

## Rachmaninov Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini – March 24, 2018

### *Scherzo Crypto*

Alexander Miller  
b.1968

“I always have been interested in composing; I started in junior high school,” Alexander Miller said in a telephone interview. “I’ve continued composing on the side ever since.” A Juilliard graduate in oboe, where he wrote pieces for his fellow wind students, Miller is now assistant principal oboist with the Grand Rapids Symphony.

Miller is an eclectic, composing on subjects as varied as nineteenth-century French literature, Balinese gamelan music, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington, fireworks displays, a remix of Pachelbel's Canon in D and the translation of encaustic (a combination of wax and resin) painting into a clarinet concerto.

Miller composed *Scherzo Crypto* in 2014 on commission from the San Antonio Symphony. He joins a small collection of composers – the most notable being J. S. Bach and Edward Elgar – who composed musical works containing mind-bending enigmas, number puzzles and even visual conundrums. Miller writes: “I cannot resist the urge to deconstruct elegant things and to find the gems nestled inside. Most of the composers I have known are like this, by the way: intensely curious about the inner workings of beauty.

“For my latest commission, a concert opener for the San Antonio Symphony... I wanted to address this side of me and find a way to compose something that is simultaneously music and (if you want) a puzzle... It is a lively showpiece for full orchestra with a particular emphasis on the virtuosity of the strings and percussion. If you want to enjoy the piece as just that, it’s all there. I’m very proud of it.

“However, there is also a puzzle somehow hidden in the fabric of the piece. A word has been secretly woven into the music, spelled out many different times, always using the same method.

“The only thing I will ever reveal about the puzzle’s answer is that it is the name of a musical instrument.”

### **Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43**

Rachmaninov  
1943

Sergey

1873-

With the success of his Second Piano Concerto in 1901, Rachmaninov managed to divide his time comfortably among composing, conducting and performing, with composing his priority. But this idyllic lifestyle changed drastically with the 1917 Russian Revolution, which, as a conservative and traditionalist, he viewed with horror. That year, Rachmaninov left the country with his family never to return, eventually settling in the United States. His sources of income having dried up, he became a full-time pianist for the rest of his life, leaving him little time to compose.

One of Rachmaninov’s late works was the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, composed in 1934. The work is a set of variations based on the 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice from Niccoló Paganini’s Caprices for Violin Solo, Op. 1. This Caprice – itself a set of bravura variations – has also

served such diverse composers as Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms, Schnittke and Lutoslawski. Rachmaninov played the premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra in Baltimore under the baton of Leopold Stokowski.

In the Rhapsody, Rachmaninov reveals an inventiveness – and even an uncharacteristic sense of humor. While Paganini’s variations concentrate on virtuosic pyrotechnics, Rachmaninov imbues the little tune with a wide array of clever harmonizations, eccentric rhythms and changing moods. But however much the variation appears to stray from the theme, the underlying harmonic structure remains constant.

The piece opens with an introduction that hints at the theme to come, followed by the first variation (which he labeled “*precedente*”), a skeletal version of the theme itself, using only the first note of each of Paganini’s measures – Beethoven had used a similar device to open the set of variations in the Finale of the Symphony No. 3 (Eroica), a stunningly novel approach for the time. Only afterwards does Rachmaninoff present the theme in full, following it with 23 more variations and a mischievous two-measure coda. The Variations give the pianist the same kind of virtuosic workout as its model did for showman Paganini.

Rachmaninov provides two surprises that save the work from unrelenting repetitiveness so common with long sets of variations. One is in Variation 7 with the appearance of a second theme, the *Dies irae* chant from the Catholic Mass for the Dead that reminds mourners of the terrors of the Day of Judgment. It is a theme that recurs frequently in Rachmaninov’s music, usually in the most somber sections, but here it has a decidedly tongue-in-cheek flavor: While the piano plays the *Dies irae*, the orchestra continues to play the Paganini theme, with which it conveniently harmonizes perfectly. The *Dies irae* recurs in later variations, but always balanced by the main theme and never imposing its lugubrious atmosphere on the composition.

The second highlight occurs in Variation 18. Nearly all of Rachmaninov’s music is in minor keys. Yet, “compelled” by tradition to compose at least one variation in the opposite mode, he accentuated the contrast by not only composing Variation 18 in the major mode, but inverting the theme as well.

