

## **Brahms Paganini Variations (Book II)**

The extent of Paganini's powerful influence as a virtuoso on the musical world of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century is impossible to over-estimate, as the impression he made on listeners who witnessed his unimaginable, dizzying improvisations was that almost of religious awe. This creation of a 'superman' performer, or magician of the stage directly inspired personalities such as Liszt to create a similar identity for the piano, while others (such as Robert Schumann) were compelled to introduce and explore a new technical, virtuoso element in the otherwise classical forms of sonatas and variations.

In Brahms' *Paganini Variations* however, this influence is felt to be gradually increasing throughout Book I. It is as if the composer, having started a set of purely technical abstractions, later realises and responds to the enormous dynamic and artistic potential of the project: by the opening of Book II we are plunged directly into music of terrific pace and sweep. While much of Brahms' technical challenge lies in his rich symphonic writing 'transcribed' for piano (similar to Schumann's), the true excitement of the piece lies in the rapid succession of different musical characters which make up the variations. Closely following the concise nature of Paganini's Theme we are raced through elegant Viennese serenades, spidery caprices, furious piano thunderings or sudden meanderings of gossamer-like delicacy.

The scale of the technical demands in the *Paganini Variations* is an interesting reminder that Brahms himself was a recognised professional pianist who regularly performed his own works and composed his own exercises. His career as a virtuoso also included the premieres of both piano concertos (in 1859 and 1881 respectively) demonstrating an extraordinary pianistic ability.

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