



RACHMANINOV

Piano Concertos Nos. 1 & 4
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Boris Giltburg

Brussels Philharmonic · Vassily Sinaisky

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1
(1890–91, final rev. version 1919)

28:25

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Vivace – Moderato | 13:42 |
| 2 | II. Andante | 6:26 |
| 3 | III. Allegro vivace | 8:17 |

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934)

24:46

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 4 | Introduction: Allegro vivace | 0:08 |
| 5 | Variation I: (Precedente) | 0:20 |
| 6 | Tema: L'istesso tempo | 0:19 |
| 7 | Variation II: L'istesso tempo | 0:19 |
| 8 | Variation III: L'istesso tempo | 0:26 |
| 9 | Variation IV: Più vivo | 0:29 |
| 10 | Variation V: Tempo precedente | 0:29 |
| 11 | Variation VI: L'istesso tempo | 1:14 |
| 12 | Variation VII: Meno mosso, a tempo moderato | 1:10 |
| 13 | Variation VIII: Tempo I | 0:33 |
| 14 | Variation IX: L'istesso tempo | 0:32 |
| 15 | Variation X: – | 0:56 |
| 16 | Variation XI: Moderato | 1:31 |
| 17 | Variation XII: Tempo di minuetto | 1:27 |
| 18 | Variation XIII: Allegro | 0:29 |
| 19 | Variation XIV: L'istesso tempo | 0:44 |
| 20 | Variation XV: Più vivo. Scherzando | 1:11 |
| 21 | Variation XVI: Allegretto | 1:52 |
| 22 | Variation XVII: – | 1:54 |
| 23 | Variation XVIII: Andante cantabile | 2:58 |
| 24 | Variation XIX: L'istesso tempo | 0:29 |
| 25 | Variation XX: Un poco più vivo | 0:37 |
| 26 | Variation XXI: Un poco più vivo | 0:27 |
| 27 | Variation XXII: Un poco più vivo (alla breve) | 1:48 |
| 28 | Variation XXIII: L'istesso tempo | 1:03 |
| 29 | Variation XXIV: A tempo un poco meno mosso | 1:21 |

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40
(1926, second rev. version 1941)

26:47

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|------|
| 30 | I. Allegro vivace (alla breve) | 9:53 |
| 31 | II. Largo | 6:56 |
| 32 | III. Allegro vivace | 9:58 |

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Piano Concerto Nos. 1 and 4 • Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1

Thinking of Rachmaninov's first piano concerto, it is not easy for me to reconcile the work's relative unpopularity with the abiding love I have felt for this piece ever since I first heard it around the age of seven or eight. By relative unpopularity, I mean of course in the unavoidable comparison with the concertos *Nos. 2* and *3*, and even the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* – all of which are performed and recorded significantly more often, and seem to have had an easier time gaining the love of audiences and promoters. Rachmaninov said as much to his friend, the composer and musicologist Alfred Swan:

'I have rewritten my *First Concerto*; it is really good now. All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily. And nobody pays any attention. When I tell them in America that I will play the *First Concerto*, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the *Second* or *Third*.'

To my ears and heart, the *First Concerto* has it all. To start with, it contains many of Rachmaninov's most beautiful melodies – from the main theme of the first movement [1 0:42], filled with heart-aching yearning and nostalgia, to the lush, warm-summer-day-laziness of the middle section of the finale [3 2:12]. And in between, the theme of the second movement [2 1:05] – a long-breathed phrase of singular beauty, tender and loving. It unfolds unhurriedly with artless simplicity, capturing with every melodic turn and every surprising harmony the subtlest, most complex shades of emotion. I can't ever play it without feeling a sense of wonder and gratitude that such beauty exists.

Drama and excitement are present in abundance. We encounter it immediately at the very opening: the short fanfare – reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's 'Fate' motif in his *Fourth Symphony* – is interrupted by a most impressive of piano entrances, a veritable avalanche of chords and octaves. But the bravura writing is not just a grand gesture to showcase the soloist's prowess: I see it as an expression of great inner turbulence and tension, which is then picked up by the orchestra at 1 0:18 – the opening motif played twice as broadly, clashing with powerful bell-like chords in the piano, resulting in a fateful, doom-laden atmosphere. The appearance of the main theme shortly thereafter is then felt like a warm embrace, despite its inherent sadness. Similar intensity recurs at the end of the exposition [3:58], at the climax of the development [7:25], both at the beginning and the end of the magnificent cadenza [10:23 and 12:33] and at the coda [13:14], leading to a final, tragic collapse.

