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GHCD 2420

Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

1 **Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43** 21:38

CYRIL SMITH piano

Recorded: 1 October 1948 – Abbey Road Studios, London
(Columbia 33SX 1579 – mono; from 78s DX 1608-1610)

Ernö DOHNÁNYI (1877-1960)

2 **Variations on a Nursery Song, Op.25** 23:41

CYRIL SMITH piano

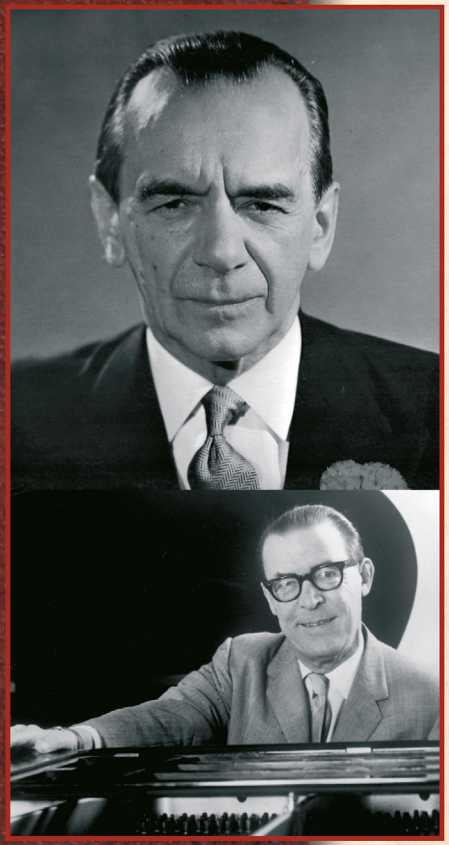
Recorded: 14 January 1953 – Abbey Road Studios, London
(Columbia 33SX 1579 – mono)

Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

3 **Symphonic Variations, Op.78** 22:22

Recorded: 20 & 22 February 1956 – Kingsway Hall, London
(HMV SXLP 20065 – stereo)

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA
conducted by
SIR MALCOLM SARGENT



Guild
HISTORICAL

SIR MALCOLM SARGENT

CYRIL SMITH

RACHMANINOFF
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

DOHNÁNYI
Variations on a Nursery Song

DVOŘÁK
Symphonic Variations

Philharmonia Orchestra

Recorded 1948-1956

A GUILD HISTORICAL RELEASE

- Master source: Recordings from the collection of Edward Johnson
- Remastering: Peter Reynolds
- Final master preparation: Reynolds Mastering, Colchester, England
- Photo of Cyril Smith courtesy of the Tully Potter Collection
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humorous allusions to other composers' music (including the 'Death' motif from Wagner's *Die Walkűre* (!)), somewhat tongue-in-cheek at times, yet remains entirely true to its creator. The essential humour of the piece – after all, the innocent little tune on which it is based ensures that we do not regard this work entirely as a 'serious' composition – together with the mastery and invention with which the composer treats the everyday subject, compels our admiration for Dohnányi's good nature and profound musicianship. None the less, the Passacaglia variation, No 10 (*Adagio non troppo*) reveals a welcome depth of utterance, far removed from the nursery.

Dohnányi himself later made two recordings of the work, in 1931 and 1956. Both recordings took place in London, where it was that Cyril Smith in the 1930s met and played for both Dohnányi and, later, Rachmaninoff. In particular, Smith became very close to Rachmaninoff, and was claimed by some sources to have received lessons from him, although the details are unclear, and probably exaggerated. None the less, from the late 1930s onwards, Smith became one of the finest interpreters of Rachmaninoff, recording for English Columbia the Second and Third Concertos and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini,* as well as the Second Suite for two pianos with his wife Phyllis Sellick. Smith's recording of Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto, conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, has been issued on a Guild GHCD 2423, coupled with Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony and Prelude in C sharp minor in Sargent's orchestration. Smith made two recordings of Dohnányi's *Variations on a Nursery Tune*, both conducted by Sargent (the first with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra), and it is Smith's later second recording, widely regarded as superior, which is reissued here – a performance of considerable virtuosity and sensitivity.

