

THE SOLO VARIATIONS OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF:
A Comparative Analysis of the Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22,
and the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the more underrated genres within the field of classical music is that of the variation set. Numbers are applied to symphonies: Beethoven has nine, Brahms has four, Shostakovich has fifteen. Numbers are applied to piano sonatas: Chopin has three, Schumann has four, Scriabin has ten. Numbers are even applied to piano concertos: Brahms has two, Tchaikovsky has three, Prokofiev has five. However, why is it not common to celebrate the number of solo piano variations that composers have written? When given the numerical treatment, the list is quite extensive: Mozart has fifteen, Beethoven has twenty-one, Mendelssohn has three, Brahms has six, etc. Composing solo piano variation sets is an undertaking that almost every influential keyboard composer has ventured upon. It is unfortunate that pianists and scholars often overlook such extraordinary pieces that showcase the ingenuity behind motivic variation.

Sergei Rachmaninoff, the pioneer behind some of the classical world's most cherished melodies and musical moments, published three long-form sets of variations in his lifetime: *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, Op. 22, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Op. 42, and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43. Of these three sets, two of them have found quite a following in concert programming: the Corelli and Paganini. However, only two of the three sets of variations are written solely for piano, with Paganini being categorized as a quasi-concerto—Rachmaninoff's "Fifth Concerto," so to speak. Exploring the intricacies of a symphonic work as a pianist is rewarding, but often not as a performer due to the challenges of gathering a full orchestra. Because of this, performing Rachmaninoff's solo variations can be a

much more rewarding experience due to the ample amount of opportunities for performance. The variations on themes by Chopin and Corelli stand as testaments to Rachmaninoff's virtuosity, ingenuity, and deep understanding of the piano's potential.

There are many reasons why a more intense focus should be placed on a composer's output of variation sets. First, understanding a composer's ability to craft a cohesive set of variations leads to a greater musical understanding of that composer's style. Variations are a perfect showcase of how a composer must excel in creativity within a structured form. Studying these pieces helps a performer understand how composers are able to manipulate themes, harmonies, rhythms, and textures while maintaining a recognizable core. In short, understanding how a composer varies a theme allows for a deeper insight into a composer's innovative mind. Additionally, placing more emphasis on variation sets reveals the ways that composers challenge performers with various technical aspects like dexterity, control, interpretation, and understanding of different musical styles. Each variation might demand different skills that provide a pianist with a more comprehensive technique. Further, variation sets offer a glimpse into the historical and cultural contexts in which they were composed, creating the opportunity for a composer to reflect upon the styles of their musical ancestors. For performers, variation sets could be described as the pinnacle of narrative achievement within performance and interpretation. Variations demand performers to showcase their interpretative skills as each variation requires a different emotional expression or technical prowess.

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to expose performers and scholars to the benefits of exploring variation sets, specifically the Chopin and Corelli Variations by Rachmaninoff. Through an in-depth look at each set, it will become apparent how Rachmaninoff matured as a composer over the thirty-year span of the two sets. However, before diving into the music itself,

it is pertinent to understand the circumstances surrounding Rachmaninoff while he wrote each set—circumstances that may have influenced each piece’s compositional style.

A Brief History

At the turn of the twentieth century, a Rachmaninoff in his late-twenties already knew the feelings that accompanied compositional successes and failures. Prior to 1900, Rachmaninoff had already written numerous pieces, including: his first piano concerto (Op. 1); works for piano and cello (Op. 2); a compendium of short piano pieces (Opp. 3, 10, 16); a suite for two pianos (Op. 5); an abundance of vocally oriented works (Opp. 4, 8, 14, 15, 17); and a few orchestral pieces (Opp. 7, 12), including his Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 13—the premiere of which famously sent Rachmaninoff into an over half-decade state of depression. Extensive as the list is, it is most important to note that each piece composed by Rachmaninoff prior to the year 1900 lacks any semblance to a single movement long-form compositional structure.

As the year 1900 arrived, Rachmaninoff—still in a depressive state following the disastrous premiere of his symphony—entered a period of compositional greatness. With a multitude of now-famous pieces composed in the first three years of the century (1900–1902), each piece was crafted in multi-movement or short-form structures, including: Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos, Op. 17; the world-famous Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18; the Cello Sonata in G Minor, Op. 19; both a cantata and cycle of twelve songs (Opp. 20, 21); and the compositional beginnings of Ten Preludes, Op. 23—the first of two sets of stand-alone preludes acting as a clear homage to the preludes of Frédéric Chopin that were written just sixty years prior.

Through the lyric and Romantic style of Rachmaninoff's works during this time, there is no doubt that he was deeply fascinated with the emotional style of Chopin's music. It is not merely a coincidence that such admiration and respect for Chopin led Rachmaninoff to embark upon a great compositional challenge: writing his first long-form piece in one movement. Still in the process of completing his Chopin-inspired preludes, Rachmaninoff began to write a continuous set of variations around Chopin's dark and sorrowful Prelude No. 20 in C Minor, Op. 28. By the age of thirty, Rachmaninoff completed his Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22, in 1903—the same year as his Ten Preludes, Op. 23. At around thirty minutes in length, the Chopin Variations pay homage to Chopin's compositional language, exemplifying Rachmaninoff's ability to channel Chopin's graceful melodies and emotional depth while infusing his distinctive harmonic language and technical brilliance.

Unfortunately, the Chopin Variations were not a celebrated success and are still not often performed in today's concert halls. The lengthy set of twenty-two variations has been claimed to struggle with maintaining concertgoers' attention. Yuli Engel, a Russian critic at the premiere of the work, stated that the variations were "much less interesting, at least on first acquaintance...The variations, though significant, are not always worthy of the beautiful theme that inspired them."¹ As Rachmaninoff's first outing into the world of long-form compositions, it seems as if he struggled with making each variation flow to the next in a cohesive manner. Rachmaninoff himself notates in the score that certain variations and codas can be omitted, hinting that many of the variations are not necessary to the overall structure of the piece. The trifled reception of the variation set may be the reason why Rachmaninoff did not attempt to publish another set of piano variations for almost thirty years.

¹ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (New York, New York University Press, 1956), 100

Over these thirty years, Rachmaninoff was forced to overcome many personal challenges. Between 1902 and 1931, Rachmaninoff found himself at the confluence of historical, personal, and musical developments that significantly shaped his life and artistic output. Geopolitical shifts, including the socio-political climate in Russia with the Russian Revolution of 1905, served as a precursor to the larger upheavals that would greatly affect Rachmaninoff. Following the period of the Russian Revolution, Rachmaninoff faced a lukewarm reception of his Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30, composed in 1909. The initial criticism deeply affected Rachmaninoff, plunging him into a creative slump. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 further disrupted Rachmaninoff's life. As the conflict engulfed Europe, Rachmaninoff witnessed the tumult from afar, eventually leading to his departure from Russia in 1917 due to the turmoil of another Russian Revolution. Settling in the United States, Rachmaninoff faced the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural milieu while continuing to compose and perform. Such factors added to the ten-year publishing hiatus between his *Nine Études-Tableaux*, Op. 39 (1916) and his Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Minor, Op. 40 (1926).

The interwar years in the United States were a period of transition and adaptation for Rachmaninoff. He grappled with the dual roles of a performing artist and composer, striving to maintain his creative identity in a new environment. Facing financial difficulties exacerbated by the Great Depression, Rachmaninoff struggled with his compositional output, only publishing another five opuses in the remaining seventeen years of his life. After his poorly received final piano concerto, he published a set of Russian songs (Op. 41) the following year in 1927. It was not until 1931 that Rachmaninoff published another composition.

Interestingly, his next piece was a set of solo piano variations—a genre that he had not visited in twenty-seven years. The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Op. 42, presents another

captivating instance of Rachmaninoff's genius. Inspired by a theme he attributed to the Baroque composer Arcangelo Corelli, these variations underscore Rachmaninoff's ability to weave short, intricate musical pieces together in another long-form set of variations. Rachmaninoff's treatment of Corelli's theme distinguishes his ability to transcend the original Baroque material, transforming it into a modern, yet Romantic landscape where each variation moves forward in a cohesive manner.

After another years-long compositional hiatus, Rachmaninoff composed and published the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43, in 1934. It is noteworthy that two of his final four works were composed within the genre of theme and variations. His final two published works, both symphonic, include his Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 44 (1936), and his Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940). Rachmaninoff died three years later in 1943.

It is notable that despite Rachmaninoff's prolific output, his focus on variations was relatively limited, with only two sets for solo piano. Yet, within these sets, Rachmaninoff displays an astonishing range of expression that showcases his reverence for musical tradition while still remaining wholly distinct. Rachmaninoff's Chopin and Corelli Variations are not mere tributes or adaptations, they are transformative reinterpretations that demonstrate his consummate artistry. The almost three decades between the two pieces reveal a subtle, yet complete transformation in Rachmaninoff's compositional style. Overall, understanding his developing outlook on long-form structure, melodic application, and harmonic developments throughout his life can be better understood through a comparison of the Chopin and Corelli Variations. These two pieces stand as a framework of his solo piano repertoire that his sonatas, etudes, preludes, and even concertos can be viewed. Studying the similarities and differences of these variation sets uniquely shows an understanding of Rachmaninoff's musical evolution.

Chapter 2: The Themes

Any proper analysis of a set of variations can only be understood if the theme is first fully explored. Rachmaninoff chose two drastically different themes for his solo piano variations: a Romantic prelude for piano and a Renaissance-era Iberian folk tune. To understand the complexities and ingenuities that Rachmaninoff expands upon within each variation set, attention must first be directed at each of the themes.

Prelude in C Minor, Op. 28 No. 20

A musical pillar for the piano, Frédéric Chopin had an incredible output of music ranging from the Polish dances of his mazurkas and polonaises to the technically progressive nature of his etudes and preludes. Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28, stand as a collection of masterful piano compositions that showcase both technical brilliance and profound emotional depth. Chopin composed these preludes between 1835 and 1839 during a pivotal period in his life: dealing with his exile from Poland, his deteriorating health, and his developing relationship with the author Aurore Dupin (who wrote under the pen name George Sand).

The preludes were not conceived as a unified set, but rather as individual pieces. Each prelude is relatively short, ranging from around thirty seconds to a few minutes in duration. They collectively cover all twenty-four major and minor keys (following in the footsteps of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*), but are distinctly arranged by major and relative minor keys moving around the circle of fifths. The concept of a prelude in Chopin's time was evolving, departing from its earlier association with an introductory piece to a larger work—and in many of Bach's

famous keyboard works, a fugue. Chopin's preludes, however, transcend this traditional notion, standing alone as expressive and complete musical entities.

Chopin's Prelude No. 20 in C Minor, Op. 28, is a powerful and emotive composition first referred to as the "Funeral March" prelude by Hans von Bülow. Another title for the prelude, given by Jane Stirling (one of Chopin's last pupils), was "La prière"—the prayer.² She further mentioned in a letter to Chopin's sister that "under Chopin's fingers, the chords of this prelude sounded more like heavenly music than like sounds from this world."³ It is one of the most famous and frequently performed pieces in the set, characterized by its solemn and mournful atmosphere achieved by a slow tempo and poignant melody. Marked *Largo*, the prelude follows a twelve measure, three-part phrase structure with a concluding tonic chord in measure thirteen. The prelude is best defined as following a modified ternary form (AABA) where the second and third A sections are slightly modified (Aa¹Ba²). Because of the added repeat, the full structure is described as Aa¹Ba²Ba².

Due to the prelude's slow rhythmic movement, an expansive array of harmonies is present within each phrase (see Example 2.1). The first four-measure phrase (Aa¹) finds itself focusing on a strong tonicization of four different key areas: C minor, A-flat major, F minor, and G major. The first two measures follow the traditional tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic progression beginning in C minor followed by a sudden change to A-flat major in measure two. The third measure steers the harmony back to tonic through an assumed setup of dominant-tonic resolution, but quickly steers away through a secondary dominant treatment of C, tonicizing F minor. The final beat of measure three, however, is hotly debated as being treated as an E-flat or an E-natural. Different manuscripts by Chopin show different pitches. If treated as an E-flat, a

² Kallberg, "Chopin's March, Chopin's Death," 11.

³ National Institute Fryderyk Chopin, "Prelude in C Minor, Op. 28 No. 20."

plagal movement from iv–i is sounded; if treated as an E-natural, an unresolved moment sets up the concluding measure of the phrase. Measure four alternates between D⁷ and G major, tonicizing another key center yet again. When reverse-analyzing the final beat of measure three as an E-natural, it is clear that C major is simply acting as the subdominant of G major. Again, it is up for debate with strong positions made for each case.

Another point of contention is the cadence that is arrived upon at the end of measure four. Is the final G major harmony a half cadence in C minor? Is it an authentic cadence in G major that is approached by its own dominant? Is the G major simply acting as an elision into measure five with an authentic cadence in C minor? According to my interpretation of the cadence structures, options one and two are both possible reads, though I tend to lean towards an authentic cadence in G major.

The following four-measure phrase (Ba²) finds itself wandering through an assortment of unique harmonies due to its highly chromatic bassline. The first two measures of the phrase (B) visit the more remote harmonies of G minor and A minor (v and vi), even making use of a French augmented sixth chord that resolves to the dominant. The final two measures of the phrase (a²) once again revisits the tonic–subdominant–dominant–tonic harmonies from the initial A section; however, the final measure does not conclude in A-flat major. Instead, the D-flat major harmony from measure two is reinterpreted as a root-position Neapolitan that moves through the dominant to resolve back to C minor. See Example 2.1 for a full harmonic analysis.

Largo

ff

p

Cm: i iv⁷ V⁷ i VI IV/VI V⁷/VI VI V V⁷/iv iv I V⁷/V V V⁷/V V
 Ab: I IV V⁷ I Fm: V⁷ i G:IV V⁷ I V⁷ I

5

i VI⁶ vii^{o7#5} v⁶ vi⁶ Fr⁺⁶ V V⁴ i⁶ ii V⁶ i VI bII V⁷ i

Example 2.1. Harmonic Analysis of Chopin's Prelude in C Minor (mm. 1–8)

The prelude's approachable tune contains interesting rhythmic and melodic motifs. Rhythmically, the prelude contains the following funeral-like procession: quarter, quarter, dotted-eighth sixteenth, quarter. In fact, this rhythmic motif exists in every measure of the C minor prelude. Pitchwise, the prelude follows the following melodic motif in the A section: 5–6–5–4–3. These scale-degrees can be interpreted the same way in measure two, but sounded in A-flat major. The a¹ section of measures three and four do not perfectly follow this pitch pattern, though the final three notes of each measure do descend by step.

The melodic pitches in the beginning of the second phrase (B) are a bit more challenging to discern due to the more linear nature of the harmonies. It is difficult to discern whether the

main line is in the top voice or if it is within the voice containing the rhythmic motif. Many pianists decide to voice the rhythmic line out of the texture, especially since it contains the most color with the added accidentals. Either way, the melodic motif of 5–6–5–4–3 is somewhat preserved through the shape found in the second measure of the B section with the only difference being a leap between the second and third notes. The final two measures of the phrase (a²) do not follow either the A or a¹ measures melodically: 8–6–5–4–3 is almost identical to the 5–6–5–4–3 of A with the remaining 3–4–3–2–1 pitches cadencing in C minor rather than tonicizing A-flat major (as in measure two).

In terms of dynamics, Chopin is quite clear with how he wanted the prelude to be organized. He begins the piece with a *fortissimo* marking, including a curious crescendo hairpin that spans from the beginning of measure three to the third beat of measure four (suggesting iv–V on a macro level). The next phrase (Ba²) is simply marked *piano* while the phrasal repeat is marked *pianissimo*. In this third phrase, Chopin does include a crescendo marking with dashes beginning on the third beat of measure eleven until the final measure in which the ultimate C minor chord is accented. Chopin also includes two *ritenuti*, each placed just before the final measure of both Ba² phrases.

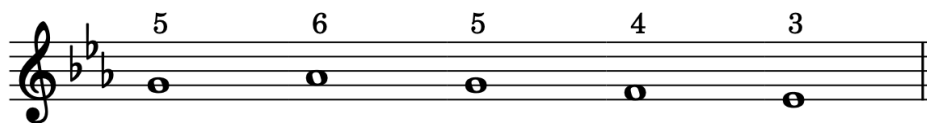
Finally, Chopin is very detailed with his phrasal slurring, suggesting his conception for how each four-measure phrase should be divided. The Aa¹ phrase is slurred as 1+1+2 while each Ba² phrase contains a long four-measure slur, but this time in both hands. This is imperative to how the prelude should be performed, especially since the static rhythmic motion of the prelude can easily be quite vertically oriented in terms of phrasing.

Transitioning towards Rachmaninoff's interpretation of Chopin's theme, it is important to note whether Rachmaninoff's initial statement of the theme at the opening of his Chopin Variations differs from the given analysis. Interestingly, Rachmaninoff includes a few small edits within his reproduction of the theme. First, he most notably omits the Ba² repeat at the end of the prelude, having the original prelude skip from measure eight to measure thirteen. For a theme and variations, this is a much needed edit because Rachmaninoff now has an eight-measure phrase to vary rather than a twelve-measure phrase that includes repetitions. Any sort of variation procedure that Rachmaninoff may apply after the theme now has much more forward momentum due to the shortened length and non-repetitiveness of the edited theme.

Rachmaninoff also modifies the dynamics within Chopin's prelude, opting to remove the crescendo hairpin beginning in measure three for a decrescendo hairpin that spans the entirety of measure four. In the following Ba² phrase, Rachmaninoff has to choose whether to maintain the original *piano* marking of Chopin's second phrase or the *pianissimo* marking with final crescendo of Chopin's third phrase. In the Chopin Variations, Rachmaninoff maintains the initial *piano* marking. Interestingly, however, Rachmaninoff later decides to omit the *ritenuto* marking just before measure eight, replacing it with two *ritardandos*: one at the end of measure seven and the other at the end of measure eight.

Finally, Rachmaninoff also makes a clear choice regarding measure three's E-flat/E-natural dilemma. Most likely due to the two-measure slur of measures three and four, Rachmaninoff purposely omits an E-flat in the final beat of measure three, proving that his opinion belongs to the notion that there is a IV–V–I authentic cadence motion within the key of G major. This better bridges measure three into measure four in a 1+1+2 phrasal motion as opposed to the more vertical 1+1+1+1 phrase that E-flat could impose.

With each of these edits understood, it is crucial to isolate the numerous motifs that can be found within Rachmaninoff's twenty-two variations. First, it is important to understand that Rachmaninoff never quotes the entire melodic line of the theme. You will never find a full eight-measure quotation of the melody. Instead of a full melodic quotation, it will become commonplace to only find the melodic motif of 5–6–5–4–3 in some way, shape, and form (see Example 2.2). This could be beginning on any number of scale degrees (e.g. 3–4–3–2–1; 1–2–1–7–6; 7–8–7–6–5). For Rachmaninoff, the single rising step and consequent triple descending steps is the most important melodic motif found within the variations. Of course, there are moments where he plays with this motif through purposeful note omissions (rest–6–5–4–3). There are even moments where he buries the motif within a longer stream of pitches (3–4–5–6–5–4–3–2–3). He may also not give this motif melodic importance at all, instead opting to morph it into an accompanimental pattern below a different theme.



Example 2.2. Melodic Motif of the Chopin Variations.

The next important motif found within the Chopin Variations are the harmonic pillars of the first four measures of the theme (see Example 2.3). This most often includes allusions to the I–IV–V–I of measure one, the I–IV–V–I tonicization of the submediant in measure two, and the tonicization of both the subdominant and dominant in measures three and four. Following this is the chromaticism of measures five and six—measures that Rachmaninoff does not outline harmonically—where he opts for some form of chromatic line as a reference to the bassline.

Rachmaninoff does, nonetheless, often return to the harmonies present in measures seven and eight—the clearest of which includes the Neapolitan movement to dominant and subsequent return to tonic (see Example 2.4).

i iv V⁷ i VI IV/VI V⁷/VI VI V V⁷/iv iv V/iv V⁷/V V V⁷/V V

Example 2.3. Harmonic Motif A of the Chopin Variations (mm. 1–4).

VI \flat II V⁷ i

Example 2.4. Harmonic Motif B of the Chopin Variations (m. 8).

Finally, the rhythmic motif—quarter, quarter, dotted-eighth sixteenth, quarter—is abundant within the Chopin Variations (see Example 2.5). Rachmaninoff obviously pairs this with the melodic motif due to their innate cohesion with one another, but there are moments where the rhythm is used without melodic pairing.

Example 2.5. Rhythmic Motif of the Chopin Variations.

Every variation of Rachmaninoff’s within the Chopin Variations includes a reference to at least one of these three motifs. Whether the melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic motifs are combined or are sounded alone, it is satisfying to know that they are constantly anchoring the work within the framework of Chopin’s prelude.

