



Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini



Are your fingers ready for a serious workout? Well, this month **Bridget Mermikides** has arranged a corker of a piece to test your technique, stamina and determination. Good luck!

ABILITY RATING

Moderate/Advanced



Info

Key D Tempo 46 bpm CD TRACKS 22-23

Will improve your... Melody and accompaniment separation
 Melodic phrasing Fretboard and harmonic knowledge

Russian composer and piano virtuoso Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was one of that rare breed of composers who managed to marry high technical skill with accessibility in their music. His work is characterised by powerful orchestral forces and deep harmonic ideas blended with highly expressive melodic themes. Rachmaninoff wrote prolifically in a range of contexts, but large-scale piano and orchestra virtuoso pieces, was a recurring approach. This richness of orchestration, stunning virtuosity and harmony makes it a challenge to translate his music satisfyingly to the solo guitar.

In GT264 we tackled the ever-popular Vocalise, and here we turn to Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini op.34, which was written in his Swiss villa in the summer 1934. It is in the form of a 'theme and variations', a well-established structure which is defined

by a series of melodic, key, rhythmic and harmonic re-interpretations of a short musical theme. Examples include Mozart's 12 variations for piano of a French folk song (most recognisable as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star these days), Elgar's Enigma variations (of which the Nimrod variation we

“I’VE TRANSPOSED THE MELODY UP A SEMITONE TO D, AND USED DROP-D TUNING. THIS MAKES THE ARRANGEMENT MORE RESONANT”

played in GT225), and Paganini's 24 Caprices, a series of pedagogical and virtuosic showcase violin pieces.

You may recognise the last of these (Caprice 24, of which there are 11 variations and 1 finale) as the theme for The Southbank Show, or as a mainstay of neo-classical metal (Yngwie's introduction on Prophet Of Doom, or loosely referenced in Eugene's Trick Bag from the movie Crossroads). It is in fact the theme of Caprice 24 that Rachmaninoff uses in a rather meta fashion as the source for his Paganini theme and 24 variations, displaying both compositional artistry and unbelievable pianistic virtuosity. He starts very inventively with an introduction followed by the first variation and then the main theme, followed by the remaining 23 variations. They are all wonderful, but for some reason variation no.18 in D, (which ingeniously is based on an upside down version of the theme) has had an enduring popularity in its own right in various arrangements. Its sumptuous melody supported by lush romantic harmony has made it a mainstay of TV and film music, perhaps most famously in the 1993 film

Groundhog Day, which Phil Connor (Bill Murray) plays to Rita (Andie MacDowell) after stopping the band as she walks into the bar. He plays it as a solo rubato melody and then with the band as a jazz-blues standard and clearly his practice pays off.

I've transposed the melody up a semitone to D, and used drop-D tuning. This makes the arrangement more resonant and allows for the extraordinary pedal-tone harmonies, such as in bars 32-36 where a series of chords is underpinned by a D pedal, even though D is not found in the chords themselves.

The challenge here is clear: a melody needs to sing over a consistent accompaniment, so this involves our usual thumb-finger separation in the plucking hand, and fretting-hand control. However, the 3/4 metre is generally broken into triplets in the accompaniment and the melody in quavers and semiquavers, so there are occasions (such as the last beat of bar 31) where there is a three against two feel which require additional control and musical understanding.

However, I think it has worked really well as a guitar solo and I hope you enjoy learning this magical masterpiece!

NEXT MONTH Bridget arranges the well known and beautiful hymn *Abide With Me*

TECHNIQUE FOCUS

Barre chords

Barre chords on classical guitar can be tiring for the hand and forearm so it's good practice to minimise them if possible. Adjusting fingering and only using barre chords when absolutely necessary is a worthwhile endeavour. Also, paying attention to which actual strings you need to be pressing down and training the first finger to apply weight to only those strings is an important part of technical development. Play a G major barre chord at the 3rd fret; 3 5 5 4 3 3 (low to high strings); you need a full barre but only need to be pressing sixth, second and first strings, and therefore the barring first finger can be curved and only be pressing said strings.



