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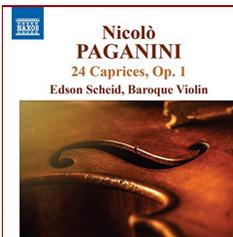
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Feature Article by Jerry Dubins

Four and Twenty Caprices Baked in a Pie, Oh My—Edson Scheid on the Paganini Perplexity

A native of Brazil, violinist Edson Scheid is currently based in New York, where he frequently performs with many of the area's local ensembles. He has also performed with Les Arts Florissants, Orchester Wiener Akademie, and the Aspen Festival Orchestra. Edson earned his Bachelor of Arts degree at the Universität Mozarteum Salzburg, his Master of Music and Artist Diploma degrees at the Yale School of Music, and his Graduate Diploma degree in Historical Performance at The Juilliard School, studying with Robert Mealy, Cynthia Roberts, and Monica Huggett. As Edson's résumé indicates, he has devoted himself, not exclusively, but to a large extent, to historical performance practice on period instruments.



Paganini: The 24 Caprices, Op. 1 Audio CD Naxos Buy from amazon.com

Eyebrows are sure to be raised, as were mine, at Edson's newly released Naxos recording of Paganini's fiendishly difficult solo violin caprices performed on a Baroque violin. I doubt that I'm alone in my skepticism that Paganini conceived these virtuosic killers or would have played them on a true Baroque violin, so in preparation for this interview with Edson, I did some research of my own in order to gather some factual data.

It occurred to me at first to headline this interview with the suggestive title, "Length Matters," because as I discovered, when it comes to Paganini's caprices, length, while not determinative, does play a role. In a paper titled "Some Misconceptions about the Baroque Violin" by Stewart Pollens in Performance Practice Review, Volume 14, Number 1, we read, "An important distinction between Baroque and modern fingerboards is the difference in their lengths. The modern violin fingerboard is about 270 mm. long, whereas Stradivari's patterns and original fingerboards are between 190 and 213 mm. long, 207–213 mm. being the apparent range for full-size violins made on the P, PG, and G forms. This length represents the uppermost note that can be stopped on the fingerboard."

We know that the violin Paganini played on was a Guarneri del Gesù, which Paganini dubbed "Il Cannone," due to its large, booming tone. It was made in 1743 and had some unusual characteristics for its time, one of which was the thickness of its plates, which Guarneri extended almost all the way out to the edges, instead of tapering them. That made the violin heavier than was customary. At 198 mm, however, the length of its fingerboard fell close to the center of the standard range

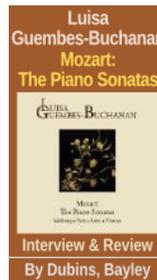
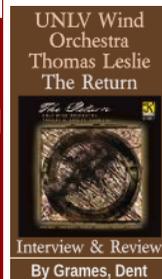
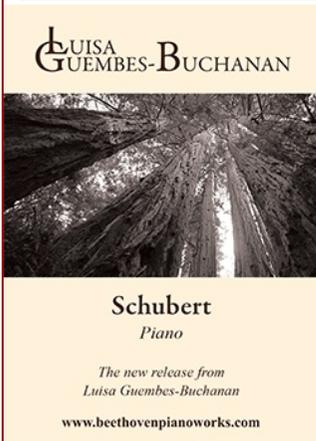
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of 190–213 mm for Baroque violins noted above. So, would the fingerboard have been too short to accommodate the highest notes we find in the caprices?

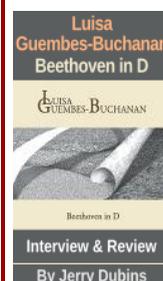
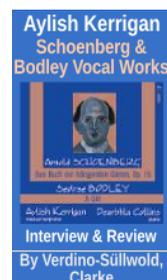
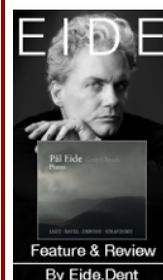
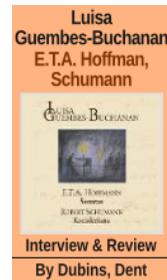
The following two sentences from luthier and dealer in Baroque instruments, Dr. Donald Earl Rickert, is telling: “Most Baroque violins were retrofitted and, thus, converted to modern violins during the late 1700s and early 1800s. The old instruments acquired mortised (rather than nailed on) necks, larger bass bars, *long ebony fingerboards* (my italics), and 19th-century tailpieces....” There is no way to know for sure one way or the other, but it’s certainly within the realm of possibility, if not probability, that Paganini’s del Gesù had undergone the modernization process, just as “most Baroque violins” of the period had. My first question to Edson is this:

Can you tell me what you mean by “Baroque violin” and describe the specifications of the instrument you used for your recording? Is it truly a Baroque violin, as described above, with a shorter fingerboard and the sort of fittings that would have been common to instruments dating to 1750 or earlier? And if not, then what makes it a “Baroque” violin?

The term “Baroque violin” was used on the album cover to indicate that I approached the Caprices from a historical performer point of view. There are other terms that could have been used, such as “period violin” or “played on gut strings,” among others, but none of them would have been ideal to precisely describe the instrument I used on the recording. “Baroque” was ultimately chosen because the violin—made in 1739 by Carlo Antonio Testore—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, as you mentioned in your introduction, one can argue that it’s still acceptable to call it a “Baroque violin,” since it’s not possible to precisely determine, as is often the case throughout the history of music, when one era ends and the next begins.

Further, as I know from personal experience, the length of the fingerboard is not the most crucial factor in determining the style or the playability of any music written for violin. There were composers in the Baroque era that wrote notes to be played well beyond the limits of the fingerboard, most notably, perhaps, Pietro Locatelli (1695–1764) in his *L'arte del Violino*, op. 3, published in Amsterdam in 1733, and Louis Gabriel Guillemain (1705–1770) in his *Amusement pour le Violon Seul*, op. 18, published in Paris in 1762. Having worked on both compositions, I can say these notes are certainly playable, even without a fingerboard underneath!

Another issue to take into consideration is the fact that the development of the violin took place differently from region to region in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, making the choice of an appropriate term to describe an old instrument even more complex. In any case, regardless of the term used to describe the violin, the main idea of this project is to explore what it means to play the Caprices on a violin with a set-up somewhat closer to one from the time of their composition, and



how ideas of historical performance practice change the performance of these works.

Just to satisfy my own curiosity, I wonder if I could ask you to expand a bit on this matter of playing notes off the end of the fingerboard. It's a strange thing, I guess, that I've played violin since I was 12 years old, and in all of these years, such a thing never occurred to me. If there's no fingerboard for the string to make contact with when you press your finger down on it, I can see how the string would still vibrate, but what kind of sound would it make?

I would describe it as an airy, soft, and non-aggressive sound. The best way to think of it is to imagine pressing down a finger of the left hand on the string very lightly, almost as if playing a harmonic, but with a little more pressure than that, just enough to allow us to hear the desired note. It's possible to try this on a modern violin, by pressing a finger down in a high position without ever touching the fingerboard.

How do the settings of your violin affect your playing of the Caprices?

I would say that because of these settings I find myself exaggerating musical gestures and being more creative and imaginative in my interpretation. Without a chin rest, it becomes difficult to use a continuous left-hand vibrato, as is commonly done on a modern violin. Instead, one has to be creative with the use of the bow. In other words, the bow becomes the main expressive tool, while the left hand plays a secondary role. As a result, we have to constantly be aware of what we are doing with the bow. Instead of simply sustaining a long note, we must give life to it by adding a *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *messa di voce*, and other effects.

With gut strings, one cannot press the bow against them too strongly, otherwise they will break! Volume becomes less of a concern, and the violinist is given a chance to explore a wide variety of sound colors, without having to worry so much about the projection of the sound. It has been a fascinating journey to work on the Caprices in this manner.

What you say about the bow becoming the main expressive tool reminds me of something one of my violin teachers once said. Waving his left-hand fingers about in the air; he said, "As long as you're not tone deaf, anyone can learn to do this. The left hand is the brain, but ah, it's the bow that's the heart." Wouldn't you agree that that's just as true when it comes to playing on a modern violin as it is for playing on a Baroque period instrument?