La Folia

Throughout the intricacies of music history, there are only a few themes that seem to echo through multiple centuries (e.g. the “Dies Irae” Gregorian chant or the many renditions of Paganini’s Caprice No. 24 in A Minor). Beyond such themes, there is the legacy of *La Folia*—a theme with mysterious origins used by countless composers. Dating back to the landscape of the Iberian Peninsula in the late-fifteenth century, the very term *Folia* (drawn from the Portuguese word for madness, folly, or empty-headedness) serves as a harbinger of the lively and captivating nature of this melodic tune.

The name *La Folia* first emerged in a Portuguese text by Gil Vicente (c. 1465–c. 1536) entitled “Auto de Sibilla Cassandra.” Until the 1670’s, the term was used to refer to a quick-paced and tumultuous fertility dance in 3/4 time in which “the dancers carried men dressed as women upon their shoulders. They were literally driven mad by the noise and the stirring rhythm.”⁴ At the time, multiple different melodies and themes were used as these “early” Foliass spread throughout Europe, eventually morphing into a more solemn Passacaglia commonly found in high-society inner circles. As it traversed the European continent, the theme found favor among illustrious composers of the Baroque period, imprinting its distinctive chord progression and rhythmic vitality into the music of Jean Baptiste-Lully (1632–1687)—the composer credited with having created the symmetrical melody of the so-called “later” Folia in 1672. This is the widespread melody that is most commonly referenced today.

La Folia evolved over time into more than just a musical theme; it became a muse for artistic exploration and innovation. Beginning in 1700, the Italian composer and violinist

⁴ Pleijsier, “Folias Variations.”

Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) began publishing his Twelve Violin Sonatas, Op. 5, in which the final sonata is constructed as a set of twenty-three variations for violin and continuo upon the later Folia popularized by Lully. The musicologist Tim Crawford wrote the following about the sonata:

“Cast as a single movement in the form of a chaconne, it is almost too well known to invite comment, but mention should be made of Corelli’s unprecedented instinct for the overall balance of the variations; he always judges exactly when to succeed fast with slow, hectic with calm. And lest the role of the accompanist be forgotten, the sonata ends with a sequence of dazzling semiquavers for the basso continuo. Although the famous *La Folia* tune had appeared in dozens of arrangements during the seventeenth century, this was its first taste of the exalted world of the sonata.”⁵

It is interesting that despite such a history existing for the Folia, Sergei Rachmaninoff still attributed the theme for his variations to Corelli. The impetus for writing his final set of solo piano variations almost certainly derived from Rachmaninoff hearing a live performance of Corelli’s violin sonata performed by his colleague and chamber music partner, Fritz Kreisler.⁶ Because Rachmaninoff ultimately dedicated his variations to Kreisler, perhaps the performance led him to attribute the theme to the composer whose work certainly inspired him to compose. Some have mentioned that due to the slower spread of information during the early twentieth century, perhaps Rachmaninoff was not familiar with the extensive history of the Folia. This is difficult to accept, especially since Rachmaninoff was undoubtedly familiar with at least one other version of the same theme, Franz Liszt’s *Rhapsody Espagnol*—a common entry in Rachmaninoff’s concert repertoire that features the Folia as one of its main subjects. Regardless,

⁵ Crawford, “Notes on Corelli: Violin Sonata in D minor, 'La Folia', Op. 5 No. 12.”

⁶ Rachmanov, “Rachmaninoff: Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42.”

it is indeed part of history that Rachmaninoff wrote variations on the Folia, attributed the theme to Corelli, and dedicated the composition to Kreisler.

In terms of the actual music (see Example 2.6), Lully's original rendition, *Les Folies d'Espagne*, was published as a theme for a quartet of instruments featuring the hautbois—an early form of the oboe. Set within D minor and in 3/4 time, it consists of two eight-measure phrases that visit a few principal harmonies: A major, C major, and F major. The harmonic progression of the first phrase, ending on a half cadence, follows the progression i–V–i–VII–III–VII–i–V, with each harmony receiving an entire measure. The second phrase follows a similar progression, but sounds the III in inversion moving to the submediant (B-flat major). This sets up a cadence of iv–V–i, creating the more complicated harmonic progression of i–V–i–VII–III–VI⁶–iv–V–i. The simple melody of Lully's Folia is quite stepwise in nature, outlining the notes D–C-sharp–D–E–F–E–D–C-sharp with the typical Baroque ornamentation of the 17th Century.

Example 2.6. Excerpt of Lully’s “Les folies d’Espagne” (mm. 1-16).

The theme of Corelli’s Violin Sonata No. 12 in D Minor, Op. 5, follows Lully’s composition closely, but is not a note-for-note transcription (see Example 2.7). Of course, the instrumentation is largely changed due to Corelli writing within the Baroque violin sonata genre. The violin and figured-bass notation for continuo (most likely performed with harpsichord and another instrument like cello or lute) does follow the same pair of eight-measure phrases, along with the principle harmonies of D minor, A major, C major, and F major. However, Corelli does

add more harmonic flair in the first phrase through the addition of a chromatic-sounding A major in first inversion to move the music from VII back to tonic in measure six (bass movement of C–C-sharp–D). Corelli also alters the bassline in measure seven, allowing Lully’s static D to move to B-flat in order to move D minor to both B-flat major and G minor within the same measure. Unlike Lully, Corelli maintains the same harmonic progression in the second phrase, again adding the chromatic C–C-sharp–D movement between the subtonic and tonic in measure fourteen. Corelli does, however, conclude the phrase with the iv–V–i progression of Lully.

Example 2.7. Theme from Corelli’s Violin Sonata No. 12 in D minor, Op. 5

The melody of Corelli differs slightly from that of Lully. Though still following the stepwise motion of Lully, Corelli adds some interesting non-harmonic tones to his sonata’s theme. First, Corelli makes use of the expressive quality of an escape tone. In the first measure, rather than repeating three D’s in a row, he replaces the final D with an E on the upbeat of beat three. This expressive ornament is crucial to Rachmaninoff’s later treatment of Corelli’s theme. He also adds an escape tone in measures five and seven, once again on the upbeat of the third beat. Corelli also makes use of sixteenth-note decorations preceded by a trill (as seen in measure

three) as an upbeat lower neighbor resolution moving to the next downbeat (C resolving to D leading to E). Finally, a lower neighbor is included just after the downbeat of measure seven, decorating D with a resolving C-sharp. Such melodic inclusions add to the importance of rhythmically stressing beat two to convey the sense of the stately Spanish sarabande feel.

To begin our study of Rachmaninoff's presentation of Corelli's theme, a few things must be clarified. First, any inner-voice movement expressed within Rachmaninoff's transcription of the theme is simply looked at as a realization of the figured bass of Corelli's continuo. Therefore, it is not pertinent to discuss unless it harmonically alters any of Corelli's music. Second, Rachmaninoff incorporates additional dynamics, slurring, and other expressive markings that are absent in Corelli's original theme. These enhancements reflect the influence of the late-Romantic era, during which Rachmaninoff lived and composed. See Example 2.8 for an outer voice comparison of the two themes.

When Rachmaninoff starts his presentation of Corelli's theme, he perfectly preserves the melody provided by Corelli—even maintaining the proper octave in which the violin sounds the theme. One exception of melodic sameness may be the lack of trill inclusion, though Corelli's inclusion of trills is a mere suggestion. The overall preservation of the bassline, however, does not result in the preservation of Corelli's harmonies. Though not drastically altered in any way, Rachmaninoff includes a few extra harmonies. For instance, an added G major-seventh harmony is added on the third beat of measure three, leading to the following subtonic harmony. Measure four sees an insignificant addition of a repeated C in the bassline. Measure six alters a dominant harmony to a diminished seventh along with an addition of a seventh in the supertonic of measure seven.

The image displays a musical score for Example 2.8, comparing the outer voices of Corelli's and Rachmaninoff's versions of "La Folia". The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It is divided into three systems of measures.

System 1 (Measures 1-5):

- Corelli:** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: i, V, i, vii^{o6}/VII, VII, III. A trill (tr) is marked above the final measure.
- Rachmaninoff:** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: i, V, i, V⁷/VII, VII, III. Performance markings: *p cantabile*, *cresc.*

System 2 (Measures 6-11):

- Cor. (Cornet):** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: VII, V⁶, i, VI⁷ ii^{o6}, V, i, V, i, vii^{o6}/VII. A trill (tr) is marked above the final measure.
- Rach. (Piano):** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: VII, vii^{o7}, i, VI⁷ ii^{o3}, V, i, V, i, V⁷/VII. Performance markings: *mf*, *dim.*, *p*, *cresc.*

System 3 (Measures 12-16):

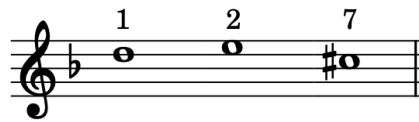
- Cor. (Cornet):** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: VII, III, VII, V⁶ i, iv⁷, V⁴⁻, 3, i.
- Rach. (Piano):** Treble and Bass staves. Chord symbols: VII (C⁺), III, V⁴/VII, VII, vii^{o7}, i, ii^{o6}, V⁴⁻, 3, i⁴⁻³. Performance markings: *mf*, *dim.*, *p*, *dim.*

Example 2.8. Outer Voice Comparison of *La Folia* by Corelli and Rachmaninoff.

Measure twelve finds an inner voice altering the provided harmony, creating a brief sounding of a C augmented triad through the inclusion of a passing G-sharp in the tenor. The

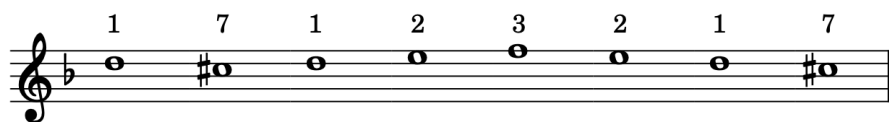
next measure includes another beat three change—an additional inclusion of the secondary dominant to the subtonic now in second inversion. Finally, Rachmaninoff slightly alters the final two measures once again through the tenor voice: the inclusion of an E in measure fifteen changes Corelli’s subdominant harmony to the supertonic and measure sixteen finds the tenor suspended until it resolves to tonic on beat two.

With each of Rachmaninoff’s edits explained, it is once again imperative to isolate the numerous motifs found within the following twenty variations. The first motif unwound in a plethora of variations is that of the main melody. Many of the variations quote the melody note-for-note while others simply use snippets of the theme. Such snippets typically surround the aforementioned escape tone moments provided by Corelli with the most common iteration being 1–2–7 (see Example 2.9). Of course, Rachmaninoff freely transposes this melodic motif, but mostly maintains the profile of rising by step and falling by an interval of a third.



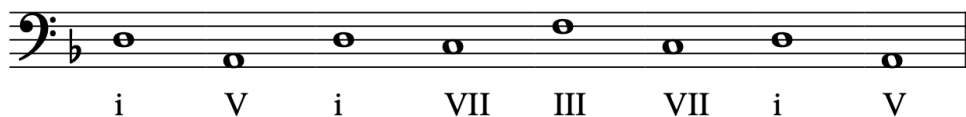
Example 2.9. Melodic Motif A of the Corelli Variations.

Another melodic pillar that Rachmaninoff frequently references—especially when a full sounding of the theme is absent—is found by sounding the downbeat of each measure within the theme. When doing so, the following line is presented: 1–7–1–2–3–2–1–7 (see Example 2.10). Rachmaninoff will often give emphasis to these pitches on the downbeat of each measure to show that the variation is consistent with Corelli’s theme.



Example 2.10. Melodic Motif B of the Corelli Variations.

Along the same lines, the final important motif found within the Corelli Variations are the harmonies that create the overall structure of the theme. This most often includes allusions to $i-V-i-VII-III-VII-i-V$ (see Example 2.11). These four different harmonic areas are significant to achieving the sound of the Folia. Extraordinary attention to such details is present throughout most of the Corelli Variations.



Example 2.11. Harmonic Motif of the Corelli Variations.

Every variation of Rachmaninoff's within the Corelli Variations includes a reference to at least one of these three motifs. Whether the melodic or harmonic motifs are combined or are sounded alone, it is important to know that they are constantly anchoring the work within the centuries-long framework of *La Folia*.

Chapter 3: The Variations

With a more complete understanding of how Rachmaninoff may use the themes by Chopin and Corelli as a launching point for variations, it is pertinent to take a short glance at every variation within each set. This is quite crucial, especially to gain insight into the stark contrasts in compositional styles the two variation sets have. Without a comprehensive exposure to each of the variations themselves, any future comparison of the two sets would be rendered useless.

Variation Procedures

There are various ways to analyze how variations develop from an initial theme. The variations within Rachmaninoff's works can be categorized into three main types: strict, developing, and free (see Figure 3.1).

A strict variation closely adheres to the theme's structure, maintaining a near one-to-one correspondence. For example, a sixteen-measure theme divided into two eight-measure phrases will have a sixteen-measure variation with the same division. Strict variations follow the theme closely both rhythmically and harmonically, like a theme with a *i-iv-V-i* pattern being mirrored in a variation with similar rhythmic placements and only slight harmonic adjustments. Many classical era variations, such as Beethoven's *Variations in C Minor*, WoO 80, adhere to this style.

Developing variations evolve from preceding variations rather than the theme. In Beethoven's variations, Variation 1 introduces an arpeggiated line. Soon after, Variation 2 moves the line to the left hand and Variation 3 plays the line in both hands. These variations are

developing due to their progression from one to another. Most importantly, variations can be both strict and developing, maintaining a theme’s structure while building upon previous variations.

Finally, Free variations develop the theme’s material more liberally, often ignoring the theme’s strict structure. A prime example would be a composer’s addition of a lengthy fugue at the end of a variation set. The subject is most definitely built on a short motif from the theme, but is unrelated to the theme’s structure. Free variations in Rachmaninoff’s sets are usually longer and can often stand alone as separate pieces. While a variation cannot use the combination of strictly free, a variation can be labeled as a developing free variation.

These labels are applied post-factum and may not always fit neatly. Some variations follow a strict procedure but add measures for harmonic emphasis. Such cases warrant another term in which “semi” is added: semi-strict variations. Other variations contain splits where one half can be neatly labeled as strict while the other half is labeled as free. These nuances will be clearly explained in each variation’s breakdown.

Variation Type	Variation Length	Thematic Material	Harmonic Structure	Phrasal Structure
Strict	Equivalent	New	Equivalent	Equivalent
Semi-Strict	Comparable	New	Comparable	Comparable
Developing Strict	Equivalent	Related to Others	Equivalent	Equivalent
Developing Semi-Strict	Comparable	Related to Others	Comparable	Comparable
Free	Distinct	New	Distinct	Distinct

Figure 3.1. Variation Procedure Descriptions Relative to the Theme.

Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22

As discussed previously, the Chopin Variations are a series of twenty-two variations that employ strict, developing, and free processes. Because this was Rachmaninoff's first long-form solo piano piece and his first set of long-form variations, the formal construction of the set is often viewed as less mature than that of his later works. The set does not cleanly break down into sections; however, a few factors can lead a performer or listener into understanding the groupings of the variations. First, the majority of the first ten variations each follow a strict variation procedure where the eight measures of the theme are varied beat-by-beat. Due to the shortness of these variations, many of them pair together as developing variations, creating a unity of motifs and character. Following Variation 10 is a variation pair that acts as a prelude and fugue, with the fugue ending with the same material that ended Variation 1.

Starting in Variation 13, Rachmaninoff shifts away from strict and developing variation procedures into more free variations that can act as standalone pieces. The key centers begin to change at Variation 15, but no tonally unrelated changes of key occur until the moment between Variations 18 and 19.

Because of these moments, a suggested breakdown of the variations into different "movements" is as follows: Variations 1–12, 13–18, and 19–22 (see Figure 3.2). This is, of course, simply a suggestion that will be supported in the following analysis. Lastly, it is important to note that Rachmaninoff gives permission throughout the set to omit certain variations and codas. The following variation overview will look at every note that was published, regardless of possible omission.

Movement I	Movement II	Movement III
Variations 1–12	Variations 13–18	Variations 19–22

Figure 3.2. Possible Movement Breakdown of the Chopin Variations

Variation 1 begins the piece in a contrapuntal fashion reminiscent of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. A single wandering line of sixteenth notes follows the harmonies of Chopin's theme while remaining void of any allusions to the melodic shape of the original. A single low C octave punctuates the second phrase as a pedal point to the ongoing rhythmic and harmonic progression of the contrapuntal texture. The phrase structure of the variation differs slightly from the theme; both phrases remain four measures in length, but are broken down into 2+2 and 1+1+2.

Variation 2 continues the texture presented in Variation 1, but adds a second voice in the treble register. This additive nature of the variation is the first example of Rachmaninoff's use of the developing variation procedure, though Variation 2 also maintains a strict variation procedure by following the eight measure phrase structure of the theme. This variation doubles the tempo of Variation 1 and presents the main melodic motif that Rachmaninoff will use: 5–6–5–4–3. Here, Rachmaninoff interestingly omits the first note of the motif each time it is heard. It is also important to note that Rachmaninoff only quotes the melody of the first measure of Chopin's theme. This abbreviated motif of 5–6–5–4–3 (and its repetition a third lower) is what will remain as the main melodic and rhythmic motif throughout the rest of the set.

Variation 3 adds another voice to the texture, again creating an entry that employs both strict and developing variation procedures. This variation is directly linked to the preceding two variations through the persistence of the wandering sixteenth note line presented in Variation 1.

In Variation 3, the clear sounding of the melodic motif from Variation 2 is no longer heard. Instead, a complex three-voice contrapuntal texture chromatically turns through the harmonic progression of Chopin's theme. In addition, Variation 3 is the first time Rachmaninoff creates a clear bassline.

Variation 4 departs from both the strict and developing nature of the first three variations all the while maintaining the same key center and tempo. The eight-measure theme is expanded into a twenty-four-measure variation in 3/4 time. The two large phrases of the theme are also broken into three large eight-measure phrases (4+4; 8; 8). The first phrase includes a pedal C, the second a pedal G, and the third a pedal C with a small resolving bass progression near the end. The underlying harmonic progression presented in the theme and the first three variations is missing, now simplified into the alternation of mainly tonic and dominant harmonies. Melodically, Variation 4 balances two motives: the theme in the left hand thumb against the skipping triadic countermelody of the right hand. This variation acts as the first true variation in Rachmaninoff's distinct style—large, dark chords expected of the Russian composer.

Variation 5 begins a textural and temporal decrescendo away from the tumult of Variation 4. Rachmaninoff employs a strict variation that returns to a 4+4 phrasal structure in common time. This variation sounds the melodic motif in the left hand while decorating above in sextuplets in the right hand. Interestingly, Rachmaninoff begins the melody on scale degree 3 instead of 5, which lands the start of the third measure on 6 instead of 1. The right hand sounds much of the variation a tenth away from the left hand melody with small traces of chromaticism within each beat. The final four measures of Variation 5 add a bassline as a third voice, slowing further still into the following variation.

Variation 6, in 6/4 time, is the most lyrical variation of the set so far. It makes use of beautiful polyrhythms of six-against-nine (an elaborated two-against-three). Rachmaninoff slows the harmonic progression of Chopin's theme from four harmonies per measure to two harmonies per measure; therefore, two measures of this variation equate to one measure of the theme. Because of this, you would expect the variation to be sixteen measures long, enacting once again a strict variation procedure. Rachmaninoff begins this way, but changes course halfway through the variation. The first eight measures follow the harmonic progression of the first four measures of Chopin's theme quite faithfully while creating a nocturne-like quality with an arpeggiating left hand and long stepwise lines in the right (though the right hand does not blatantly outline the melodic motif). The second subphrase of four measures introduces a third voice to the middle of the texture, creating more melodic interest. Rachmaninoff cleverly ends these first eight measures with an authentic cadence on the mediant instead of with a half cadence. In the second large phrase, the obvious melodic motif of three descending notes appears in the middle of the texture beginning on 1 (1-7-6-5). This is followed by the same motif beginning on 2 (2-1-7-6) and on 3 (3-2-1-7). It is expected that four more measures would be needed to find its way back to tonic, but Rachmaninoff concludes the variation with this simple four measure phrase, resulting in only twelve measures (4+4; 4) instead of sixteen. Thus, this variation employs a partial strict variation procedure.

Variation 7 abruptly changes tempo, resembling the tempo of Variations 2-4. It also reverts back to common time while using the eight-measure strict variation technique of those same variations. However, the sextuplet rhythm of Variation 6 is doubled into "twelve-tuplets." The phrase structure of Variation 7 is simplified from Chopin's original theme, resulting in two phrases of four measures. The texture of the variation resembles Variation 1 slightly through its

use of a single wandering line, though a second voice is quickly added. The melodic motif is quite difficult to hear in Variation 7 as it is fragmented even further. Instead of hearing 5–6–5–4–3, only the two-note sigh of 6–5 can be heard and is often transposed to other starting pitches. The final two measures contain the longest stepwise line of the variation: scale degree 6 steps downwards all the way to 1 in the highest voice (6–5–4–3–2–7–1).

