

## Nicolò Paganini

by Mark O'Connor

<http://www.sonyclassical.com/music/62862/liner.html>

As an avid fiddle student growing up in Seattle, I was mostly unaware of the music of Nicolò Paganini. As a young adult, I may have listened a couple of times to his First Concerto in D Major and the Twenty-four Caprices. Then, when I wrote my first six caprices, although I was inspired to name them as such after Paganini's and Locatelli's, it was more as a convenient title than the result of a careful study of the gentlemen's great works. It was not until after recording my caprices for *Midnight on the Water* that I decided to read in more depth about Paganini's life. I became fascinated, even bowled over, by his astonishing accomplishments. I was so moved by accounts of his life that I decided to write an essay about him with the parts of his story I found the most interesting. Here are my discoveries about the man some called the "Inimitable."

In 1782, the northwest coastal town of Genoa saw the birth of one of the greatest violinist/composers of all times, Nicolò Paganini. His father, a laborer, held a lowly position, drank heavily, and demonstrated abusive behavior toward his family. Nicolò's mother, a housewife, held irrational beliefs in the supernatural and experienced revelations about musical success for her young son. Raised in a large family, which lived in a three-room house, Nicolò was a weak and sickly child. He began to learn his first instrument, the mandolin, under his father's instruction at the age of five. Two years later, after becoming fairly adept on the instrument, it was decided that he should graduate to the violin.

Paganini studied with a series of teachers and made his public violin debut at the age of 11. Soon he wanted to experiment with the violin's possibilities and rebelled against the rigidity of his tutors. While still in his pre-teens, he began studying the violin on his own. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen it is said that he motivated himself to practice the instrument twelve hours a day. Realizing his own talent, Nicolò saw music as the ticket out of his cramped quarters and the escape route from his abusive father, who was trying to use Nicolò's talents for his own monetary gain.

Things did not go as well as one would expect for the young virtuoso finally away from the constraints of his family. Predisposed toward bad habits, Paganini became an addicted gambler, which lasted for four years until he decided one day to play his last hand. Sometimes he suffered complete indifference about life and tended to be lazy. At nineteen he started to have health problems that forced him to cancel many musical engagements. And then something he had longed for happened: Paganini had his first serious romance, which lasted three years. He lived with a mysterious wealthy lady, "Signora Dida," several years his senior, who happened to be fond of the guitar. As a result, Paganini learned to play the guitar and composed for it. He figured out difficult music for himself to play, and, because of the guitar's metal strings and wider finger spacings with frets, it did as much for the development of his left hand as many years of violin playing could have accomplished. He wrote many duets for guitar and violin and soon became a virtuoso on the guitar, as he was already on the fiddle. Ultimately, Paganini found the guitar less satisfactory for musical expression than the violin; however, he thought it very useful for composition.

After his romantic involvement, hiding away at his paramour's mountain estate for three years, it was time to get back to his violin career. At this point, in his early twenties, he discovered the music of the great Italian violinist/composer Pietro Locatelli (1695-1764), a pupil of Archangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Locatelli, a great innovator on the violin, utilized new tunings, double-stops, arpeggios, and harmonics. Locatelli composed twenty-four caprices which served as cadenzas for his concertos, and it was Locatelli's caprices that further inspired Paganini.

Paganini's first full-time employment came from Princess Elisa, Napoleon's sister, who at that time governed the small republic of Lucca. In describing some of his concerts for the princess, Paganini wrote, "I always improvise with piano accompaniment. I write this accompaniment in advance and work out my theme in the course of the improvisation." After a time, this permanent position began to stale, so in order to get dismissed, he defied royal protocol by appearing parading up and down in the ballroom wearing the uniform of a captain of the guards; it worked!

By 1809 Paganini decided to become a freelance musician and started to play again in concert halls throughout his native Italy. It wasn't until 1813, however, when he was 31 years old, that he played at La Scala in Milan, his greatest triumph to date. His reputation started to spread to the point where people who had never attended a musical recital wanted to hear him. The devices that helped him communicate to broader audiences were his individual style, unique repertoire, different appearance, and the fact that he had learned to play so well mainly on his own, causing speculation about supernatural intervention and satanic powers, which stirred up lots of good press. Certainly there had to have been some association with the unnatural!

Paganini described his selection of repertoire as follows: "I have my own peculiar style; in accordance with this, I regulate my compositions. To play those of other artists I must arrange them; I had much rather write a piece in which I can trust myself to my own music expression." In his early years he did perform other composers' music, such as that by Pierre Rode and Rodolphe Kreutzer, but freely admitted that he couldn't do justice to the interpretation of others' works and practically abandoned playing any music except for his own. A Paganini biographer Lillian Day wrote, "If Paganini had applied himself to the performance of Beethoven or Bach, he would undoubtedly have achieved excellence, and perhaps he would never have been heard of."