Yes! However, on a Baroque instrument the need to be expressive with the bow becomes more evident. On a modern violin it is tempting to "hide" behind the use of continuous vibrato, while on a Baroque violin, there is no choice other than being very creative with the bow in order to make a piece of music sound decent! I agree that the importance of the bow should be a concern of modern violinists as well. There is a wonderful phrase by the famous violinist and composer Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824) that illustrates the importance of the bow: "Le violon c'est l'archet," or "The

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violin, it is the bow.”

One of my pet theories is that the Caprices were never actually meant to be played, but instead were intended as a kind of treatise and Paganini's legacy of what was theoretically possible. In other words, they were meant to be seen (studied) but not heard. This notion has occurred to me because I've heard so many first-rate virtuoso players tackle the Caprices on record and not one of them, no matter how technically accomplished he or she is, ever gets through them with his or her poise and dignity intact. Sure, a violinist may learn to play the notes, but there are technical difficulties in almost every caprice that can never be made to sound pretty. Bows balk at bending string crossings that grate on the ears and chafing double stops abrade like fingernails on a blackboard. I have to say that your recording, reviewed below, gets closer to a semblance of musicality than many I've heard. So what is your secret? Is it the violin?

In part, yes. One of the most crucial consequences of playing on a Baroque violin is that our mind-set changes. We learn how to approach a piece of music from a composer's point of view. What I mean is that, if we look at a Mahler symphony score, we see that there are several indications by the composer that tell the performer what to do: *dim, cresc, accel, rit, molto rit, sempre pp, più mosso, etwas zurückhaltend, immer noch zurückhaltend, etwas bewegter, aber immer noch sehr ruhig*, among many others. When we look at manuscripts by Bach, or even Paganini, there are very few, if any, such indications.

Of course that doesn't mean we should play these pieces without any dynamics or tempo changes. We are invited to understand the music on a deeper level, as if we were composing it, in order to figure out where to add a certain dynamic, which note to bring out in a certain passage, or how to highlight a certain harmonic progression. If we see a deceptive cadence, we react to it. If we see a diminished chord, we react to it. If we see a dominant chord followed by the tonic, we react to it. It becomes our job to understand the structure of the piece so we can build a convincing interpretation without depending on indications in the score. In this recording, one of my goals was to bring out the musical qualities of the Caprices, even though there are not many instructions with words by Paganini that tell us how to do so.

I would also say that I've heard the Caprices for the first time when I was about 10 years old (I started to actually really practice them years later). Since then, I have been fascinated by the challenge of playing these pieces, and I genuinely like them as pieces of music and works of art. Having worked on them for so many years, I developed a certain familiarity with them, and I think this is reflected in the recording.

Unlike so many sets of pedagogical études by other composers, which tend to introduce the student to only one specific technique building exercise at a time, and which become progressively more difficult as they proceed, Paganini's Caprices seem to throw multiple difficulties at the player in each number all at once, and I'm not sure that the last caprice is any more difficult than the first. Besides the usual double-

stopping, string hopping, arpeggios, and rapid runs up and down the fingerboard, Paganini comes up with a real chamber of horrors that no sane individual had previously attempted, let alone even contemplated. One that strikes me as particularly nasty is the fingered octave, where you have to play the lower note with your first finger and then stretch to play the upper note with your third finger, all for the purpose of leaving your pinky free so you can trill with it at the same time. Then there are the regular octaves, but on non-consecutive steps of the scale, which pose such a nightmare in intonation. Add to the mix such things as left-hand pizzicatos alternating with bow slaps on string.

All of this only scratches the surface (no pun intended) of the truly torturous difficulties Paganini devised. It's probably true, though, that the techniques set forth in the Caprices open the door for later composers to write for the violin as they did. I'm thinking, in particular, of Ravel's Tzigane, which borrows from the Caprices the octaves, and left-hand pizzicatos alternating with rapid bow slaps.

Of all of the various technical trials in the Caprices, which do you find the most harrowing?

I'm not sure it's possible to choose one! I agree with you that the fingered octaves are particularly difficult, especially in the extensive passage in the middle section of Caprice 17. I also remember spending a lot of time figuring out how to play a convincing ricochet, in addition to all the complex left hand positions in Caprice 1. What I would say about all these technical challenges present throughout the Caprices is that it's always a question of practicing and finding out how to play them comfortably. I would also say that if a violinist knows the fundamentals well enough—shifting, bow control, posture, etc.—nothing is difficult anymore. That is the ultimate goal, technically speaking, of any violinist.

