

## What does Paganini mean to us today?

### Paganini is misunderstood

To play Paganini's music perfectly without making mistakes, without missing any notes or adding any, is an impressive feat by any stretch of the imagination. We marvel at classical violinists today, especially the prodigies (who seem to get younger and younger with each passing year), as they conquer the technical challenges of the 24 Caprices or *La Campanella*. Practice, practice, practice: it takes all kinds of sacrifice to bring those little black dots on the page to life, to master those fiendishly difficult sequences and pass them off as easy.

The note-perfect performance of Paganini's music – a particular ideal of virtuosity promoted at many competitions and conservatories – is a modern notion, one that Paganini himself would have hardly recognised. Among other reasons for this, he would have been astonished at the idea of performing without improvising at all; this was completely alien to his thinking. He called it playing 'in the Italian manner' or 'preluding'.

Paganini's particular approach to improvisation was similar to the oral tradition of *commedia dell'arte* actors, whereby stock devices were passed down from one generation to the next. Working within the framework of dance forms and grounds, all strongly rhythmic in character and based on fixed harmonic patterns, he freely deployed 'tricks of the trade' much as a magician pulls rabbits out of a hat. Paganini's approach was similar to how jazz musicians perform when they play standards and improvise solos on written chord changes. He later notated what he performed, but these were closer to what we now think of as transcriptions than to what we think of as compositions.

Of all the professional classical violinists alive today who perform Paganini's music as soloists, none deviate from the notes – with only two exceptions known to me. One is the extraordinary Austrian violinist Thomas Zehetmair, who recorded the 24 Caprices (2009) with his own embellishments and alterations, thereby adding an extra layer of difficulty onto this already difficult music. To pick one example out of many, 4 bars from the end of the last Caprice, where Paganini wrote a three-octave ascending and descending arpeggio, Zehetmair thrillingly adds an extra octave.

The other is the incredible Shunske Sato of Japan, the only violinist known to me who has dared, in a stroke of genius, to perform Paganini on gut strings. In his live recording of the Violin Concerto No. 4 with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra (2017), Sato plays a highly original cadenza in the first movement. He strings together fragments from Caprices nos. 5, 9 and 10 as well as technical effects (e.g. a trill plucked by the left hand) that violinists will recognise as having been taken from other pieces of Paganini's (such as 'Nel cor più non mi sento'). The result is three thrilling minutes of brilliantly constructed, amazing playing, packed with intertextual references, with the overall effect of sounding like an inspired improvisation.

Sato's cadenza reminds me of the improvised (or improvisatory) passages played by Salvatore Accardo - the Paganinian pride of Italy – on the soundtrack to the film 'Kinski Paganini'. In the death scene of the film, Accardo plays snippets from the 24 Caprices, snippets that become increasingly splintered and chaotic as the title character, our hero, falters and falls down. But whereas Accardo's liberal interpretation of Paganini's music is part of a cinematic construct intended for dramatic effect, Sato's innovation is to legitimise this style of performing on the classical concert stage.

Along with improvisation, another aspect of Paganini's performing style that has been forgotten today is the extreme physicality of his playing. Our idea of what a virtuoso violinist looks like is quite tame compared to the figure Paganini cut on stage. First, there was his peculiar body with its famous and mythologised Gothic features. Then, there was the way that peculiar body moved: arms gesticulating wildly, feet tapping to keep time like a jazz musician, folding in half like a marionette for curtain calls demanded by frenzied audiences. The convention of disciplined bodies as the site for the polite – one could say bourgeois – appropriation of classical music today could not be further from the freakshowmanship of a poor boy from the docks whose father beat him if he didn't practise.

The only mainstream concert violinist who comes even close to the freedom of movement and sheer exhibitionism that historical sources suggest Paganini embodied is the inimitable Russian violinist Alexander Markov. When he plays the left-hand pizzicato variation of the 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice with lips puckered, flailing around as if possessed, it is pure theatre. Strictly speaking, Markov's bow does not need to bounce so high, but he knows how to create a spectacle. I once saw Markov do this live, causing the audience to spontaneously whoop and whistle one night in New York City's Alice Tully Hall, which had the atmosphere of Madison Square Gardens. (Luckily, his performance of this excerpt has been captured on film; you can see it for yourself on the DVD 'The Art of Violin'.)

### **What would it mean to be authentically 'Paganinian' today?**

A former Paganini Competition winner once told me in a private conversation that a modern-day equivalent of Paganini might not be a violinist at all, but rather a completely new phenomenon, like Google – a major paradigm shift that fundamentally reconfigures our everyday reality. What Paganini achieved was revolutionary: he redefined not only the boundaries of what was possible on the violin but also the assumptions of what it meant to be a musician.

Being the 'demonic' virtuoso was key to Paganini's identity - as I argued in my book of 2013. I put the word demonic in scare quotes because it was far from clear what this word really meant: it seemed to have different meanings and connotations for different people at different times. For many, it signaled the presence of a force beyond the ordinary - supernatural, even paranormal - to take violin technique beyond known human limits. The speed, the range, and the agility of both his hands and the communicative power of his performances had to be seen to be believed. For others, it signaled his wizard-like ability to mesmerise audiences and hold them captive. Part of this was his cadaverous appearance – the original Goth musician, long before Alice Cooper and Marilyn Manson popularised the look (there is no evidence Paganini ever

wore makeup). For yet others, it signaled his masculinity, blending taboo metaphors of violin playing as a form of sexual domination with his reputation as a libertine.