Variation 8 acts as a continuation of Variation 7, resulting in both a strict and developing variation. At eight measures in length, this variation continues the twelve-tuplets of Variation 7 while adding a voice both above and below the wandering line. The bottom voice follows the Chopin harmonic progression quite faithfully while the top-most voice continues the two-note slurs from before, this time in ascending abbreviated staccato attacks. The climax of the variation occurs at the start of the second four-measure phrase as the twelve-tuplet line chromatically wanders above the two-note statements. Rachmaninoff then ends the variation with a final two measures similar to the opening two measures.

Variation 9 departs from all previous textures while still maintaining the strict variation procedure of eight measures. Rachmaninoff puts two lines against each other: one that sounds the theme and another that provides the bassline. Each of these lines is sounded in three or four parallel octaves with the thematic line receiving inner-voice treatment. The jumping nature of the variation resembles the more complicated texture of the ossia cadenza of his Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor. The melodic motif is front and center, though slightly rhythmically altered. Rachmaninoff opts for more chromatic and linear harmonies than those Chopin presented in his theme.

Variation 10 strays from the strict variation procedure, producing a variation that is fourteen measures in length (2+2+2+2+6). This variation is canonic in nature as the right and left

hands begin with the same material, but offset by a single beat. The melodic motif is balanced with simple triadic tones in each hand, creating an oscillating sixteenth-note pattern. Rachmaninoff repeats this idea three times: first in C minor, then in A-flat major, and followed by F minor. The fourth two-measure phrase simply expands dominant until it seemingly cadences on tonic at a quadruple forte (though an A-flat major harmony is briefly outlined instead). The following six measures begin with a submediant harmony instead of tonic, continuing to fall from the high registers of the piano until its ultimate cadence back in C minor. A hidden sounding of the melodic motif occurs in the antepenultimate measure.

Variation 11 marks the first shift away from C minor as well as the first compound time signature (12/8). Extremely chromatic in nature, this E-flat major variation is best conceived of as a prelude before the fugal Variation 12. As a prelude, it is interesting that little-to-no semblance of Chopin's original theme or harmonic progression exists. In fact, there is not much of a melody to follow at all except for a wandering chromatically-moving top voice. The variation also does not follow a strict variation procedure as it is fifteen measures in length divided in a 1+4+4+3+3 phrase structure, where the first measure acts as a transition and the final three measures act as a small coda. Harmonically, Variation 11 further veers from Chopin through its abandonment of harmonic progression. The variation lingers around E-flat and A-flat, visiting each key center's major and minor modes. It is definitely the most obscure variation of the entire piece relative to the theme.

Variation 12, a free variation back in C minor and in common time, is divided into two large sections: a slowly unfolding fugue and a more up-tempo fantasy. The fugue is twenty-three measures in length with the subject consisting of the 5-6-5-4-3 melodic motif. After the four individual voices enter in the first four measures, Rachmaninoff begins a long exploration of

subject entries that is quasi-stream-of-consciousness. It is not organized like a typical Bach fugue. Instead, short excerpts of the subject begin to overlap in stretto without coming to full completion. The second section of the variation enters after the arrival of the Neapolitan harmony and consequent resolution to the dominant. At this point, the final nine measures display multiple overlapping extended soundings of the melodic motif in thirds across multiple registers of the keyboard. This results in a final resolution back to tonic that recalls an almost identical line found in Variation 1. Because of the overall developing nature of the first twelve variations and due to the bookend writing of Variations 1 and 12, these first twelve variations are again easily conceived of as a single “movement.”

Variation 13 resets the piece: Rachmaninoff writes a variation with an identical *Largo* tempo as Chopin’s theme and sets the variation back into strict procedure. Now in 3/4 time, the melodic motif is altered to constantly rise in pitch on beats one and two, answered by a distant three-note echo in the upper registers of the keyboard on beat three. Because of the augmentation of the theme, every two beats of the theme is paralleled by a single measure of Variation 13. The variation is also harmonically darkened with many of the original harmonies of the theme chromatically moving in each voice to form other minor triads (e.g. C minor to A-flat minor; F minor to D-flat minor; A-flat minor to E minor).

Variation 14 uses all three methods of variation. It begins as a strict variation of the theme where each beat of the theme is augmented into an entire common time measure of the variation. It also acts as a developing variation paired with Variation 13 due to the recurring three-note echoes continuing in one of the four voices. The bass sounds long pedal tones while the tenor reuses the three-note motif from Variation 13. The alto sounds the melodic motif in whole notes while the soprano consists of scales. However, as the variation continues, it begins to stray away

from the confines of Chopin's theme as large scalar chords descend and ascend in the same fashion as the earlier soprano voice. This moment is critical as it marks a final sounding of the C minor tonality within the set and is a final departure from the strict and developing variation procedures for the piece. Each of the following variations act as standalone pieces.

Variation 15, marked *Allegro scherzando*, is a Chopin-esque scherzo written in F minor and in 12/8. At forty-three measures in length, the variation is in an ABA'C form (8+10+8+9) with an attached eight-measure coda. The A section slightly modifies the melodic motif in the top voice, changing 5-6-5-4-3 to 5-6-5-6-5-4-3-2-1 in the key of F minor and then sounding it again a third lower. The B section focuses on the dominant, but continues the rhythmically infectious "gallop" that is present throughout the majority of the variation. The C section changes character through its use of longer slurred lines that clearly outline the main melodic motif in right hand octaves. The coda simply ends the short piece in F minor with a flashy scherzo-like ending.

Variation 16 is a hidden gem of Rachmaninoff's output due to the beautiful theme he crafts. Still in the key of F minor (but now in common time), the melodic motif is cleverly hidden within the nocturne-like texture, with 5-6-5-4-3 ingeniously embedded within 3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2-3. Rachmaninoff places rhythmic emphasis on 6 through its appearance on the downbeat and at a dominant-tonic resolution to D-flat major (acting as D-flat's scale degree 1). This melodic manipulation is a clear foreshadow to how Rachmaninoff will alter Paganini's theme in the famous D-flat major variation in his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43. Regardless, this variation struggles to identify its tonic as either F minor or D-flat major. Both key centers receive their own dominant and can both be found diatonically in their respective keys. Interestingly, by the end of the variation, F minor is destabilized so much that the final

harmony of F major sounds like an unresolved dominant rather than a tonic with a picardy third. This is quite purposeful, as the next variation is in the key of B-flat minor.

Variation 17 acts as a central moment in the piece: the funeral march. It is within the same key (B-flat minor) and character as Chopin's funeral march movement from his Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35. Essentially, Rachmaninoff is writing a funeral march in the style of Chopin within a set of variations based on a theme by Chopin. The variation alters the melodic motif similarly to Variation 15 with 5-6-5-4-3 turning into 5-6-5-6-5-6-5-6-5-4-3. Despite this simple alteration, Rachmaninoff focuses more on the rhythmic aspect of the dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythm found in both Chopin's funeral march and theme for the set of variations. In measures five through nine of the variation, this rhythm is heard overlapping between the tenor and the soprano, creating forward momentum towards the climax and resolution to B-flat minor in measure twelve. The entire variation is somber and emotional.

Variation 18 remains within the key of B-flat minor, but reverts from 3/4 back to common time. This variation clearly unifies with Variation 17 through its key center, but must also be viewed as the release of tension found within its predecessor. It is also the final variation within the middle group of variations (Variations 13-18). At twelve measures in length, Variation 18 displays a two-against-three polyrhythm with nocturne-like arpeggiations in the left hand countered by scalar octaves in the right. The melodic motif appears as a hemiola in the left hand thumb of measures two and four, sounding in B-flat minor and G-flat major. This parallels the harmonic relationship of measures one and two of the theme (C minor and A-flat major). In measure five of Variation 18, the melodic motif continues in the left hand thumb for the rest of the variation. The final four measures cleverly change harmonies through common tone

relationships (i.e. D-flat in B-flat minor becomes C-sharp in A major; F in D minor becomes F in D-flat major). The melodic motif is of primary focus within this variation.

Variation 19 marks the beginning of the final group of variations (Variations 19–22) due to its sudden change of key from B-flat minor to A major. Such a shocking change in tonality between variations only occurs once in the entire set. This variation is one of the more spirited variations, harkening to a triumphant Russian affect that imitates the sound of bells. The thirty-five measures are broken into an ABA' form with a short coda (8+8+15+4). The A sections are in two voices: the first being large, accented octaves in both hands and the second being the melodic motif in eight-note chords. The 5–6–5–4–3 and 3–4–3–2–1 motif of the theme has been altered into the major mode and has been morphed slightly into 5–6–4–5 and 3–4–3–2–3–1. This occurs in both A major and its dominant. The B section takes this new melody and expands upon it while the left hand sounds a counter melody in the thumb while adding forward momentum in sixteenth notes. The section ends with a similar statement of the A section, but in F-sharp minor. The return of the A' section sounds the motif in A major and then in a surprising F major—a half step higher than A major's dominant. Then, through chromatic movement, the variation climaxes back in A major and sounds the ringing of the Russian bells in large *fortissimo* chords. The following coda majestically reiterates the chordal melodic motif and cadences in A major.

Variation 20 is the fastest variation of the entire set. Marked as *Presto*, this 3/4 etude-like variation in C-sharp minor is felt with one pulse per measure. It is the longest printed variation of the set thus far at over one hundred measures in length. Variation 20 is structured in two similar sections (mm. 1–53 and 54–107). The first section begins with a quickly ascending chromatic line in the right hand with allusions to the melodic motif in the left hand with what sounds like

the first two notes of 5–6–5–4–3. An actual quotation of the melodic motif is quite difficult to hear in performance. When the main section actually begins in measure seventeen, the right hand sounds 3–4–3–2–1–2 over and over again. This is a direct quotation of the theme, but in an accompanimental role. The variation's main theme is instead a hemiola chromatic line in the left hand thumb, sounding first in C-sharp minor, then in A major. This first section ultimately cadences authentically in E major before catapulting into the similar second section. Here, the variation sounds in C-sharp minor again before moving to B minor. This ensures that the consequent music remains within the key of C-sharp minor, especially within the brief closing material at the end. The variation ends with a lone C-sharp.

Variation 21 is the penultimate variation of the entire set and is also the most lyrical and beautiful variation in the piece. Set in two large sections, the variation's tonality is enharmonically transformed from the previous C-sharp minor of Variation 20 to D-flat major. This directly parallels the Neapolitan quality of the antepenultimate harmony of Chopin's theme. In the first section of Variation 21, the melodic motif is clearly stated in the left hand thumb. By measure two, a second melodic motif is sounded in octaves in the right hand. This variation displays the two motifs in canon and in double counterpoint at a tenth. Rachmaninoff further complicates the variation by integrating a three-against-five polyrhythm between the hands. The first section also cadences on the dominant much like the first phrase of the theme. In the second section, Rachmaninoff changes the right hand texture by omitting the melodic motif and adding wandering octaves in four-, five-, and even eight-tuplets against steady triplets in the left hand. This section continues the melody from the theme, quoting the entire theme's melody for the first and only time in the entire set. Because of this, the variation could be viewed as a strict variation

with an added coda where each measure of the theme is two measures in the variation, resulting in a sixteen measure variation with an additional eight measure coda.

The following *Più vivo* section, though not a variation in itself, acts as a transitional variation focused within G major. Set in 3/4 time, this “variation” is set in three sections. The first section (mm. 1–16) features the melodic motif in the left hand thumb moving through various key centers (e.g. C minor; D minor; E minor) all the while maintaining a G pedal point. The second section (beginning in m. 17) maintains a galloping rhythm introduced in the previous section, traveling through key areas like C major, E-flat major, G minor, and even D-flat major, again maintaining a G pedal point. The third section (beginning in m. 23) introduces a triplet rhythm between the two hands, increasing the tension as the music cycles through the harmonies of C major, C dominant seventh, D dominant seventh, and G dominant seventh. The final two measures of the transition chromatically walk into a final G dominant seventh harmony, setting up the final variation. Note the similarity of this section’s harmonic tendencies with the penultimate harmony of Chopin’s theme.

Variation 22 finally sees Rachmaninoff altering the original theme of Chopin into C major from C minor. Set in 3/4 and written in six sections (ABCAB and Coda), the final variation is the longest of the entire set. The A section sounds the melodic motif perfectly in the major mode, even keeping the original harmonies from the theme intact. The end of the section moves the tonality from C major to G major, concluding with a triumphant bass versus soprano texture that will be expanded upon later. The B section turns the G major tonality into E minor, expanding upon the melodic motif by adding an extra two measures of melody. The texture in this section is also more scalar with sextuplets in the right hand and a nocturne-like setting in the left. This theme is immediately resounded in a march style with repeating notes in the right hand.

The section then modulates to G major and duplicates the scalar and march styles. The middle of the B section creates music box imagery of the melodic motif in the topmost region of the piano, moving through D minor, A major, C minor, A minor, and A-sharp diminished to land upon B major. The following C section acts as a transition back into the A section material. Here, Rachmaninoff cleverly finds his way from B major to an E dominant seventh, finally resting on a clearly unstable G dominant seventh. This gives way to the return of the A section, where Rachmaninoff remains within the key of C major. At the end of the section, he expands upon the triumphant bass versus soprano texture from earlier, acting as the most grand dominant resolution to the tonic. The second B section sounds the same melodic motif from the first B section, but this time remaining within the key of C major. Rachmaninoff lands upon a C dominant seventh and chromatically descends a B-flat in the left hand thumb until it reaches a C an octave lower, all the while maintaining a C pedal tone. This section is a clear expansion of tonic. The final section of the variation, marked *Meno mosso*, acts as the coda with a timpani-like pattern in the left hand supporting the final statements of the melodic motif. The music comes to rest on a peaceful C major harmony. There is an optional second coda marked *Presto* that brilliantly displays a virtuosic ending without any melodic motifs, but it is difficult to ignore the closure of the first coda. See Figure 3.3 for a concise overview of the entire variation set.

Variation	Key	Tempo	Meter	Length (Measures)	Variation Type	Significant Elements
Theme	C Minor	Largo	4/4	8+1	-	-
1	C Minor	Moderato	4/4	8	Strict	Contrapuntal
2	C Minor	Allegro	4/4	8	Developing Strict	Paired with Var. 1
3	C Minor	L'istesso tempo	4/4	8	Developing Strict	Paired with Vars. 1 and 2

4	C Minor	L'istesso tempo	3/4	24	Free	Dark Russian writing
5	C Minor	Meno mosso	4/4	8	Strict	Melody in Left Hand
6	C Minor	Meno mosso	6/4	12	Semi-strict	Lyrical; polyrhythmic
7	C Minor	Allegro	4/4	8	Strict	Var. 1, but faster
8	C Minor	L'istesso tempo	4/4	8	Strict	Paired with Var. 7
9	C Minor	L'istesso tempo	4/4	8	Strict	Contrapuntal octaves
10	C Minor	Piu vivo	4/4	14	Free	Canonic
11	E-flat Major	Lento	12/8	15	Free	Prelude
12	C Minor	Moderato	4/4; 2/4	32	Free	Fugue and Fantasy
13	C Minor	Largo	3/4	16	Semi-strict	Theme, but darker
14	C Minor	Moderato	4/4; 2/4	25	Developing Semi-strict	Paired with Var. 13; 4-voices
15	F Minor	Allegro scherzando	12/8	43	Free	Scherzo
16	F Minor	Lento	4/4	14	Free	Nocturne
17	B-flat Minor	Grave	3/4	18	Free	Funeral March
18	B-flat Minor	Piu mosso	4/4	12	Free	Polyrhythmic Nocturne
19	A Major	Allegro vivace	4/4	35	Free	Russian Bells
20	C-sharp Minor	Presto	3/4	107	Free	Etude
21	D-flat Major	Andante	4/4	24	Semi-Strict	Double counterpoint
Transition	G Major	Piu vivo	3/4	29	Free	G pedal
22	C Major	Maestoso Meno Mosso Presto	3/4	136	Free	Finale

Figure 3.3. Chopin Variations Summary Chart.

Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Corelli Variations are a series of twenty variations that employ mainly strict and developing variations upon the sixteen-measure “La Folia” theme. Because this was Rachmaninoff’s final long-form solo piano piece and his penultimate set of long-form variations, the set is more cohesive and woven together than that of the Chopin Variations. There are two viewpoints regarding the set’s overall structure. First, the set can be divided into two large-scale sections broken up by an *Intermezzo*—that is Variations 1–13 and 14–20. The second viewpoint divides the set into three “movements” based upon key centers. Variations 1–13 and 16–20 are all in D minor while the middle “movement” of Variations 14–15 (along with some of the *Intermezzo*) are written in D-flat major. Perhaps the following overview of each variation will help cement one of these two perspectives.

Variation 1 displays a full sounding of the Corelli melody at a slightly faster tempo while maintaining most of the original harmonies from the theme. It is, therefore, a strict variation. The biggest change in this variation lies within the rhythm; a steady stream of sixteenth notes provides forward momentum throughout the sixteen measures. A defining feature of Variation 1 is also the inclusion of a newly imagined bassline that constantly sounds one sixteenth note displaced from each beat. Another intriguing inclusion is the modified arrival at each cadence where Rachmaninoff lingers on a seemingly random harmony before resolving at the last moment.

Variation 2 remains in the same tempo as the first variation and continues the steady stream of sixteenth notes in strict variation procedure. However, this variation is written in four voices. During the first eight measures, all voices except the alto sound on the first and fourth divisions of each sixteenth note grouping, slurring between the upbeat and downbeat. The

soprano voice outlines the main melody with added decorative thirds while receiving harmonic support from the tenor and bass. In the second eight measures, the voices are grouped differently with the tenor joining the offbeat alto to create a more chromatic countermelody. The articulation of the outer voices converts to all staccato markings, contrasting the former slurs.

Variation 3 continues in strict variation procedure and is the first “dance” variation of the set—*Tempo di Menuetto*. Rather than hearing a full sounding of the melody, this variation begins to sound fragments of the Folia, primarily focusing on the 1–2–7 motif. Rachmaninoff even distorts this melodic motif to 1–flat-2–7, always providing an interesting chromatic harmony beneath *ra*. He also veers away from the original harmonic motion of i–V–i–VII–III–VII–i–V. In the first eight measures, VII–i is replaced with VI–iv; in the second eight measures, VII moves to iii and encounters v, III, and a D-flat major harmony (flat-I?) on its way back to tonic. Of final note are the distant echoes of thirty-second notes at each of the two cadences.

Variation 4, also utilizing strict variation procedure, exists in two voices: one sounds the melody in its entirety while the other continues Variation 3’s distant echoing in a higher register. The melodic voice is doubled in octaves for the first eight measures, but tripled in much of the final eight measures. Like in the previous variation, Rachmaninoff chromatically alters some of the melodic pitches. For instance, 1–2–7 is morphed into 1–2–flat-7. This sets up a conundrum for the harmonic progression of the theme. Rather than i–V, Rachmaninoff steers clear of the tonic-dominant relationship and replaces V with III. At the first half cadence, an even stranger harmony is used below 1–7: i–V is replaced by i–sharp-vii. The final four measures of the variation are some of the most jazz-inspired harmonies yet, with III–VII–i–V–i replaced by iv–III–flat-II–V–i where each is preceded by an unusually chromatic seventh chord.

Variation 5 increases in tempo from *Andante* to *Allegro*. Sixteen measures in length, this variation alternates between 3/4, 2/4, and 4/4, often creating phrases of five beats. Variation 5 again incorporates two voices into its texture where the first sounds chordal strikes on downbeats while the second ascends in triplets at intervals of fourths and fifths. The entire variation is quite open in texture due to a minimization of thirds. The melodic motifs of earlier variations are absent, placing more attention on the harmonic progression of the Folia. Rachmaninoff again alters some of the harmonies, but not to the same extent as the previous variation.

Variation 6 maintains the same tempo, triplet rhythm, and strict variation procedure as Variation 5. Though written entirely in 3/4, the variation feels like it alternates between 4/4 and 2/4 due to the placement of harmonic resolution. Variation 6 further plays with time by incorporating numerous hemiola-like passages that regroups the three notes of a triplet into groups of two. Any semblance of the original melody is hidden, once again placing the focus upon Rachmaninoff's harmonic treatment of the theme. Though extensive use of chromatic movement is used, the staple progression of i-V-i-VII-III-VII-i-V is mostly maintained.

Variation 7 increases the tempo once again but deviates from the standard sixteen measures of the theme. Though still in strict variation procedure, an additional four measures are added to the end of the variation to strengthen the climax of the past three fast variations (Variations 5-7). Musically, Rachmaninoff provides a D pedal point throughout the entire variation and has both hands playing a blur of sixteenth notes in perfect octaves. Within this texture lies a clear melodic variation of the theme, with the goal pitches of 1-7-1-2-3-2-1-7 all appearing in their expected measure placements. Rachmaninoff simply adds passing chromatic motion to each of the staple pitches. The harmonic progression of the theme is now absent, replaced with non-functional chromatic harmonies to support the melody. As stated earlier,

Variation 7 ends with an added three measures where the topmost voice of each downbeat resolves chromatically by way of *te-ti-do* (flat-7-7-1).