It's interesting you speak of posture because some of those drawings of Paganini show him in a stance—shoulders hunched forward, right arm elevated and bent—that make him look disfigured and that would surely horrify any violin teacher today. Do you believe some of the fanciful and far-fetched rumors that grew up around Paganini to explain his freakish appearance and seemingly supernatural technique? I'm not referring to the silliness of his alleged pact with the Devil, but rather to reports that his flexibility was due to certain aberrant physical characteristics, such as double-jointed fingers and/or to his use of certain "tricks" in the setup and tuning of his violin and the weighting of his bow.

Paganini certainly used such tricks in some of his performances! We can learn about these in Carl Guhr's treatise *Paganini's Kunst, die Violine zu Spielen* (Paganini's Art of Violin Playing), published in Mainz in 1830. Since Guhr knew Paganini, his treatise deserves some degree of credibility! Paganini would tune his violin a half-step higher to play his Concerto No. 1 in E \flat Major, making it much easier to play, as if it were written in the key of D Major (the key we are familiar with for this concerto today). He also used thin (*schwach*) strings, in order to facilitate the playing of harmonics in high

positions, and a flat bridge, enabling him to play three strings at the same time.

I think, however, that although these tricks can contribute to a performance, what ultimately determines a violinist's success is his own enthusiasm, hard work, and creativity in working to achieve a convincing result, regardless of "tricks" in the setup and physical characteristics, although I recognize they do play a role. It was probably no different with Paganini!

No one alive today, of course, has ever heard Paganini play, and there are no recordings of him. So how much of the legend is just that—a kind of Romanticized, idealized mystique of what he must have sounded like and been capable of? If you could pit them in a one-on-one contest against each other, who do you think would win in a technical showdown, Paganini or Heifetz?

I would have loved to see such a contest! As you said, it's impossible to know how Paganini sounded, but we can imagine it must have been radically different than Heifetz, especially in terms of portamento and rhythmic flexibility. When we listen to old recordings by Joachim, Sarasate, and others, we can get a glimpse of a 19th-century style of playing in which those two elements are strikingly different from the way Heifetz would approach them in a performance. In terms of who would win the contest, I would answer that question with a quote by pianist Arthur Rubinstein. When asked if he agreed with people who said he was the greatest pianist of the 20th century, he replied: "Nothing in art can be the best, it can only be different." He went on to say: "Who do you really think is the greatest of all time? Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rafael, Titian, Velázquez, Rembrandt? Each one of them is a world by himself." I love this answer, and I think the same principle can be applied to a Paganini vs. Heifetz contest. Maybe the result would be a tie?

Can you cite later 19th- and 20th-century works that incorporate some of the same techniques as the Caprices?

In the 19th century, the works that stand out as the result of Paganini's legacy were composed by Moravian-born violinist Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–1865). Hearing Paganini in Vienna in 1828 proved to be a profound experience for the young violinist, who decided to follow his footsteps. His *Six Polyphonic Studies* (especially the variations on *The Last Rose of Summer*) and his transcription of Schubert's song *Der Erlkönig* are perhaps his most famous compositions, at times even surpassing Paganini's Caprices in terms of technical difficulties.

In the first half of the 20th century, Bartók's Sonata for Solo Violin includes a number of techniques present in the Caprices, as do the sonatas for solo violin by Eugene Ysaÿe and Paul Hindemith. In the second half of the century, Luciano Berio's *Sequenza VIII* and Alfred Schnittke's *A Paganini* are significant examples of such works.

I would also say that the techniques present in the Caprices influenced in a certain way practically every composer writing for violin since. Left hand pizzicati, double stops, passages to

be played on a single string, and using the full length of the fingerboard were incorporated in the repertoire as standard violin techniques, although not always as ingeniously as in the Caprices.

