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Niccolò Paganini – Violin Virtuoso and Technique Innovator

The virtuosic achievements of Niccolò Paganini were so profound that violinists today are still influenced by him. There are many legends surrounding Paganini, most of them describing his unconventional performing style, his incredibly difficult compositions, and his supposed connection with the devil. In order to understand the accomplishments and stories of Paganini, one needs to learn the background of the violinist.

Niccolo Paganini was born on October 27, 1782 in Genoa, Italy. He began the study of the violin at a very early age. He was taught by his father, Antonio, a dock worker and amateur musician. His father, dreaming of wealth which a prodigy might bring him, applied cruelty in keeping Niccolò at his musical tasks, punishing each mistake severely, and not permitting relaxation or play. Paganini rapidly progressed in his studies, and began studying with Giovanni Cervetto, and later Giacomo Costa. He also studied composition with Francesco Gnecco.¹

At the age of twelve, Paganini already gave concerts in local churches, and had composed some music. The next year, Paganini was sent to study with a famous violin teacher named Alessandro Rolla. Rolla, upon hearing young Niccolo play, refused to take Niccolo as a student because he claimed he could

¹ Neill: Niccolo Paganini

teach Niccolo nothing. In 1795, he gave his own benefit concert to raise funds to cover traveling expenses and tuition fees.

In September 1801, Paganini moved to Lucca. Between 1801 and 1805, Paganini disappeared from public sight. It is believed that he lived during these years in complete retirement in the chateau of a Tuscan lady, a guitarist, devoting his time to mastering the playing of the guitar and to composing music for that instrument. In 1805 he was appointed first violin of the republican orchestra, where he played with his older brother Carlo, also a violinist.² That same year, he composed the famous 24 Caprices. At the time, many violinists did not believe the caprices could be played, but Paganini proved that wrong in many concerts.

In 1809, Paganini decided to leave Lucca. His freelance career took him all over Europe, playing many concerts and developing his unique style of playing. In 1813, he debuted at La Scala in Milan. All of Milan seemed to fall under his spell, so Paganini began to compose larger works for violin and orchestra. He composed his 3 violin concertos between 1815 and 1826, and in 1820, his 24 Caprices, Op. 1 were published.³ In 1828, Paganini went to Vienna where he was a sensation. By this time, Paganini had become a legend - not only by his incredible technique, but his cadaverous appearance that aroused the superstitious terror and awe of his audiences.

² Neill: Niccolo Paganini

³ Kendall: Paganini: A Biography

Paganini traveled to Germany in 1829 and toured for almost two years. He also gave more than a hundred concerts in Poland during that time, and composed his fourth concerto, as well as several sets of variations. Paganini won the general acclaim of German audiences, but some criticized the eccentricity of his playing. Paganini's first concert in Paris (1831) was a major event, many people paid double price and crowded in the hall to see him. He then went to London, where he was successful again. Paganini next went to Ireland, Scotland, and then back to London and Paris. In a letter he wrote from Paris, Paganini stated that in one year he gave one hundred fifty-one concerts and traveled five thousand miles by coach! His diminishing health did not allow him to compose as much during these years.

Early in 1835 Paganini was back in Genoa, only to travel to Parma a few months later. After a couple frustrating months, he left for Turin, Marseilles, and Nice, giving a few concerts. In 1837, a friend persuaded Paganini to open his own establishment where he could perform. The Casino Paganini was opened in Paris in August, but did not last long, as Paganini's health declined. Paganini continued to compose even though he did not perform. He moved to Nice and became an instrument dealer. Paganini's poor health became serious, and on May 27, 1840, he died.

Due to his many innovative and virtuosic accomplishments, Paganini is considered to be the "father" of modern violin technique. One innovation that Paganini began is the practice of memorization. Musicians before Paganini

usually used music during a concert. Paganini, on the other hand, would boldly walk onto the stage, shake back his long black hair, place his violin under his chin, and begin to play without the aid of music. Audiences were astounded. They marveled at the thought of one man memorizing an entire program of music.

