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THE PAGANINI CAPRICES: A LIFELONG JOURNEY

By Rachel Barton Pine



“To all the artists”—not just one individual, nor even “to all the violinists,” but “to all the artists”—this was Paganini’s dedication on his 24 Caprices for solo violin. His choice of dedicatees reveals an often overlooked, perhaps at times ignored, depth of musical integrity and substance at the core of the man and his Caprices. It is Paganini’s inherent musicality that has always been at the heart of my relationship with this artist and his works.

Today Paganini is remembered primarily for his exceptional virtuosity and his stage persona. He was a product of the *bel canto* (“beautiful singing”) era in Italy, where the human voice was the most revered of instruments and great singers were worshiped. Some of the characteristic traits of the great *bel canto* singers were an agile and flexible technique with the capacity for incredible virtuosity, an impeccable legato throughout the singing range, graceful phrasing through complete mastery of breath control, and the ability to execute fast, accurate passagework.

Drawing from this vocal tradition, Paganini revolutionized violin playing and elevated the violinist to levels of superstardom previously achieved only by singers. Among other things, he made extensive use of the entire range of the violin, from its lowest notes to its highest, often moving rapidly up and down through the range. He extended the use of techniques—for example left-hand pizzicato (plucking

*Chicago’s own Rachel Barton Pine will perform
Paganini’s 24 Caprices twice as part of Ravinia’s
\$10 BGH Classics series on August 17 and 18.*

with the hand that fingers the strings), harmonics (“whistle tones”), and playing entire melodies and pieces on a single string—to new levels. Paganini also took advantage of the ability of the violin to play multiple notes at the same time and incorporated rapidly moving chords and seemingly impossible combinations of notes into his music.

For audiences of Paganini’s day, the sound of a violin mimicking the human voice and capturing all the attributes most valued in the best singers must have been amazing. The addition of techniques and sounds unachievable by vocalists must have been unbelievable. It is not surprising that people associated Paganini’s playing with supernatural forces. Newspapers published eyewitness accounts of audience members who claimed to have seen a witch standing behind him while he was playing, controlling his bow and manipulating his fingers. He was widely believed to have sold his soul in exchange for his amazing ability. (To this day these rumors still cause some conservative families to forbid their children from learning his music.)

Paganini was a great showman as well as a great violinist. He understood that his devilish reputation helped sell tickets, so he didn’t always protest these accusations. He cultivated his image, dressing all in black with long, black hair to complement his tall, gaunt frame. Paganini’s love life and gambling woes would easily fill the pages of modern-day gossip magazines. He was, in many ways, the first rock star and, with Liszt, provided a template for today’s rock musicians.

(Incidentally, he was also an extraordinarily accomplished guitarist and mandolin player.)

However, Paganini was more than just a technical wizard and a showy performer. He was a great musician who composed wonderful melodies. *Bel canto*, at its core, is about beauty and expression, and Paganini captured this in both his playing and his compositions. The great Italian composers of his day—legends like Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini—held him in the highest regard. Rossini reportedly said that if Paganini were to write opera, he’d put the rest of them out of business. Paganini’s melodies have inspired or have served as the basis for works by numerous composers, including Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms and Rachmaninoff.

It was the colors and expression of Paganini’s music that first captivated me when I was about 6 years old. My mother purchased an LP of Itzhak Perlman playing the 24 Caprices. I still recall the powerful impression of that recording and how intrigued I was by the sheer variety of the pieces: the excitement of numbers 1 and 10, the mysteriousness of numbers 2 and 6, the playfulness of numbers 17 and 19, the drama of number 9, the heroism of number 14, and the romance of number 21. Of course, I was amazed by the technical possibilities of what could be done on the violin. But it was the music itself that inspired me to practice hard so that I could one day play these pieces.

When I was 10, I finally got my wish when I attended the Meadowmount School of Music, Ivan Galamian’s summer

LOU BRUTUS



Rachel Barton Pine performs the Paganini Caprices at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.



string program in the Adirondacks. My teachers, Almita and Rolando Vamos, assigned to me my first Caprice: number 24. I was hooked. Over the next four years, I studied each of the Caprices. My teachers wouldn't "pass" one until I had interpreted, memorized and performed it.

After "passing" my last Caprice, I set them aside for a couple of years while I continued to focus on my other studies. However, my decision at age 16 to enter the international competition circuit reunited me with these works. The Paganini Caprices are widely viewed as a measuring stick of technical skill and advancement. (When visiting conservatories, I often overhear students asking each other how many Caprices they've learned.) Each of the 24 Caprices is extremely physically demanding and involves particular skills on the violin. As a result, most international competitions require two as part of the first round. The Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, a notoriously difficult competition, requires three. I remember how challenging it was as a teenager to have three Caprices concert-ready at the same time.

After six international competitions over three years, I began concertizing full-time. Aside from an occasional encore, I didn't spend much time with the Caprices. However, at the age of 21, I told my now-husband Greg about the 24 Caprices and how incredible they were, both technically and musically. I shared with him my dream of following in the footsteps of a small number of violinists, for example Ruggiero Ricci, and performing them in a single concert that would take the audience on an incredible journey. It was something I aspired to do but feared that I would not be able to accomplish for lack of the necessary preparation time.

