

# Nicolo Paganini (1782-1840) : the violin virtuoso in excelsis?

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NICOLO PAGANINI (1782–1840)  
THE VIOLIN VIRTUOSO IN EXCELSIS?

by ROBIN STOWELL

Opinions are divided about both the historical stature of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century violin virtuosi and the artistic significance of their compositions. Critics have often been scathing in their denunciations, dismissing such musicians as charlatans completely lacking in musical taste, who composed with the sole objective of exhibiting their own technical proficiency or musical capriciousness. Such a frivolous side to the virtuoso phenomenon is corroborated by our knowledge that Jakob Scheller (1759–1803) and Antonio Lolli (c 1725–1802) were renowned as violinists for their imitations of other musical instruments and animals in their performances. Furthermore, Karl Stamitz (c 1745–1801) performed *A Musical Entertainment* in Hamburg in 1785, the first part played „in a serious manner“ and the second part „played ... in a pantomime style“;<sup>1</sup> and the second part of the concert in which Franz Clement (1780–1842) premiered Beethoven's Violin Concerto in Vienna (December 23, 1806) featured Clement playing a „sonata on a single string, holding the instrument upside down.“<sup>2</sup> While many reviewers have tended to place Paganini's performing style in a similar pantomime category, others have been more temperate in their views, acknowledging the Italian's achievements in raising the status of the solo instrumentalist to equal and even surpass that of the solo singer and in seizing the opportunities offered by the remarkable transformation of European musical life in the second half of the eighteenth century.

By the turn of the nineteenth century the stage was rapidly being set for the full flush of Romanticism to develop; „one of this period's most significant products was the itinerant virtuoso, one of the essential and corroding institutions in music history“ responsible for both the development and the debasement of the violin art.<sup>3</sup> Public concerts multiplied. Virtuosi became hero figures, symbols of post-revolutionary emancipation; they toured regularly and more widely than formerly. Audiences increased considerably and were not confined merely to the aristocracy. Music publishing spread; and Leipzig, Paris, Vienna and London far surpassed in activity the principal centres of Italy and Holland. Talented instrumentalists were

<sup>1</sup> Marc Pincherle, *Le Monde des Virtuoses*, Paris 1961, Eng. trans. London 1963, 20.

<sup>2</sup> „Wird Herr Clement auf der Violine phantasiren und auch eine Sonate auf einer einzigen Saite mit umgekehrter Violine spielen.“ The relevant concert poster is reproduced in Dominic Gill (ed.), *The Book of the Violin*, Oxford 1984, 166.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Veinus, *The Concerto*, New York 1944, 154.

thus offered a wider range of opportunity to operate as independent, self-sufficient performers, instead of having to rely on the patronage of, for example, a prince or potentate, and Paganini is often considered the archetype, the paragon of the Romantic violin virtuoso.

Even if allowances are made for the rose-tinted memories of those who wrote about his playing, Paganini was a legend in his lifetime. No artist of his day, nor since so successfully and completely captured the imagination of his contemporaries. People of diverse rank and interests flocked to his concerts and avidly absorbed information about him, whether anecdote or rumour. Newspapers and journals vied with each other in presenting the latest news of his personal and musical life. He drew the attention of other Romantic composers, notably Liszt, to the significance of virtuosity as an „indispensable element“ in music,<sup>4</sup> and his unique personal and musical attributes prompted Jeffrey Pulver to describe him as the „violin virtuoso *in excelsis*“.<sup>5</sup> Two questions arising from Pulver's description form the basis of this investigation: Can the tag *in excelsis*, suggesting Paganini's pre-eminence as a violin virtuoso, be substantiated? And, if so, what special qualities set Paganini apart from his contemporaries and predecessors?

The various legends and mysteries concerning Paganini and the secrecy with which he guarded his own compositions and technical methods ensure that there is limited reliable evidence on which to base firm judgments regarding these questions. However, close study of his surviving compositions, contemporary reports of his performances and, in particular, Carl Guhr's (1787–1848) account of Paganini's performing style<sup>6</sup> provide us with vital information. Guhr's volume is dismissed as an unreliable source by, for example, Imbert de Laphalègue, who describes it as „a mystification conceived in a purely trading spirit;“<sup>7</sup> but this is one of few derogatory references, for Guhr was generally well respected by his contemporaries in his triple role as conductor, composer and violinist. He received praise from, among others, Wagner, Spontini and Berlioz, the latter commending his „musical intelligence and purpose.“<sup>8</sup> Although it would be dangerous to assume that everything notated by Guhr is without error, especially given the manner and circumstances in which his information was accumulated, it seems reasonable to accept that his treatise is *substantially* accurate.

<sup>4</sup> Owen Jander, „Virtuoso,“ in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London 1980, 20, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Pulver, *Paganini the Romantic Virtuoso*, London 1936/R1970, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Guhr, *Ueber Paganini's Kunst die Violine zu spielen*, Mainz 1829.

<sup>7</sup> G. Imbert de Laphalègue, *Notice sur le célèbre violoniste Nicolo Paganini*, Paris 1830, 16: „Malheureusement le livre de M. Guhr prouvera au public qu'il n'a rien découvert; c'est une mystification conçue dans un intérêt purement mercantile, et contre laquelle il est de notre devoir de prémunir les personnes qui cultivent la musique.“

<sup>8</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires*, Paris 1870, 236, trans. and ed. David Cairns, London 1969, 268: „... tout annonce en lui une intelligence et un volonté musicales!“

Although Paganini's virtuosic achievements represent arguably the summit of technical artistry in violin playing in the early nineteenth century, any description of him as a technical innovator could be hotly debated. Central to any such argument would be the special technical „system“ that Paganini claimed to have used partly in the teaching of his only violin pupil, Camillo Sivori (1815–94). Paganini told his close friend, Julius Schottky, that this „system“ enabled ten years' technical development to be achieved in three years; but he also revealed that only the cellist Gaetano Ciandelli fully knew his „secret.“ He [Ciandelli] had formerly been a very mediocre player on the violoncello, Paganini remarked. „... I communicated my discovery to him, with such beneficial effect that within three days he became an entirely different person, and people were lost in amazement over the sudden reformation of his playing.“<sup>9</sup> Paganini's „secret system“ has thus proved something of an enigma about which many have theorized.<sup>10</sup> However, although Paganini often spoke about writing a violin treatise, nothing of the kind has survived;<sup>11</sup> and the fact that he was still talking about it a few months before he died seems to prove conclusively that he neither accomplished it nor imparted any secret to his lawyer, confidant and closest friend, Luigi Geremi, or anyone else who might publish it for financial gain. Several documents also make clear his intention to publish his own works together with a commentary on their execution – for example, a „catalogue of pieces to be printed“ is preserved in the Library of Congress, Washington, in which Paganini lists 28 pieces ready for publication. However, few of his compositions were published during his lifetime, Geremi chiding him in 1836 for having engaged in other activities at a time when he might have prepared his manuscripts for their eagerly awaited publication.<sup>12</sup>

According to Guhr, Paganini's contribution to the development of violin technique lay in two main directions: first, in evolving a technical approach which was unique to his physique and which prompted some