The concerto is also full of brilliant writing for the soloist – not only in the impressive chordal passages in the opening or the cadenza, but also in the fast (and very cool!) fingerwork sections at 1 1:44 and 8:15, in the glittering passages surrounding the second theme of the first movement [3:04 and with a variation at 9:30], and even more so throughout the blazing outer sections of the finale, where the difficulty seems to spike, and a whole array of pianistic techniques is called upon by Rachmaninov. He also gives us plenty of opportunities for lyricism and 'singing' on the instrument – not just the aforementioned theme of the second movement, but also the main theme of the first movement [1:10] or the beautiful soliloquy at 3 3:25.

Taking all of this together, it is difficult for me to put a finger on why the concerto has never achieved a (much) higher level of popular success. The structure is clear and uncluttered, the orchestration is warm and rich yet not overwrought, the emotions are saturated and punchy and the ending is as effective and triumphant as one would like in a brilliant concerto. Perhaps, if anything, this is a testament to the incredible impact of the other concertos – the overpowering emotional waves of the *Second*, the epic narrative of the *Third*, the sheer coolness and fun of the *Rhapsody*. Yet it doesn't seem a fully satisfying explanation. Perhaps the *First Concerto* is still waiting for its champion – in the same way that Vladimir Horowitz championed the *Third Concerto* in the 1930s. And I hope that over the past decades the other concertos have established themselves sufficiently so that in the coming years we, as audiences, will have more attention and love to also give to Rachmaninov's earliest work in the concerto genre.

Speaking of 'earliest', I should mention that the version of the concerto recorded on this album – the one almost exclusively performed these days – is the revised version of 1917. Rachmaninov completed the first version in July 1891, barely 18 years old, and premiered it at the Moscow Conservatory in 1892. He seems not to have played it again in this form, though it was performed several times by the concerto's dedicatee, the pianist and conductor Alexander Siloti.

Later in his life, Rachmaninov wanted to come back to the concerto and revise it thoroughly. He wrote in spring 1908 to his close friend, the musicologist Nikita Morozov:

'Now tomorrow I'm planning to take up my *First Concerto* and look through it, and then decide how much toil and time a new version would take, and whether it's worth bothering with at all. I am so often asked about this *Concerto*, and this *Concerto* is so horrible in its current form – this is the main thing – that I would love to deal with it and, if possible, bring everything in it into a decent shape. Though, of course, much will have to be written anew, as the orchestration is even worse than the music. So, tomorrow I will decide this question, and I would like to decide it positively.'

In the end, Rachmaninov only undertook the revision in 1917, finishing it in October that year, as he and his family were staying at home for safety amid the unfolding October Revolution. Comparing the two versions is fascinating, and shows Rachmaninov's tremendous compositional growth in the intervening years. The melodies are identical, but almost nothing else remains from the original! Rachmaninov's model for the early version was Grieg's *Concerto*, but almost no sign of that remains either. Rachmaninov simplified and clarified the structure, cutting multiple sections. He reworked the orchestration, remaining within the sound world of the original, but filling it with new colours and adding much-needed transparency. Piano textures, which in the original could be simple almost to the point of banality, were re-written throughout, adding variety and, once again, transparency. The finale was basically composed anew – most of the muscular, spiky, fiery music of the outer sections did not exist in the original version. And finally, while harmonic progressions mainly remained unchanged, the exact harmonies are almost all subtly different, as if a previously bland dish was remade with an inventive and memorable combination of harmonic 'spice'. Altogether, the revision in my opinion is a tremendous success – as Rachmaninov himself wrote, he managed to keep the youthful spirit and energy of the original while giving it new life, using all the knowledge and skill he possessed at the peak of his creative powers. In the same letter to Morozov he mentioned that he wanted to make a similar revision to the *First Symphony* and the *Caprice bohémien*, but in the end neither of these revisions took place.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40

The story of the *Fourth Concerto* is a somewhat painful one of multiple failures, with the work never achieving success in Rachmaninov's lifetime. He completed the original version of the concerto in 1926 and premiered it in 1927 – the first new major composition in ten years, following a long period of creative silence. That premiere was a complete fiasco, with the work badly received by both the audience and the critics. The reviews were the worst the Rachmaninov had met with since the disastrous premiere of the *First Symphony* in 1897, 30 years earlier. To quote just one particularly vitriolic critic, he found the concerto 'long-winded, tiresome, unimportant, in places tawdry.' It was 'now weepily sentimental, now of an elfin prettiness, now swelling toward bombast in a fluent orotundity.' It was criticised simultaneously for not being as expressive as the *Second Concerto*, and for not being modern or forward-looking enough.