Variation 8 strays slightly from the strict variation procedure common to the previous variations. Marked as *Adagio misterioso*, this variation omits a few measures from the theme and ends after only fifteen measures. Still in two overall sections (7+8), both the theme's melody and harmony are apparent, but twisted. Melodically, Rachmaninoff chromatically wiggles around but often includes the motif of 1-2-7 where one would expect it. However, the chromatic nature of the variation's melody bleeds into including chromatically moving harmonies. Vestiges of the common progression of i-V-i-VII-III-VII-i-V appear, but are somewhat clouded by a chromatic alteration here and there. For example, the V in measure four of the variation has a raised fifth. Of special note are the harmonies in the final four measures, where Rachmaninoff visits flat-V and flat-I (nonstandard Roman Numerals).

Variation 9 continues in a slightly faster tempo while continuing to stray from the strict variation procedure. This variation follows the two-section phrasing of the theme, but uniquely lengthens at each of the cadential moments (10+9). Three voices occur in Variation 9. The first provides a pedal point D throughout the majority of the variation; the second provides chromatically moving chordal harmonies in the tenor; the third provides arpeggiating decorations up and down the treble register. Melodic focus is on both the tenor and soprano voices, with melodic fragments of 1-2-7 embedded within the top voice as 3-4-2. The common harmonic progression outlined in the theme does not appear clearly in this variation. The focus is placed on harmonic voice-leading to new harmonic areas. Despite this, each of the sections ends with a chromatic prolongation of dominant (A major) without explicitly stating the proper harmony.

Variation 10 begins another grouping of fast-paced variations. Similar to Variation 5, this variation alternates between different meters (4/4 and 2/4) to create rhythmic interest. Though once again split into two sections, Variation 10 does not find itself repeating textures between its two large phrases. In the first section, the main melody of the theme is absent and is replaced instead with the staple pitches of 1–7–1–2–3–2–1–7 at critical moments occurring around every two measures. An inner alto voice received much of the attention as the note A is chromatically decorated in sixteenth notes. The first half of this variation does outline the i–V–i–VII–III–VII–i–V harmonic progression quite clearly. However, upon arriving on the half cadence in measure twelve, a long transitional prolongation of the dominant occurs where Rachmaninoff incorporates an additive chromatic scale of up to four unique voices. This carries the variation into the second section where the music progresses through a “stride piano” iteration of i–VII–natural–vi–VI–V–i, ending with an ingeniously crafted D minor scale.

Variation 11 sees an increase in tempo and a return to a strict variation procedure of two phrases totaling sixteen measures. The expected D minor tonality is not clearly stated in the first measure; instead, an accented neighbor tone of 6–5 sounds above a first inversion D minor triad, but quickly resolves to a first inversion dominant chord within the beat. In measure two, the expectation is to hear scale-degree 1 move to 7. This occurs, but C-sharp is written enharmonically as a D-flat and is accompanied by a flat-I harmony. Measures three and four duplicate this effect, but land on the mediant harmony. Rachmaninoff is clearly altering i–V–i–VII to resemble i–flat-I–i–III. This is successful despite the odd Roman Numerals due to the enharmonic treatment of pitches. The second section increases tension by moving the tonic attack chords up an octave and thickening its texture. Rachmaninoff also displaces the arrival in

the next measure by one beat through a unique three-against-four chromatic polyrhythm. This continues throughout the section.

Variation 12, marked to follow the same tempo as its predecessor, once again departs from a strict developmental procedure. Spanning twenty-three measures, it unfolds as a continuous passage, with eighth notes weaving between the hands. The left hand outlines a new melody in octaves that occasionally references the 1–2–7 of the theme via flat-7–7–6 and 5–6–4 while the right hand sounds upbeats moving upwards chromatically. Measure eleven begins a melodic interplay between the hands with the left hand sounding a short melody followed by the left hand echoing a half-step lower in measure thirteen. The final measures of the variation see 4 rising by step until resolving back to 1 (4–5–6–flat-7–7–1). The harmonies within Variation 12 are quite different from the original theme, not bearing any particular relationship due to the chromatic voice tendencies.

Variation 13 marks the final variation of this short group of fast variations (Variations 10–13). Written in 9/8, this variation follows somewhat of a strict variation procedure while introducing a gallop rhythm that will become incredibly important in the final variations of the set. Variation 13 is the most dissonant variation of the set with each beat containing some form of cluster harmony. Nonetheless, the variation follows the i–V–i–VII–III harmonic progression quite clearly, though the occasional change of meter disrupts the feeling of the theme's simple phrase lengths. Melodically, Variation 13 contains several different lines that one could follow, specifically a chromatic stepwise alto line beneath the soprano 2–4–3–2 line. The final section of the variation visits more distant harmonic regions once again due to chromatic voice leading, but ends with a finite perfect authentic cadence.

The *Intermezzo* between Variations 13 and 14 acts as a reset and as a way to transition from D minor to D-flat major. A quasi-variation in-and-of-itself, the *Intermezzo* in 3/4 time clearly outlines melodic motifs from the theme. However, incorrect harmonies are used to progress the music into a modulation. For instance, the Dm–A–Dm–C–F progression from the theme is replaced with Gm7–F#7–G7–A#°7–Am. This is followed by a cadenza that moves the music into a repetition now up a third. Once again, melodic motifs sound above chromatic harmonies culminating in another flurry of notes that ultimately changes key signature. The final twelve notes of the *Intermezzo* perfectly lead into the next variation, set in D-flat major.

Variation 14 marks a stark return to normalcy with a complete sounding of the original theme now in the major mode. Rachmaninoff accompanies this with utterly unique harmonic choices. The first three harmonies, for example, move in parallel fifths. At the half cadence, it is expected to hear the dominant harmony of A-flat, but Rachmaninoff ends on a C7. The harmonic intrigue continues at the end of the variation where the music seemingly modulates instantaneously to D major, followed by harmonies within the key of D-flat major. This occurs again as Rachmaninoff progresses a *ii* chord through D minor and immediately into a perfect authentic cadence.

Variation 15, the only other variation in the key of D-flat major, is the most lyrical variation of the set. Written in 9/8 once again, Rachmaninoff melodically ornaments the staple notes of 1–7–1–2–3–2 with wandering triplet neighbor tones. This occurs above a calm triplet accompaniment with a stepwise countermelody in the tenor. The harmonies within this variation are not expected, moving in the following progression: I–vi–I–ii–vi. Upon arrival in measure seven, Rachmaninoff extends the E-flat melodic resolution to D-flat via an alternation between D-natural and E-natural—a direct allusion to the contrasting key centers of D-flat major and D

minor. The second section of the variation follows along the same lines, ultimately moving the extended melodic passage down a fourth so that B-flat can resolve upwards to D-flat via 6-sharp-6-7-1.

Variation 16 begins the final variations of the set with an *Allegro vivace* marking. Written in a single-section form and back in D minor, the variation is divided into two main voices: the first sounds the harmonic progression in open fourths and fifths on strong beats while the second outlines the same harmonies in short octave arpeggios on the upbeats. The melody from the theme is quite sparse here with the primary focus belonging to the interplay between major and minor harmonies with the same top voice. Measure five of the variation sees A in the top voice supported by both F major and F-sharp minor; measure six of the variation sees F in the top voice supported by both D-flat major and D minor. The other salient feature of Variation 16 lies in the dramatic triplet arpeggio whirls that accent important harmonies. In the end, the variation chromatically ascends back into D minor on the downbeat of the next variation.

Variation 17 is a melodically focused variation with modified melodic motifs in the right hand sounding above a persistent rhythm in the left hand. The melody plays with 1-2-7 in different key areas, sometimes modifying it into 1-2-flat-7. In the second half of the variation, 1-2-7 in the melody begins on D, C, and B-flat as the music seemingly hints at modulations to faraway areas such as F-sharp minor, A-flat major, and E minor. Variation 17 ends with a deceptive resolution of V-iv in the fourth-to-last measure. This ultimately results in a plagal cadence of iv-i to end the variation.

Variation 18 sets the base tempo for the eventual accelerando in the final three variations. Written in a strict variation procedure, this variation returns to the gallop rhythm first introduced in Variation 13. The first eight measures follow the i-V-i-VII-III-VII-i-V progression almost

perfectly, straying slightly from the final three harmonies by visiting flat-II-i-V^{#5}. The second section thickens in texture and moves up an octave to increase intensity. Much like in the first phrase, the final measures of this variation strays from the original theme's harmonies by moving through the unusual progression of iv-vi-V^{#5} to return back to tonic.

Variation 19 increases the tempo while maintaining the rhythm and strict variation procedure from the previous variation. The melodic focus of this variation lies once again within the outline of 1-7-1-2-3-2-1-7, but now a third above each tone resulting in 3-2-3-4-5-sharp-4-4-3. Below these melodic tones lies a chromatically descending line that highlights i-V-i-VII-III on each of the downbeats. Rachmaninoff cleverly adds an eighth note rest in measures five and six to disrupt the gallop rhythm. The second half of the variation continues with this descending chromatic movement now in both hands and in multiple octaves. The gallop continues in the left while a steady stream of sixteenth notes accompanies it in the right. The final three measures of Variation 19 find Rachmaninoff decorating 1-7-flat-7-natural-6-6-5 in three different ways: first alternating between minor triads and half-diminished sevenths, then major triads and dominant sevenths, and finally in all minor triads above a tri-tone jumping bass.

Variation 20, the final variation of the set, increases the tempo once again while sticking with the gallop rhythm and strict variation procedure of the previous two variations. This variation finds both hands playing unison lines an octave apart. Rachmaninoff modifies the melodic content to reflect the following pitches: 1-5-sharp-4-5, 1-5-natural-6-7, 3-natural-6-2-6, 1-sharp-4-5. To create more interest and drama, he sounds these pitches in various octaves around the keyboard, creating a disjointed effect that is entirely unique. The harmonic rhythm is quite simple here as each octave melody note is harmonized a tenth above

each pitch, making the texture somewhat sparse. After the usual sixteen measures, Rachmaninoff adds a fifteen measure climax to really increase the tension. In usual fashion, a chromatic line within large chords is created to eventually resolve to tonic. The final measures see multiple minor chords ultimately resolving to D minor (of note is C-sharp minor resolving to D minor chromatically).

After such a forceful finale, the music finds rest in the final *Coda*. The music is at its most lyrical and expansive in this final page, with each upward soaring melody reflecting the *do-re-ti* motif from the theme. Of utmost importance is the eventual resolution to D major for the first time at the highest melodic pitch. From this point, Rachmaninoff descends through a destabilization of harmonies while maintaining a D pedal point. The final four measures harken back to the opening moments of the theme and the entirety of the variation set settles back into the dark key of D minor. See Figure 3.4 for a shortened breakdown of each variation.

Variation	Key	Tempo	Meter	Length (Measures)	Variation Type	Significant Elements
Theme	D Minor	Andante	3/4	16	-	-
1	D Minor	Poco Piu mosso	3/4	16	Strict	Off-Beat Bass
2	D Minor	l'istesso	3/4	16	Developing Strict	4-Voice Counterpoint
3	D Minor	Menuetto	3/4	16	Strict	Minuet
4	D Minor	Andante	3/4	16	Developing Strict	Reference to Chopin Variation 13
5	D Minor	Allegro (ma non tanto)	3/4; 2/4; 4/4	16	Strict	Open Fifths, Two Voices
6	D Minor	l'istesso	3/4	16	Developing Strict	Triadic Motion in Triplets
7	D Minor	Vivace	3/4	18	Semi-strict	Dissonant Harmonies Over Pedal D

8	D Minor	Adagio	3/4	15	Semi-strict	Irregular Phrase Lengths
9	D Minor	un poco piu mosso	3/4	19	Semi-strict	Wandering 16ths above LH Melody
10	D Minor	Allegro scherzando	4/4; 2/4; 3/4	25	Free	Triadic Motion
11	D Minor	allegro vivace	3/4	16	Strict	1st Inversion Tonic Harmonies
12	D Minor	l'istesso	3/4; 2/4	23	Free	Hocket Style
13	D Minor	Agitato	9/8; 6/8	17	Semi-strict	Precursor to Gallop of Finale
Intermezzo	-	A tempo rubato	3/4	13	Free	Cadenza, Harmonic Transition from D Minor to D-flat Major
14	D-flat Major	Andante (come prima)	3/4	16	Strict	Theme in Major
15	D-flat Major	L'istesso	9/8; 6/8	26	Semi-strict	Nocturne-like
16	D Minor	Allegro vivace	4/4	15	Semi-strict	Open Fifths, Sudden Changes of Mode
17	D Minor	Meno Mosso	4/4; 2/4; 6/4	23	Free	Melodic Augmentation
18	D Minor	Allegro con brio	9/8	16	Developing Strict	Gallop Motif
19	D Minor	Piu mosso, agitato	9/8; 6/8	17	Developing Semi-strict	Gallop Motif with Triadic Chromaticism
20	D Minor	Piu mosso, Andante	9/8; 6/8; 4/4; 2/4; 3/4	44	Developing Semi-strict	Gallop Motif in Various Octaves

Figure 3.4. Corelli Variations Summary Chart.

Chapter 4: The Comparison

Having unraveled the intricacies of both the Chopin and Corelli Variations over the past three chapters—delving into the background, themes, and variations of each piece individually—we now begin a compelling journey of comparison. The exploration of these compositions has provided a crucial understanding of the distinct landscapes that Rachmaninoff traversed while varying the themes of Chopin and Corelli. As we transition into the comparative analysis, the rich context established in the previous chapters serves as a foundation for unveiling the contrasting elements that define these two works. Throughout the following comparative analysis of Rachmaninoff’s solo piano variations, this exploration will cover numerous musical topics, including the following:

Compositional Influences:

Rachmaninoff’s solo variations often incorporate subtle references to pre-existing material. Analyzing these influences reveals the unique approaches he employed in shaping each set.

Variation Type:

The variations fall into three main categories—strict, developing, and free. Examining these types highlights the techniques Rachmaninoff used to transform and develop musical material throughout each work.

Tempo:

A study of each variation's tempo uncovers underlying connections within the set, revealing how different moments relate to one another structurally and expressively.

Length:

The length of each variation can be measured in beats, measures, and overall duration. This analysis sheds light on the structural nuances and pacing of each variation set.

Tonality:

An examination of key centers reveals Rachmaninoff's tonal choices and how they contribute to the flow and character of each variation set.

Harmonic Usage:

Each set features a distinct harmonic palette. Analyzing these choices highlights the harmonic complexity that enhances the expressive quality of the variations.

Meter:

A study of metric structure reveals how Rachmaninoff organizes each set, builds tension, and enhances its expressive impact.

Rhythm:

An exploration of rhythmic patterns and syncopations shows how Rachmaninoff manipulates rhythm to shape the overall character of each set.

Through this organized exploration, the goal is to explore the strategies implemented by Rachmaninoff that distinguish the Chopin Variations from the Corelli Variations (and vice versa). This comprehensive analysis serves as a way to unravel the compositional choices that contribute to the distinct character of each piece. The ultimate aim is to offer a more in-depth understanding of each piece in its own right.

Compositional Influences

Whether intentional or not, many moments within Rachmaninoff's solo variations seem to adhere to preexisting musical styles, textures, and works from other composers. Rachmaninoff's Chopin Variations exhibit significant compositional influences throughout the set, most notably from Bach, Chopin, and Brahms, but also include references to Rachmaninoff's own compositions.

The variations referring to Bach's style are distinguished by their use of counterpoint as the foundation of the compositional process. This is evident in the contrapuntal structure of Variations 1–3, the single line in Variation 7, the contrasting lines in different registers in Variation 9, and the four separate contrapuntal voices in Variation 13. Variations 11 and 12, which can be viewed as a prelude and fugue, further underscore the homage to Bach, while the use of canon in Variations 10 and 21 exemplifies additional Baroque influences. Bach's

contrapuntal style is perfectly depicted in Example 4.1 through the wandering violin lines in his Chaconne from the 2nd Violin Partita in D Minor, BWV 1004.



Musical Example 4.1. J.S. Bach, Chaconne in D Minor (mm. 51–61).

Rachmaninoff's reverence for Chopin beyond simply using his theme is apparent throughout the set. Variation 15, structured as a scherzo, directly parallels the genre of Chopin's four renowned scherzos. Variation 16 emulates the style of Chopin's nocturnes, featuring a flowing left-hand accompaniment beneath a bel-canto melody in the right. The funeral march in Variation 18, composed in Chopin's funeral march key of B-flat minor, directly references the third movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35. Variation 20 continues the homage to Chopin, resembling the texture and feel of Chopin's Etude in F Minor, Op. 25, No. 2.

In the final section, the Brahms-ian influence is somewhat more nuanced. Variation 21, the penultimate variation, features a slow-moving canon written in inverted counterpoint that happens to be a single accidental away from the penultimate variation in Brahms's Variations on a Theme of Schumann, Op. 9. Brahms's variation introduces the theme in the left hand followed

by the right a measure later whereas Rachmaninoff's variation begins the theme in the right hand followed by the left.

The Chopin Variations also include references to Rachmaninoff's own compositions. The transition to the final variation includes similar harmonic treatments of his Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18—specifically the final movement's orchestral tutti. Variation 19, on the other hand, concludes with a fast progression of chords that is indicative of his fascination with bells. Such sounds are abundant in many of his works (e.g. Prelude in C-sharp Minor, Op. 3, No. 2; Etude in C Minor, Op. 39, No. 7, etc.).

Rachmaninoff's influences found within the Corelli Variations differ from the clear homages to specific composers found in the Chopin Variations. Instead, the Corelli Variations blend modernity with that of Medieval and Renaissance sounds. By choosing a Renaissance melody, Rachmaninoff connects to earlier soundscapes, incorporating open fourths, fifths, and octaves—seen in Variations 5 and 16. The Intermezzo adheres to a more medieval style with a chant-like solo voice alternating with a “choir” of harmonies. Subtle Baroque influences also appear, with some variations (Variation 2 in particular) containing clear contrapuntal writing. The modern sounds of Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, are most evident through his use of Eastern-related scales featuring multiple minor seconds, as in the Intermezzo and Variation 16.

The Corelli Variations further relate to the Renaissance and Baroque eras through references to dance movements. The theme is a sarabande, and Rachmaninoff writes Variation 3 in a *tempo di minuetto*—a marking he previously used in his Prelude in D Minor, Op. 23, No. 3, and Variation 12 of his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43.

Rachmaninoff quotes his earlier works in the Corelli Variations, this time more extensively than in his Chopin Variations. Variation 4, interestingly, has an almost identical

texture to Variation 13 of the Chopin Variations; Variation 9 mirrors a serene moment in the first movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18; Variation 12 recalls the texture of his Etude in F Minor, Op. 33, No. 1. The rhythm in Variation 19 reflects the snare drum writing found in the final movement of Rachmaninoff's own Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30.

As for references to music written around the same time as the Corelli Variations, musicologist Stephen Walsh identifies Variation 15 as a precursor to the 17th variation of the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, noting their shared reliance on neighboring harmonies and three-note figurations for harmonic prolongation.⁷

As a final touch, Rachmaninoff concludes the last variation with multiple low D's, a clear allusion to Chopin's climactic final notes of the final prelude found within the quintessential Preludes, Op. 28.

Variation Type

Variations in music encompass a rich spectrum of creative expressions in which three distinct types have already been identified—strict, developing, and free variations. It is again important to note that variations often defy a singular classification, giving rise to many hybrid forms (e.g. developing strict variations). Variations that stay relatively close to the structure and harmonic pace of a theme but also incorporate subtle deviations to it are again referred to as semi-strict variations. Further, developing semi-strict variations combine a somewhat strict variation approach while referencing motifs from other variations. Ultimately, each of these variation types and subtypes provide a framework for understanding the nuanced ways in which

⁷ Walsh, Stephen. "Sergei Rachmaninoff 1873 – 1943." *Tempo* 105 (1973): 12-21.

composers navigate this compositional process. See Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 for a clear breakdown of each set's variation type profile.