<sup>9</sup> Julius Schottky, *Paganinis Leben und Treiben als Künstler und als Mensch*, Prague 1830/R Prague 1977, 278: „Er spielte schon längere Zeit das Violoncell auf eine höchst mittelmäßige Art, [so daß sein Spiel für alltäglich galt und mit Recht ohne Beachtung blieb] ... so machte ich ihn mit meiner Entdeckung bekannt, welche so vortheilhaft auf ihn wirkte, daß er in dem Zeitraum von drei Tagen ein ganz anderer Mensch wurde, und man über die plötzliche Umschaffung seines Spiels Wunder über Wunder rief.“

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Godefroi Anders, *Niccolò Paganini, sa vie, sa personne, et quelques mots sur son secret*, Paris 1831; Roberto Mantovani, *Le Secret de Paganini*, Paris 1922; Edgar Istel, *op. cit.*; Albert Jarosy, *Die Grundlagen des violinistischen Fingersatzes. Paganinis Lehre*, Berlin 1922; Carl Fleisch, „Apropos of Paganini's Secret,“ *The Strad* 50 (1939) 205–207.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Gazette Musicale*, January 23, 1840, in Edgar Istel, „The Secret of Paganini's Technique“, *Musical Quarterly* 16 (1930) 107.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Geremi to Paganini dated May 4, 1836, preserved in the Muller Collection, New York Public Library.

unorthodox approaches, chiefly with regard to posture, the manner of holding the violin and bow and the use of certain bowstrokes; second, and more important, in formulating an imaginative performing style which revived and exploited to unprecedented degrees techniques long since introduced into the violinist's repertory by, for example, Pietro Locatelli (1695–1764), Heinrich von Biber (1644–1704), and immediate predecessors such as Michel Woldemar (1750–1815), Antonio Lolli and Giovanni Giornovich (c 1740–1804). The extraordinary technical demands of Locatelli's 24 caprices, issued in 1733 with his 12 concertos op. 3 under the title *L'Arte del Violino*, particularly inspired Paganini. Further inspiration emanated from the playing style of Viotti-pupil Auguste Durand (c 1770–1834), who visited Genoa in about 1794 and impressed Paganini with, amongst other things, his novel technique of accompanying a bowed melody with left-hand pizzicato, and the strong dramatic/operatic bias of Paganini's most influential composition teacher, Ferdinando Paër (1771–1839).<sup>13</sup>

Peculiarities of physique noted by Dr. Francesco Bennati set Paganini apart from his peers and account for many of his unorthodox approaches to technique, not least in matters of posture.<sup>14</sup> When standing upright, his left shoulder was apparently slightly higher than his right, a natural conformation favourable to the adoption of a relaxed stance. Although many contemporary illustrations and caricatures depict Paganini in rather ungainly attitudes, Guhr records that his posture was „unrestrained, although not so dignified as that of *Baillot*, *Rode* and *Spohr*. He also supports the weight of his body on his left side but he bends forward the left shoulder more.“<sup>15</sup> Guhr's conclusions are verified by several sources, including illustrations, which reveal that Paganini thrust his head and his right foot well forward and rested his body-weight on his left hip; his left elbow was brought close in towards the trunk, in front of the body, with the upper arm turned inwards, and his chin was positioned either on the tailpiece itself or slightly to its left. A „triangular“ stance and playing position thus resulted, doubtless helping him to stabilise the instrument with his upper arm, which constantly maintained contact with his trunk. Additional support came from the left hand and chin, but without the help of a shoulder- or chin-rest.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Paganini's violin teachers played a relatively insignificant role in shaping his career.

<sup>14</sup> Francesco Bennati, *Histoire Physiologique et Pathologique de Niccolò Paganini*, Paris 1831.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Guhr, *op. cit.*, 4.

*Paganinis Stellung des Körpers*: Dieselbe ist ungezwungen, wenn auch nicht so edel wie bei BAILLOT, RODE und SPOHR. Der Schwerpunkt des Körpers ist bei ihm ebenfalls auf die linke Seite gestützt, jedoch beugt er die linke Achsel mehr vor, als jene Meister es bei ihrem Spiel sich erlauben.

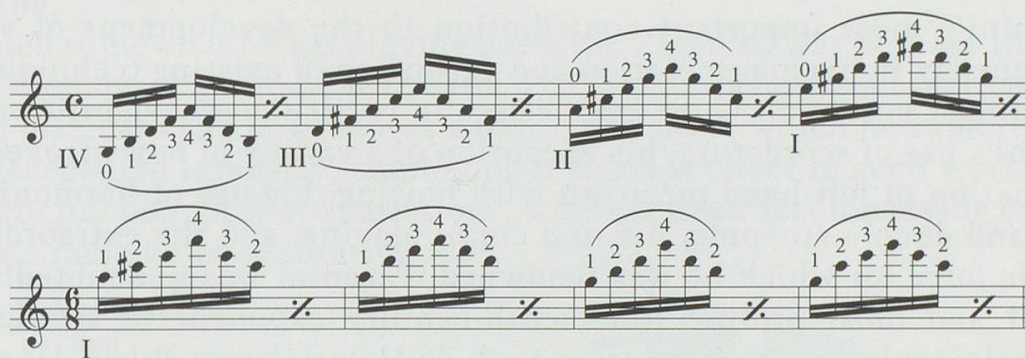
<sup>16</sup> The chin-rest is believed to have been introduced c.1820 by Louis Spohr, while the first reference to any kind of shoulder rest/pad is made by Pierre Baillot in his *L'art du violon*, Paris 1835.

Paganini's left-hand position was also somewhat unconventional, most sources confirming his adoption of an advanced thumb-position some distance along the neck from the scroll. Furthermore, the extraordinary flexibility of his thumb, fingers, wrist and other joints were apparently such that he could stop a span of three octaves with ease.



Ex. 1: Guhr, *op. cit.*, page 42.

Guhr provides examples of other remarkable extensions, many of which render practically impossible the recognition of a definite concept of positions.



Ex. 2: Guhr, *op. cit.*, page 43.

Contemporary reports even relate that Paganini sometimes executed an astonishing unison double trill, and there were few precedents for his occasional use of the left thumb to facilitate the execution of certain multiple-stopped chords. Such feats have led some medical specialists to conjecture that Paganini suffered from Marfan's Syndrome, a disease of the connective tissue which allows abnormal stretches of the hand, while others have concluded that the hyperextensibility of his joints points instead to the Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.<sup>17</sup> Guhr's attribution of Paganini's enormous stretch to his abnormally flexible thumb and various anatomists' surprise at Paganini's ability to bend his left thumb backwards until it touched the little finger would appear to endorse the latter conclusion.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In Harold C. Schonberg, *The Virtuosi*, New York 1988, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Guhr, *op. cit.*, 42; John Sugden, *op. cit.*, 150.

Paganini's extraordinary physique and his unorthodox violin-hold naturally affected the position of his right arm, resulting in a somewhat cramped bowing style. Available illustrations are somewhat contrary concerning the bowing position depicted, but most reveal that Paganini held the bow some distance from the nut and confirm Guhr's observations:

His right arm lies quite close to his body and is hardly ever moved. He allows free play only to his very bent wrist, which moves extremely easily, and guides the flexible movement of the bow with the greatest rapidity. It is only in strong and drawn-out *chords*, for which the lower part of the bow near the heel is used, that he lifts his hand and lower part of his arm somewhat higher, and moves his elbow away from his body.<sup>19</sup>

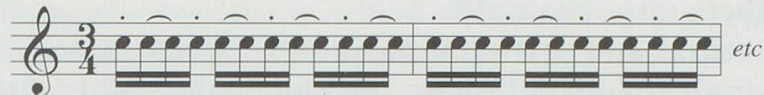
Such a bow grip facilitated the execution of the various thrown bowings for which Paganini was renowned, offering greater bow control and more subtle expressive effect within a limited dynamic range. However, along with his use of thin strings and his adoption of light, fast bow-strokes especially suitable for harmonic effects, it doubtless also adversely affected Paganini's tone, which by most contemporary accounts lacked fullness and volume.

