

Comments on Paganini's life, times, and work

Paganini 's Secrets

By Gene Redewill

FROM the biographies on the life of the greatest violin genius, Nicolo Paganini, we are informed that the famous Italian discovered and employed certain musical effects that died a secret with him. At this late date all we can do is to form deductions as to just what these secrets consisted of. If Paganini had lived at the present day he no doubt would have been considered a Houdini of the violin world, except for the developments that have come to light with violinists since the old master's time.

In forming our present day opinions we should, at the outset, make proper discount for the accredited "wizardry," "witchcraft" and "aid of the devil" such as was the common belief of matters not generally understood in Paganini's day. On the other hand, to give full credit to the master, we should allow for the physical possibilities and deduct what Paganini had that other violinists have not acquired, rather than lend an ear to some critics who have expressed themselves negatively as regards his music and virtuosity and whose only source of information seems to be the mere handful of violin literature which somehow escaped Paganini's wastebasket.

If from no other source than a marvelous left hand, which all agree the Italian had, Paganini would be physically able to command more musical effects than any succeeding violinist has displayed on the concert stage or shown in all available music for the violin. His left hand was probably no more than any other large hand in beginning, and its development would probably not exceed in proportion the development in the case of Camilla Orso, greatest lady violinist that ever lived, who had the hand of a small child but who developed it so that she could span tenths with apparent ease. Paganini played the guitar as a solo instrument, and this no doubt was the foundation for the marvelous development in the digits of his left hand that "could span four A flats with ease." (Four A flats, an octave apart on the four strings.) Spanning these four A flats on the four strings of the violin all at one time would be equivalent to reaching a major tenth on one string. Some present day violinists have some difficulty in reaching a tenth on two strings. Imagine a left hand that could play fingered tenths as easily as fingered octaves, if not easier !

Other violinists will say, "playing fingered tenths would not offer new effects over glissando tenths"; aside from clarity and agility of performance, that is true. But take other combinations made possible by a large reach and it would open up a field of at least a third more outstanding musical effects than other violinists have been able to produce except by substitutions and rapid shifting. The lowest harmonic tone on the violin is G, played by touching= the G - string lightly in the middle. The next harmonic above is D, played By touching the d string at one-third its length from either end. Thus the intermediate harmonics A, B and C are omitted and are not used today because the playing of them would require an octave span on the G string! This is just a small sample of what could be accomplished on the violin with a hand that could "span four A flats with ease." Chord combinations, passages for bounding bow on four strings, double octave harmonics, left hand pizzicati accompaniments with melody played simultaneously with the bow, and other effects, could be produced with a large left hand which would practically open up a whole new field in violin playing. The first part of his "Marveille," duo for violin alone will give a slight insight as to what Paganini could have and probably did accomplish. It is written that Paganini guarded his music carefully and his music which we now have include only those earlier writings which he was not particular about keeping to himself.

Whether Paganini used other music than we now have is the question. But the fact remains that he could have used considerably more musical material according to his physical equipment than

we now have. Such composers as Schumann, Brahms, Reger, Liszt, Auer, Kreisler, Spalding and others have found Paganini's compositions excellent material for musical development.

In the technics of the bow, outside of his flying staccato which probably was equalled by Henri Wieniawski, it is doubtful if the Italian accomplished more than present day violinists. His biographers tell us that Spohr had a much better tone in both quality and sostenuto.

In tonal effects the old master must have developed the vibrato and employed pianissimos and sforzandos more than present day violinists. On account of his very simple accompaniments he had ample opportunity to bring out tone shading whereas today the heavy accompaniments with contra-melodies and extended harmonies would not permit it, lest it not be heard at times through sheer being "drowned out."

To visualize and hear Paganini with his physical equipment for violin playing combined with a perfect specimen of a Guarnerius violin in its prime, must have been something more than the conception of an ordinary imagination. Were he alive and could perform for us today, with greater
It is doubtful if the world will again produce a violinist the equal of Nicolo Paganini. To find a person musically and physically adaptable who would be willing to isolate himself from the world and devote himself to endless practice and preparation in these days of all too many tempting diversions would be a miracle even greater than the creation of Paganini as he was. However, there are many little suggestions that come to us from our deductions on this inspiring artist which may be utilized and found of value in performance.