Although this particular type of musical virtuosity was a product of Romanticism, there is a convincing case to be made that a more truly Paganinian counterpart in our own time can be found not in classical music, but outside it. As I suggested in a section of my book entitled 'Paganini as Rock Star', numerous parallels can be drawn between him and rock stars of our own time. With his spectacular virtuosity, and especially because of his overtly sexualised stage persona, Jimi Hendrix is the obvious archetype. By engaging in what one scholar has memorably termed 'fellating the strings' - a reference to the fact that Hendrix used his tongue to set the strings of his guitar vibrating - Hendrix achieved for the Woodstock generation something comparable to the risqué, quasipornographic imagery Paganini brought to the minds of his audiences. Perceptions of his violin crying out orgasmically under the assault of a phallic bow appeared in the subtext of his contemporaries' reviews. From the adoption of violin themes and techniques by Eddie Van Halen, Yngwie Malmsteen and Steve Vai (as musicologist Robert Walser has pointed out) to 'cock rock' and the unabashedly masturbatory gestures of the Artist formerly known as Prince, guitarists have followed Hendrix's lead in channeling the virtuosity and sexuality that erupted in the revolutionary approach of Paganini.

Another point of commonality is their attachment to and fetishism of instruments – 'instruments of desire' (in musicologist Steve Waksman's memorable coinage). Every Paganini competition entrant dreams of holding Paganini's favorite 'Il Canone' Del Gesù in his or her hands, just as every aspiring rocker drools over Hendrix's 'Black Beauty'. Legends persist about instruments bearing the aura or 'soul' of musicians via the repeated imprint of their fingertips on the neck or fingerboard of instruments over many years of being cradled and caressed intimately. Now, with the opening of this exhibition, we can compare these irreplaceable instruments side by side for the first time, and look for the traces of their long departed owners. And if we should find ourselves daydreaming about what would happen if 'Il Canone' and 'Black Beauty' were crossbred, we would not have to look far for the result.

The electric violin, a recent development in the long history of the violin, has six strings, a fretless fingerboard, amplification, and is played with a bow. The V-shaped 'Viper' model, for example, was invented by Mark Wood, who supplies instruments to electric violinists who perform with Lady Gaga and other pop and rock stars. Wood performs on his own instruments with a neon-green glow-in-the-dark bow and has come to be known as the 'Les Paul of the Violin World'. With his long dark hair and flamboyant stage manner, Wood looks very much the part of the diabolically-possessed virtuoso. I once saw him in black spandex performing a high-voltage rendition of 'The Devil went down to Georgia' with pelvic thrusts, leaping across the stage to deliver notey solos with shuddering paroxysms – hips elevated, head tilted back, eyes tightly shut. Wood's signature move is to flip his left hand around to the left side of the violin and, placing his forefinger high on the fingerboard, sliding it slowly down the G-string in a suggestive gesture.

The leading figure in a new breed of American hybrid performers – part classical violinist, part rock guitarist – is the extraordinarily versatile Tracy Silverman. He once told me: 'I went to Juilliard wanting to be Heifetz and left wanting to be

Hendrix'. Silverman seems equally comfortable standing in front of an orchestra playing the solo in John Adams's Concerto 'The Dharma at Big Sur' (a work that was written for him after the composer heard him playing at a San Francisco jazz club) and singing his own songs while accompanying himself in the Nashville singer-songwriter tradition. As a self-described 'guitarist trapped inside a violinist's body', Silverman utilises new techniques based on picking and strumming using a quarter-size bow, which is more agile than a full-size bow. With 'strum-bowing', for example, Silverman captures the rhythmic sensibility of a guitarist and makes syncopated rhythms 'groove' as no traditionally trained classical violinist can.

Through their work at summer camps, Silverman, Wood and others are training youthful electric violinists for whom violinistic-guitaristic thinking is second nature – just as it was to Paganini. Paganini loved to play guitar and mandolin and, with the electric violin, history has come full circle. Among the upcoming generation who dream of being rock stars and who are practising four-octave scales and arpeggios, there might be one who is poised to write the next chapter in the continuing story of Paganini's musical and cultural legacy.

### **In summary:**

Paganini is misunderstood. The goal of perfect technical replication associated with his name is an invention of our own time. For him, the goal was not perfection, but rather glory as a 'maestro', as a master musician, which in his case meant as a composer, improviser, and virtuoso performer. Thus, those who are arguably more true to his spirit today than the note-perfect Paganinians who win competitions are the rare classical violinists who play his music with their own original touches; rock guitarists and heavy metal guitarists who perform contemporary songs while updating tropes of 'demonic' virtuosity from Romanticism; and highly skilled electric violinists who combine electric guitar techniques with classical violin techniques to create new instruments, new playing styles and new repertoires.

### **And finally...**

Rock stars today are alpha males who combine testosterone-filled guitar solos, outsized egos, songs with attitude, a 'bad boy' image, and an excessive lifestyle of substance abuse and sexual promiscuity. While it remains to be seen whether or not any of them will be called out for bad behaviour, any abuse of power needs to be addressed in light of the #MeToo movement. Paganini himself was a serial seducer and made no secret of his multitudinous exploits, some of whom were under-aged girls. If we have learned anything from the Harvey Weinstein case and the cultural moment it has sparked, it is that gender inequality and power imbalance are rife. It took courage for victimised actresses to break their silence, some after many years – and that is the situation in 2018. So then, what chance had the countless women and girls of two hundred years ago to assert their rights? In the world of classical music, the conductors James Levine and Charles Dutoit have already fallen from grace. And although we cannot hold figures from the past to today's standards, can we really ignore Paganini's record and behaviour any longer?