Paganini's most important contribution to the development of violin technique lay in his manipulation and expansion of existing techniques to their utmost potential. Guhr emphasises in particular the significance of Paganini's use of scordatura; his execution of a variety of bow-strokes; his combination of left-hand pizzicato with bowing; his use of harmonics in single and double stopping; his *una corda* playing; and the extraordinary *tours de force* for which he was renowned. Paganini was undoubtedly the greatest and most prolific nineteenth-century exponent of scordatura, previously exploited by composers such as Heinrich von Biber. He often employed it to simplify his music and add brilliance to his tone and performing style. The solo part of his First Violin Concerto, for example, requires each string to be raised a semitone, thus giving the soloist a unique tonal colour and extra brilliance over the orchestra and facilitating certain bravura passagework. A similar tuning is employed, for example, in his *Il Carnevale di Venezia*, *I Palpiti* and *Le Streghe* variations, enabling him to reproduce on open strings harmonics which would normally have to be stopped and effectively extending the range of the instrument. His adoption of special tunings for his works for the G string only, generally raising that string a tone to A, a minor third to B flat or sometimes, evidently,

<sup>19</sup> Carl Guhr, *op. cit.*, 4: „Der rechte Arm liegt ganz fest am Körper, und derselbe bewegt sich beinahe niemals. Freien Spielraum hat bei ihm nur das sehr gekrümmte Handgelenk, welches sich äusserst leicht bewegt und mit der grössten Schnelligkeit die elastischen Bewegungen des Bogens leitet. Nur bei stark herausgerissenen *Accorden*, wobei der Untertheil des Bogens nahe am Frosch gebraucht wird, hebt er die Hand und den Vorderarm etwas höher und den Ellbogen vom Körper ab.“

even a major third to B natural, performed a similar function. He apparently used very thin strings for such remarkable applications of scordatura and had them stretched to the desired pitch prior to their being wound.

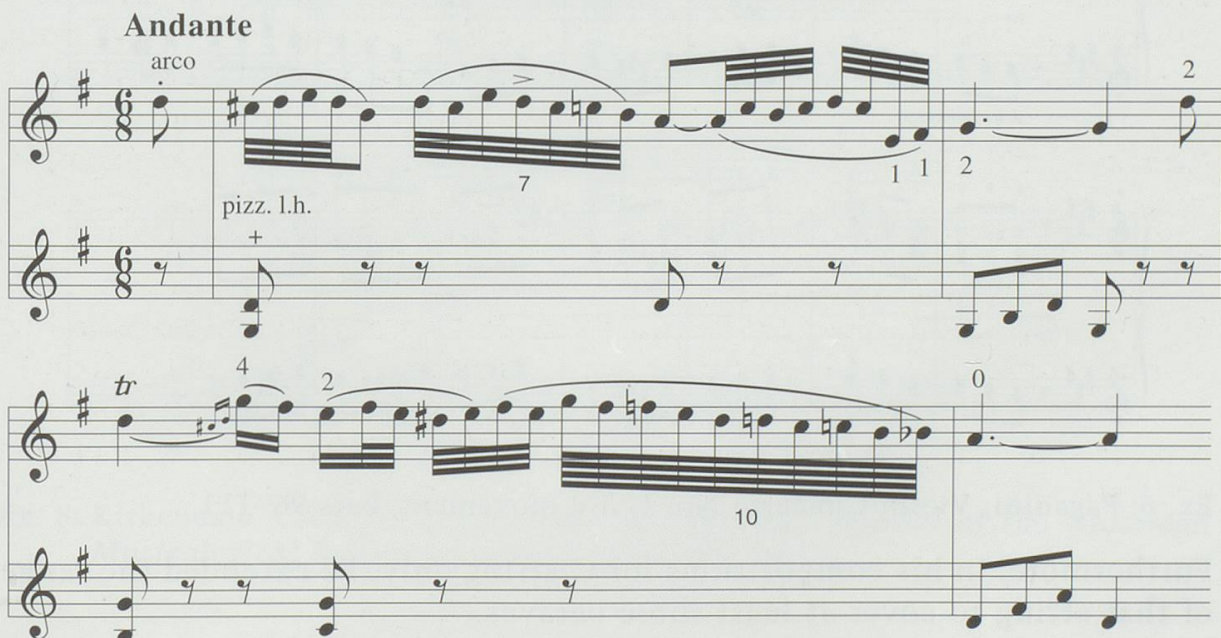
Paganini tapped the full extent of the contemporary repertoire of bow strokes in his compositions, his general bowing vocabulary ranging from the violinist's stock-in-trade to a wide variety of virtuosic effects involving complex string crossing, undulating bowing, staccato and legato playing, and such „spring“ bowings as *ricochet*, *spiccato*, and flying staccato. The only genuine novelty attributed to him is the so-called „Paganini bowing,“



Ex. 3: made up by Robin Stowell to illustrate the so-called „Paganini bowing“.

with its consistent alternation of one articulated and two slurred notes,<sup>20</sup> but the more virtuosic varieties, especially the „spring“ bowings, were exploited in far greater concentration and for longer passages than ever before. Paganini's First Caprice, for example, is based entirely on *ricochet* bowing.

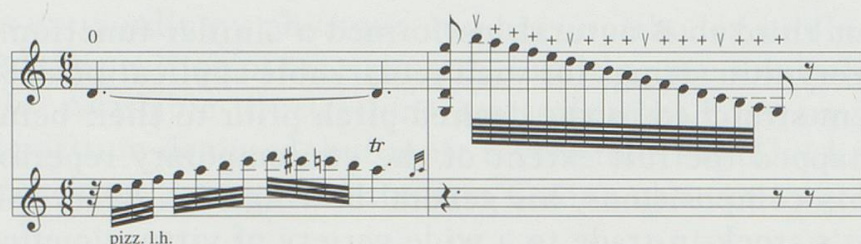
Aided somewhat by his playing position, Paganini was perhaps the greatest exponent of left-hand pizzicato. The simultaneous combination of left-hand pizzicato and bowing was a particular effect which he exploited with unprecedented intensity, employing it to great effect in such works as the *Nel cor più non mi sento* variations, whether in an accompanying capacity, or in a melodic or decorative role.



Ex. 4: Guhr, op. cit., page 48.

<sup>20</sup> This bowing is introduced by many editors in, for example, the first movement of Beethoven's Violin concerto, bars 139–41.

