

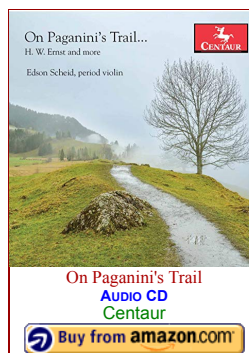
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CD Review by Jerry Dubins

ERNST *Six Polyphonic Studies. Grand Caprice for Solo Violin* (after Schubert's *Erkönig*), op. 26. **PAGANINI** *Introduction and Variations on Paisiello's Nel cor più non mi sento*, op. 18. **MOZART** *Duo for Violin and Viola*, K 423: **Rondo in G** (arr. Scheid for solo violin) • Edson Scheid (vn) (period instrument) • CENTAUR 3735 (56:22)

In 40:3, I had the pleasure of interviewing Edson Scheid and reviewing his Naxos CD of Paganini's 24 Caprices, played on an authentic 1739 period violin by Carlo Antonio Testore. The instrument, according to Scheid, had a Baroque bridge and tailpiece, gut strings, no chin rest, and no shoulder rest, although it did have a modern neck and fingerboard, as did some violins in the late 1700s and early 1800s which had gone through a modernization process.



Even as an amateur violinist since my early teens, I learned some things from my interview with Scheid that I honestly never knew—for example, that it's possible to play very high notes beyond the end of the fingerboard, without the support for the string to make contact with when fingered. Since the Testore instrument Scheid used for his recording of Paganini's Caprices was updated to the extent of being fitted with the longer, modern fingerboard, I don't think anything in the Caprices necessitated "going off the edge." In any case, Scheid's Paganini Caprices were quite jaw-dropping.

The violinist is now back, this time on Centaur, with an album titled *On Paganini's Trail*. Had the titling been left to me, I'd have omitted one letter from the last word, so that it would have read, "On Paganini's Tail." The reason is that 36 of the disc's 56 minutes are devoted to works by Paganini's rival, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–1865), who didn't just follow in Paganini's footsteps, he literally "tailed" Paganini wherever he went.

It's hard to know how much of Ernst's story is true and how much of it is anecdotal, but to quote from my review of an album of Ernst's works in 39:1, he shadowed the legendary virtuoso, determined to learn the cagey Italian's secrets. It's told that Ernst would travel to wherever Paganini was booked to play, rent an adjoining hotel room, and listen through the wall to Paganini practice. Ernst's obsession and apparent jealousy knew no bounds. Once confident he had mastered Paganini's tricks, Ernst booked himself to play at venues in

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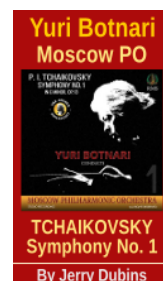
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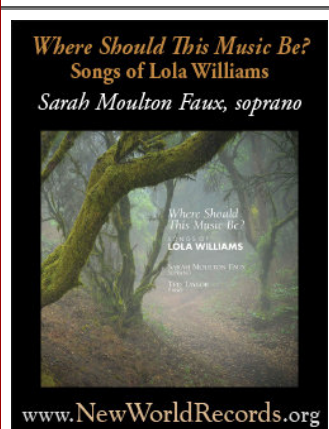
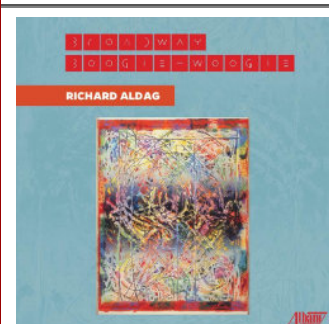
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advance, a concept Ernst believed would show Paganini at the same venue, a strategy Ernst believed would show Paganini up and make him sweat all the harder for the comparison.

If all, or even most, of this is true, Ernst should have been sent away to a mental hospital for becoming so fixated on Paganini that the elder violinist came to dominate and define Ernst's very being. It's like one of those psychological thrillers in which a boarder assumes a roommate's identity. I suspect, though, that at least some this is Romantically-inspired storytelling. The more probable reality, no doubt, is something less sinister. Ernst carried forward Paganini's legacy, creating works for his instrument that may possibly surpass in technical difficulty even those of his great predecessor.

There are, of course, physical limits to what any instrument can do. Once bowing and fingering techniques on the violin have been exhaustively explored, one can draw upon that bag of tricks over and over again in ever-varied combinations, but as the wise man said, "There's nothing new under the sun."