Ludwig van Beethoven was Paganini's favorite musician. Nothing gave the violinist more pleasure than enjoying his favorite Beethoven string quartet, the Quartet in F, Op. 59, No. 1. He joined in playing it for pleasure at the homes of friends. When Beethoven died, it was reported that Paganini wept uncontrollably.

Paganini continued to suffer from severe illness, which often laid him low for weeks at a time, and he experienced considerable pain. He took medicine for many years, which had a bad effect on his digestive and "nervous" system. Paganini did not have much faith in the medical profession, although he felt each new doctor meant new hope. He tried every remedy that came to his attention. In referring to his threshold for pain, Paganini was quoted as saying, "I play more music at my concerts than is the case with other artists.... I believe I have, like Mutius Scaevola, conquered pain." One could wonder if his creativity and the mastery of his craft manifested itself through the pain he suffered as an adult, similar to what he experienced when he was a child of abuse. Once in Leghorn, the Musica Society and British consul presented him in concert, but only four mediocre members of the orchestra showed up, and Paganini had to play solo for three hours! Lillian Day writes, "Some people are buxom and round and reassuring. In their presence all fears vanish and problems are quickly reduced to a material and logical basis. There are others whose presence makes our pulses quicken, who seem to be old souls, weary with the journey of centuries, whose voices come from depths and whose eyes seem to penetrate into our hidden places. They are tense, nervous, intuitive and quick of perception. Perpetually consumed in their own fires, they are neither happy nor healthy. Nicolò Paganini was of this type. He was born withered."

To accomplish the impossible was becoming a habit for Paganini. He took great delight in amazing his friends and confounding his enemies. His violin seemed a part of him, an extension of his left arm -- the bow an extension of his fingers. **Paganini's good friend Schottky wrote, "When playing, his right foot is well advanced, and with it he beats time when the music becomes more animated, in a manner that borders on the comic." (Most violinists were trained back in Paganini's time, as is the case now, that the left foot should be forward.) A newspaper also reported that his right foot was planted well out in front of his body with its knee bent. Charles Gurh was a violinist and conductor who attended many of Paganini's concerts. He wrote about Paganini's posture and that the right upper arm was close to the body and almost never moved, but that the wrist was very mobile. Only when he vigorously attacked a chord with the lower part of his bow did he raise his elbow and forearm a little by moving them away from the body. Essentially, he used only the top half of the bow, just the amount of bow necessary to vibrate the string, except when playing chords or legato. He also used a flatter bridge, with strings so low to the fingerboard that they almost rubbed. These characteristics are also a trademark for many American fiddlers -- like Benny Thomasson -- throughout the South.**

We also know that Paganini did not practice his violin much, if at all, as an adult. One report from a tour was that he was never observed to practice; he just performed rehearsals. Paganini, however, insisted that his prized student Camillo Sivori arduously grind out daily scales, although Sivori said that neither he nor anyone he knew had ever heard his teacher practice anything at all. Paganini was quoted as saying, "I have labored enough to acquire my talent; it is time to rest." Arthur Hartman thinks that Paganini's so called "secret" was that he practiced mentally, without the instrument in his hands, and therefore did not need the endless hours of physical practice. This, along with the rigid self-training in his youth, enabled him in his prime to give concert after concert without physically studying a note! Just how he acquired his tremendous facility is simply unknown.

It is surprising that Paganini did not tour out of the country until well into his 40s, for in the North he was known as the "Magician of the South." He cursed the climates of the northern countries and preferred only Italy. He finally performed in Vienna shortly after Beethoven died. France and Britain came next. By most accounts his concerts were often a hit with the critics as well as the audiences, taking in more gate receipts than anybody before. "The only thing that Paganini has in common with other violinists is the violin and the bow," a Vienna critic reported. By his own determination, self-instruction, and invention, he was able to reach a height of achievement that has never been surpassed. Many people, though, could not believe his talent was derived this simply. It is generally agreed that Paganini hardly ever opened a book, although he mixed constantly with educated people. Paganini had the ability to absorb everything with his remarkable natural intelligence.