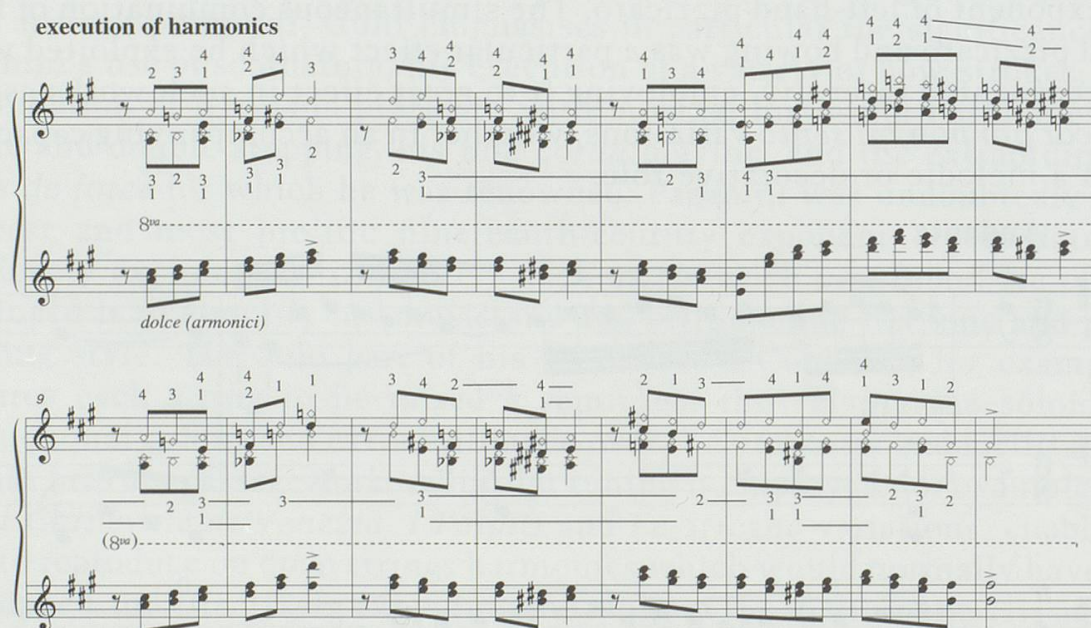




Ex. 5: Paganini, Variations on *Nel cor più non mi sento*, Theme, bar 7.

He sometimes even performed pizzicato passages with both left and right hands, the fifteenth variation of his *Il Carnevale di Venezia* providing an admirable, albeit rare, example.

Although natural and artificial harmonics were an accepted part of the violinist's technical vocabulary by the end of the eighteenth century, they were only rarely employed, principally for reasons of timbre uniformity.<sup>21</sup> Paganini, however, extended their use to the limits of their potential, uniting them effectively with normal playing. His introduction of artificial harmonics in double stopping, employing all four fingers simultaneously, was an innovation, the finale of the First Concerto, the Second Variation of *Il Palpiti*, and the Third Variation of *Le Streghe* incorporating arguably the most notable examples.



Ex. 6: Paganini, Violin Concerto No. 1, 3rd movement, bars 96–111.

Furthermore, in his compositions for G string only, he extended the range of that string to cover at least three octaves.

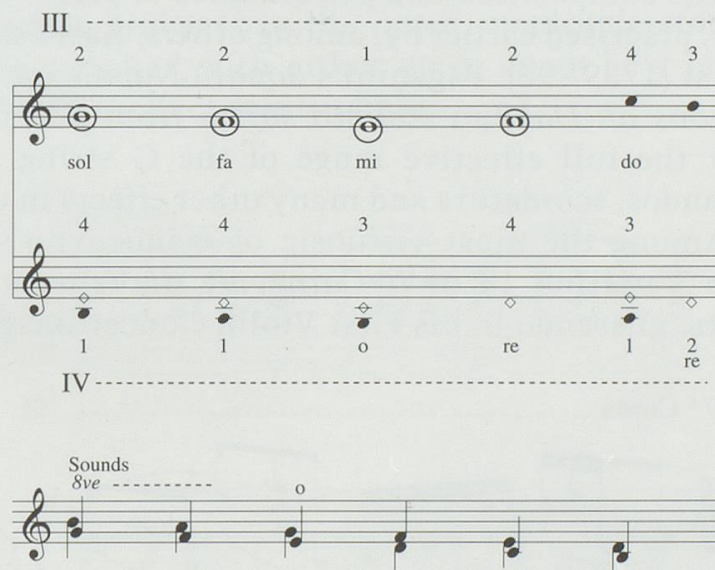
<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, Augsburg 1756, 106–7; Louis Spohr, *Violinschule*, Vienna 1832, 108; François-Joseph Fétis, *Notice biographique sur Nicolo Paganini*, Paris 1851, Eng. trans. London 1876, 74–5.



Ex. 7: Paganini, Variations on *Dal tuo stellato soglio* from Rossini's *Mosè*, Variation 2, bar 24.

Some contemporary reports even relate that he would suddenly tune a string to a different pitch during a performance, in order to gain a new range of harmonics, and then just as suddenly re-tune to the original pitch; frustratingly, the work or works to which this observation relates are never divulged, creating yet another Paganinian enigma.

Chromatic slides, single trills, trills in double stopping and double trills, all in harmonics, were included in his general repertoire, as well as a number of pseudo-harmonic effects, openly confessed by both Paganini, in an autograph document of c.1820 or earlier, and Guhr.<sup>22</sup> Part of this manuscript comprises a demonstration of the manner of performing continuous scales of artificial harmonics in double stopping in thirds. The four encircled notes are not harmonics, but make use of a trick not employed in legitimate violin playing: the string is pressed lightly at a non-nodal point and „squeaks“ to produce a note an octave higher than written.<sup>23</sup>

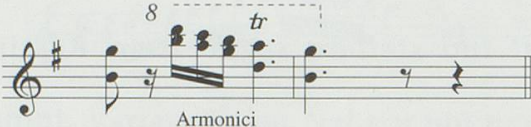


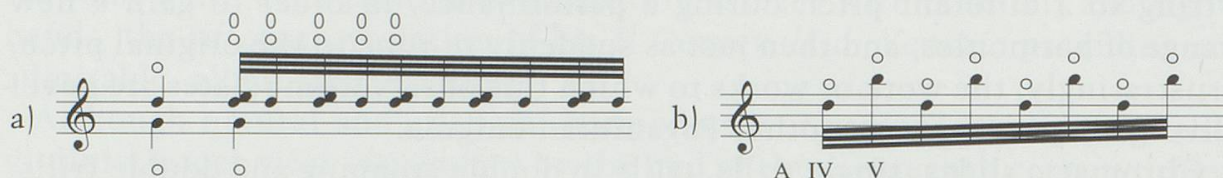
Ex. 8: Kirkendale, „Segreto Comunicato da Paganini“, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 18 (1965), pages 396–97.

<sup>22</sup> Warren Kirkendale, „Segreto comunicato da Paganini,“ *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 18 (1965) 394–407.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

Guhr describes a similar artificial effect in his discussion of Paganini's use of an „overshot“ tone rather than a true harmonic in the double trill at the end of the Third Variation of *Nel cor più non mi sento*.

The trill  was performed thus by Paganini:



Ex. 9: Guhr, *op. cit.*, page 46.

Guhr explains Ex. 9a thus: „The first finger continues lightly resting on the d and the second finger forms the e, the auxiliary note of the trill ... Incidentally, Paganini here deceives the ear, as the note e and its underlying d do not give a pure interval of a major second B–A; and when this is the case, it is rather an *overshot* tone than a true harmonic. Occasionally,“ continues Guhr, „he executes the same trill on two strings“<sup>24</sup> (Ex. 9b).

