



CARTE BLANCHE CONCERT I:

Paganini's Incomparable Caprices

Sean Lee, *violin*; Peter Dugan, *piano*

JULY 21

Friday, July 21

7:30 p.m., Stent Family Hall, Menlo School

SPECIAL THANKS

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Kathleen G. Henschel and John W. Dewes with gratitude for their generous support.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

To this day, Paganini's Twenty-Four Caprices represent the Mount Everest of violin technique. Violinist Sean Lee, in a rarely encountered feat of virtuosity, performs the entire cycle of Paganini's caprices, with Music@Menlo debut pianist Peter Dugan offering the beautiful accompaniments composed by none other than Robert Schumann.

NICCOLÒ PAGANINI (1782–1840)

Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin, op. 1 (ca. 1805–1815) (piano accompaniment by Robert Schumann)

- no. 1 in E Major: *Andante*
- no. 7 in a minor: *Posato*
- no. 3 in e minor: *Sostenuto – Presto – Sostenuto*
- no. 9 in E Major: *Allegretto (The Hunt)*
- no. 10 in g minor: *Vivace*
- no. 6 in g minor: *Lento*
- no. 2 in b minor: *Moderato*
- no. 8 in E-flat Major: *Maestoso*
- no. 11 in C Major: *Andante – Presto – Tempo primo*
- no. 12 in A-flat Major: *Allegro*
- no. 5 in a minor: *Agitato*
- no. 4 in c minor: *Maestoso*

- no. 13 in B-flat Major: *Allegro (The Devil's Chuckle)*
- no. 16 in g minor: *Presto*
- no. 14 in E-flat Major: *Moderato*
- no. 17 in E-flat Major: *Sostenuto – Andante*
- no. 20 in D Major: *Allegretto*
- no. 15 in e minor: *Posato*
- no. 18 in C Major: *Corrente – Allegro*
- no. 21 in A Major: *Amoroso – Presto*
- no. 22 in F Major: *Marcato*
- no. 23 in E-flat Major: *Posato*
- no. 19 in E-flat Major: *Lento – Allegro assai*
- no. 24 in a minor: *Finale: Theme and Variations*

Sean Lee, *violin*; Peter Dugan, *piano*

INTERMISSION

CARTE BLANCHE CONCERTS

Program Notes: Paganini's Incomparable Caprices

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

NICCOLÒ PAGANINI

(Born October 27, 1782, Genoa, Italy; died May 27, 1840, Nice, France)

Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin, op. 1 (piano accompaniment by Robert Schumann)

Composed: ca. 1805–1815, piano accompaniment composed 1853–1854

Published: 1820, Milan

Other works from this period: *Grand Sonata* in A Major for Violin and Guitar (1803); *Six Sonatas for Violin and Guitar, op. 2* (ca. 1805); *Six Sonatas for Violin and Guitar, op. 3* (ca. 1805); *Duo merveille* for Solo Violin (ca. 1808)

Approximate duration: 70 minutes

“He’s a comet! For never did a flaming star burst more abruptly on the firmament of art or excite in the course of its universal ellipse more astonishment mixed with a sort of terror before vanishing forever.” Thus wrote Hector Berlioz about one of the most extraordinary phenomena in music history—Niccolò Paganini. There has never been anything quite like Paganini. He was rumored to be a murderer, a seducer, and an escaped convict. One report held that three hundred of his auditors were “in the hospital suffering from over-enchantment.” A satirist thought his incomparable virtuosity “enough to make the greater part of the fiddling tribe commit suicide.” The celebrated opera composer Meyerbeer once followed Paganini on his travels through northern Europe in an attempt to penetrate the mystery of his powers. Otherwise perfectly reasonable and sober Englishmen poked him with their canes as he walked the streets of London, just to see if he was really made of flesh and blood. Paganini won his Stradivarius in a wager that he could play at first sight a piece that no other violinist could play with preparation. Said Edward Downes about Paganini’s persona, “He did everything but come onstage wrapped in blue flame.”

Perhaps the only episode in our contemporary experience resembling the career of Paganini was the mania surrounding such pop stars as the Beatles and Elvis, Madonna and Lady Gaga. But even that is not a thoroughly valid comparison, since few concert musicians gave more than passing notice to the rock music of the 1950s and 1960s, whereas Paganini was hailed as a master by the finest artists of his day. Berlioz not only wrote the glowing words quoted above, but he also composed *Harold in Italy* for the great virtuoso. Schubert maintained that “in Paganini’s [playing of his] *Adagio* I heard an angel sing.” Schumann correctly called him “the turning point in the history of virtuosity.” And even Rossini was infected with the fever. “I have wept only three times in my life,” he confessed. “The first time when my earliest opera failed, the second time when, with a boating party, a truffled turkey fell into the water, and the third time when I heard Paganini play.”