In 1956, at the age of 47, Cyril Smith suffered a stroke in Kharkov, whilst on a tour of the USSR with his wife Phyllis Sellick and a group of other British musicians. The stroke incapacitated Smith's left arm, effectively bringing his career to a premature end, although he gave subsequent concerts with his wife, with music arranged or specially composed for three hands at two pianos. He was also able to continue teaching, but his brilliant virtuoso career as a soloist was over. Owing to the recordings preserved on this and the companion Rachmaninoff CD, we can continue to admire and appreciate the magnificence of Cyril Smith's matchless pianism.

Symphonic Variations

The title 'Symphonic Variations' may not have been invented by Antonin Dvořák but it was a genre of composition that made its greatest impact in the latter half of the 19th-century, of which his example was soon to become the most significant work bearing the name. The 'symphonic' nature of such works is that the variations follow one another without a break, frequently forming a musical elision to preserve the continuity of the music, as opposed to the individual, single nature of what might be termed a 'standard' set of variations, with each more often separated by a short pause.

If there is uncertainty as from where or from whom Dvořák took the title, there is no doubt that the work that became his published Opus 78 made a considerable impression when it was heard in its final version in March 1887 under the composer's baton – so much so that it was soon taken up by Hans Richter in London and in Vienna that same year, since when it became one of the most frequently-played of Dvořák's works.

The work had first appeared ten years earlier, in 1877, as Dvořák's *Symphonic Variations on an Original Theme* (the Czech title, *Symfonické variace*). Dvořák was 36 at the time, and becoming established as a composer, but for reasons that are uncertain, although the work was apparently quite well received, it failed to catch on – even Dvořák's publisher, Simrock, turned it down. And so it languished in obscurity until Dvořák's reputation had grown to the point where he was frequently asked for new works; still feeling that the Variations had merit, Dvořák returned to the score, polishing it up so to speak, and brought it out as a new work with a later opus number, implying that it was entirely new. Simrock soon published this new version and, launched on its proper career, Dvořák's *Symphonic Variations* took their rightful place in the repertoire. The work is scored for a standard orchestra of the day: double woodwind (plus piccolo), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings – no tuba, harp or percussion (apart from timpani).

The concept of continuous variations for orchestra was, as it were, 'in the air' at the time. In 1885 the Belgian master César Franck's *Variations symphoniques* for piano and orchestra appeared, a work demonstrating a remarkable innovative fusion of Austro-Germanic symphonism with post-Lisztian cyclic form. The continuous nature of Franck's *Variations symphoniques* virtually defies analysis: there is disagreement as to how many 'variations' there are (from six to fifteen, depending on the commentator); Dvořák's Opus 78, however, is made up of 27 continuous variations in various tempos, with a fugal finale *Allegro maestoso*. The tonality of the work is largely anchored on C major but a series of increasingly subtle harmonic changes enhances the work's tension until a remarkable transitional modulation from the opposite tonality (G flat-F sharp) in the penultimate variations herald the triumphant return to the home key for the increasingly brilliant finale.

Sergei Rachmaninoff was approaching his 14th birthday at the time of the premiere of Dvořák's Opus 78. He had been born into a musical family in Novgorodian Russia in 1873, yet it was not his parents who identified the boy's great gifts but his first cousin Alexander Siloti (1863-1945), a pupil of Liszt, who arranged for him, at the age of 12, to become a pupil of Nikolai Zverev at the Moscow Conservatoire. Zverev's methods were rigorous but were what the youth needed: by the time he was 17, Sergei had become an exceptional pianist and budding composer, graduating in 1892 with the Conservatoire's Great Gold Medal. Although Rachmaninoff's career as pianist, composer and conductor prospered in the 1890s - despite the horrendous experience of the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony under Alexander Glazunov in March 1897 – it was the Second Piano Concerto of 1901, together with the early Prelude in C sharp minor, which made his name internationally. Other works reinforced his reputation in the succeeding dozen years or so before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, which was to lead to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the fall of the ruling Romanov dynasty and for Rachmaninoff to leave his homeland forever with his young family.