Rachmaninoff: among the all time great composers



TRACK RECORD We are lucky enough to have Rachmaninoff himself playing the piece (Victor 1934). [But for less crackle, try Stephen Hough with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra (Hyperion 2010) featuring the Rhapsody (alongside Piano concertos 1-4); or his stunning 2013 Proms performance. For a great introduction to Rachmaninoff, the 'Best Of' (Phillips 1993) has the Rhapsody and other amazing works.

RHAPSODY ON A THEME OF PAGANINI { RACHMANINOFF

PLAYING TIPS

[Bars 1-9] The theme starts at 7th position with the melody on the second string for a warm, sumptuous tone. It shifts down to 2nd position in bar 2 and then back up the second string in bar 3. The accompaniment is in triplets and can be played with a fair amount of rubato. Project the melody as lyrically and beautifully as you can. Bar 6 has some stretches. Take care to give the melody notes their full value so keep them pressed down where necessary.

CD TRACK 23

[Bars 10-17] At bar 10, beat 3 you will need a 2nd-fret barre and the fourth finger of the fretting hand gets busy at the end of bar 10 in order to keep hold of the B and D notes underneath. The fourth finger can then slide up to the C note on bar 11 without losing contact with the string. At the end of bar 12 the melody reoccurs, this time with a fuller G(add9)/A chord and the melody is fingered on the first string.

Andante Cantabile $\text{♩} = 46$

Drop D tuning

Chords: Gadd9/A, D, Em, D, D, Em/A, D, Dm6, A, A9, Em, Bm, Bm9/A, F#m, F#m9/E, Bm, Bm7, Dm7, E13, Bm7/A, A, Gadd9/A

Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Staff: E, B, G, D, A, D

Bar numbers: 1, 4, 7, 10

Amplitude: a, m, i, p, p

CD TRACK 23

appears again at the end of bar 23, this time with the melody on the first string, but it can be done on the second string if you prefer. And of course if you find fingerings that you prefer, and still sound good, feel free to use them.

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RHAPSODY ON A THEME OF PAGANINI { RACHMANINOFF

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 23

[Bars 26-33] At bar 28 we reach a D7 chord and from there on the harmony becomes much richer. Allow the melody notes to sustain correctly and at the same time pick out the accompaniment triplets as clearly as possible. The harmony is extraordinarily beautiful at this point and is changing on every beat so take your time and allow every note to speak clearly and with

plenty of feeling, to achieve the full musical effect.

[Bars 34-41] More lush harmony ensues here with the chromatically ascending chords in bars 35 and 36 before the octave A# which ends that section. There is then a final and very brief return of the melody before the piece reaches its tranquil conclusion.

The following table summarizes the chords and fret numbers for the guitar accompaniment across the provided bars:

Bar	Chords	Fret Numbers (E, B, G, D, A, D)
28	D7	8, 9, 7, 10, 0
29	B/D, Esus4, Em/G, Em7	7, 9, 8, 9, 7, 10, 8, 0, 7, 9, 11, 7
30	Dm13, F#	6, 5, 7, 0, 4, 3, 4, 2
31	G6/B, Bm7, A9, Gm6/D, D, A/D, D7	5, 0, 0, 2, 0, 2, 4, 2, 0, 5, 3, 5, 4, 2, 0, 6, 5, 7, 9, 10, 10, 9, 8, 9, 9, 8
32	C#7/D, Cmaj7/D, F#7/D	9, 8, 8, 8, 7, 0, 10, 10, 9, 9, 9, 8
33	B/D, Gm/D, Dsus2, A7#5/D, Daug/A, Eb aug/A, Am7, A7	7, 8, 7, 6, 8, 7, 8, 7, 0, 5, 6, 6, 0, 6, 7, 8, 8, 9, 15, 7, 8, 9
34	A7#5/D, Daug/A, Eb aug/A, Am7, A7, A#	5, 6, 6, 0, 7, 8, 8, 9, 18, 15, 15
35	Gadd9/A, D, A7	5, 3, 4, 0, 3, 2, 0, 0, 2, 3, 4, 2, 0, 2
36	D, A9/C#, A9/B, A9/A, D	3, 4, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 4, 0, 0
37		
38		
39		