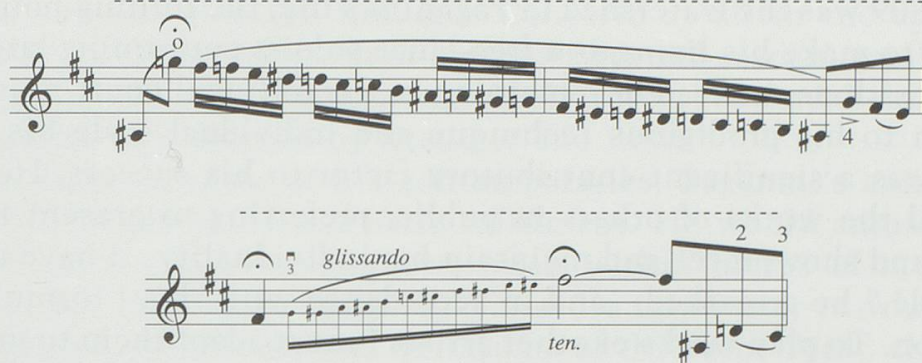
*Una corda* passages are common in Paganini's music and one of his specialities was the composition and performance of pieces specifically for the G string only, practised earlier by, among others, Karl Esser (1737–c 95) and Friedrich Rust (1739–96). Paganini's *Sonata Napoleone* and *Introduction and Variations on Dal tuo stellato soglio* from Rossini's *Mosè*, for example, exploit the full effective range of the G string, incorporating harmonics, glissandos, scordatura and many other effects in unprecedented concentration. Among the most virtuosic of manoeuvres is the type of shift required in Variation 14 of *Il Carnevale di Venezia*, whereas the unusual chromatic glissando in his First Violin Concerto is somewhat less problematic.

IV<sup>a</sup> Corda .....



Ex. 10: Paganini. *Il Carnevale di Venezia*, Variation 14 [bars 9–10].

<sup>24</sup> Carl Guhr, *op. cit.*, 46: „Hier bleibt fortwährend der 1te Finger auf dem d sanft liegen and der 2te bildet mit dem e den Hülfsston des Trillers. Uebrigens täuscht Paganini hier das Ohr, indem der Ton e mit seiner Unterlage d durchaus nicht rein das Intervall einer grossen Secunde b-a gibt, und ist dies der Fall, so ist es mehr ein *Ueberschlagen* des Tones, als reines Flageolet. Bisweilen führt er den nemlichen Triller auf zwei Saiten aus ...“



Ex. 11: Paganini, Violin Concerto No.1, 1st movement, bars 255–256 and 260–261.

Paganini developed his artistry in all these areas for financial gain, as his concert posters clearly show; and Spohr's presumably reliable observation that Paganini „for the purpose of imposing more upon the audience ... takes off the other three strings of the violin,"<sup>25</sup> serves to emphasise further his objectives as a showman.

Double stopping over a wide variety of intervals occurs in great profusion and concentration and in myriad contexts in Paganini's works, the effects produced ranging from the bravura to the ornamental, and even to some descriptive of mood. In his examples of passages in triple stopping, Guhr emphasises the force with which Paganini held the violin in the execution of such sustained passages as Ex. 12. Paganini was doubtless aided also by his use of a flatter bridge than the norm, quadruple-stopped chords most probably being attacked with either up or down bow in such a way that little or no arpeggio effect was audible.



Ex. 12: Guhr, op. cit., page 11.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Spohr, *Selbstbiographie*, Kassel and Göttingen 1860–1861, 1, 299–300, Eng. trans. London 1865, 1, 279. „... wobei er, um noch mehr zu imponiren, die drei übrigen Saiten von der Geige herabzieht.“

The year 1809 was the watershed in Paganini's life, the turning-point when he decided to make his living as a free-lance soloist performing largely his own compositions, instead of remaining as a traditional court-musician.<sup>26</sup> In addition to his prodigious technique and individual style his unique repertory was a significant contributory factor to his success. He hardly ever played the works of others in public, preferring to present his own concertos and showpieces and maintain his individuality. „I have my own special style,“ he remarked, „and in accordance with this I formulate my composition. To play works of other artists I must adapt them to my style. I would much rather write a piece myself in which I can trust my own musical feelings entirely.“<sup>27</sup> Private music making with friends was a different matter; then he could enjoy the quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, as he often did, without fear of criticism. Indeed, it is ironic that Paganini, so often cavilled as a superficial showman, possessed the artistic acumen to recognise the eminence of Beethoven's quartets while Spohr, that pillar of respectable musicianship, was among many who failed fully to appreciate them. Even when drawing up his organisational plan for his proposed Parma ducal orchestra towards the end of his career,<sup>28</sup> Paganini recommended among other suggestions that the string players should keep themselves „in shape“ by practising Beethoven's quartets.

When, on rare occasions, Paganini did perform other composers' works in public, he often treated them somewhat freely, embellishing or „improving“ them as he thought fit. On playing Kreutzer's Double Concerto with Lafont, Paganini said that he kept strictly to the written notes when the two violinists played together; but „in the solo passages“, he said, „I gave free rein to my imagination and played in the Italian manner that is really natural to me.“<sup>29</sup> And Wilhelm Speyer wrote to Spohr in 1829 regarding Paganini's performance of Beethoven's *Frühlings-Sonate* Op.24: „To tell you the most bizarre part of it: learn that after the repetition of the first section of the rondo he sounded the theme in harmonic double stops of the octave!“<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Peter Lichtenthal reported that in Milan in 1813

<sup>26</sup> He had, of course, served as such in Lucca 1805–1809 at the court of Napoleon's sister, Princess Elisa Baciocchi

<sup>27</sup> François-Joseph Fétis, *op. cit.*, 79, Eng. trans. London 1876, 75: „J'ai ma méthode personnelle: c'est d'après elle que je dispose mes compositions. Pour jouer celles des autres artistes, il me faudrait les arranger à ma manière; j'ai plus tôt fait d'écrire un morceau dans lequel je laisse pleine liberté à mon sentiment musical.“

<sup>28</sup> In fact, this orchestra never materialised.

<sup>29</sup> Julius Schottky, *op. cit.*, 297: „Wo beide Violinen zusammengeben, blieb ich dem ursprünglichen Satze Note für Note treu, so daß Lafond darauf wetten wollte, wir müßten aus ein und derselben Schule sein; in den Solo's aber überließ ich mich der Phantasie und spielte in meinem Genre als Italiener, das mir nun einmal naturgemäß ist.“

<sup>30</sup> Edward Speyer, *Wilhelm Speyer der Liederkomponist 1790–1878*, Munich 1925, 103: „Um Ihnen das Wunderlichste davon zu erzählen, so vernehmen Sie, dass er nach der Wiederholung des ersten Teils des Rondos das Thema in Flageolett-Oktav-Doppelgriffen hören liess!“

Paganini did not play the Kreutzer Concerto at all in the spirit of the composer, but distorted much of it almost beyond recognition;<sup>31</sup> and Fétis confirms that in Paris Paganini „scarcely rose above mediocrity“ in his performances of concertos by Kreutzer and Rode.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike those of most of his contemporaries, Paganini's concerts combined entertainment with artistic fulfilment. He would amuse his audiences by imitating animal noises, often within pieces of more serious intent, as his „Fandango Spagnolo Variato e Capriccio, in which will be introduced various Humorous Imitations of the Farm Yard“ clearly testifies.<sup>33</sup> Boucher de Perthes considered that Paganini spoilt his playing „by buffooneries unworthy of the art and his fine talent;“ he continued, „I've heard him add a cadenza to a concerto of Viotti's in which he imitates a donkey, a dog, a rooster etc.“<sup>34</sup> Reports abound of similar examples of pantomime at other venues, and Paganini's objectives as an entertainer and his unashamed promotion of his own works to achieve those goals often led to criticism. One correspondent commented: „I could not avoid feeling pain, that so exquisite a master should have bestowed such time and talents on what may be termed the charlatanism of music.“<sup>35</sup> Spohr made similar criticisms: „In his compositions and his style of interpretation there is a strange mixture of consummate genius, childishness, and lack of taste, so that one is alternately charmed and repelled ...“<sup>36</sup> „The very thing by which he fascinates the crowd debases him to a mere charlatan, and does not compensate for that in which he is utterly wanting – a grand tone, a long bow-stroke, and a tasteful execution.“<sup>37</sup> However, this notion that Paganini's success owed most to charlatanry was a widespread misconception among foreign violinists, his contest with Charles Lafont (1781–1839) in 1816 proving that arguably the best French violinist of that period was no match for him.