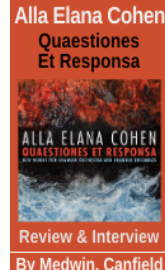
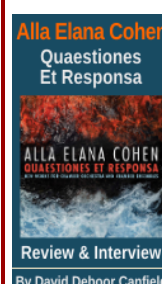
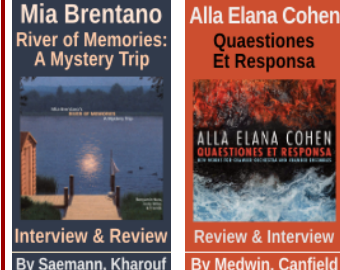
"Polyphonic" in the title to Ernst's *Six Polyphonic Studies* is the giveaway. We know that these études, like Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin, will involve extensive double- and triple-stopping. Each of numbers is in a different key, and each is dedicated to another famous violinist of Ernst's time, as follows:

Étude	Key	Title/Tempo	Dedicatee
1	F Major	Rondino-Scherzo	Ferdinand Laub
2	A Major	<i>Allegretto</i>	Prosper Sainton
3	E Major	Terzetto	Joseph Joachim
4	C Major	<i>Allegro risoluto</i>	Henri Vieuxtemps
5	G Minor	Air de ballet	Joseph Hellmesberger
6	G Major	Last Rose of Summer	Antonio Bazzini

The sixth in the set has acquired a life of its own, sometimes offered as an extended encore piece by those capable of mastering its hair-raising difficulties, which include everything but the kitchen sink. Ernst structured it as a theme and variations, not so subtly throwing down the gauntlet before the theme and variations of Paganini's 24th Caprice in a challenge to make his own étude even more difficult. And it sounds like it is because Ernst goes places even Paganini didn't, for example, string-length glissandos in double-stops.

The two things I'll say about Ernst's *Six Polyphonic Studies* are 1) Edson Scheid once again amazes with his seemingly superhuman technique; and 2) I don't know how much pleasure non-violinists will derive from listening to these pieces, for one can marvel at the mental lucubration that conceived them and the physical gymnastics involved in playing them, but beautiful, moving, or even interesting music they're not.

Ernst's rendering of Schubert's *Erkönig*, in which the violin must simultaneously play the galloping piano triplets and the vocal line of the stricken child is truly, pardon the pun, the original song's grotesquerie made simply grotesque. For all his astonishing virtuosity, even Scheid can be heard having a bit of a struggle with the piece.



Paganini himself is represented on the disc by his Introduction and Variations on the duet *Nel cor più non mi sento* from Giovanni Paisiello's 1788 opera *L'amor contrastato, ossia La molinara*, in common opera parlance, just *La molinara* (The Miller-Woman). And what better operatic number than a duet to serve as the basis for work in which a solo violin must play both vocal lines at the same time?

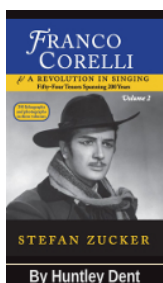
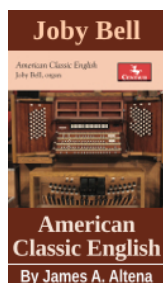
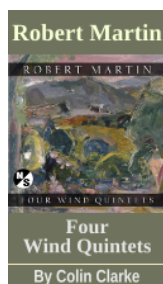
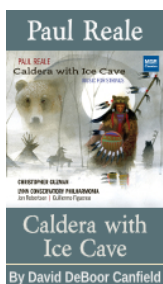
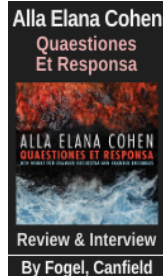
Based on this one piece by Paganini, and the *Studies* by Ernst, I don't think it would be fair to compare the musical gifts vs. the technical talents of each violinist-composer. Ernst's *Studies* are, after all, études, having a different purpose and place than Paganini's Variations. The latter would have been presented as a dazzling salon showpiece at an actual concert before a live audience. I don't think Ernst's studies were intended for public performance. They are technical exercises the primary purpose of which is not a musical one. If you never explored the outputs of these two towering figures of the violin world beyond this disc, Paganini would be the one who emerges as the greater musical talent, one with an ear not just for virtuosic display but also for memorable melodic invention. It's the latter that strikes me as lacking in Ernst, but these *Studies* are probably not the most representative examples of his work. He composed many salon showpieces along the lines of Paganini that are of greater musical value and more rewarding to listen to.

As in the Paganini Variations based on a vocal duet, Edson Scheid puts his hand to composing a similar work of his own, only this time, instead of two singing voices, he combines the lines of two instrumental voices, violin and viola, from the Rondo in Mozart's Duo in G Major, K 423. Musically, in my opinion, it's the best thing on the disc, which tells me that Scheid is not just a violin virtuoso extraordinaire, he's a talented composer.

None of my reaction to the Ernst works can tarnish the efforts and accomplishments of Edson Scheid. If he's playing on a period instrument, he draws from it all of the fullness, robustness, and healthiness of tone one expects from a modern violin. As suggested above, I suspect that Scheid's new album will likely appeal to violinists of all stripes, but less so perhaps to general audiences. This is specialized repertoire. In a way, that's too bad, because Scheid is a violinist who deserves—no, demands—to be heard by everyone. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:3 (Jan/Feb 2020) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

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