, the revised version of 1931 made cuts, with passages sometimes completely rewritten. The opening thematic material is marked by a descending rush of notes, followed by strongly marked chords. There is typically romantic lyrical secondary material and both these elements are developed, before a final recapitulation, the three sections at once recognisable from the opening notes and marked chords with which they begin. The sonata ends with an emphatic and positive B flat major chord.

**Keith Anderson**

## Konstantin Scherbakov

Hailed by critics at the Lucerne Festival as a “modern Rachmaninov”, and the triumphant winner of the first Rachmaninov Competition in Moscow in 1983, Konstantin Scherbakov launched his international career in 1990 at the XXth Chamber Music Festival of Asolo where he performed Rachmaninov’s complete works for piano solo in four recitals to the manifest approval of Sviatoslav Richter. Born in the Siberian town of Barnaul, Konstantin Scherbakov made his debut there at the age of eleven as soloist in Beethoven’s *First Piano Concerto*. Soon after he moved to Moscow to continue his musical education at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory with the legendary teacher Lev Naumov, whose assistant he later became. Since winning an array of prizes at prestigious international competitions in Montreal, Bolzano, Rome and Zurich, he has performed with all the leading orchestras of the former Soviet Union and given recitals in more than a hundred cities. Konstantin Scherbakov has lived in Switzerland since 1992. His concert activity has brought participation in major festivals – including those of Frankfurt, Bregenz, Bodensee, Luzern, Schubertiade Feldkirch, Lugano, Sorrento, and the Klavier-Festival Ruhr – radio and television broadcasts (ARD, SF, Radio France, DRS 2, BBC, among others) as well as recitals, orchestral performances and tours all over the world. Boasting a phenomenal repertoire of some fifty concertos and a similar number of recital programmes, Scherbakov has recorded music from Bach to Strauss and Scriabin and from Beethoven to Medtner and Respighi, and he has a current commitment to record for Marco Polo the complete piano music of Leopold Godowsky. His acclaimed contribution to the Naxos Liszt piano music series includes critically acclaimed performances of Liszt’s transcriptions of Beethoven’s *Symphonies*. His recording of Godowsky’s *Sonata in E minor* for Marco Polo was awarded the German Critics’ Prize in December 2001, and his recording of the *24 Preludes and Fugues* of Shostakovich for Naxos received the Classical Award 2001 at Cannes. As a former teacher of the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire and Professor at the Winterthur Conservatoire, Scherbakov is also in increasing demand as a teacher, with master-classes in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Japan and Cuba.





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Rachmaninov was known during his lifetime not only as a composer, but as a pianist of considerable skill and virtuosity. In its original form, the *Piano Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 36*, makes considerable technical demands on the performer and includes extended passages of virtuoso piano writing. The composer revised the work in 1931, cutting out extensive passages and clarifying textures. The *Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22*, composed in 1902 and 1903, add a series of 22 variations, well suited to Rachmaninov's own style of performance, to Chopin's *Prelude, Op. 28, No. 20, in C minor*, while the five *Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3*, feature some of the composer's most characteristic music, particularly the second piece in its drama and implicit feeling of melancholy.



## Sergey RACHMANINOV

(1873-1943)

### Variations on a theme by Frédéric Chopin, Op. 22

1	Theme: Largo	1:12
2	Variation 1 – Moderato	0:32
3	Variation 2 – Allegro	0:13
4	Variation 3	0:13
5	Variation 4	0:45
6	Variation 5 – Meno mosso	0:29
7	Variation 6 – Meno mosso	1:07
8	Variation 7 – Allegro	0:16
9	Variation 8	0:19
10	Variation 9	0:22
11	Variation 10 – Più vivo	0:32
12	Variation 11 – Lento	1:18
13	Variation 12 – Moderato	2:28
14	Variation 13 – Largo	1:19
15	Variation 14 – Moderato	1:39
16	Variation 15 – Allegro scherzando	1:23
17	Variation 16 – Lento	1:14

18	Variation 17 – Grave	1:27
19	Variation 18 – Più mosso	1:04
20	Variation 19 – Allegro vivace	1:18
21	Variation 20 – Presto	1:05
22	Variation 21 – Andante	3:05
23	Variation 22 and Coda – Maestoso	4:53

### Morceaux de fantaisie, Op. 3

24	Elégie	5:53
25	Prélude	3:53
26	Mélodie	4:39
27	Polichinelle	3:16
28	Sérénade	3:11

### Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 36 (1913, rev. 1931)

29	Allegro agitato – Meno mosso	8:33
30	Non allegro – Lento – Più mosso	6:54
31	Allegro molto – Poco meno mosso – Presto	5:29

### Konstantin Scherbakov, Piano

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