<sup>31</sup> In Geraldine de Courcy, *Paganini the Genoese*, Norman 1957/R New York 1977, 1, 125

<sup>32</sup> François-Joseph Fétis, *op. cit.*, 79, Eng. trans. London 1876, 75: „Dans ses concerts, Paris, il crut devoir flatter le sentiment national en jouant un concerto de Kreutzer et un de Rode: il ne s'y éleva point au-dessus du médiocre.“

<sup>33</sup> This Fandango is an early work, the Ms. of which has not survived.

<sup>34</sup> In John Sugden, *Niccolò Paganini: Supreme Violinist or Devil's Fiddler?*, Tunbridge Wells 1980, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondent of *The Times* about Paganini's performance in Paris on March 22, 1831.

<sup>36</sup> Louis Spohr, *Selbstbiographie*, Kassel and Göttingen 1860–1861, 2, 180, Eng. trans. London 1865, 2, 168: „In seinen Compositionen und seinem Vortrage fand ich aber eine sonderbare Mischung von höchst Genialem und kindisch Geschmacklosem, wodurch man sich abwechselnd angezogen und abgestoßen fühlte, [weshalb der Totaleindruck nach öfterem hören für mich nicht befriedigend war.]“

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 299, Eng. trans. London 1865, 1, 280: „Die Kenner hingegen meinen, daß ihm zwar eine große Gewandtheit in der linken Hand, in Doppelgriffen und allen Arten von Passagen nicht abzusprechen sei, daß ihn aber gerade das, was den großen Haufen entzücke, zum Charlatan erniedrige und für seine Mängel – einen großen Ton, einen langen Bogenstrich und einen geschmackvollen Vortrag des Gesanges – nicht zu entschädigen vermöge.“

The qualities of clarity, genius, beauty and expression were highly prized among performers by late-eighteenth-century theorists and it is significant that critics often attached less importance to Paganini's technical feats and skills as an entertainer than to his musical artistry and expression. Adolf Bernhard Marx reported that Paganini's audiences were captivated more by his imaginative interpretation than his seemingly impossible tours de force;<sup>38</sup> similarly, Ludwig Rellstab was impressed by the Italian violinist's powers of expression such that he was able to make his instrument speak, weep and sing.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Friedrich Wieck, father and teacher of Clara Schumann, wrote: „Never“ had he „heard a singer who had touched him as deeply as an Adagio played by Paganini. Never before had an artist been born who was equally great and incomparable in so many genres;<sup>40</sup> and Schubert claimed, after hearing Paganini in Vienna, that he heard an angel sing in the Adagio.<sup>41</sup> Such admiration from so many suggests that it would be unjust to discriminate against Paganini's performing style and wrong to assess his compositions merely as vehicles for technical display. Their emphasis may well be on virtuosity, but Paganini skilfully allies technical and musical considerations – notably a wealth of melodic inspiration, a fine sense of structure and an intense dramatic awareness influenced by contemporary Italian opera – to artistic objectives, even if his works are sometimes found wanting in harmonic invention and thorough thematic development.

Paganini wrote a vast quantity of music for violin and orchestra, including sets of variations on Italian operatic themes, arrangements of folk tunes and at least six concertos. Not one of his concertos was published during his lifetime, for a vital ingredient of the Paganini myth was his inaccessibility. He always performed entirely from memory and ensured that the distribution of his orchestral parts was strictly controlled. His music thus relied on his exclusive advocacy for its popularity, and it seems likely that Paganini reinvented much of his solo contribution for each performance. Working with the musical language of Italian contemporaries such as Donizetti, Rossini and Bellini, and adopting the traditional design of the French violin concerto, Paganini created works of breath-

<sup>38</sup> In Geraldine de Courcy, *op. cit.*, 1, 317.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 318.

<sup>40</sup> In Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: ein Künstlerleben*, Leipzig 1902–1908, 1, 16: „Nie‘ hatte er [Friedrich Wieck], schrieb er in Clara's Tagebuch, ‚einen Sänger gehört, welcher ihn so gerührt hätte, als ein Adagio von Paganini. Nie ist wohl ein Künstler geboren worden, welcher in so vielen Genre gleich groß und unerreichbar wäre.“

<sup>41</sup> In Otto E. Deutsch ed., *Franz Schubert: die Dokumente seines Lebens und Schaffens*, Munich 1914, 487: „Ich habe einen Engel darin singen gehört.“ Eng. trans. Eric Blom, London 1946, document 1095“ From a lost letter from Schubert to Anselm Hüttenbrenner“, 773.

taking bravura and warm intensity, their novelty lying in the content of their solo passagework rather than in their overall structure.

In keeping with Pulver's assessment, Paganini's individuality as a virtuoso projected far beyond his music and performing style, revealing itself also in his very personality, his self-confidence and his ability both to promote himself and to manipulate the press. Such qualities are first demonstrated in his youth, when, with his father's support, he arranged a benefit concert to defray the cost of his intended instruction with Alessandro Rolla at Parma. The following announcement appeared in the Genoese press on July 25, 1795:

There will be a concert in the Teatro di Sant' Agostino next Friday, July 31. It will be given by Niccolò Paganini of Genoa, a boy already known in his paese [native city] for his skill as a violinist. Having decided to go to Parma to perfect himself in his profession under the guidance of the renowned Professor Rolla, and not being in a position to defray the many necessary expenses, he has conceived this plan to give him courage to ask his fellow citizens to contribute towards his project, hereby inviting them to be present at this event which he hopes will prove enjoyable.<sup>42</sup>

The concert proved both an artistic and financial success and enabled Paganini to progress to the next stage in his career.<sup>43</sup>

Paganini's was a carefully calculated rise to fame. For some years his concert career was developed initially in Italy, reaching its first peak in 1827 when Pope Leo XII awarded him the Order of the Golden Spur; this honour proved a profitable addition to the Paganini publicity bandwagon and allowed him to be billed as „Il Cavaliere Paganini.“ The holdings of the Muller Collection of Paganiniana in the New York Public Library give some indication of the numerous other honours that were heaped upon him during his international career, thus setting him well apart from his peers. He was made a baron and was the recipient of various orders of nobility, and his many contacts with persons of high rank are reflected in the invitations he received to give concerts in their cities.<sup>44</sup>

Paganini's publicity campaign throughout most of his first major European tour (1828–34) was so effective that he was a celebrity practically everywhere on his arrival. Word of his breathtaking musical skills, as well as his notoriety as a malefactor, was proclaimed in advance of his arrival in Vienna (March 16, 1828) by the newspapers and scandalmongers such that the Viennese besieged him in the streets, displayed his portrait in their shop windows and gossiped interminably about him. Such „Paganini

<sup>42</sup> In Geraldine de Courcy, *op. cit.*, 1, 38.