A Modernized Lesson from Paganini

All violinists should tune their instrument in playing position. There is no need to place the scroll of the violin on the knee or on the piano while tuning. By adjusting the slant of the violin pegs, by drawing just the proper amount of string through the peg hole, and with a little peg grease applied to well fitted pegs the violin may be tuned by anyone while in a horizontal position. Long drawn bows should be used while tuning and not short jerky strokes. The tendency to pluck the strings with the left hand before playing to an audience (probably caused by nervousness) is not conducive to a favorable opinion on the ability of the performer. If the violin can be tuned prior to performance or while another number is performing it would be better. Tune quietly - to yourself. The auditors are not interested in listening to a succession of parallel fifths. The performer should observe his intonation and note if any of the strings of his instrument have a tendency to drop in pitch while playing, and if so these could be tuned a trifle sharp before beginning, without perceptible notice on the part of an audience. And to be caught with a broken string—almost an unpardonable thing in this day and age—the performer should have a set of stretched strings in his violin case ready for emergency. This can be easily arranged by putting on a new set of strings and after a few days' use take them off and hold in readiness.

Thus endeth the flight of an imagination as suggested by an analysis of the works on Nicolo Paganini, the Italian violin maestro who took at least some of his secrets to the grave with him ninety years ago.

Paganini as Sight Reader

By Gene Redewill

THE accompanying music in this issue of *The Violinist* is the Rondo by Kreutzer. The original printed copy is probably the only one in existence and was presented to the writer by an Italian bandmaster of the Mare Island Navy Station around thirty years ago

In Paganini's day the dominant rivalry in performing prowess was real action. Soloists would play in practical "duel," to have the audience judge who was the best player. All manner of contests were staged: to see who could play the best, who could sight read the best, and all manner of comparisons.

Kreutzer's Rondo in E minor is a clever and worth while number, although it was only intended to "stump" Paganini at sight reading. It has a few tricky places that would embarrass most players if played up to tempo, at sight.

It will be noted that the words "Performed by Signor Paganini—at his 4th Concert" appears at the heading. This indicates that the publication was made in England, during Paganini's historical tour and conquest of that country. It was there that an Englishman started to follow the great violinist, to learn some of his secrets, and the best "key hole work" only showed Niccolò pick up his Guarnerius and examine the strings prior to a concert.

The only record of the performance of this Rondo is in the biography, where it is stated he performed this number "with ease." The same Englishman in telling of it said, "Paganini played it like a streak of lightning, with both hands tied behind his back" !

Paganini's Marvelous Left Hand

The following "facts and fancies" will give an idea of the difficult stretches Paganini could accomplish, some of which are physically impossible for any other violinist to execute:

A—The famous "Four A Flats," spanned with ease by Paganini.

B—The "missing link" octave harmonics (except in reverse position in figure I below) which are not shown in any existing violin literature.

C—Fingered tenths, which the hand of Paganini could easily execute.

D—A passage from Paganini's Witches Dance, in the original, showing how all the notes are played pizzicato with the left hand—without the aid of the bow.

E—The same passage facilitated through aid of the bow and made possible for performance by violinists since Paganini's day.

F—Double octaves on two strings which Paganini could have performed.

G—A passage of similar difficulty which Paganini could have played.

H—Paganini's biographies state that he turned the pegs of his violin while playing. The last three notes of this passage are the only ones in violin literature used in this manner—by tuning the peg while playing - ("La Golondrina Fantasie" by Rediwill). The fact that Paganini left no music indicating this treatment is assurance that the famous Italian had compositions that were only enjoyed by his auditors, and were never published.

I—The three harmonics before the last are the "missing links" to complete the gamut of the violin register in harmonics—probably never used since Paganini's time (from "La Golondrina Fantasie"). It is possible for a large hand to span these going down—but not so easy going up ! Most violinists play too loud, beyond the endurance of their instrument, caused by excessive pressure of the bow. The great artist's tone is not "forced" and his playing is generally lighter than the amateur. This is prevalent in piano playing as well as violin. The cause of this "bearing down" is traceable mostly to a too loud accompaniment. The soloist wants to be heard and has to play strongly to prevent being "drowned out" by the accompaniment. Take your accompanist to hear the "Tambourin Chinois" of Kreisler as played by his accompanist, Carl Lamson, on the Ampico, and it is startling to note how softly the accompaniment is played. Also listen to the piano accompaniment to the Mendelssohn E minor violin concerto as played by Heifetz' and Spalding's accompanist Andre Benoist on the Duo Art and it is safe to say that you can save your piano accompanist over half his strength in playing for you. Paganini's accompaniments during solo passages were very soft—musical effects down to the barely audible pianissimo played to a full house were the great

Italian's most concern during his triumphant career.