Prior to the premiere, Rachmaninov had also expressed some unease about the new concerto in a letter to his friend, the composer Nikolay Medtner. He himself felt the concerto was too long, saying, tongue in cheek, that he believed it would need to be performed over several evenings, like Wagner's *Ring* cycle. He was concerned that the orchestra was never silent, thus making it, in his words, a concerto for piano *and* orchestra instead of a *piano* concerto. And finally, he noticed that the theme of the second movement [31 0:23] was the theme of the first movement of Schumann's *Piano Concerto* and humorously berated Medtner for not pointing it out to him.

Following the critics' much harsher response, Rachmaninov revised the concerto extensively before its publication in 1928, making significant cuts and re-writing some of the material. But despite the changes, the published version did not turn out to be more successful than the first. Discouraged, Rachmaninov withdrew the work from publication until a final revision took place in 1941. Then, Rachmaninov shortened the work by another ten percent, revised the orchestration and largely restructured the finale. This was the version he himself recorded with Eugene Ormandy that year, tinkering with the score up until the last night before the recording, and lamenting afterwards that he did not have the chance to re-orchestrate the concerto once again.

Like the *First Concerto*, the *Fourth*, too, could not for a long time escape the very long shadow cast by Rachmaninov's more popular works in the genre – though I am very happy to see it start coming into its own in recent years. For me it occupies a unique place in Rachmaninov's output, with a musical 'flavour' unlike any of his other works (perhaps the *Third Symphony*, 1935–36, comes closest). It has a sense of a composer who is still searching, or is in transition – perhaps part of the reason the critics faulted it. And while in the end this wasn't quite the direction which Rachmaninov was to take in his final works, I dearly love the snapshot of his creative vision as seen in this concerto.

From the three versions, the best in my eyes is the last – the leanest and most focused. I do not consider the harsh critical response to the original version to be justified, but I do feel the changes made by Rachmaninov improved the concerto. For instance, he removed many passages which were, in my opinion, somewhat empty (what we musicians call 'water'). He also removed several jazz-like phrases: those were a lovely gesture towards a musical genre much loved by Rachmaninov as a listener, as well as towards his new home in the US. But they did feel startlingly out of place within Rachmaninov's own style. The result, in the 1941 version, is of a clear and unified musical language, well within Rachmaninov's world, while still showing his progression from the lush Romantic textures of the earlier concertos to a more transparent, muscular way of writing.

These cuts also meant large parts of the structure were excised – for example, the entire reprise of the finale, with the end of the development now directly segueing into the coda. This could be (and indeed was) seen as a fault in itself, but I would challenge this point of view: for me, the resulting unpredictability of the structure works wonderfully with the sense of searching, almost of improvising on the spot exhibited by much of the musical material. I would call this concerto, for a lack of a better word, rhapsodic – a captivating tale, freely-narrated, with a somewhat vaguely-defined outline, whereby the experience of listening is simultaneously an engaging experience of discovering the shape of the work we are listening to. And Rachmaninov did leave us more than enough structure to still be able to orient ourselves through the music.

To help with this, I would like to include a brief guide for listening. The theme of the first movement [\[1\]](#) is literally a rising scale, first appearing in harmonised chords in the piano (0:09 – what a noble, defiant gesture, after the nervy, offbeat orchestral introduction!). But then it permeates the entire movement, from polyphonic exchanges between the orchestra and the piano [1:12], through an English horn soliloquy [1:45], a mysterious chant in the horns in the middle of the development [4:59] – surely one of the more inspired moments of the concerto! – and later, at [6:16] as the piano surges upwards, crossing the entire keyboard to bring the music to the main climax of the first movement.

The recapitulation that follows is fascinating – Rachmaninov does reprise all the sections and melodies, but in the wrong order: first the second theme [7:10], then the material from the beginning of the development [8:03], then the bridge section [8:18], and only at the very last, the opening theme [8:52], which is robbed of its chordal pathos and given as a single line to the violins instead, to soar above calm waves in the piano – a moment of deep-seated, unquenchable nostalgia.