### **Enigma Variations, Op. 36 ‘Variations on an Original Theme’**

Edward Elgar  
1857-1934

If you look at photographs of Edward Elgar, read about his tastes or listen to his music, he projects the stereotype of Imperial Britain’s aristocracy or, as composer Constant Lambert described Elgar, “[the image of]... an almost intolerable air of smugness, self-assurance and autocratic benevolence...” His military bearing, walrus moustache, country gentleman’s dress – all very proper and Edwardian – matched his conservative, violently anti-Liberal ideas. His style appeared to have been fostered and fully sanctioned by the equally conservative Royal College of Music.

The reality was very different: Elgar was born to a lower middle class family and never served in the army. Worst of all, his father was a music store owner, or as the British used to say, “in trade.” And he was a Catholic. He was nervous, insecure, and prone to depression and hypochondria; he always carried a chip on his shoulder for not being “fully accepted.” Musically, he was completely self-taught. But to the chagrin of Britain’s music

establishment, Elgar – an “outsider” – was the first English composer since Henry Purcell (1659-1695) to achieve world fame. It was the *Enigma Variations*, composed in 1899 when he was 42 that propelled him out of his parochial obscurity to worldwide recognition.

Elgar had begun the Variations as a private amusement for his wife, Alice, whom he adored. He created musical portraits of their friends, later turning them into a proper orchestral composition at her suggestion. The expressive and stately theme was his own, but Elgar claimed that he had employed a second, hidden theme along with the main obvious one. This second theme has remained a mystery to this day, although in later years Elgar said that it was derived from a melody “...so well-known that it is strange no one has discovered it.”

The Elgar friends and their peculiarities are portrayed in the 14 variations, each of which is headed by a nickname or initials, making some of the identities a puzzle as well – although by now scholars have figured out the lot:

1. CAE: Elgar’s wife Caroline Alice, whose inspiration contributed to a romantic and delicate touch to the theme.
2. HDSP: H.D. Steuart-Powell, amateur pianist and chamber music partner of Elgar. The detached, rapid staccato note replicates the sound of the piano.
3. RBT: R.B. Townshend, author, eccentric and actor with a “funny voice.”
4. WMB: William M. Baker, a country squire and neighbor. The variation suggests that the man fancied the hunt.
5. RPA: Richard Arnold, son of poet Matthew Arnold, music lover, conversationalist and party wit. The contrast in the two parts of the variation suggests Arnold was eloquent on both serious and frivolous topics.
6. Ysobel: Isabel Fitton, an amateur violist with hopeless fingering difficulties.
7. Troyte: Arthur Troyte Griffin, well-known architect and terrible amateur pianist. The pounding of the timpani says it all.
8. WN: Miss Winifred Norbury, owner of an eighteenth-century house with a nervous laugh, both of which Elgar loved. It leads without pause to:
9. Nimrod (the Bible’s great hunter): A.J. Jaeger (“hunter” in German), an editor at Novello, Elgar’s publisher. Jaeger’s encouragement and support were crucial for Elgar in his major debut. His love for Beethoven is hinted at in a quote from the *Pathétique* sonata. This, the second longest of the variations, is traditionally performed as a separate piece to memorialize the death of an orchestra musician.
10. Dorabella: Dora Penny, a frequent visitor with hesitant speech, whose nickname derived from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*.
11. GRS: George R. Sinclair, organist; actually the variation is a musical description of Dan, Sinclair’s bulldog, falling into the river, paddling out and barking.
12. BGN: Basil G. Nevinson, amateur cellist and close friend.
13. \*\*\*: Lady Mary Lygon and a second, earlier, younger flame who had left Elgar heartbroken; one went to Australia, the other to New Zealand, hence the steamer engine thump and the quote from Mendelssohn’s *Calm Sea and Prosperous*

*Voyage*. The second part of the variation, a clarinet solo, suggests a wrenching farewell.

14. EDU: Edo, the nickname for Elgar himself, known only to his closest friends; his self-portrait sounds quite heroic.

Program notes by:  
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn  
Wordpros@mindspring.com  
www.wordprosmusic.com