The garment used for a public appearance should be used a while before performance so that one will feel at home in it. The violin neck should be washed occasionally with a little soap and water on a rag. Then thoroughly rinsed and dried and talcum applied to overcome friction. Have the rag just moist and not dripping to prevent the strings getting wet. The fingerboard and strings may be cleaned with a little benzine or cleaning fluid on a rag after which a few drops of olive oil applied to the full length oil the strings will restore their softness and prevent whistling and scratching caused by the effect the wire E string has in caking the rosin on the strings and hair.

The violin bows should be shifted to other positions in the case occasionally so they will not warp. False strings should never be used. Care should be taken in stretching a new string. Pulling on a new string while it is soft often makes it thin in places and out of tune.

Considerable discomfort is often experienced by sore finger tips of the left hand, after long stretches of practice. The soreness may be quickly removed overnight by using soap, warm water and a good stiff brush on the finger tips immediately after practice. This will increase circulation and the whole hand will benefit if included in the brushing. Dry the hand thoroughly and apply iodine carefully to the finger tips. This will remove the soreness and after a few applications, each day for a few days, will cause the callous or "corn" to disintegrate and crumble away, thus removing the chief cause of sore finger tips and keeping the left hand in condition for frequent practice of left hand pizzicatos. The tip of the right thumb could be treated in the same manner, which sometimes develops a corn from continuous contact with the bow frog. White iodine may be procured at the drug store for those who do not want their fingers temporarily discolored, but the effect of the brown iodine is better.

IMPRESSIONS OF PAGANINI

By Henry W. Goodban

AS a boy I heard Paganini and shall never forget his weird look when he first presented himself on the stage; his thin, gaunt figure, ill-fitting clothes, long, black hair, pale face and extraordinary and scarcely human expression of countenance. He did not seem to be human; and when he made a sweep of the bow in the air, previous to its coming into contact with the strings and drew those wondrous tones from his violin, the effect made one's nerves vibrate with a new and marvelous sensation. The piece which particularly excited me was "The Witches Under the Walnut Tree"; a meeting of the weird sisters much more conducive to pleasure under his presidency than in the dark.

At a quartet party in London, in 1852, on which occasion Camille Sivori, nephew and pupil of Paganini played the first violin. Tolbecque, the alto player told us stories of Paganini. Paganini arrived in London quite unknown. Signor Lablache, the eminent Italian singer, invited him to dinner at four o'clock, saying there would be a place at his table for him. Paganini dined nearly every day for a month at the residence of the celebrated basso. At the expiration of this period Paganini's mind evidently began to be uneasy so he wrote his host a note, expressing his feeling of delicacy, inclosing a sum of money at the rate of two shillings and six pence for each meal—the sum he would have paid had he dined at a restaurant—begging him to accept it, and requesting an acknowledgment of its receipt.

When Paganini gave his concerts at the King's Theatre, he resided in Regent Street Quadrant and practiced always with a mute, so that nobody might hear him but those who had paid for the privilege. His laundress, when she brought home his linen, sent up her humble and modest request that he would be good enough to give her an order for the gallery to hear him play at his next

concert. He complied readily, and sent down a pass for two, but when her account was settled, she was startled to find the price of the two admissions deducted from it.

Paganini, with one of his characteristic spurts of generosity, gave Berlioz \$4,000 as a compliment for his *Symphonic Fantastique*.

PAGANINI AT AN AUCTION

IN THE year 1831, at an auction in London, which drew a small crowd of fashionable people, was a black, greasy violin, said to be an ancient Cremona 120 years old, by Antonius Stradivarius. The auctioneer gave its history, and a well-known professional artist was on hand to show off its sweetness and power; but the tones were not especially fine.

After some coaxing the auctioneer began with an offer of a guinea, and gradually worked the people up to ten guineas, beyond which it seemed impossible to move.

At this point, a middle-aged Italian in a velvet coat entered the auction room, and gently pushed his way toward the front. Lifting the violin from its case he handled it fondly, keenly examined it, putting it to his ear and listening; and when he stretched out his hand for a bow and turned his face, some of them recognized Paganini.

The first three or four notes thrilled everyone, in another moment many were in tears; they smiled and nudged one another. When Nicolo Paganini reverently kissed the violin and placed it in its case, half a dozen persons cried fifty guineas; the fiddle was knocked down to the famous musician for one hundred guineas.

At Drury Lane that night, Paganini stood before a packed throng with the fiddle he had bought a few hours before, and the people were spellbound. He so aroused their enthusiasm that they waved their hats crying "Hurrah!"