The same nostalgia opens the second movement [\[2\]](#) with a few unsentimental, almost offhand piano phrases, before the orchestra introduces the main motif at [0:23]. This motif is repeated countless times, always with different harmonies, colours, keyboard registers and orchestration. Even the aural shock at [4:01] is derived from the same motif, as is the receding bass and timpani line at the end of the movement [6:32]. The only moment that introduces new material is the ardent section at [5:33], which quotes verbatim a much earlier work by Rachmaninov – the *Étude-tableau, Op. 33 – No. 3 in C minor* from 1911. That *Étude-tableau* was not published during Rachmaninov's lifetime; he withheld it from publication, and the theory that he had already then known that he would use it in his next concerto is fascinating, though most likely unprovable either way.

The reworked finale [\[3\]](#) is the most fragmented movement of the three. It opens with a theme and variation, which might not be perceived as such at a first listen, but here is the schema:

- theme part A [0:13] – fiendish writing for the piano!
- theme part B [0:27]
- theme part C [0:38]
- orchestral variation on part B [0:50]
- joint variation on part A [1:00] – cool canon between piano and trumpet!
- second variation on part B [1:14]
- variation on part C [1:23]

Then a light-hearted transition section [1:40] leads to the second theme [2:03] – a multi-partite section in itself, with two beautiful moments in its centre: the exquisite poly-melodic texture at [2:35] and the piano sequence at [2:47].

A free meditative section [3:56] slots in after the exposition. Then a short cadenza leads to a brilliant development [4:57], which is mostly based on the opening theme. After it ends, instead of the expected repeat of the second theme, Rachmaninov writes a prolonged coda, which contains three threads loosely linking the finale with the first movement. First, the very opening of the concerto seems to make a return at [7:08]. Then, the coda builds up to a climax which mirrors that of the first movement [8:49] – perhaps the most important link, as these two climaxes tower over the concerto like mountain peaks, echoing each other across a large divide. And finally, the concluding passages in the piano [9:37] are built on two sequences of *descending* scales, to match the ascending scale motif which opened the concerto, before the triumphant G major finish.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

The story of the Rachmaninov last piano concerto – and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is a concerto in all but name – is finally a happier one. Rachmaninov composed it in summer 1934 at his newly-built summer home on Lake Lucerne, Villa Senar (the name stemming from **SE**rgei and **NA**talia Rachmaninov). Spending his summers there seemed to diminish the longing he felt for his old homeland, and the will to compose appeared to have slowly come back. The *Rhapsody* was premiered in November that year with Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra, and has been a huge success with audiences ever since.

It is a blast of a piece, its electrifying rhythmical energy working alongside the irresistible catchiness of the source material – Niccolò Paganini's famous *Caprice No. 24* for violin solo, which has inspired works by dozens of composers, among them Brahms, Liszt and Lutosławski. The *Rhapsody* is in fact a set of 24 variations on Paganini's theme, with the briefest of introductions [4], and with the first variation [5] *preceding* the theme: it outlines the theme's salient notes, like a melody's skeleton without any connecting material – similar to Beethoven's idea in the variations that form the last movement of the *Eroica* symphony.

From there on, Rachmaninov takes us on a white-knuckle ride, with an underlying current of danger throughout: as if something dark or even demonic lurked just outside the corner of our eye. And yet, the overriding sense of the music is *fun* – to which I attribute a significant part of the *Rhapsody's* popular success. Despite the serious content of most of the variations on their own (excluding, perhaps, the wonderful sparkle of *Variation XV* [20]), the work as a whole feels exhilarating and entertaining. It seems to want to delight and amaze us, perhaps more than to move us deeply in the same way Rachmaninov's other major works invariably do. His inherent warmth is present as ever, though in smaller doses, most manifestly showing itself in the glorious *Variation XVIII* [23] – ingeniously derived from the inversion of Paganini's theme. 'This one is for my agent', Rachmaninov said, half-jokingly, but if we disregard for a moment the kitschy baggage which this variation (somewhat unfortunately) carries upon its back, we will find one of the most beautiful, tender and soul-stirring moments to have ever come from Rachmaninov's mind and heart. Surrounded by the unsentimental muscularity of the *Rhapsody*, the variation shines even brighter – both in itself, and as a throwback to a different era, bathed in memory's golden light.