According to Robin Stowell, “Paganini’s most important contribution to the development of violin technique lay undoubtedly in his manipulation and expansion of existing techniques to their utmost potential.”⁴ These techniques include “scordatura [mistuning the violin in order to play in another key], his execution of certain bow techniques, his combination of left-hand pizzicato with bowing, his use of harmonics in single and double stopping, his *una corda* playing and the extraordinary tour de force for which he was renowned”.⁵

Paganini’s abnormal physique accounts for his novel methods of technique. According to many accounts, when standing, his left shoulder was about an inch higher than the right, but still unrestrained. His unique posture resulted in a triangular stance and playing position. Contrary to the modern school of violin playing, the neck of the violin pointed down, both arms were held close to the body, and one foot was placed slightly forward. This posture was relaxed, and allowed Paganini to achieve a strong center of gravity. Paganini’s left hand position appears to have been due to the extraordinary

⁴ Stowell: “Niccolo Paganini – Technical Innovator?”

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flexibility of his thumb, fingers, wrist, and other joints. He could easily reach a span of three octaves! Paganini's bent wrist moved extremely easily and rapidly, despite the fact that his bow arm was cramped and usually very close to his body.

There are many bow strokes for the violin that Paganini perfected. These include legato, string crossings, staccato, ricochet, sautille, spiccato, and flying staccato. Left-hand pizzicato is a difficult technique that Paganini perfected, as well as double stopped natural and artificial harmonics (which he invented).

In his Concerto No. 1 in D Major (originally E-flat Major), Paganini makes use of many of his virtuosic techniques. First of all, Paganini wrote the concerto so that the violin strings would be tuned half a step higher than normal, but fingered as if it were in the original key (called scordatura). Violinists today play the concerto in D Major, not E-flat Major with scordatura tuning. Other techniques used include various bow strokes (staccato, ricochet, spiccato), artificial harmonics, double and triple-stops, fingered octaves, and even double-stop artificial harmonics.

Paganini's technique was outstanding and unusual, but it was his devilish nature that caused great crowds to attend his concerts. One instance of superb technique being mistaken for supernatural guidance was the "duel" between Lafont, a famous French violinist of the time, and Paganini. Lafont had volunteered to give a joint concert with Paganini; however, people gained the impression that the concert would be a contest. Paganini was the unofficial

"winner" of the contest, by improvising during the concert by adding octaves, thirds, and sixths. At a concert in Paris in 1832, Paganini played his *Sonata a movement perpetual* at an amazing twelve notes per second!⁶

Paganini's physical appearance completed the image of the devil violinist. His dark hair and pale face contrasted, giving him an ethereal aura. The loss of his teeth in 1828 gave his face a sunk-in appearance, which added to his ghost-like image. Few concert goers were left unmoved by a performance given by Paganini. Boerne, a German poet at the time, described his impression of a concert given by Paganini: "It was a heavenly and diabolical enthusiasm, I have never seen or heard its like in my life".⁷ Paganini's ability to entrance an audience can be attributed to his physical appearance and to his technique.

The myth surrounding Paganini lingered even after his death. Since Paganini had refused the final sacrament, he could not be buried. His remains were kept in a basement for five years until his family petitioned to have them buried. Many people speculated on his refusal of the sacrament. Some said he did not believe that he would die, others said he was a non-believer, while many believed he was intimate with the devil.

Paganini's "secret" of violin playing divides people into two groups, those to whom it has been revealed, and those who are still looking for some document to appear which will revolutionize the technique of violin study. Carl Guhr is

⁶ Schwarz: Great Masters of the Violin.

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one of the closest people to solving the mystery. He was so impressed with Paganini's playing that he attended concerts frequently, and observed everything Paganini did. He wrote a book called Paganini's Art of Playing the Violin, an analysis of Paganini's methods. Some of the facts that he observed were: the use of thin strings, a flatter than usual bridge, tuning the violin by the way he wants the instrument to sound, and his unique position and manner.

Through the many stories, myths, and documents about Paganini, as well as his own compositions, one can undoubtedly label Paganini as one of the greatest violinists who ever lived. His technical innovations and virtuosic performances have been unsurpassed, and his contributions to violin technique are still widely practiced. His compositions are still some of the most difficult, but incredible, pieces in violin repertoire, and are performed regularly. Thin strings or a thin body, long hours of practice, a raised shoulder blade, or an intimacy with the devil – any or all of these things, or even none of them, can explain Paganini's secret.