<sup>43</sup> This did not, as it happened, involve his receiving instruction from Rolla.

<sup>44</sup> See Albert Mell, „Paganiniana in the Muller Collection of the New York Public Library,“ *Musical Quarterly* 39 (1953) 1–23.



fever“ naturally had a remarkable effect on concert attendances, and hence receipts, and ensured him the close attentions of the nobility.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Paganini became a celebrity in Paris before he had played a note, thanks largely to the groundwork laid by friends such as Meyerbeer, Rossini and his former composition teacher, Paër. The manager of *L'Opéra* immediately engaged Paganini for ten concerts spread over five weeks, and the first-night audience included such nineteenth-century giants in literature, music and painting as Baillot, Bériot, Castil-Blaze, Delacroix, Donizetti, Gautier, Halévy, Heine, Liszt, de Musset and Rossini.

Paganini's manipulation of the press extended to encouraging and spreading, for box-office gain, many of the rumours and anecdotes disseminated about him. He is also suspected of persuading a friend to publish an anonymous derogatory report about his playing in order to kindle reaction and interest from the somewhat apathetic public in Prague. The resultant press reaction was to side with Paganini, thus reviving public curiosity in his remaining concerts and boosting concert receipts! He also used the press to pander to London audiences, publishing letters to all but apologise for the original, highly inflated ticket prices for his first concert<sup>46</sup> and notices comparing his income from various European cities to prove his popularity and enhance his appeal in the capital. It was only when matters went too far in Paris with gross exaggerations of his criminal record that he fell victim to his own press agency and felt moved to counter such inaccuracies by requesting Fétis to publish the true facts.

Paganini was also a past master at exploiting the farewell concert, often holding a number of valedictory events in a city before his actual departure. Most of his major concerts in the late 1820s and early 1830s involved an elaborate evening's entertainment with orchestra and at least one singer. The programme of his first concert in Vienna on March 29, 1828 is representative:

Beethoven: Overture, *Fidelio*  
Paganini: Violin Concerto No. 2 in B minor  
Paër: an aria sung by Antonia Bianchi<sup>47</sup>  
Paganini: Sonata militaire on the G string  
Rossini: an aria sung by Antonia Bianchi  
Paganini: Variations on Rossini's „Non più mesta“.

<sup>45</sup> The Viennese Imperial Court later paid Paganini the compliment of attending an intermezzo concert in full regalia at the Burg Theatre, conferring on him the title of *Kammervirtuoso* and presenting him with a gold snuff box with the Emperor's monograph in diamonds. Paganini was also awarded the St. Salvador medal in Vienna in 1828 for his aid to local charities.

<sup>46</sup> The high prices were caused, naturally enough, by his own financial demands.

<sup>47</sup> Paganini's then partner Antonia Bianchi and mother of his son, Achille; their affair broke up in 1828.

So long as he operated in large centres of cultural activity such as Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London, the organisation of concerts was reasonably straightforward. He sometimes dealt directly with theatre managers and a circle of musicians and friends was often available to assist him in such transactions. Nevertheless, his meteoric course across Europe proved to be a fairly cumbersome operation. Performers had to be engaged, parts provided, and advertising arranged in every city; and in some venues, more menial tasks had to be undertaken. The violinist Lipinski informs us that for an appearance in Padua in 1818, „Paganini himself sold tickets, following which he locked the door with a key so that no one could enter the concert hall without paying the entrance fee; only then did he come onto the stage. During the interval he sold tickets at half price.“<sup>48</sup>

In order to lessen the burdens on himself, including in some cases problems of language, Paganini employed various tour managers during the height of his career. Although this policy met with mixed success, his vision in employing such a management agency was a progressive step which placed him well ahead of his time. Chief among his managers were Lazzaro Rebizzo, Paul Couriol, George Harrys, Freeman and John Watson. Rebizzo, a friend of independent means, became Paganini's manager in Dresden in 1829, but Rebizzo's own business interests resulted in his association with Paganini lasting only six months. Couriol, an ex-army officer whose venture as a theatre impresario had ended in bankruptcy in 1827, replaced Rebizzo. Although he managed efficiently Paganini's tours of South and West Germany in the autumn of 1829, Paganini and Couriol eventually found themselves to be incompatible in business. Harrys took over in Hanover, but the partnership lasted less than a month.<sup>49</sup> Freeman arranged a tour of Ireland, Scotland and Northern England with varying degrees of success, but Paganini's meeting with the Watson family, in particular John and his attractive mezzo-soprano daughter Charlotte, led to Freeman's demise. Watson, whose contract as musical director at London's King's Theatre was about to terminate, persuaded Paganini to take him on as manager-accompanist, with unfortunate financial, musical and personal consequences.<sup>50</sup>

Paganini earned and spent money relatively easily throughout his international career. He had an astute business sense, at least as far as his income was concerned, and it is no surprise to discover that, in the midst of all his Parisian engagements, he was negotiating those over-generous terms with the impresario Laporte for a forthcoming visit to London. His hard bargain

<sup>48</sup> In Henry Roth, „The greatest violinist who ever lived,“ *The Strad*, 101 (1990) 461.

<sup>49</sup> During that time Harrys collected personal information for a book about Paganini: *Paganini in seinem Reisewagen und Zimmer*, Brunswick 1830.

<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Paganini's planned elopement with Charlotte, about which her father was forewarned, led to the scandal being exposed in the press on both sides of the channel.

forced the impresario to double the prices at The King's Theatre for Paganini's first concert and led to a public uproar, the press, spearheaded by *The Times* of May 19, 1831, urging concert-goers to boycott the event. As it happened, Paganini had to postpone the concert, due to ill health; but the public won the day – Paganini and Laporte agreed a revised contract – and when the opening concert eventually took place, the normal admission prices applied, Paganini himself announcing such in an open letter in the press.

Paganini normally kept accurate accounts of his itineraries and concert receipts, mostly in his famous Red Book (from about March 1828 to March, 1831). For most of the concerts, there is a record of the total income, the expenses deducted and the net income to Paganini. Occasionally, other interesting details are provided, such as the cost of the orchestra or the admission prices. He was particularly astute at slotting in extra concerts for financial gain, sometimes to the frustration of his tour managers, and he was also sensitive enough to realise when he should move on. His immense wealth is mirrored, among other things, in his dealings in stringed instruments; at his death he owned twenty-two Cremonese instruments of high pedigree.<sup>51</sup> However, not all of Paganini's business dealings were successful, his disastrous involvement in a casino venture in Paris (1837), for example, injuring his pride as well as his wallet.

