

Nicolò paganini

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When Paganini walked along the street, people eyed him closely, wondering whether they might detect his cloven foot—a mark of the devil. Once, shortly before he was to go onstage, he felt a nail in his shoe, which caused him to limp slightly as he arrived on the podium. Some members of the audience looked at each other knowingly, for it was widely believed that there was something mysterious, supernatural about his playing. Even people who did not believe in the devil were convinced of it. Ever since they have tried to discover his secret. For almost a year, an Englishman followed him on his tours, taking an adjoining hotel room and listening constantly. While on the road, however, Paganini hardly ever practiced, and when he briefly warmed up before concerts, he used such a heavy mute that no one could hear him (Prod'Homme 13).

Countless books and pamphlets have been written about the secret of his practicing and about other, hitherto unknown, explanations of his virtuosity. Much has been brought to light that is interesting and informative, but no secrets have been revealed. Paganini's accomplishments must be attributed to a handful of quite understandable factors, as is true of above-average achievement in any field. In his case we are aware of great musicality; a distinct talent for the violin that included certain physiological characteristics; a strict practicing regime supervised by his father, who soon noted the unusual gift; and a highly developed desire to excel as an artist. All produced astonishing results (Anders 39).

Paganini was born in Genoa in 1782, the son of a dockworker whose hobbies included fortunetelling and playing the violin and mandolin. He taught Nicolò both instruments. "It would be hard to imagine a stricter father," the boy

recalled. Further instruction by two orchestra violinists led to lessons by Giacomo Costa, musicdirector at the cathedral, whose pupil soon performed solos there.

This was a customary eighteenth-century venue, as it had been for Tartini, and such appearances in church were occasionally reviewed in the press. On 31 May 1794 a notice was printed in *Avvisi*, a Genoa newspaper: "[During high mass] Nicolò Paganini, a highly gifted eleven-year-old boy, performed a concerto, for which he was greatly admired." (Prod'Homme 7-8)

Encouraged by such successes, the father entrusted the thirteen-yearold Nicolò to Alessandro Rolla, then teaching in Parma. Though Rolla declared that there was nothing he could teach him, he gave his young student a solid foundation in music theory, and probably good advice as well. While in Parma, Nicolò also studied counterpoint with Ghiretti and Paër, for whom he wrote, among other exercises, twenty-four fugues in parts. Years of intensive practice under the father's strict supervision followed his return home. During this period he acquired the phenomenal command of the violin that amazed musicians and music lovers everywhere (Anders 40-41).

Paganini stands at the threshold of a new era in violin playing, if later in life he referred to himself as self-taught, this does not imply a lack of gratitude to his teachers. He developed his very individual style of playing on his own, during his up to twelve hours of daily practice, as he recalled. In 1801 he freed himself of his father's relentless supervision by joining the orchestra in Lucca as a first violinist. Five years later he moved on to the court of Napoleon's sister Elisa Bacciocchi, then princess of Lucca. He remained there

until 1809, active as a soloist, music director, orchestra member, and chamber music player. His career as a touring virtuoso did not begin until 1813 when, thirty-one years old, he reaped such spectacular successes in Milan that the world took notice (Anders 42).

Paganini was a compulsive gambler who at times came close to being sent to debtor's prison, and who once had to use his violin to pay his debts. In this dilemma, someone presented him with a Guarneri violin so that he could play a concert that had already been scheduled (McGinnis 117).

The sensational aspects of Paganini's public appearances were heightened by a wealth of freely invented stories, such as the one about his prison sentence, for which there is absolutely no foundation. While he played the violin in prison, it is related, three strings broke, one after another, until only the G string remained, so that he was forced to develop his uncanny ability to play on one string alone (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer 1).

The later "Moses" Fantasy is one of his compositions demonstrating this skill.) According to another wild story he strangled his wife (in fact, Paganini never married) and used her intestines as raw material for strings. Such stories may have been inspired by the virtuoso's fondness, reminiscent of Don Giovanni's, for the fair sex, which indeed accounted for many romantic adventures in his youth. Stories persisted, even late in his life, about wealthy countesses and others who offered him their money and their everything—stories that of course were good publicity. It is a fact that his profoundly melancholic appearance and his haggard, mephistophelian figure held a strong fascination for women, which he did not mind at all (Prod'Homme 24).

Behind the virtuoso facade he cultivated, there was another Paganini—the one who in private gatherings played Beethoven quartets well and with great enthusiasm, including the late quartets. When on tour, he missed no opportunity to hear *Fidelio* or *Don Giovanni*. He also was quite fond of older vocal music, especially Palestrina's (*Prod'Homme* 24).

Paganini's fame was restricted to Italy until 1828, when, at the age of forty-six, he traveled to Vienna for his first engagement abroad. The impression he made there defies imagination. The first recital took place on 29 March in the Redoutensaal, filled to capacity (*Athanassoglou-Kallmyer* 2).

All local violinists were there, along with Schubert, the poet Grillparzer, the Esterházy family, and everyone who was anyone in the arts and in society. Thirteen more concerts followed, all equally crowded. A veritable Paganini mania broke out (*Prod'Homme* 35). Strauss wrote a "Paganini Waltz," merchants offered Paganini schnitzel, cravats, and haircuts. When Paganini's good business sense led him to raise the price of admission to one gold florin, that coin became known as a "Paganinerl." There were poems of fulsome admiration, and the critics outdid each other writing hymns of praise.

Until 1831, Paganini chiefly concertized in Germany, residing in Frankfurt on the Main. Some during this period refused to be caught up in the delirious adulation and were all the more critical of the violinist and his mesmerized public. Others were more insightful and understanding of the changing times (*Athanassoglou-Kallmyer* 1).

Serious scholars, eccentrics, journalists, and charlatans ever since have tried to discover the miracle of his playing and its effect on audiences. Some significant details were established, but anyone who tried to build an entire system on such discoveries, even a philosophy of violin playing, lost their credibility. As Flesch (*The Art of Violin Playing*, vol. 2) said, "A publication whose title uses the name Paganini as a sales placard impresses one at once as a mere advertising puff" (Flesch 85).

Paganini must be credited with inaugurating a new era, not only for violin playing but for instrumental accomplishment in general. The standards he set are still valid in our time. Liszt, a genius, was able by virtue of great effort and superhuman concentration, to adapt Paganini's technique to his own piano playing. It took violinists almost a century to accomplish this for their instrument and to develop pedagogical methods based on Paganini's achievements.

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