Greg told me that he knew I could do it and that I should start reviewing the Caprices alongside my other concerts and recording projects. He supported me and encouraged me every step of the way. I succeeded in preparing all 24 simultaneously and scheduled a concert. To get ready, I did a private run-through for a few friends. Performing all 24 in a row is like playing championship tennis while simultaneously reciting beautiful poetry. The first time I tried it, I was seeing double by number 22 and, upon finishing the last note of number 24, I felt faint and exhausted from physical exertion and sheer concentration. However, I

\$10 BGH Classics Series

Ravinia's \$10 Classics series is not only the greatest musical bargain in Chicagoland; it has also grown into the longest and most substantial recital/chamber series of any summer festival in the world. This year, in honor of the 25th anniversary of Ravinia's Steans Music Institute (RSMI), no fewer than 25 classical, jazz and dance recitals will be presented in the festival's most intimate performance space, Bennett Gordon Hall in the John D. Harza Building, home of RSMI. Many of these wonderful concerts have sold out in the past, including the Empire Brass Christmas Concert with Elisabeth von Trapp last December and the Midwest premiere of James Whitbourn's *Annelies*, a musical setting of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, last February.

Many of the featured artists have come through RSMI and are returning to make their solo or ensemble debut, such as pianists **Joel Fan** (August 26) and **Adam Golka** (August 29); cellist **Narek Hakhnazaryan** (August 14) with pianist Noreen Polera; and violist **Ayane Kozasa** (August 15) with festival veterans the Lincoln Trio on a very special "request night": approximately 25 works have been listed on Ravinia's website from which audience members can choose prior to the concert. Current fellows from each of RSMI's three programs, Jazz (June 14), Piano and Strings (July 8) and Singers (August 5 and 12) will participate in the series as well, performing works commissioned in honor of the anniversary year.

Perennial Ravinia favorite **Concert Dance, Inc.** kicks off the series once again on June 6 and 7. Former Rising Stars the **Linden String Quartet** (July 21) and pianist **Bryan Walliek** (August 16) will return to the festival, as will pianist **Gabriela Montero** (August 20). Additional pianists include: **Anthony de Mare** (August 25), performing his commissioned arrangements of Sondheim's most memorable Broadway songs; **Aaron Diehl** (August 27), the 2011 Cole Porter Fellow in Jazz; **Benjamin Grosvenor** (July 22); **Kuok-Lai Lio** (August 16); and **David Fung** (September 2). A variety of string artists will also ascend the stage, from violinists **Fumiaki Miura** (August 28) and The Knights' Co-concertmaster **Johnny Gandelsman** (September 1) to cellist **Amit Peled** (August 31) and virtuoso piano trio **KahaneSwensenBrey** (September 8)—even a classical guitarist, **Robert Michaels** (August 30). A foursome of Nashville songwriters rounds out the series on August 23. And violinist **Rachel Barton Pine**, whose BGH concert last summer sold out, will undertake the Herculean challenge of performing Paganini's complete Caprices twice, on August 17 and 18.

PATRICK GIPSON



Rachel Barton Pine signs autographs after a 2012 concert at Ravinia.

continued to build my stamina, and my first public performance was a dream come true.

Since then, I have had the opportunity to perform the complete Paganini 24 Caprices in some amazing places around the world. Possibly the most memorable to date was in Washington (DC) at the Phillips Collection, right next to the famous Delacroix painting of Paganini himself.

There's something special about experiencing a complete cycle of a composer's works, whether it's all six Bach Sonatas and Partitas or all ten Beethoven Sonatas. Hearing each work in the context of its peers allows a deep exploration of the composer's style and forces the performer to clearly define each piece's individuality. For me, this is particularly true with Paganini's 24 Caprices. Each Caprice focuses on certain special skills and characters, requiring its own, very distinct interpretation. As a series, they offer an amazing exploration of the violin's personality, tone colors and expressive range.

Over the years and through these performances, my love for and appreciation of these pieces has continued to grow. I have found that, all too often, they are treated by violinists as vehicles to show off the performer's technique and virtuosic flair. But behind the physical challenges is beautiful music that should never be overshadowed.

To this end, I have spent numerous hours studying Paganini's manuscript and use most of his original bowings and articulation markings in my performances. I've found that these bowings, while occasionally counter-intuitive and extra difficult, have a profound musical purpose that is audible to listeners. I have also spent time with singing coaches who specialize in *bel canto*. Their insights into phrasing and sound have significantly informed my interpretations. The greatest compliments about the Caprices I have ever received were from listeners who, following a performance, revealed in Paganini's musicality and never even commented on my technique.

For the past 11 years I've been very fortunate to have an incredible musical partner—the 1742 "ex-Soldat" Guarneri del Gesù, on generous loan from my patron. This violin was made by the same maker and in the same year as Paganini's famed "Il Cannone." Each time the "ex-Soldat" and I collaborate on the Caprices, we seek to find ever more effective rhetoric and nuances.

Paganini's dedication was to all the artists, and, in turn, my dedication for this performance is to you, all the listeners. It is you who give purpose to our art. I look forward to sharing these masterpieces of the violin repertoire with you at Ravinia.