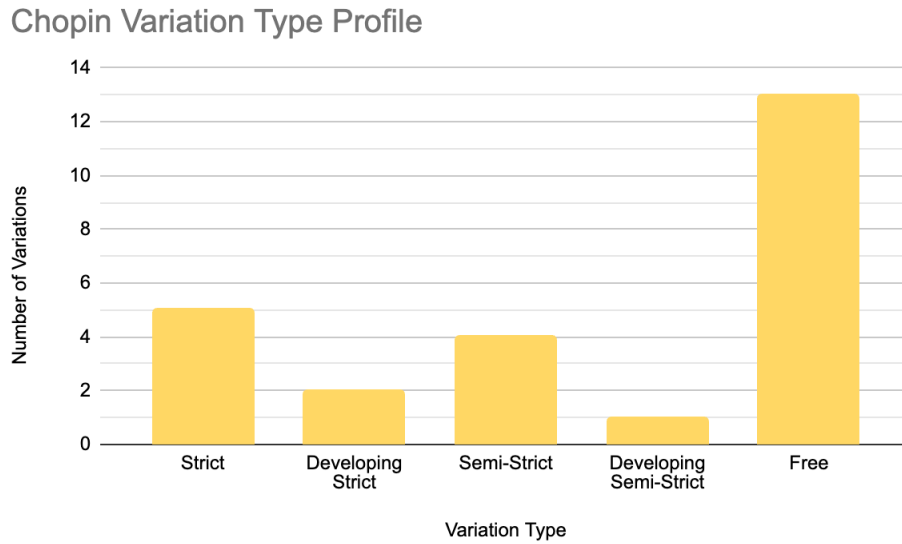


Figure 4.1. Variation Type Profile of the Chopin Variations.

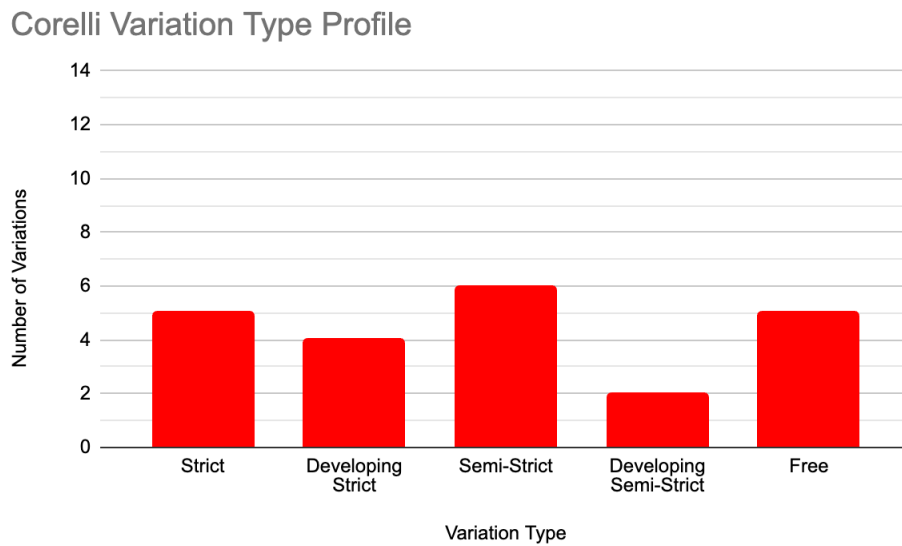


Figure 4.2. Variation Type Profile of the Corelli Variations.

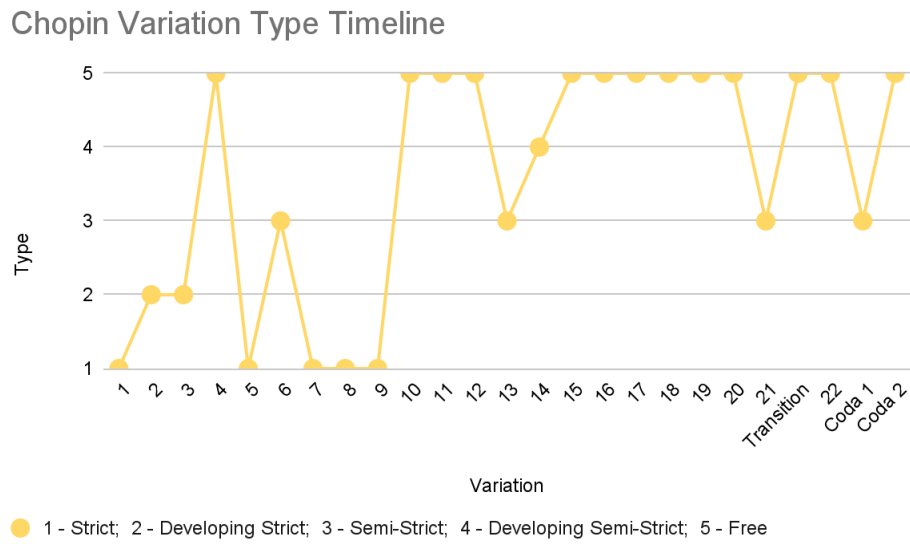


Figure 4.3. Variation Type Timeline of the Chopin Variations.

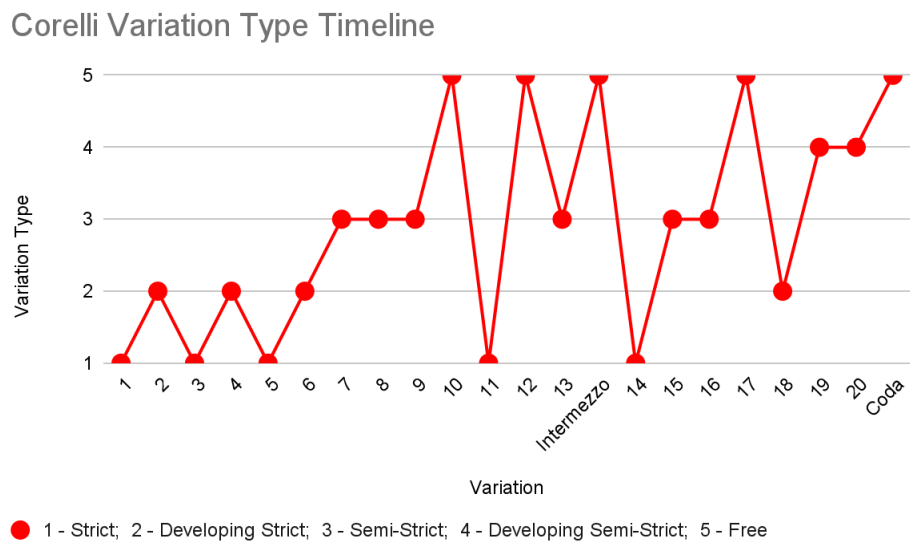


Figure 4.4. Variation Type Timeline of the Corelli Variations.

Examining the different types of variations used within the Chopin and Corelli Variations reveals interesting patterns in the composition styles of Rachmaninoff over the nearly thirty-year span between the sets. The Chopin Variations show a notable emphasis on compositional freedom with thirteen variations falling under the category of free variations (Variations 4, 10–12, 15–20, Transition, 22, and Coda 2). This suggests a creative and unrestrained approach to the piece where Rachmaninoff took more structural liberties rather than adhering to the strictures set by Chopin's theme. Additionally, the presence of five variations classified as strict (Variations 1, 5, and 7–9) and four variations classified as semi-strict (Variations 6, 13, 21, and Coda 1) indicates a balance between structured elements and artistic expression. Interestingly, the majority of these variations occur within the first half of the piece. The developing strict and developing semi-strict categories (Variations 2–3 and Variation 14, respectively) suggest a gradual evolution or exploration of motivic ideas across multiple variations. Of importance are the occurrence of several consecutive free variations beginning in Variation 10; once Rachmaninoff leaves the bounds of Chopin's theme, he rarely returns. When he does, so much has changed (meter, key, etc.) that the semi-strict variations are quite difficult to recognize.

In contrast, the Corelli Variations demonstrate a relatively higher adherence to strictness, with five variations in the strict category (Variations 1, 3, 5, 11, and 14) and six variations in the semi-strict category (Variations 7–9, 13, and 15–16). This implies a more disciplined and structured approach to composition, emphasizing precision and adherence to the theme's strictures—a notable quality when determining a variation set's cohesion. The inclusion of four developing strict variations (Variations 2, 4, 6, and 18) and two developing semi-strict variations (Variations 19–20) indicates a set of variations where many variations act as their own character pieces while still motivically tied to others. However, it is worth noting that the Corelli still

incorporates elements of freedom, as seen in the five variations classified as free variations (Variations 10, 12, the Intermezzo, 17, and the Coda). In terms of variation type order, the oscillation between strict and developing-strict variations in the first six variations is notable. Rachmaninoff introduces an idea (either rhythmically or melodically focused) in each odd variation, and expands upon it in the subsequent even variation. This produces a cohesion not found in the Chopin Variations. Similarly, note the lack of consecutive free variations; Rachmaninoff consistently brings the Corelli Variations back to structure while still maintaining a semblance of freedom of composition.

Additional percentage comparisons between the Chopin and Corelli Variations most clearly reveal the distinct differences in their approach to form and structure. The Chopin Variations are notably characterized by a dominant use of free forms, making up 52% of the piece. This once again reflects a strong emphasis on creative freedom and flexibility within the earlier set. In contrast, Corelli's use of free forms is considerably less, comprising only 22%, suggesting a more restrained approach to flexibility in the later set.

In terms of strict variations, both sets employ them somewhat equally with the Chopin at 20% of its variations and the Corelli at 22% of its variations. This indicates that Rachmaninoff placed a slightly greater emphasis on rigidly structured forms in the later set of variations compared to the earlier. The use of semi-strict variations in the Chopin Variations stands at 16%, whereas the Corelli Variations incorporate them more prominently, making up 27% of the piece. This highlights an older and more experienced Rachmaninoff having a greater skill of adhering to a theme's structure while still displaying compositional freedom.

When examining the developing strict variations, the Chopin features a modest 8% while the Corelli uses this form more extensively at 18%. Once again, an older and more accomplished

Rachmaninoff places more focus on variations that adhere to the strictness of the theme's content while weaving variations together motivically. Finally, developing semi-strict variations are minimal in the Chopin Variations at 4%, but the Corelli Variations use them more frequently at 9%. This indicates that the Corelli Variations are slightly more structured as they incorporate more variations that evolve from semi-strict forms compared to the Chopin.

Overall, the Chopin Variations showcase a strong preference for free-form creativity and flexibility of structure while the Corelli Variations present a more balanced approach, blending strict and semi-strict forms with moderate flexibility. This contrast underscores the idea that Rachmaninoff was most focused on innovation and thematic flexibility within the Chopin Variations, whereas his later focus was emphasized on cementing each variation's structure while remaining adaptable with semi-strict variation forms.

Tempo

In this next exploration, it is vital to visualize a piece's tempo profile to see how it contributes to the overall grouping of variations and the comprehensive narrative arc of the composition. When discussing tempo in an academic setting, there is an obvious challenge at play: tempos can be quite subjective. An *allegro* in one piece does not necessarily constitute an *allegro* in another piece. In order to best show a comparison between two different pieces, it is necessary to set such subjectivities aside for the purpose of simply visualizing a piece's tempo profile. For the sake of this portion of comparison, the tempo markings found within the Chopin and Corelli Variations will be treated without much subjectivity regarding the contexts of each piece.

In order to level the playing field between both sets and to best visualize how the tempos of each set differ from one another, a simple numerical digit will be assigned to each variation dependent upon its Italian tempo marking. To do this, a broad approximation of eighteen of the most common tempo markings will be sorted from slowest to fastest via a loose approximation of their respective beats per minute. From here, a numerical digit ranging from 1 to 18 will be assigned to each tempo marking in ascending order, making it possible to graph the relative tempos of each variation (where smaller digits denote slower tempos and larger digits denote faster tempos). See Figure 4.5 for each tempo and its respective numerical digit.

Adagissimo and Grave	24-40 bpm	1
Largo	40-66 bpm	2
Larghetto	44-66 bpm	3
Adagio	44-68 bpm	4
Adagietto	46-80 bpm	5
Lento	52-108 bpm	6
Andante	56-108 bpm	7
Andantino	80-108 bpm	8
Andante moderato	80-108 bpm	9
Moderato	108-120 bpm	10
Allegretto	112-120 bpm	11
Allegro moderato	116-120 bpm	12
Allegro	120-156 bpm	13
Molto Allegro/ Allegro vivace	124-156 bpm	14
Vivace	156-176 bpm	15
Vivacissimo/ Allegriissimo	172-176 bpm	16
Presto	168-200 bpm	17
Prestissimo	200+ bpm	18

Figure 4.5. Tempo Approximations and Assigned Digits.

Using the assigned values from this process, it is now possible to assign each variation within the Chopin and Corelli Variations a numerical digit that explains the relative tempo to be performed. For those variations lacking a specific tempo marking found in the list of eighteen tempos, another approximation of numerical assignment will be taken. For example, Variations 5 and 6 of the Chopin Variations are both marked *meno mosso*. Using the editor’s metronome marking suggestions, a numerical value will be assigned that follows the above suggested beats per minute while also making logical sense within the context of the music. Most markings beginning with *meno* or *più* will simply result in a subtraction or addition of a single numerical value. See Figures 4.6 and 4.7 for each variation set’s tempo profiles.

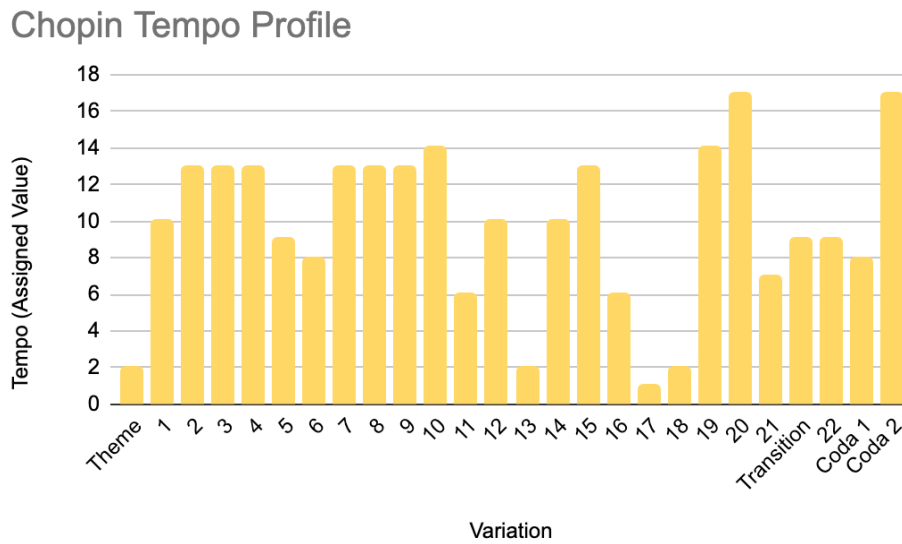


Figure 4.6. Tempo Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Tempo Profile



Figure 4.7. Tempo Profile of the Corelli Variations.

Each graph allows for a visualization of a twenty- or thirty-minute piece. From the visual, it becomes even more clear as to which variations are connected to each other and which stand alone. An eagle’s-eye view of the piece is pertinent for both performer and listener in order to best understand the complicated series of pitches that is sounded within each variation.

When viewing the Chopin tempo profile, the following groupings become clear: the theme stands alone; Variation 1 is developed upon through Variations 2, 3, and 4; Variations 5 and 6 are paired together; Variations 7 through 10 are conceived as a single unit; Variations 11 and 12 seem to build upon one another; Variation 13 resets the set with an *a tempo*; Variations 14 and 15 build intensity while Variations 16 through 18 come as a trio of slower entries; Variations 19 and 20 start another series of lively variations; Variations 21 through Coda 1 depend on one another; and Coda 2 ends the piece in a brilliant fashion. This creates the impression that the variations are grouped in the following way: 1–4, 5–6, 7–10, 11–12, 13, 14–15, 16–18, 19–20, 21–Coda 1, Coda 2. With the understanding of each variation from Chapter 3, this reading is not

far off from the supposed three-“movement” structure (Variations 1–12, 13–18, 19–end); it is a very much needed aid when interpreting this set of variations. However, the somewhat choppy perception of variation groupings by tempo may also add to the reasons why the Chopin Variations are not performed as frequently. To a listener unfamiliar with the piece, the stop-and-go nature of the pacing could lose one’s attention. It also shows the novice of a young Rachmaninoff’s first attempt at a long-form piece of solo piano music.

Turning to the Corelli Variations, it is evident that Rachmaninoff was able to form a more cohesive piece regarding tempo. From Corelli’s tempo profile alone, the following groupings become clear: the theme is stated followed by Variations 1 through 4; Variations 5 through 7 add excitement to the music; Variations 8 and 9 pull back the music to the slowest of the set; Variations 10 through 13 act as a single unit; the Intermezzo resets the set back to *a tempo* and belongs to a trio with Variations 14 and 15; Variations 16 through 20 bring energy with a tempo crescendo in the final three variations; and the Coda brings a less active close to the piece. This creates the impression that the variations are grouped in the following way: 1–4, 5–7, 8–9, 10–13, Intermezzo–15, 16–20, Coda. Again, with the understanding of each variation from Chapter 3, this reading fits nicely into both the two- and three-“movement” structures (Variations 1–13, Intermezzo–end; or Variations 1–13, Intermezzo–15, 16–end). These large-scale understandings are incredibly important to properly interpret this set of variations.

Compared to the Chopin Variations, the Corelli Variations are much more cohesive when simply looking at the abundance of tempo markings. The six large groupings of variations in the Corelli are clearly more coordinated than that of Chopin’s ten. Over the course of thirty years, Rachmaninoff became much more knowledgeable with how to maintain a listener’s attention

throughout the span of a lengthy work. This is possibly one reason as to why the Corelli Variations are that much easier to comprehend upon first listen than that of the Chopin.

Furthermore, the data for both variation sets reveals distinct preferences in tempo distribution. In the Chopin Variations, tempos within the 1–6 range constitute 23% of the entire piece—a moderate use of slower tempos. The middle range (tempos in the 7–12 range) accounts for 35%, suggesting a more balanced approach to tempo markings from *andante* to *allegro moderato*. The faster tempos (13–18) are the most frequently used, comprising 42% of the entire piece. This fact shows a clear preference towards quicker tempos overall with eleven of the variations/sections written in a more hurried style. The Chopin Variations, however, only have an average tempo of 9.69—one akin to *andante moderato*. The Corelli Variations display a different pattern. Slower tempos (1–6) are used sparingly, making up only 9% of the total. The medium tempos (7–12) are predominant, constituting 48%, indicating a heavy reliance on maintaining a thread through the variations via similar tempos. The faster tempos (13–18) are also used frequently, at 43%, another example of Rachmaninoff inclining towards writing variations in similar tempos to maintain coherency. The average tempo in the Corelli is, as a result, slightly higher at 10.35. This average is comparable with *moderato*, clearly highlighting a general preference for a more brisk pace compared to the Chopin Variations.

Length

In Rachmaninoff's solo variations, the number of variations, total duration in minutes, and overall measure count collectively play essential roles that influence both the perceptual and structural dimensions of each piece. While these metrics are quantifiable, their significance extends beyond mere numerical values with each metric encapsulating distinct implications for

the pieces overall. The overall objective of this comparison is to illuminate how the three forms of length individually provide unique insights that enrich the analytical discourse surrounding the variation sets. See Figures 4.8 and 4.9 for each variation set’s duration profile.

Chopin Duration Profile

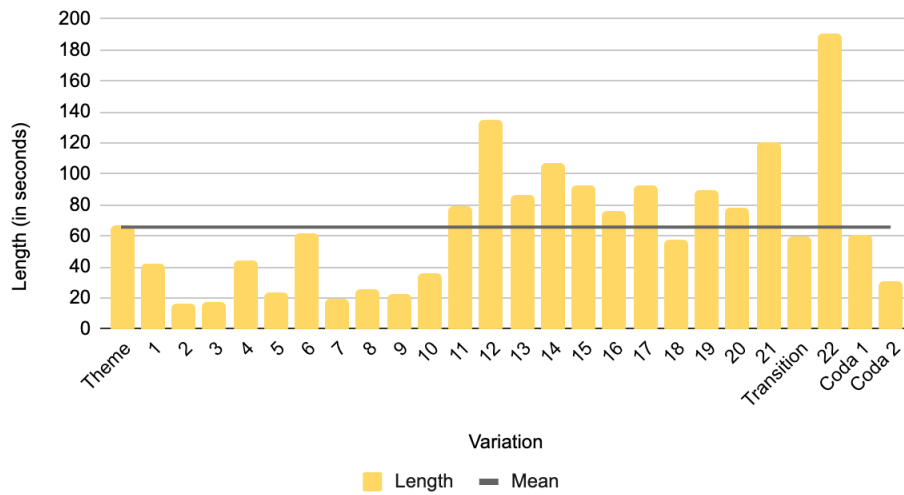


Figure 4.8. Duration Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Duration Profile

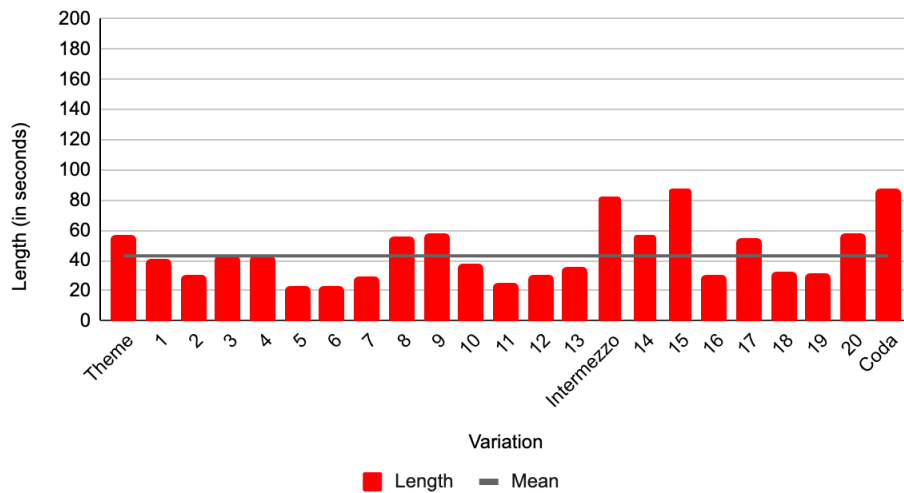


Figure 4.9. Duration Profile of the Corelli Variations.