It seemed that the more notoriety and success Paganini achieved on his foreign tours the more his critics lashed out to bring him down. They might applaud him loudly on one day and condemn him the next. Paganini was

a fine showman, as well as a good business man, and these attributes were constantly being questioned by serious musicians. Violinist, composer and conductor Ludwig Spohr admired Paganini's qualities which "enchant the great multitude but cannot compensate for his lack of fine tone, a long bow stroke, and a tasteful singing style." It was commonly reported that Paganini's technique possibly lacked a bold and powerful tone. Early on when Princess Elisa attended his concerts, she would always depart early because his use of all the harmonics irritated her nerves. The first and only performance in Belgium did not go well at all. At the Theatre de la Monnaie during the 1830s, Paganini took the stage and was greeted by a burst of laughter, and, when he began playing, the laughter only increased. He was criticized for "playing according to no known system and how ridiculous he held his violin." Even his great admirer and acclaimed pianist Franz Liszt wrote in the *Gazette Musicale*, "I say it without hesitation that no second Paganini will ever be. May the artist of the future gladly and readily decline to play the conceited and egotistical role, which we hope has in Paganini had its last brilliant representative." Records show that he performed numerous benefits for the poor and sick and many times turned over a portion of his profits at his concerts for a worthy cause, but somehow it seemed to make big news only when he was unable to oblige a charity. Lillian Day writes, "Paganini squabbled with the world. He was flattered by women and honored by men, but he was fundamentally alone. Suspicious, diseased, perpetually on the defensive, the world divided itself into those who wished to injure him and those who begged favors." He became someone who never trusted anyone completely. In 1824 Paganini met a singer Antonia Bianchi, who bore his only child, Achilles Cyrus Alexander Paganini, on July 23. Having a son was the immortality of fatherhood that Paganini wanted more than anything. The relationship with Bianchi lasted only a few years. She would frequently burst with jealous rage and would be emotionally, mentally and physically abusive to him. When Achilles was just a couple of years old, they separated. Paganini wrote "she embittered my life as long as she was with me. Now that I am rid of her, I know that she only desires to make me appear bad. She is ridiculously arrogant and greedy. Achilles is lovable and beautiful, he is always with me and he it is that keeps me alive." Paganini never forced the child to do anything he didn't want to do. Although Paganini did not make a good partner in his relationships with women, all his tenderness and protective instinct took the form of love for his child. "Achilles becomes more beautiful everyday; he pleases everyone, and the ladies are constant rivals for his favor. He is my consolation and my entire joy." Achilles had a beautiful pale oval face, brown hawk eyes, and long parted hair. Being very intelligent he also grew to tyrannize his father with ingratitude, but Paganini was not demanding. "He loves me tenderly, and I, I idolize him." [Paganini's mother died without ever having met her grandson.] Paganini wanted to settle into a home for Achilles, so he purchased the only house he ever acquired near Parma. It was a three-story with large rooms and high ceilings, all protected by beautiful hills. Paganini continued to tour Europe. Never had the fame of a virtuoso spread to all the classes of the population. He did not premiere his Second Concerto until in his mid 40s. As a composer, most of his themes were lyrical and melodious. Much of Paganini's music may be lost to us, for it is said that his improvisations were as good or better than his finished compositions. Paganini, unlike his rival contemporary Spohr, regarded music that stirred the emotions as legitimate. Paganini's *Twenty-four Caprices* is one of his most important works, written when he was in service to Princess Elisa in Lucca. They are unaccompanied solo violin pieces, requiring the most demanding virtuosity, and, except for harmonics, covering the entire scope of violin technique. Each caprice is a masterpiece of difficulty with as many innovations as were possible, some of which had been explored by earlier composers. Before Paganini, there was Lombard Blagio Marini (1597-1667), a pupil of Fontana (d. 1630), who composed *Romanesca* for solo violin, which is believed to be the first published composition written for solo violin and contains the first application of a trill. The German Franz Biber (1644-1704) explored and advanced the technique with scordatura tunings. Biber is also credited with the unaccompanied solo sonata. Then of course there was Locatelli, who with his unaccompanied caprices made way for Rode, Kreutzer and Paganini.

Florizel von Reuter says of Paganini's work, "when the caprices first attracted attention of the public, under the title *Ventiquattro caprici per violino solo, dedicati agli artisti da Nicolò Paganini*, the general opinion was that they were not playable, until the author himself succeeded in convincing the music world, through his remarkable performances, about the error of this supposition. The caprices are (apart from the two violin concertos in D Major and B Minor) Paganini's most important work. [They] reveal such a wealth of pedagogic love, coupled with such inexhaustible fantasy and poetical romance that they may be considered as a convincing proof of Paganini's worth as a musician and composer." A generation and more after, violin/composers such as Ernst, Lalo, Saint-Saëns, Sarasate, Wieniawski, Ysaÿe and Kreisler were all affected in some way by Paganini's success. As one of the few violinist/composers performing original unaccompanied pieces in concert halls, I dedicate this essay, as well as my first six caprices, to the memory of the "Inimitable" Signor Nicolò Paganini.

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