Paganini's Explanation of the Prison Story

WHEN Paganini paid his first visit to Paris, he was amazed (and perhaps pleased) to be confronted at every turn by the most ludicrous caricature of himself; a picture represented him in his lonely cell "expiating his crime at the altar of his beloved art." As a rule he seemed to have enjoyed the many bizarre tales referring to his close relationship with the Evil-One, and he decided to offer the Parisians the true version of the prison story.

He addressed a letter to Fetis, which follows:

"Sir: Much kindness and applause has been lavished upon me by the French public . . . Your artists have taken care to reproduce my physical form, a great number of portraits . . . (whether truthful or not) which are hung on the walls of your capital.... While walking yesterday on the Boulevard des Italiens I noticed in a print shop a lithograph representing 'Paganini in Prison.' 'Good,' said I to myself, 'here are honest people who . . . exploit for their profit a calumny which has pursued me for fifteen years.' . . .

"The thing has been taken seriously-by what you call . . . (les bandauds); and I realized that this speculation was not at all a bad one. It occurred to me that since everyone must live, I myself could furnish some anecdotes.

"There are several stories. It is said that I killed my rival upon discovering him with my mistress. Others have said that my jealous fury was exercised upon my mistress, but they do not agree as to the manner of my killing her. Some will have it that I used a poignard; others that wishing to enjoy her sufferings I used poison. Each one arranged the matter in accordance with his own fancy. The lithographers are therefore similarly privileged. : -;

"This is what actually happened to me in Padua about fifteen years ago. I had given a concert which I was led to believe was successful. The next day I was seated at 'table d'hote' unnoticed. One of the guests referred to my playing in the most flattering terms. His neighbor joined him in those

eulogies, but added: 'Paganini's skill is not astonishing; he owes it to his eight years' sojourn in prison, where he had only his violin to soften the sufferings of his captivity. He was condemned to this imprisonment for having assassinated, in the most cowardly manner, his rival—one of my friends.'

"Addressing the individual who knew my history so well, I begged him to tell me which and where this adventure had occurred. All eyes were immediately turned toward me. imagine the astonishment when I was recognized as the principal actor of this tragic story. The narrator was greatly embarrassed. It was no longer his friend who had died; he had heard—some one had told him—he had believed—but it was possible he had been deceived—etc. So you see, sir, how people play with an artist's reputation and that lazy people will not understand that one can study just as well when at liberty in one's own room as under lock and key.

"In Vienna, a rumor still more absurd tried the credulity of enthusiasts. I had played the variations entitled 'Le Streghe' and they had proved quite effective. A gentleman stated that he could see nothing astounding in my art, because when I was playing the variations he had distinctly seen the devil near me, guiding my arm and conducting the bow. His striking resemblance to me clearly explained my origin. He was clothed in red and provided with horns and a tail. You will appreciate, sir, that after such a minute description there could be no doubt as to the truthfulness of such a statement and that many people were convinced that they had discovered the secret of what they termed my 'tricks of strength.'

"These rumors annoyed me. For a long time, I tried to prove their utter absurdity. I called attention to the fact that since my fourteenth year, I had been continuously before the public; that for a period of sixteen years I had been musical director at the court of Lucca; that, consequently, if it had been true that I had been imprisoned for eight years for having killed my mistress or my rival, the deed must have been committed before I became known to the public; that is to say I must have had a mistress and a rival when I was but seven years old. In Vienna I appealed to the Italian ambassador, who made the declaration that he had known me as an honorable man for twenty years.

"Thus I succeeded in stifling this slander; but something of it has always remained, and I was not surprised that it should appear in this place. What can I do about it? I see no other way than to be resigned and let malignity exercise itself at my expense. However, I believe I ought to tell you in conclusion the anecdote which has given rise to these injurious stories.

"A violinist named D who was in Milan in 1797, became intimately associated with two men who led a wicked life. These men persuaded him to accompany them to the village one night, for the purpose of murdering the rector, who was supposed to have some money. Fortunately the courage of one of these guilty men failed him at the last moment and he denounced his accomplices. The police arrested D and his companion just as they arrived at the rector's house. They were sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment; but General Menou after he became governor of Milan liberated the artist after the latter had spent two years in prison.

"Would you believe, sir, that my whole history has been embroidered on this incident? The man in question was a violinist and his name ended in 'T'— surely that must have been Paganini. The assassination became either that of my mistress or my rival. "Yet, one word. Since impossibilities are believed, I must submit to the inevitable. The hope remains to me, however, that after my death Calumny will abandon her prey, and that those who have so cruelly revenged themselves for my success will leave my ashes in peace Nicolò Paganini."