First, the Chopin and Corelli Variations are not considerably different in terms of number of variations. As discussed before, the Chopin Variations entail twenty-two different variations. Other non-“variation” sections include a lengthy transitional section and two codas at the end of the piece (where Coda 2 is optional). For the sake of this section, the theme, all variations, the transition, and the two codas will be included, bringing the Chopin Variations to a total of twenty-six different modules of varying lengths. Conversely, the Corelli Variations are formed by twenty different variations. Rachmaninoff again includes a section for transition—the Intermezzo—and a coda. Therefore, the Corelli includes the theme, all variations, the Intermezzo, and the coda, bringing the set to a total of twenty-three different modules of varying lengths.

The next measurement for length is the total duration in minutes that each piece takes to perform, providing a better visual aid to see the divisions of each variation in time. As this is subjective and relative to every performer’s unique decisions, the timings of the recent video recordings created surrounding my final doctoral recital were used. Due to the cut-and-paste style of the variation sets, two warnings must be assessed. First, not all repeats found within the final variation of the Chopin Variations were performed, eliminating a small amount of time. This omission will not be factored into the total runtime. Second, the final coda of the piece was not performed; however, an estimation of the coda’s length was added by observing a few recordings that do end the piece in this fashion. See Figures 4.10 and 4.11 for each variation set’s cumulative time.

Chopin Cumulative Time

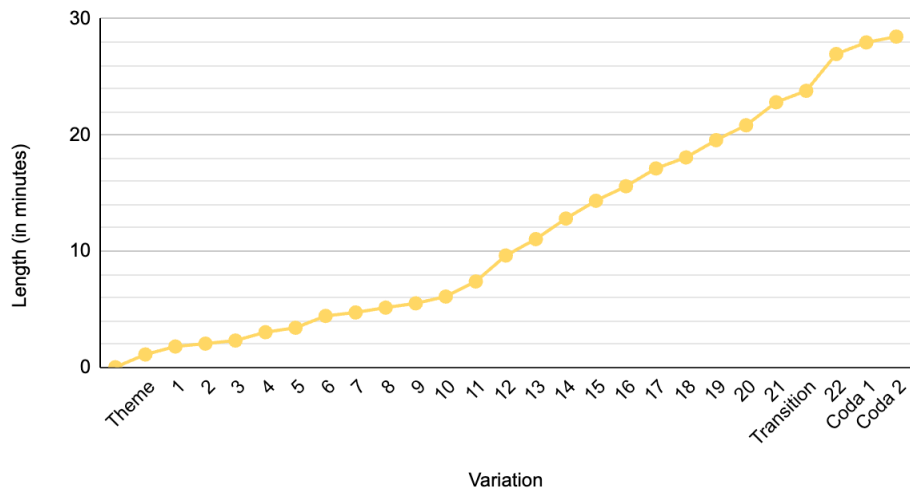


Figure 4.10. Cumulative Duration of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Cumulative Time

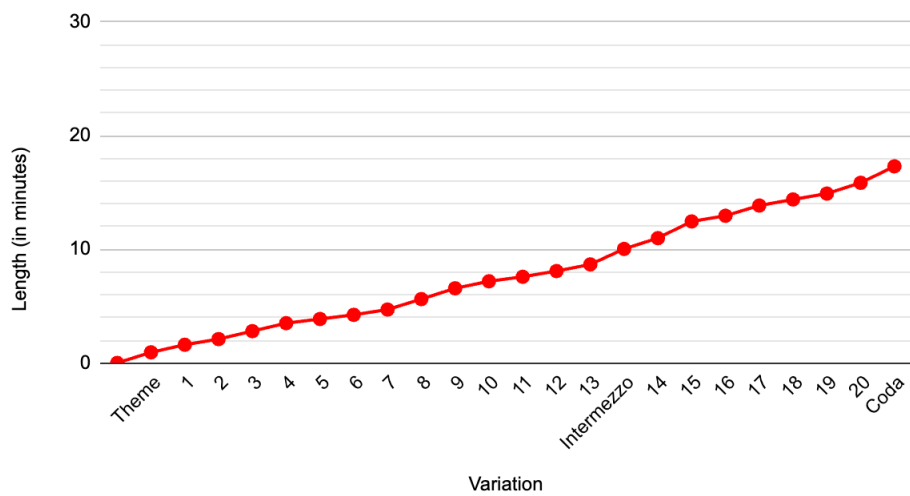


Figure 4.11. Cumulative Duration of the Corelli Variations.

The Chopin Variations, spanning 28.46 minutes with an average duration of 65.69 seconds per module, suggest a substantial and expansive exploration of thematic material. The longer durations may contribute to a heightened listener engagement and intricate development

of motifs, indicating a deliberate compositional strategy. In contrast, the Corelli Variations, totaling 17.3 minutes with an average of 45.13 seconds per module, exhibit a more concise and compact approach. The shorter durations imply a focused and perhaps more succinct treatment of thematic material, potentially emphasizing brevity and contrast within the set. The shorter variations create a dynamic flow that keeps the listener engaged while ensuring the overall structure remains coherent and easy to follow. These differences in length between the Chopin and Corelli sets offer a starting point for understanding how each composition navigates the balance, pacing, and expressive nuances inherent in their respective variation structures. Further exploration may unveil additional layers of insight into the interplay of thematic elements and formal considerations within each variation set.

Beyond the total length of each piece lies the rough estimation of the imaginary “movements” that comprise each set (see Figures 4.12, 4.13, and 4.14). In the Chopin Variations, the first movement (Theme and Variations 1–12) unfolds over 9 minutes and 36 seconds, establishing a substantial thematic foundation. The second movement (Variations 13–18), lasting 8 minutes and 27 seconds, marks a notable juncture with Rachmaninoff’s reference to Chopin’s “Funeral March.” The third movement (Variations 19–22), spanning 10 minutes and 24 seconds, further extends the exploration of musical ideas, emphasizing thematic complexity. Notice the balance of length despite the drastic difference in number of variations (12 vs. 6 vs. 4). Turning to the Corelli Variations, two possible breakdowns offer distinct perspectives. In the first option, the first movement (Theme and Variations 1–13) comprises 8 minutes and 40 seconds, presenting a considerable thematic foundation. The second movement (Intermezzo–Variation 15), at 3 minutes and 47 seconds, introduces a moment of brevity or contrast, while the third movement (Variations 16–20), lasting 4 minutes and 51 seconds, maintains a moderate length that

contributes to the overall structural balance. Alternatively, the second and third movement can be combined to 8 minutes and 38 seconds, resulting in a more substantial thematic development that begins with a sounding of the theme in a remote key (Variation 14). Both configurations for the Corelli Variations showcase intentional choices in movement lengths, influencing the pacing, balance, and expressive dynamics of Rachmaninoff's composition. These variations in duration contribute to the interplay of structural elements and thematic development that ultimately guides the listener's journey.

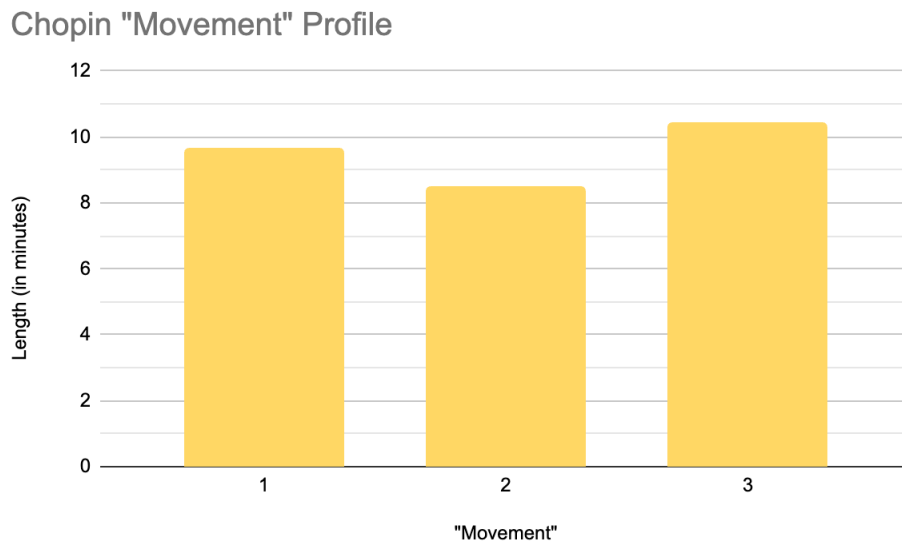


Figure 4.12. Movement Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli "Movement" Profile A

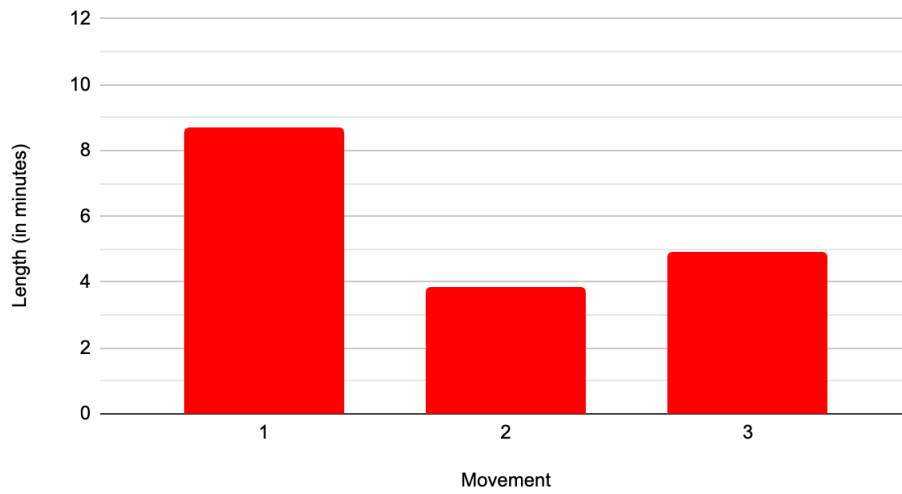


Figure 4.13. Movement Profile A of the Corelli Variations

Corelli "Movement" Profile B

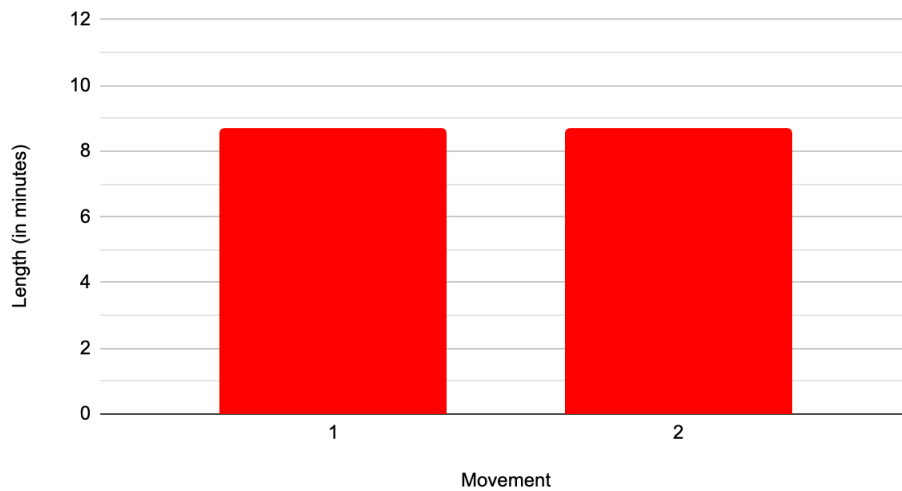


Figure 4.14. Movement Profile B of the Corelli Variations

The identification of golden mean points within the Chopin and Corelli Variations introduces a compelling perspective on their structural and expressive significance. In the Chopin Variations, the golden mean that occurs at around 17 minutes and 35 seconds coincides

with Rachmaninoff's conclusion of the reference to Chopin's "Funeral March." This also marks the climax and close of the set's so-called second "movement." This temporal juncture indeed signifies a pivotal moment within the composition, suggesting a deliberate emphasis on the culmination of a thematic reference and potentially contributing to a sense of structural balance. Conversely, in the Corelli Variations, the golden mean at 10 minutes and 41 seconds aligns with the *Intermezzo*, almost precisely at the juncture where the key transitions from D minor to D-flat major. This particular temporal midpoint carries notable weight, occurring within a section characterized by a significant tonal shift. The juxtaposition of contrasting keys at this golden mean point may serve as a strategic compositional choice, introducing a moment of harmonic tension and resolution. The placement of these points aligns with key structural elements, indicating potential moments of heightened expressive impact and contributing to the overall coherence and narrative flow of the compositions. Further exploration could unveil additional layers of insight into Rachmaninoff's deliberate use of golden mean points and their role in shaping the listener's experience throughout the Chopin and Corelli Variations.

Finally, it is possible to analyze the length of each set in terms of measure counts, providing a different angle of duration (see Figures 4.15 and 4.16). In the Chopin Variations, the average variation consists of 24.48 measures, showcasing notable variations in terms of length across the set given the eight-measure theme. Rachmaninoff employs variations ranging from concise eight-measure segments to more expansive structures, such as Variation 20 with over one hundred measures. The variance in measure counts contributes to a diverse and dynamic progression, emphasizing thematic intricacy and allowing for a more detailed exploration of the theme within each variation. On the other hand, the Corelli Variations exhibit a comparatively consistent average of 18.13 measures per variation, just over two measures longer than the

theme. Here, Rachmaninoff maintains a more uniform structure, with each variation adhering to a similar measure count. This uniformity contributes to a sense of cohesion and rhythmic continuity throughout the set. Notably, the Intermezzo stands out with a distinct duration of thirteen measures, the shortest of the set, while the climactic final variation serves as the longest at twenty-seven measures. Overall, the variance in measure counts within the Chopin Variations contributes to a rich tapestry of thematic exploration, while the more consistent measure lengths in the Corelli Variations establish a sense of rhythmic continuity and coherence. Both approaches showcase Rachmaninoff’s skillful manipulation of variation form, employing diverse structures to convey distinct expressive and structural intentions within each set.

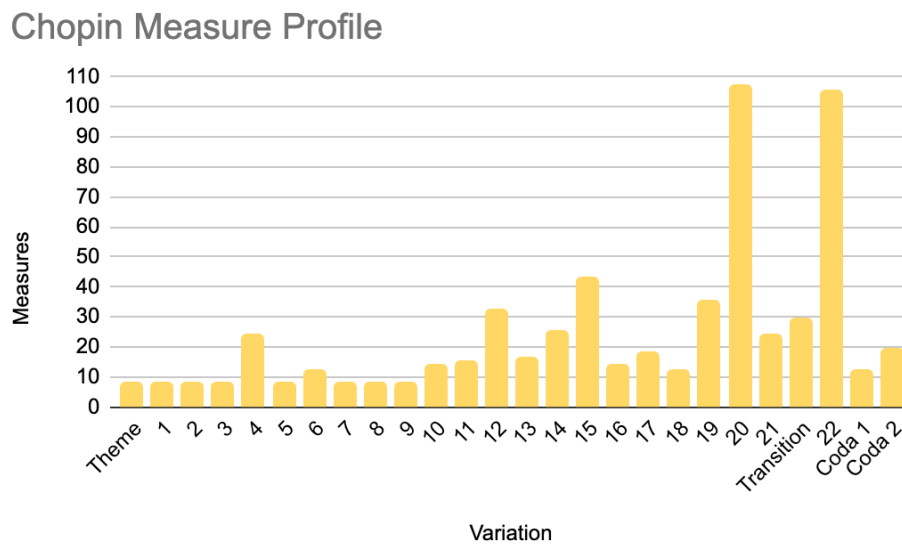


Figure 4.15. Measure Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Measure Profile

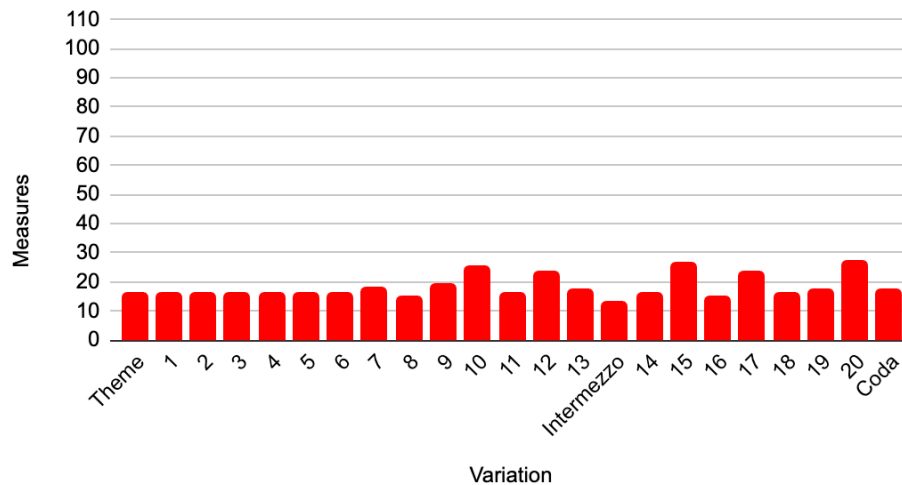


Figure 4.16. Measure Profile of the Corelli Variations.

Tonality

The impact of having multiple key centers across all variations in a variation set emerges as a crucial point of comparison. The deliberate selection and modulation of key signatures yields considerable influence over the expressive and structural dimensions of a piece, let alone the clear impact on a performer's interpretation. This portion of comparison aims to uncover the implications of having varying key centers within a set of variations, delving into how different tonalities affect the impression of thematic unity.

The Chopin Variations are clearly more adventurous than the Corelli Variations in terms of the inclusion of different tonal centers. Of the twenty-two variations, only thirteen exist within the theme's original key of C minor, leaving nine to modulate into other keys (though the final variation maintains C as a tonic, it has a drastic change of key signature). Of these nine variations in other tonal areas, seven different key centers are explored by Rachmaninoff. Further, only two of the seven keys receive the treatment of having two different variations share

a tonality. On the other hand, the Corelli Variations stay closer to the theme's tonic with eighteen of the twenty variations having been written in the key of D minor. The remaining two variations share the same key signature, allowing the whole set to only visit two keys throughout its runtime. Compared to Chopin's nine, there may be more evidence as to why the Chopin Variations are more challenging to interpret as a single cohesive set.

The choice of key centers within each set can be analyzed further. To do so, it is important to see how distantly related each key is in respect to their themes. Per typical music theory key analysis, any keys only one accidental away from the overall tonic will be considered a closely related key. Conversely, the degree in which a key signature differs from the overall tonic will determine how foreign the key is (see Figures 4.17 and 4.18).