Paganini could be artistically generous, as he was to Lipinski, and financially generous, as in his numerous charity concerts and with his gift of 20,000 francs to Berlioz,<sup>52</sup> but he was often reproached for being mean and avaricious. His shrewdness led him carefully to cultivate the legends surrounding him for financial gain. For some years it suited him that the public believed that he had made some Faustian pact with the Devil; that he had been imprisoned for a long period, during which all his violin's strings broke except the G string, hence his extraordinary facility on that string; that he had murdered his mistress in an act of jealous rage; that he had spent years in the galleys. Stendhal, among others, believed these stories and in his biography of Rossini described how Paganini had developed his violin technique in a dungeon. Although attempts were made by his friends and associates – and by Paganini himself from about 1828 onwards – to discount these fabrications, some of the legends have lived on to discredit somewhat his reputation. That he possessed a strong psychical force, however, has become an integral part of the Paganini legend, and this has been given different shades of meaning and significance by various writers.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Paganini's collection included 11 Stradivari instruments, 2 Amati violins and 4 violins made by the Guarneri family, most notably his favourite violin known as „The Cannon.“

<sup>52</sup> Presented after attending a concert in Paris (December 16, 1838) in which Berlioz conducted a programme of his own works.

<sup>53</sup> See John Sugden, *op. cit.*, 40–41.

Paganini's appearance was as individual as his achievements. From the Spring of 1808 he evidently began to cultivate the image that posterity still has of him. He grew his hair long and always appeared in a somewhat shabby black frock coat and long trousers with a coloured waistcoat, his awkward, emaciated, spectral figure making an immediate impression on audiences. Colonel Maxwell Montgomery, who met Paganini in Genoa in 1814, describes him as „the most outré, most extravagant, and strangest character I ever beheld, or heard, in the musical line ... His long figure, long neck, long face and long forehead, his hollow and deadly pale cheek, large black eyes, hooked nose, and jet black hair, which is long and more than half hides his expressive Jewish face – all these rendered him the most extraordinary person I ever beheld. There is something scriptural in the ‚tout ensemble‘ of the strange physiognomy of this uncouth and unearthly figure.“<sup>54</sup> Descriptions such as this and the supernatural qualities attributed to him by others represented good box office to Paganini and the words, „magical,“ „spiritual,“ „bewitching“ and „demonic“ litter the reports of his concerts in German newspapers in 1828–29. In Berlin, for example, the two critics most highly respected for their scholarship, integrity and lack of sensationalism, Marx and Rellstab, each emphasised his supernatural qualities, Rellstab even comparing him with a vision of Goethe's Mephisto playing the violin.

Paganini's stage appearances gradually became more contrived, and he seems to have had a unique, effective ritual of creating audience expectancy and milking their rapt attention and applause. Audiences were kept waiting, apparently deliberately, so as to increase the air of expectancy, and when he finally appeared, the curtains parted to the sound of a drumroll. His entrance at one of his Liverpool appearances (1831) is described thus:

... he enters the orchestra, bending and smiling, (but what a ghastly smile!) – a sallow, haggard, ungraceful spectre, – with his instrument clutched, rather than held, in his lean, claw-like fingers, – you would as soon expect melody from a sepulchre. A few seconds elapse, the burst of applause subsides, and a change comes over the musician, so sudden, that you are already tempted to believe him a sorcerer. His figure grows erect, his attitude commanding, his features stern and thoughtful.<sup>55</sup>

Paganini's reaction to audience acclaim at the end of his concerts seems to have been calculated with similar objectives in mind. He is reported to have shed tears at his reception in Munich, while a reliable London witness comments:

... though he retired amidst a confusion of huzzas and bravos ... yet he was called for to receive the homage of the audience; and was so apparently affected, that he would have dropped had he not been supported by Laporte and Costa.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> In Henry Roth, *op. cit.*, 459.

<sup>55</sup> In John Sugden, *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

This latter statement may be a genuine reflection of Paganini's poor health at that time. That he suffered chronic illness of some kind from about the age of thirty seems certain; what is not known – and probably never will be – is the nature of the disease or to what extent it was exacerbated by his succession of treatments, some prescribed by leading European doctors, others by inept quacks. Furthermore, although it brought him rich rewards, the travelling involved in his punishing concert schedule must also have taken its toll on his constitution. Amazingly, however, the stimulus of a concert seems to have been enough to rouse him from the bouts of depression associated with his weak condition to a state of euphoria.

Despite the plaudits granted to him, Paganini was human and he did not always perform to his fullest potential. At his first concert in Strasbourg, we learn that he broke down twice and was forced to interrupt his performance until he regained his composure. His first concert in Brussels was a similar case in point, adding credence to Heine's remark that he had never heard anyone play better, or for that matter, worse than Paganini.<sup>57</sup> However, such occurrences were comparatively rare and the positive influence of his countless acclaimed performances on successive generations of musicians was considerable. His original and strikingly imaginative performing style – that amalgam of fine musicianship and that carefully calculated extension and unprecedented concentration of already extant techniques – was quickly absorbed by a number of touring virtuosi, particularly members of the Franco-Belgian school such as Heinrich Ernst, Charles-Auguste de Bériot, and Vieuxtemps. Pianists such as Franz Liszt and Fryderyk Chopin and executants of other instruments were also inspired to emulate him, establishing him in Robert Schumann's opinion as the turning-point in the history of virtuosity.<sup>58</sup>

Few will challenge Schumann's evaluation. Paganini was an original figure who inspired new attitudes and new expectations, creating the notion of the instrumentalist as hero, genius and superman, while at the same time personifying that notion and fulfilling it in a sensational way that few since have achieved. On comparing Paganini with the contemporary French virtuoso Alexandre-Jean Boucher (1778–1861), the correspondent of the *Dresdner Merkur* classified Boucher's art as charlatanism, while describing Paganini's as „the spirit of true genius expressed with daring.“<sup>59</sup> „He [Paganini] forms a class by himself“, reported *The Times*; and Chorley, the most

<sup>57</sup> Heinrich Heine, „Musikalische Saison in Paris,“ *Zeitungsberichte über Musik*, 140.

<sup>58</sup> In Boris Schwarz, *Great Masters of the Violin*, London 1984, 181.

<sup>59</sup> In Julius Schottky, *op. cit.*, 134: „... dieser [Boucher] hatte gewiß auch viel Genialität, aber wie tief stand er unter Paganini! er wollte das scheinen, was dieser ist, darum war jenes Charlatanismus, wo hier ächter Genius sich auf die originellste und kühnste Weise ausspricht!“

celebrated English critic of his day, described him as „a solitary man in his art!“ He continued, „There is a relation between a unit and a million – none between him and his fellow men.“<sup>60</sup> Such views concerning the enormous gulf between Paganini, his predecessors and his contemporaries would appear to confirm the Italian’s stature as „the greatest instrumentalist the world of music has ever known.“<sup>61</sup> Although he was not the first violin virtuoso to win international fame and, indeed, may have been far from the best, he was received like no other. His art stood alone because he brought to its service a personal magnetism, technical expertise, freedom of expression, poetic appeal, commercialism and a dramatic and emotional impact that in the combination of its details was unique. Few can therefore justifiably call into question Pulver’s view of Paganini as „the violin virtuoso *in excelsis*;“ for, as Liszt remarked, „there will never be a second Paganini. ... The greatness of this genius, unequalled, unsurpassed, precludes even the idea of a successor. No one will be able to follow in his footsteps; no name will equal his in glory.“<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> In Geraldine de Courcy, *op. cit.*, 2, 55.

<sup>61</sup> In John Sugden, *op. cit.*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> In Albert Jarosy, *op. cit.* 9 and 10: „Kein zweiter Paganini wird auferstehn! ... Die Höhe dieses nie erreichten und nie überflügeln Genies schließt selbst die Nachahmung aus. In seine Fußstapfen wird keiner mehr treten, seinem Ruhm sich kein Ruhm mehr ebenbürtig zur Seite stellen.“