As the *Rhapsody*'s music is so clear, I will only point out one last thing – starting from *Variation VII* ¹², a second theme joins in: the opening notes of the medieval chant *Dies irae*, a motif Rachmaninov was obsessed with throughout his life. In the *Rhapsody* it works wonderfully alongside the main theme, its connotations of fate, doom and death enriching the subliminally dark narrative of the work. Its appearances come to a climax at the immensely satisfying passage at ²⁹ 0:53, as it is blasted out by the entire forces of the large orchestra. And shortly thereafter, the music – and Rachmaninov – bow out on a final, wry joke, as Paganini's motif vanishes into thin air.

Boris Giltburg

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Brussels Philharmonic



The Brussels Philharmonic was founded in 1935 by the Belgian public broadcaster NIR/INR. It enjoys an excellent reputation for performing premieres of new works, and has collaborated with world-renowned composers. The orchestra's historic home is the Flagey Building, one of the top concert halls in the world. At an international level, the Brussels Philharmonic has made a name for itself through regular appearances in major European capitals. International representation by IMG Touring has brought further tours and concerts across Japan and the US. In addition, the orchestra is internationally acclaimed for its expertise in film music, one highlight being the Oscar-winning score for *The Artist*. The orchestra's recordings, released on Deutsche Grammophon, Palazzetto Bru Zane, Klara, Brussels Philharmonic Recordings and Naxos, have been warmly received by the international press and received the ECHO Klassik award, Classica Choc de l'année and Diapason d'Or de l'année, among others. The Brussels Philharmonic is an institution of the Flemish Community. www.brusselsphilharmonic.be

Vassily Sinaisky



Photo: Marco Borggreve

Russian conductor Vassily Sinaisky enjoys a highly distinguished career holding important positions with many of the world's leading orchestras and opera houses. Most recently he held the position of chief conductor and music director of Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, and in September 2020 he became music director of the Janáček Philharmonic Ostrava. Sinaisky is also Conductor Emeritus of the BBC Philharmonic, Conductor Emeritus of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra and honorary conductor of the Malmö Symphony Orchestra. He has previously held the positions of principal guest conductor of the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, music director and principal conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra and music director of the Russian State Orchestra. His guest conducting has included the London Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra both in Amsterdam and at the Lucerne Festival, as well as the Seoul Philharmonic, Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and Cleveland, St. Louis, Houston and Utah symphony orchestras among others.

Boris Giltburg



Pianist Boris Giltburg is lauded across the globe as a deeply sensitive, insightful and compelling musician. Born in 1984 in Moscow, he moved to Tel Aviv at an early age, studying with his mother and then with Arie Vardi. He went on to win numerous awards, notably the First (and Audience) Prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 2013. Giltburg has appeared with leading orchestras worldwide such as the Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, Israel Philharmonic, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, NHK Symphony, WDR Cologne, Oslo Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France and Baltimore and Seattle symphonies. He made his Australian debut in 2017 and has frequently toured China and South America. Since his BBC Proms debut in 2010 he has appeared at many of the major festivals, and has played recitals at Carnegie Hall, the

Concertgebouw Amsterdam, London's Southbank Centre and the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. In 2020 he recorded on audio and audiovisual all 32 Beethoven sonatas, released in a box set in 2021. He has also recorded the complete Beethoven piano concertos with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Vasily Petrenko, with whom he previously recorded both Shostakovich concertos, winning a Diapason d'Or; this recording also featured his own arrangement of Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8* for solo piano. The first volume in his complete Rachmaninov concerto recordings series, coupled with the *Études-tableaux* and subsequently the *Corelli Variations* and performed with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Carlos Miguel Prieto, won the award for Best Solo Recording at the inaugural Opus Klassik Awards, and his recital discs of Rachmaninov, Liszt and Schumann have been similarly well received. Giltburg is an avid amateur photographer and blogger, writing about classical music for a non-specialist audience.

www.borisgiltburg.com

Rachmaninov's *First Piano Concerto* was composed while he was a student at the Moscow Conservatoire, then fully reworked before he left Russia in 1917 and again in 1919. It is hard to explain why it never achieved a higher level of popularity – it has all of the melodic beauty, passion and brilliance found throughout the composer's music. The *Fourth Piano Concerto* was much revised after harsh criticism at its premiere but it occupies a unique place in Rachmaninov's *oeuvre*, showing a progression from lush Romanticism towards the muscular transparency of his later works. The electrifying *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is a concerto in all but name – the work's sense of fun and demonic bravura has ensured its place among the most-loved and often performed works for piano and orchestra.

Sergey
RACHMANINOV
(1873–1943)

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|--------------|--|--------------|
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Boris Giltburg, Piano
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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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