Chopin Key Profile

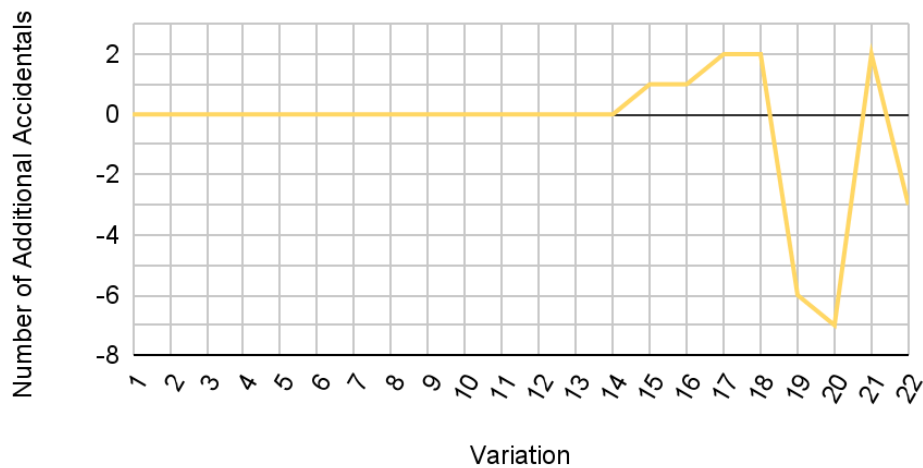


Figure 4.17. Key Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Key Profile

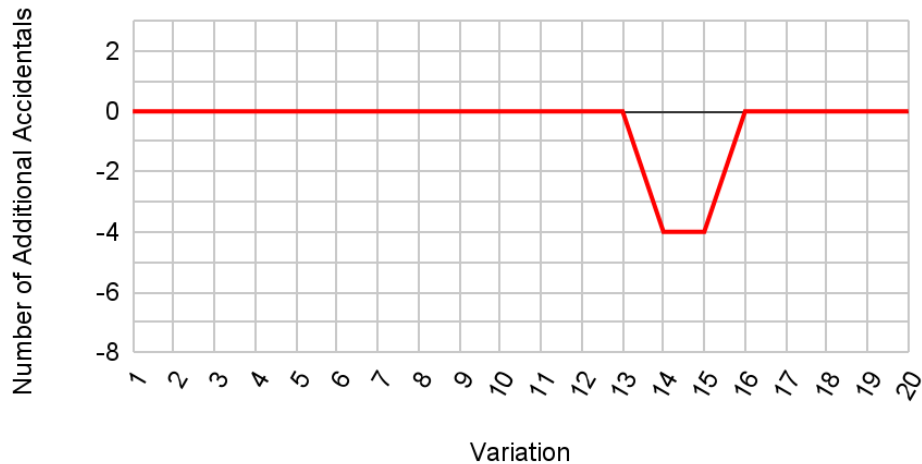


Figure 4.18. Key Profile of the Corelli Variations.

In the Chopin Variations, the overall tonic is C minor with three flats. The keys with either two or four flats can thus be considered as closely related within this piece (i.e. B-flat major, G minor, E-flat major, A-flat major, and F minor). Three of the nine variations outside of C minor are considered to be within a closely related key with Variation 11 visiting the relative major (E-flat major) and Variations 15 and 16 settling within F minor. The other six variations are slightly more problematic. The next closest key relations to C minor are those keys that are just two accidentals away (i.e. F major, D minor, D-flat major, and B-flat minor). Of the remaining six variations, three fall within this category, including Variations 17 and 18 in B-flat minor and Variation 21 in D-flat major. Interestingly, these are the two key centers that are Rachmaninoff's Chopin-inspired keys with B-flat minor reflecting the key of Chopin's famous "Funeral March" and D-flat major being the antepenultimate harmony—the Neapolitan—of the

variation's theme. The next closest relationship to C minor is the parallel mode of C major found in Variation 22 (three accidentals away). Finally, both Variation 19 and 20 are six and seven degrees away—A major and C-sharp minor, respectively—showcasing how foreign the two keys really are in relation to the theme. Expectedly, these two variations mark the beginning of the so-called third “movement” of the piece—a reset most clearly defined through sudden changes in tonality.

The Corelli Variations, in retrospect, are seemingly much more simple in terms of key relationships. With most variations existing in the key of D minor, the closest related keys to the theme would assumedly be C major, A minor, F major, B-flat major, or G minor. Interestingly, not a single variation is related to the theme in this way. Instead, the two variations outside the key of D minor lie within D-flat major, a key that is distantly related as it is four accidentals away from the overall tonic. Though not as foreign to the theme as some of the Chopin Variations, the choice of key centers within the Corelli is definitely intriguing. Rather than referencing previous pieces and parts of the theme as in the Chopin Variations, Rachmaninoff is particularly interested in the relationship between D minor and D-flat major throughout the entire set. He is often seen moving between the two chords, exploiting the fact that they both contain the same third of F. A simple, yet extreme harmonic movement of raising or lowering both the first and fifth of either chord leads to the other. In fact, you can find these chordal relationships within eleven of the twenty variations. Variations 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 13, 16, and 19 all contain some form of D-flat chord (sometimes enharmonically written as a C-sharp) that leads to D minor. Variations 14 and 15 both contain some form of D minor chord that ultimately leads to D-flat major.

Regardless, the numerous closely related keys and foreign keys that Rachmaninoff visits within the span of the Chopin Variations is shocking, especially for a piece unified by a single theme. Despite Rachmaninoff's compositional genius, this may be a leading cause as to why the variation set is so challenging to interpret. However, it is a logical choice for Rachmaninoff because the Chopin theme suggests at least three different keys with additional tonicizations. Conversely, the sameness of the Corelli can be just as challenging to interpret because each variation has to be distinct in character without the aid of different tonal centers. Though the Corelli theme does have the D/C-sharp idea embedded in the first gesture, the theme itself does not suggest any other keys, hence Rachmaninoff's disregard of other key centers. See Figures 4.19, 4.20, and 4.21 for a visual of each variation set's key profile overlaid with each set's overarching movements.

Chopin Key Profile with Movements

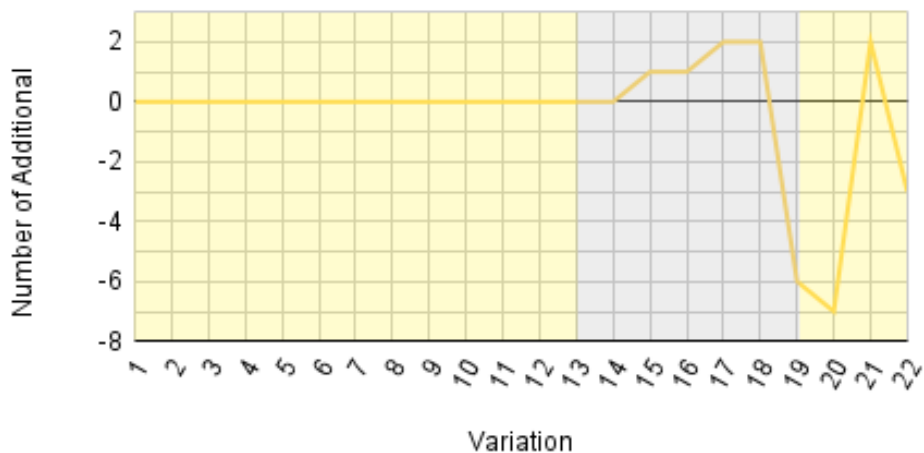


Figure 4.19. Key Profile with Three Movement Structure of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Key Profile with Movements A

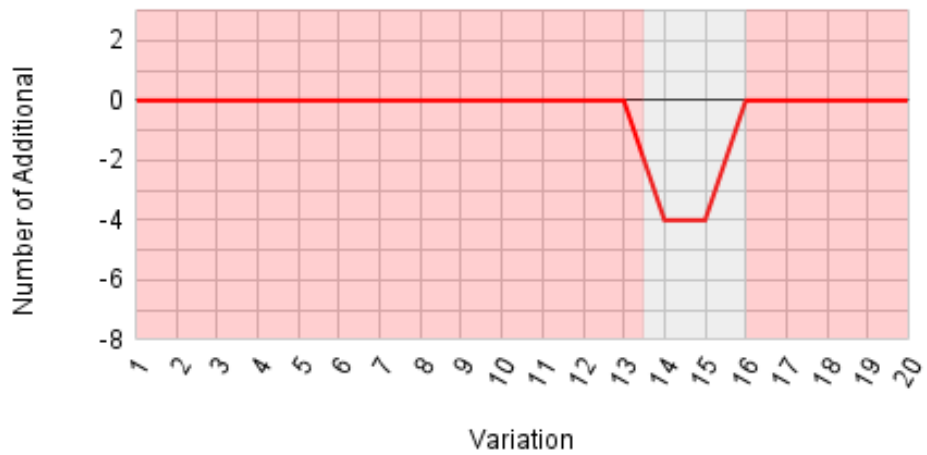


Figure 4.20. Key Profile with the Three Movement Structure of the Corelli Variations.

Corelli Key Profile with Movements B

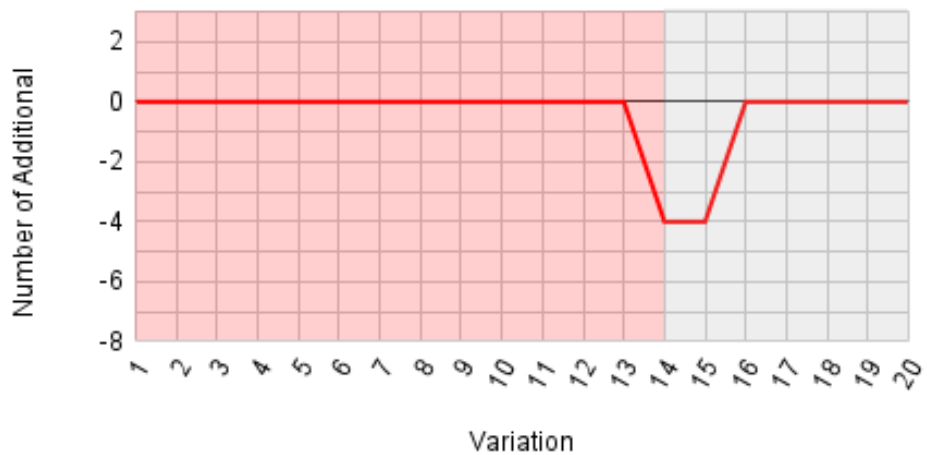


Figure 4.21. Key Profile with the Two Movement Structure of the Corelli Variations.

Harmonic Usage

The harmonies used by Rachmaninoff in each set of variations play a crucial role in shaping the character and emotional impact of each piece. The harmonies within Rachmaninoff's

Chopin Variations closely align with the typical conventions of Romanticism: an abundance of rich, expressive chords that make up intricate harmonic progressions. The harmonic language of this set of variations features extended chords, chromaticism, and modulations to help create the luscious texture that typifies the musical aesthetic of the Romantic era. Rachmaninoff, clearly inspired to write a Romantic-centered homage to Chopin, uses a similar language to evoke the same depth of feeling and complexity found in Romantic era works, including Chopin's. These variations feature a variety of harmonic techniques, such as the use of dominant seventh and ninth chords, a heavy reliance on diminished and half-diminished chords, and bold modulations which heighten the intensity of emotion and lyricism of the piece. Such an adherence to the Romantic harmonic tradition in the Chopin Variations provides a sense of continuity and homage, ultimately reinforcing the emotional and expressive qualities that defined the Romantic Era.

In the early moments of the piece, Variations 4 and 6 show Rachmaninoff's leaning towards Romantic harmonies. In Variation 4, the harmonic movement is quite still with the tonic maintaining its presence for the majority of the first eight measures. This reliance on C minor is only destabilized through chromatic lines in the left hand, not by harmonic progressions. In measure 9, the dominant harmony is introduced and stays active (with smaller harmonies supporting the dominant) for eight measures, again decorated through chromatic linear motion in the left hand. At the climax of the variation (measure 13), the tonic returns, moving through secondary dominants, diminished seventh chords, and even the Neapolitan, all resulting in a final dominant-tonic resolution. The harmonies are standard within the Romantic era, but are greatly impacted through Rachmaninoff's individual style of chromaticism.

Variation 6 is quite similar, too. Following closely to the original theme's harmony, the variation moves through tonics, dominants, subdominants, and half-diminished supertonic harmonies. Measure 7 introduces the tonicization of the mediant through its own dominant–tonic relationship. All of the harmonies thereafter are also standard to the Romantic Era.

Towards the end of the piece lies another perfect example of Romanticist harmonic choices. Variation 18, truly in Rachmaninoff's style, follows similar harmonies to those found in Variation 6, this time in B-flat minor. Once again, Rachmaninoff's unique sound is displayed not through his harmonic choices, but through his chromatic and rhythmic decorations in the right hand. More interesting harmonic choices, however, exist beginning in measure 9 of the variation. Though not too complex, Rachmaninoff uses common tones to move to unrelated chords, a staple found towards the end of the Romantic era. The left hand D-flat is enharmonically spelled as C-sharp resulting in a smooth transition of the tonic B-flat minor to A major. The following measure uses an F in D minor to move to D-flat major while measure 11 uses an A in F-sharp minor to move to A major. Each of these shifts highlight mediant relationships.

In contrast, the harmonic language used by Rachmaninoff in the Corelli Variations exhibits a more modern approach, still using chordal extensions, but in a more progressive way. Rachmaninoff often moves between chords through the use of planing, typically with major and minor triads and seventh chords. This method involves moving a chord shape up and down a scale while maintaining its structure, but not the chord's overall harmonic context. Such harmonic planing creates a more ambiguous and less traditionally resolved sound compared to the rich harmonies of the Romantic style. Take note of the way chromaticism is used in measure 9 of Variation 21; Instead of using chromaticism as a way to decorate the underlying harmonic functions, Rachmaninoff applies harmonies to each chromatic tone, planing downwards from D

minor to A major by moving through C-sharp minor, C minor, B minor, and B-flat minor. This more modern harmonic language, plumb full of parallel motion and less-than-predictable progressions, demonstrates Rachmaninoff's willingness to experiment and evolve beyond the language of his music written 30 years earlier.

The Corelli Variations incorporate modal harmonies and non-functional chord progressions that add to the sense of innovation and departure from Rachmaninoff's more traditional harmonic practices. In Variation 13, chromatic movement is once again supported through the addition of harmonies to each chromatic pitch. The right hand line of D–C–B–B-flat–B–C-sharp is supported by individual harmonies, revealing complex clusters of ninth chords that do not function similar to the Romantic Era. A tonic chord with an added 9 is moved through a tonic chord with seventh and ninth to a cluster chord involving D, E, F, G, and B. This moves to a chord consisting of D, E, F, G-sharp, and B-flat, which ultimately moves through a cluster of D, E, F, A, and B to land on a dominant A major chord. A descriptive harmonic analysis of these measures is not feasible due to Rachmaninoff's clustered writing in the variation.

Overall, the unconstrained use of dissonance and more progressive harmonic resolutions in the Corelli Variations reflects the broader trends of the early 20th-century. By juxtaposing these modern harmonic techniques with the more traditional harmonies found in the Chopin Variations, Rachmaninoff highlights his versatility as a composer and his ability to bridge different musical eras and styles.

Meter

The selection of meters in each variation set—whether simple or compound, duple or triple—plays a pivotal role in shaping the character of each piece. In delving deeper into the metrical distribution of the Chopin and Corelli Variations, a comprehensive analysis reveals nuanced differences and notable comparisons in their rhythmic structures (see Figures 4.22 and 4.23). The Chopin Variations, with 88% of the piece written in simple meters, prominently features a strong predilection for simple quadruple time. Fifteen variations adhere to this common meter which provides a robust rhythmic foundation of four beats per measure. Interestingly, the deliberate use of mixed meters in two instances of the Chopin Variations showcases a moderate exploration of rhythmic complexity within the framework of simple meters. Furthermore, the intentional introduction of compound meters in three variations adds a layer of intricacy which demonstrates a selective incorporation of more complex rhythmic structures.

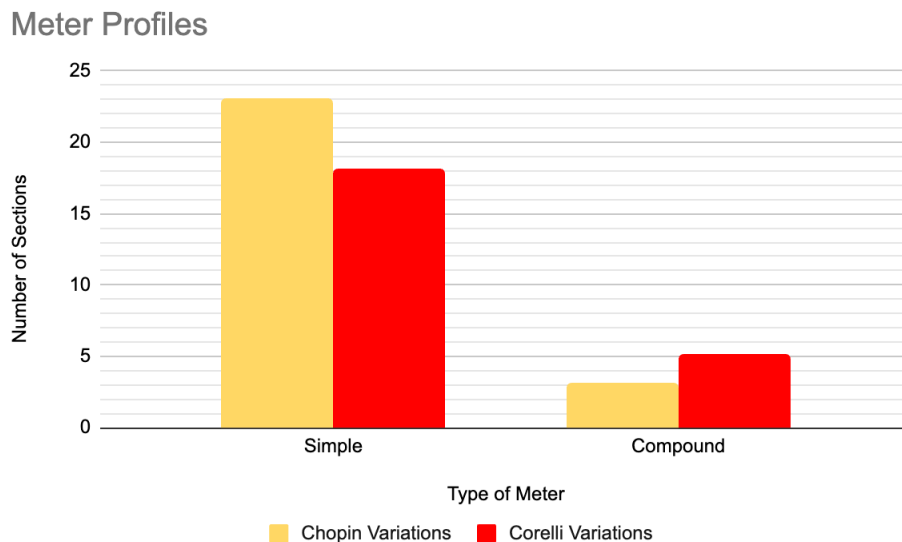


Figure 4.22. Meter Profile 1 of the Chopin and Corelli Variations.

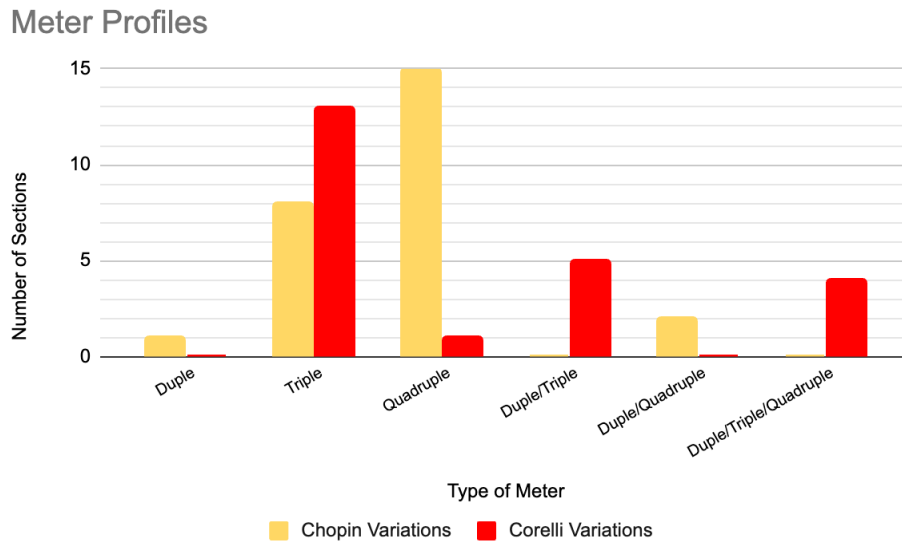


Figure 4.23. Meter Profile 2 of the Chopin and Corelli Variations.

The Corelli Variations predominantly unfolds within simple meters, with 78% falling into this category. This set’s distinct avoidance of duple and quadruple time is a notable departure from the approach in the Chopin Variations, emphasizing a deliberate exclusion of binary rhythmic elements. The prevalence of simple triple time in thirteen variations underscores the Corelli set’s strong reliance on ternary rhythmic elements. Moreover, the Corelli Variations’ exploration of mixed meters is more extensive than the Chopin set, with four variations seamlessly blending duple, triple, and quadruple time. This contrast highlights Rachmaninoff’s propensity for rhythmic diversity within the simple meter framework of the Corelli Variations.

Examining the thematic foundations further enriches this comparison. Chopin’s theme, existing in simple quadruple time, sets the stage for the subsequent variations—a steady and structured rhythmic foundation. Corelli’s theme is in simple triple time, contributing to the prevailing ternary feel in the following variations. This initial choice in thematic meter informs and shapes the subsequent developments in both sets of variations. Furthermore, the Corelli set’s

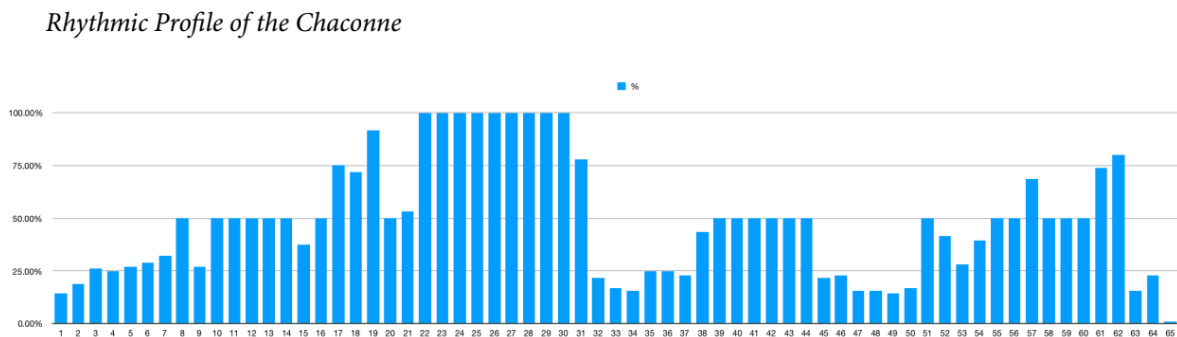
slightly higher proportion of variations in compound meters (22%) compared to the Chopin set's (12%) underscores a greater inclination towards rhythmic intricacy in the Corelli Variations. The Chopin has a deliberate focus on simple quadruple time while the Corelli navigates through a more diverse rhythmic landscape, both showcasing the distinct rhythmic palettes employed by Rachmaninoff at different times in his life.