They settled first in the United States, where Rachmaninoff completed the revision of his First Piano Concerto, which he premiered in New York in 1919. Now in exile, Rachmaninoff temporarily abandoned his career as a composer and concentrated on becoming a travelling virtuoso and making gramophone records for the Victor Company. In April 1920 the great Irish tenor John McCormack recorded two songs by Rachmaninoff with obbligato solo violin played by Fritz Kreisler. The ensuing friendship with Kreisler saw Rachmaninoff making piano transcriptions of Kreisler's *Liebeslied* and *Liebesfreud,* and later recordings with Kreisler of Sonatas by Beethoven, Schubert and Grieg.

Kreisler introduced Rachmaninoff to 'La Folia', once attributed to Corelli, and in 1931 Rachmaninoff composed twenty variations for solo piano on that theme as his Opus 42, which he dedicated to Kreisler. His next work was another set of variations on a theme by a virtuoso violinist, the Caprice No 24 in A minor by Paganini, which had already been used for that purpose in solo piano works by various composers, including Schumann, Liszt and Brahms. But Rachmaninoff's variations were for piano and orchestra, his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* which he premiered on November 7th, 1934, in Maryland with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. It was an immediate success (unlike Rachmaninoff's Fourth Concerto, which had appeared in 1927 – it is only in recent decades that the Concerto's individual qualities have come to be recognised), and the *Rhapsody* was recorded in December 1934 by the same artists, since when it has become one of the most frequently performed and most deservedly popular of all works for solo piano and orchestra.

Although Rachmaninoff's *Paganini Rhapsody* is a continuous work, the variations tending to succeed one another without a break (with one short and notable exception), Rachmaninoff's 24 variations are grouped, so to speak, into three continuous sections, as the three movements of what one might consider to be a standard concerto. In addition, Rachmaninoff finds a connection between Paganini's Caprice and the plainchant Dies Irae (which had always fascinated the composer – it makes fleeting appearances in several of his works), and following the most famous (and subtly inspired) variation (No 18, in D flat major – almost always, in Rachmaninoff's work, a 'special' key, as in the Fourth Concerto and the *Corelli Variations*), sudden descending string pizzicatos lead into the final fast group of six. However, the score implies that the pizzicatos are part of the 18th variation, suggesting any pause after the quiet D flat major chord should be short – a sudden awakening from the reverie.

A year before Rachmaninoff began to revise his First Concerto, and at the height of the Great War which had broken out in August 1914, the Hungarian composer, pianist and conductor Ernst von Dohnányi had returned to the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest as professor, and soon Director, of the greatly-admired institution from which he had graduated in 1897. Two years after Dohnányi's graduation, Bösendorfer awarded the 22-year-old the first Hans von Bűlow Prize, founded in memory of the great musician who had died five years before. During the intervening 18 years until his return to Budapest, Dohnányi – like Rachmaninoff – had built an impressive career in Europe and in the United States as pianist and composer, teacher and conductor.

Some indication of Dohnányi's reputation may be gained from the fact that he was engaged by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in February 1914 in the triple role of composer, conductor and pianist. The concert on February 17th that year saw the German-born conductor Carl Panzer (who had also conducted the New York Philharmonic) direct Richard Mayr in Dohnányi's Three Songs for Bass Voice and Orchestra, his Opus 22, before Dohnányi gave the world premiere of his Suite in the Olden Style for solo piano, Opus 24, which he had completed in Berlin the previous year. The composer/pianist and Panzer, following the interval, returned to the platform to give the second world premiere of the evening: Dohnányi's Variations on a Nursery Song for piano and orchestra, Opus 25. It proved enormously popular, and, had the War not broken out six months later, the success of the work would have spread earlier than it did. As it was, it was not until January 1923 that Dohnányi could give the British premiere of the Variations, with Sir Henry Wood at Queen's Hall in London.

Comprising an introduction, theme, eleven variations and finale, it remains a brilliant work, outstandingly well laid out for the solo instrument, and superbly well orchestrated. It is full of subtly