There was, however, more to Paganini than just his wizardry on the violin. Beyond the dazzling array of unprecedented technical feats—**harmonics**, double-stops, pizzicati, blinding speed—there was the mesmerizing pageant of theatrics, both onstage and off, that was the fascination of Europe. The great German poet Heinrich Heine left an account of his appearance and mannerisms that described him as “looking as if he had risen from the underworld.” His satanic image and the superhuman qualities of his playing gave rise to tales that he was in league with the devil. “What mere mortal could do the things that this man does?” wondered his hearers. Some who accidentally touched him quickly crossed themselves as a safeguard. He denied any diabolical influence, and he even had his mother submit a letter attesting to the normality of his parentage and birth. In those simpler times, such a move was a public relations inspiration, and it served only to further fan the flames of his fame. (Clever devil, this Paganini.) The shadow of Beelzebub hung over him even after death. Because he rejected the last rites of the Church, his body was refused burial in consecrated ground. His heirs fought for more than three years to have him properly laid to rest, until finally the Vatican

itself issued an order for his Christian burial. Perhaps the decision took so long because of reports that spread from Nice and, later, Villefranche, where Paganini’s unburied coffin was kept. On still nights, when the moon was full, the natives claimed, the sound of a ghostly violin could be heard playing softly inside the mysterious box.

Nearly two centuries since his death, Paganini continues to fascinate for both the supernatural qualities of his life and the sparkling treasury of music that he left to posterity. The standards of performance he established still lie at the limits of violin technique, and playing his compositions remains one of the most daunting challenges for today’s virtuosi. It was Paganini’s practice to keep his secrets as well hidden as possible. One way in which he did that was by not allowing any of his violin music (except for his nearly unplayable caprices) to be published during his lifetime. For his concert appearances, he memorized the solo sections and carried with him only the parts for the orchestra. He did not play at rehearsals but only gave cues, so that at the performance the orchestra members were as astounded by what they heard as the audience.

The most astounding of Paganini’s compositions are his Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin, which even today mark the outer limits of traditional violin technique. Their date of composition is uncertain. Paganini himself claimed that he wrote them while still a teenager studying in Parma with Ferdinando Paër, the Italian composer who served for a time as Napoleon’s *maître de chapelle* and composed an opera titled *Leonora* in 1804 on the identical subject that Beethoven treated in his only opera a year later. Current opinion on the provenance of the caprices places their creation at various times between about 1805 and shortly before their publication in 1820 by Ricordi in Milan. They were the only violin music Paganini published during his lifetime (the other four opus numbers he allowed to be issued included a dozen sonatas for violin and guitar and fifteen quartets for guitar, violin, viola, and cello), and he made them available principally to prove that no one else could play them. The two dozen numbers, though all united by their breathtaking array of double-stops, left-hand pizzicati, trills, cross-string arpeggios, and whirlwind scales, cover a surprisingly wide range of musical styles and moods. The Caprice no. 5 (a minor), for example, frames a display of spiccato (fast, bouncing bow) with cadenza-like flourishes. The Caprice no. 9 (E major) is a rondo based on a theme evocative of hunting-horn calls. No. 14 (E-flat major) is a *marche miniature* built on a fanfare-like melody. No. 16 (g minor) is a *moto perpetuo* study with quick changes of register. The last and most famous of the caprices, a set of eleven spectacular variations on a demonic a minor subject, has served as inspiration and theme for works by Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Lloyd Webber, Casella, Lutosławski, Dallapiccola, Blacher, and others.

Though the caprices are whole (and then some) in their unaccompanied state, later musicians have chosen to render them into other forms. Schumann reworked twelve of them for solo piano (as his Opus 3 and Opus 10) after being bowled over by a recital Paganini gave in Frankfurt in 1830, and he again took up the caprices near the end of his life, in 1853–1854, to provide them with piano accompaniments. Franz Liszt created dazzling piano transformations of five of them in 1838 as his *Études d’exécution transcendante d’après Paganini*. The celebrated Hungarian-born violinist Leopold Auer (1845–1930), teacher in St. Petersburg of Elman, Zimbalist, Heifetz, and others of the twentieth-century’s greatest virtuosi, fitted the Caprice no. 24 with a keyboard accompaniment. In 1985, the Russian composer Edison Denisov (1929–1996) arranged five of the caprices for violin and strings.

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 92.