In essence, coupling the meter distribution with the exploration of each set's thematic foundations highlights the contrasting rhythmic choices within each variation set. These differences contribute significantly to the individual character and expressive qualities of each piece, an indication that Rachmaninoff's unique take on meter developed over the 30-year span of his solo piano variations.

Rhythm

In order to graphically compare the rhythmic profiles of each variation set, it is important to understand what data is being displayed. This section is interested in the rhythmic intensity found in each set of variations. Rhythmic intensity is best described as the distribution of rhythmic values used to create a rhythmically full measure. Let us once again use the Chaconne from Bach's Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004. Written in 3/4 time, the fastest rhythms used in the piece are thirty-second notes. Therefore, a variation that is 100% rhythmically intense would consist of measures that are purely thirty-second notes. Bach reaches this rhythmic climax in measure 85—twenty-four notes per measure. Conversely, a line of repeating eighth notes—six notes per measure—is much less rhythmically active, ranking as only 25% intense. Jonathan

Leathwood, Professor of Music Theory at the University of Denver, developed the following graphic from a lecture on the Chaconne:⁸



x: variation

y: how 'full' the variation is: a variation is considered 'full' if it consists entirely of 3 2nd notes

Figure 4.24. Rhythmic Profile of Bach's Chaconne.

With piano music, the issue of having two hands creating polyrhythmic textures is slightly more challenging to interpret. Further, the Chopin and Corelli Variations do not remain in the same meter throughout. Due to the polyrhythmic setting and shifting meters of the variation sets, a common denominator of sextuplets can be used for both pieces. In any given measure, every beat can consist of six sub-notes. Therefore, the most rhythmically intense variations would be those in which a steady line of sextuplets is present. In order to achieve the proper readings for each variation, we can simply divide the number of vertical noteheads against the total number of sextuplets per beat in each variation (see Figures 4.25 and 4.26).

⁸ Leathwood, "Bach's Chaconne: How to Learn and How to Practice It."

Chopin Rhythmic Profile

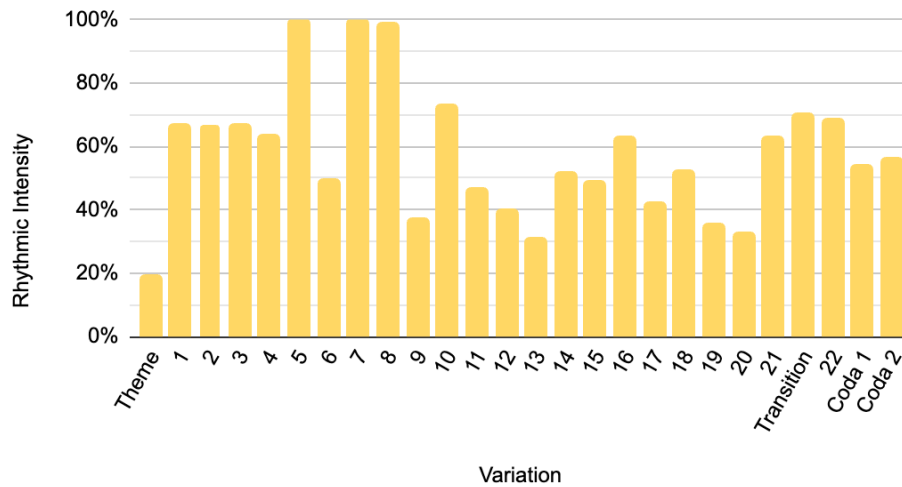


Figure 4.25. Rhythmic Profile of the Chopin Variations.

Corelli Rhythmic Profile

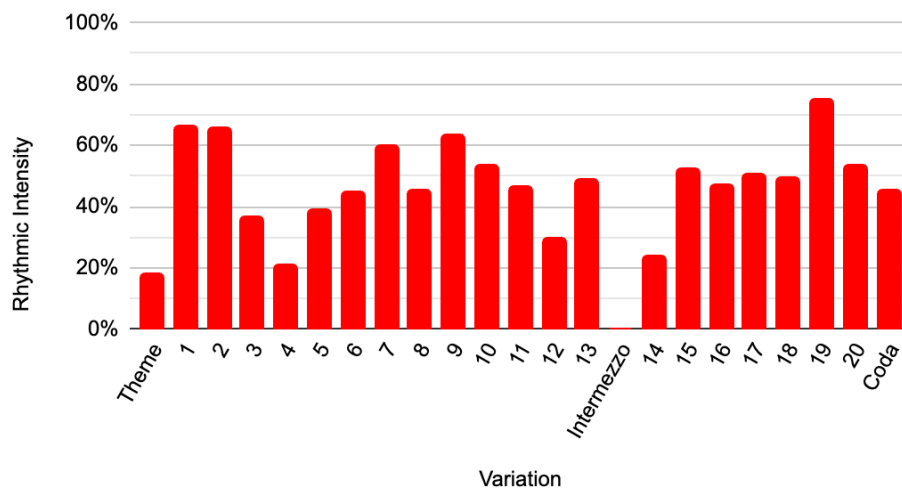


Figure 4.26. Rhythmic Profile of the Corelli Variations.

When looking at the data for the Chopin Variations, a certain roadmap of rhythmic intensity becomes clear. The piece begins with a rather mild rhythmic setting in the theme due to the abundance of quarter notes and the occasional dotted-eighth/sixteenth rhythm. The following

three variations, however, all maintain a rather intense rhythmic profile of 66% as each is a steady stream of sixteenth notes. (Note that this data set ignores tempo altogether, or else Variation 1 would not rank equally with Variations 2 and 3 in regards to total intensity.) Variation 4 pulls back slightly as it includes a few moments where the strands of sixteenth notes are broken. According to other datasets, this variation is the supposed climax of the first several variations; interestingly, Variation 5, a transition into Variation 6, is 100% rhythmically intense. It would be expected that the climax would champion the role of most rhythmic intensity, but alas, this is not the case.

Variation 6 pulls back in terms of rhythmic intensity, but is the first variation to rely heavily on polyrhythms. The interplay between triplets and eighths allows for the slow variation to rank at just under 50% rhythmically intense. As the variation concludes, the second occasion of 100% rhythmic intensity appears in Variation 7, a variation consisting purely of sextuplets. Note that Variations 5 and 7 are the only variations in the set that accomplish a rhythmic intensity of 100%. Variation 7's pair—Variation 8—lies just beneath 100% rhythmic intensity due to its subtle pauses in rhythm at the ends of phrases.

In the next four variations, Rachmaninoff does not include any rhythmic equivalences, crescendos, or decrescendos like he does in the first few variations. Variation 9 ranks at around 37% rhythmically intense; Variation 10 at 73%; Variation 11 at 46%; and Variation 12 at 39%. Unlike those in Bach's Chaconne, these variations are somewhat sporadic in terms of rhythm, perhaps leading to the more individualistic feeling of variations not relating to one another rhythmically.

Variations 13 and 14, acting as a pair due to motivic connection, does reveal a slight rhythmic crescendo from 31% intense to 51% intense; these two variations feel like a pair

because of it. Variation 15 follows with a slight decrease in rhythmic intensity, though the added tempo adjustment and change of meter makes it feel more intense. Interestingly, the following slow variation, Variation 16, is regarded as more rhythmically intense due to its constant sixteenth-note accompaniment versus the gallop of Variation 15. Next, the two B-flat minor variations, Variations 17 and 18, include a small rhythmic crescendo from 42% intensity to 52% intensity. These two variations can feel cohesive if illuminating this rhythmic connection.

When entering the final variations, it would be expected that the rhythmic intensity would build as a way of climaxing the music into the big finale. In the Chopin Variations, this is not the case. Variation 19 begins with 35% intensity, lessening to Variation 20 at 32% (though this is the variation with the fastest meter). The highly polyrhythmic Variation 21 lands an intense percentage at 63%, mostly due to the intense polyrhythmic nature of the writing. The transition into Variation 22, exciting as it is, only lands at a 70% rhythmic intensity, which slightly lessens to 69% intensity in the final variation. The following two codas, drastically different in tempo, both rank similarly in rhythmic intensity with Coda 1 at 54% and Coda 2 at 56%. The average rhythmic intensity of the entire piece is 57%.

When viewing the rhythmic intensity in the Chopin Variations, it becomes clear that there are rhythmic trends. The Theme along with Variations 9, 13, 19, and 20, all exhibit lower rhythmic densities with each having a rhythmic intensity of 33% or under. Variations 4, 6, 11, 12, 14–18, and 21 fall into the moderate rhythmically intense category with rhythmic intensities ranging between 34% and 66%. And most significantly, Variations 1–3, 5, 7, 8, 10, the Transition, Variation 22, Coda 1, and Coda 2 all feature high rhythmic intensities of 67% to 100%.

There are moments where Rachmaninoff uses rhythm to string variations together and to

increase intensity to the point of musical climax. However, this is not the only method that Rachmaninoff uses to increase intensity, evidenced by the lack of 100% rhythmic intensities towards the end of the variation set. It is indeed strange that the only instances of 100% intensity occur within the first eight variations with none of the following variations ever coming close to this amount of intensity again. It is also interesting that the least rhythmically intense variation, Variation 13, is still over 10% more intense than the theme. This variation is somewhat of an echo to the theme, reintroducing the slow rhythmic procession of chords for the second half of the piece.

Turning the focus towards the Corelli Variations, the theme of the Corelli Variations ranks at just about the same rhythmic intensity as Chopin's theme of 18%. Rachmaninoff connects the first few variations of the Corelli Variations rhythmically through continuous strands of sixteenth notes, leaving Variations 1 and 2 at a rhythmic intensity of 66% and 65%, respectively. Variation 3 departs from this rhythmic consistency, opting for a slower rhythmic intensity of 36% due to the more dance-like rhythms of a *Menuetto*. Variation 4 returns to a similar rhythmic intensity as the theme, but with some flourishes every measure that marks it as 21% intense.

The following three variations, Variations 5 through 7, are a fantastic representation of Rachmaninoff incorporating a rhythmic crescendo in order to build intensity and cohesion. Variation 5 begins with a 39% rhythmic intensity that builds to a 44% intensity in Variation 6 and to a 60% intensity in Variation 7. The triplets of Variation 5 and Variation 6 culminate with sixteenths in Variation 7. Variations 8 and 9 also act as a cohesive unit, again demonstrating a rhythmic crescendo from 45% rhythmic intensity to 63%.

The following four variations, Variations 10 through 13, also act as a unit. Interestingly,

the rhythmic intensity of the variations do not create the sense of climax that Variations 5 through 7 do. Instead, Variation 10 begins with a 53% intensity, decreasing to 46% in Variation 11, and greatly decreasing to around 30% in Variation 12. Variation 13 suddenly increases the intensity to around 49%. Though the four variations are seen as a unit, Rachmaninoff uses tools other than rhythmic intensity to tie them together.

Next, an interpretive graphical error of 0% intensity exists for the Intermezzo of the variation set. Because this quasi-variation includes extensive cadenza-like flourishes free from metric stability, the decision to omit it from the data set of rhythmic intensity was made. It is, of course, not 0% intense; rather, it does not lend itself to the same criterion of sextuplet divisions per beat that every other variation falls within.

Variations 14 and 15, the only variations within a major key in the set, obviously act as a pair. Rachmaninoff also adds a rhythmic crescendo here, too, with Variation 14 resounding the theme in a major key at 23% intensity and increasing it to 52% in Variation 15. Notice how the change of mode in Variation 14 is 5% more intense than Corelli's theme.

The final five variations, Variations 16 through 20, act as the final "movement" of the work. It would be expected to have a rhythmic crescendo sound through to the final variation, making the ultimate moment one of extreme intensity. This does not quite come to fruition. Instead, Rachmaninoff increases the rhythmic intensity from Variation 16 to Variation 19, the penultimate variation. Variation 16's 46% intensity builds to the most rhythmically intense variation of the piece—a near-75% rhythmic intensity. Of special note are the final eight measures of Variation 19. If calculated separately from the rest of the variation, these measures would rank at 100% intense due to the string of sixteenth-note sextuplets. This rhythm dissolves quickly, thus resolving rhythmically to Variation 20 through a lessening of rhythmic intensity.

Climactic though it is, Variation 20 lies at 53% intensity, commanding the ear with registral leaps rather than increases in rhythm.

Rather unlike the Chopin Variations, this set's singular Coda does not end with an uptick in rhythmic intensity. Instead, it continues the slow rhythmic decrescendo from Variation 19, landing at 45% intense. The piece comes to a conclusion with echoes of the theme's rhythm in the final bars. If taken alone, such echoes of the opening would again return to the theme's rhythmic intensity of 18%. Overall, the average rhythmic intensity of the entire piece is 46% rhythmically intense, excluding the Intermezzo.

It is once again clear that there are rhythmic trends within this set of variations. The Theme along with Variations 4, 12, and 14 all exhibit lower rhythmic densities with each having a rhythmic intensity of 33% or under. Variations 2, 3, 5–8, 10, 11, 13, 15–18, 20, and the Coda all fall into the moderate rhythmically intense category with rhythmic intensities ranging between 34% and 66%. Most significantly, Variations 1, 9 and 19 all feature high rhythmic intensities of 67% and above.

The analysis of rhythmic intensity reveals notable differences between the Chopin and Corelli Variations. The Chopin features a diverse rhythmic profile, with a significant portion of the piece dedicated to high rhythmic intensity at 42%. This is complemented by 38% of the piece having moderate rhythmic intensity and 19% with low rhythmic intensity. In contrast, the Corelli places a strong emphasis on moderate rhythmic intensity, which constitutes 68% of the piece. Only 18% of the Corelli exhibits low rhythmic intensity, while high rhythmic intensity accounts for a smaller 13%. This distribution underscores how the Chopin Variations have a broader range of rhythmic intensities while the Corelli Variations focus on moderate rhythmic intensity in a more concentrated way. This steady streamline in the Corelli accounts for the more unified

compositional approach on the whole.

Finally, there are moments in both variation sets where Rachmaninoff uses the “Chaconne effect” of rhythmic crescendos and decrescendos to tie variations together and to create cohesion. The Corelli Variations include many more instances of multiple variations being glued together via rhythmic intensity. It is the Chopin Variations that seem to struggle with some forms of multi-variation cohesion, indeed due to the abundance of free variations towards the end of the piece.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through this in-depth exploration of Rachmaninoff's two solo piano variation sets, valuable insight has revealed how his compositional style evolved over time and how each respective theme influenced his compositional process. Two topics specifically arose throughout the exploration of each piece. First, the nature of each theme clearly guided Rachmaninoff's choices as he wrote each piece. This ultimately highlighted where he was at in his compositional career during the writing of each set. Second, this exploration urged a deeper examination of the large-scale forms of each set of variations and the salient elements that led to such conclusions. The results of this idea ultimately reflected how Rachmaninoff's structural decisions revealed the unique qualities of his musical language once again at different moments in his career.

Chopin's Prelude in C Minor, a quintessentially Romantic piece, provided Rachmaninoff with fertile ground for expansive exploration in his variations. The harmonic strength of Chopin's prelude allowed Rachmaninoff to delve into bold chromaticism and unexpected modulations, creating variations that are dynamic, dramatic, and emotionally charged. Due to the abundance of vertical harmonies in the theme, the consequent variations are less focused on keeping in line with the provided beat-by-beat harmonic progression. Because of this, Rachmaninoff's set of variations includes an abundance of unique variations that follow in the free variation style. He is less concerned with maintaining the intricacies of quarter-note harmonies and more focused on creating different moods and musical affects. Furthermore, the straightforward rhythmic structure of the theme allowed Rachmaninoff to introduce complex rhythmic elements in the variations that enhance the dramatic tension of the work and highlight the emotional depth inherent to the original theme. Matched with the recurring melodic motif,

many of the variations are thus explorations concerned with how these two musical motives can be combined to create new soundscapes. Rather than focusing on clear and connective variations, Rachmaninoff chose to craft small musical explorations solely based on the content of the theme.

In contrast to the Romanticism of Chopin, the theme used in the Corelli Variations is rooted in the Renaissance and Baroque traditions. This theme has an underlying symmetrical formal structure that reflects its origins as a dance theme. The repetitive and cyclical nature of *La Folia* invited Rachmaninoff to approach the variations with a more controlled and nuanced hand. The theme's historical resonance and rhythmic vibrancy inspired a set of variations that are methodical, subtle, and reflective of Rachmaninoff's mature style. In this piece, intellectual rigor surrounding the theme's formal structures is balanced with expressive depth. Due to this clarity of formal structure in the theme, the following variations are much more cohesive and restrained in terms of structural and harmonic exploration. This highlights Rachmaninoff's ability to engage with historical material in a way that both respects tradition and pushes his own personal innovation.

These thematic differences underscore the evolution of Rachmaninoff's compositional voice. The Chopin Variations vividly reflect Rachmaninoff's Romantic leanings found in the music of his early career. Such pieces—like his Preludes, Op. 23—are often marked by sweeping gestures and a wide-ranging emotional palette. Conversely, the Corelli Variations reveal a more introspective and mature approach with his focus shifting to structural clarity and thematic continuity. This work, composed later in his life, suggests that Rachmaninoff was more reflective and engaged with the intellectual aspects of form—qualities also found in his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43. It further shows a composer who is more attuned to the nuances of thematic transformation while bound to one tonal center for long periods of time.

Next, when considering the large-scale form of each work, the differences in thematic material once again played a significant role. The Chopin Variations, as explained earlier, are best identified as a loose three-movement structure wherein each movement progresses further away from the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and metric structures of the theme. The happenings of the theme are outlined by short, strict variations in C minor at first and in the end by stand-alone free variations in far-away keys; short phrases in C minor are followed by lengthy phrases that move through distant chromatic harmonies. Rachmaninoff used the theme as a springboard for exploring a wide range of pianistic textures and harmonic landscapes, creating a set of variations that feels just as expansive and dynamic. The variations are carefully structured to build tension and release, with moments of intense drama interspersed with reflective, lyrical passages. Such moments are not, however, looked at through a balance in supposed movement lengths or a multi-movement genre approach.

On the other hand, the Corelli Variations exhibit a different kind of structural logic, one that is more aligned with the formal and repetitive nature of the Folia theme. Here, Rachmaninoff's approach was more easily broken into a more typical three movement fast-slow-fast structure or into a binary movement structure that is balanced in length. The variations are thus tightly woven with a strong sense of continuity and cohesion that reflects the theme's formal clarity. Rachmaninoff's use of variation form in this work is clearly marked by a restraint that contrasts with the more expansive and dramatic form of the Chopin Variations. This formal clarity must be seen as a reflection of Rachmaninoff's matured compositional voice.

While this document has provided an extensive examination into both of Rachmaninoff's solo variation sets, there still remains an abundance of opportunities for further research. With a seemingly unlimited amount of topics to explore, future scholars could search deeper into the

interpretative challenges posed by these works. In particular, an in-depth study on how different performers approach both sets would be especially intriguing. How do the theory-based categories explored in this document change the way each piece is learned and performed? Secondly, scholars could explore the reception of audience members who have encountered these works—both first-time listeners and long-time lovers of the variations. What is their experience like before and after each piece is explained to them in depth? Does it change their appreciation or understanding of each piece? Further, there is room to explore the influence of Rachmaninoff's initial Russian heritage and later American influence after his move to the United States. How did the cultural and historical contexts that he lived through shape his musical output, especially concerning these eras of his compositions? Finally, comparative studies with other variation sets written during the same time, including Rachmaninoff's other long-form pieces that include moments of variation (e.g. Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30, Movement 2), could ripen the discourse pertaining to his approach to variation form.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's limitless contributions to Western music are unique and profound as they remain firmly rooted in the Romantic tradition while simultaneously extending into the modern age. His command over variation form should not be overlooked. Both the Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22, and the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42, deserve to be staples in concert halls worldwide and main points of research for music scholars.

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Vita

James Wehe is a pianist and educator completing his Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano at Texas Christian University, where he studies with Tamás Ungár. He holds a Master of Music and Advanced Certificate in Piano Pedagogy from New York University, studying with Jose Ramos Santana and Eteri Andjaparidze, and a Bachelor of Music and Performance Certificate from the University of Denver under Steven Mayer.

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Abstract

THE SOLO VARIATIONS OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF:

A Comparative Analysis of the Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22,
and the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

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Sergei Rachmaninoff's two contributions to the solo piano variation genre include his Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22, and his Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42. Composed at opposite ends of his career, these works reveal the evolution of Rachmaninoff as a composer. This study examines the historical and thematic influences that shape each set along with the variation techniques that Rachmaninoff employs. Through a comprehensive comparative analysis, this study further explores key elements of each set such as their compositional influences, variation types, tempo, length, tonality, harmonic usage, meter, and rhythm. By positioning these works within the bounds of Rachmaninoff's broader output, this research provides deeper insight into his artistic development and the lasting significance of these compositions in the piano repertoire.