I'm so glad you mentioned Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst in your above answer. One of the joys of writing for Fanfare is that over the years it has exposed me to so much music that was new to me and that I may otherwise never have discovered on my own. A little over a year ago, I reviewed an album of violin works by Ernst and, in researching background information for the review, I learned a lot about this "nut case" who probably should have been arrested for stalking. Here is some of what I wrote:

"The name Paganini is so synonymous with violin devilry that we simply accept as an article of faith that he was the unequalled sorcerer of virtuosic voodoo. But did Paganini meet his match in Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–1865), a slightly later rival? I don't know how much of Ernst's story is true and how much of it is anecdotal, but if you swallow it whole, he was a stalker who shadowed Paganini wherever he went, determined to learn the cagey Italian's secrets. It is 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 apparently his jealousy, knew no bounds. Once confident that he had mastered Paganini's tricks, Ernst booked himself to play at venues in advance of an announced concert by Paganini at the same venue, a strategy Ernst believed would show Paganini up and make him sweat all the harder for the comparison. Apparently it did."

Nor was Ernst Paganini's only rival. Again thanks to Fanfare, I made the discovery of Polish violin virtuoso Karol Józef Lipiński (1790–1861), who some considered at the time Paganini's superior. I can't speak to whether he was actually more technically brilliant or not—no one can—but having heard his violin concertos, I'd be prepared to say that Lipiński was the better composer.

All of this brings up the question of why. Why Paganini, and not Ernst or Lipiński, has fired our imaginations and been elevated to virtually cult-like status? Was it showmanship? The smart marketing hype of diablerie and the cloak of secrecy he surrounded himself with? Vis-à-vis your earlier point about each artist being different and a world unto himself, of course I agree, but for me the question is a slightly different one. Practically no issue of Fanfare goes by without my discovering incredible music by composers almost no one has heard of. In just this issue, for example, I review a two-disc set of sonatas for viola d'amore and piano by Robert Lach (1874–1958).

Who? Right. Nothing by him has ever been reviewed in the magazine before or, as far as I know, has even been recorded. An Austrian composer, musicologist, professor, and lecturer who studied at the Vienna Conservatory under Robert Fuchs, very little is known about Lach. Yet, as is so often the case, as it is with Lach, these practically anonymous composers didn't write just one or two pieces. In Lach's case, the man wrote 10

symphonies (!), eight string sextets, 14 string quintets, 25 string quartets, music for the stage, and a Requiem. Yet most of his works remain unpublished, and until these viola d'amore works came to light, no one in the vast musicological community seems to have taken any interest. And yet who hasn't heard of his exact contemporary and compatriot, Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) or, for that matter, Charles Ives (1874–1954)?

So, my question isn't about how an Ernst or a Lipiński was different from Paganini. Rather it's about how and why Paganini became the famous figure he did, if he had rivals who were just as good or possibly better? Why does one composer or performing artist become venerated while another doesn't?

It is certainly a fascinating question. In Paganini's case, a possible explanation is that he came first. Ernst was one of his "followers," but I'm not sure he ever achieved the same degree of originality as his idol, even having written music at times more challenging than his.

One way of looking at it is that in general what ultimately decides the success of an artist over others is really the content of his or her work. I am aware that there is great music that is not recognized as it should be or that is not played as often, but there is a reason why we want to hear Beethoven's string quartets over and over again, or why we keep coming back to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. These works truly have something to offer. Something that is honest and meaningful. We want to come back to them and drink from these fountains as often as possible.

Well, we've spent a lot of time on this one subject. So, to wrap this up, tell me about other activities you're engaged in and what near-future recording plans are on your calendar.

I have a lot of great projects to look forward to this year! Mozart's *The Magic Flute* has always been one of my favorite operas. I will have the opportunity to play it in New York City. I'm always excited to participate in an opera production. I'm also involved in performances of Bach's *St. John Passion* and *Easter Oratorio*, as well as performances with several period and modern ensembles throughout the country.

In terms of recordings, my next project will likely involve solo violin repertoire as well. And finally, going back to Paganini, I was invited to play all the 24 Caprices in one concert at the Aston Magna Music Festival during the summer, 2017. I'm certainly looking forward to that!

 **PAGANINI Caprices for Unaccompanied Violin, op. 1 (complete) • Edson Scheid (vn) (period instrument) • NAXOS 9.70264 (80:02)**

This article originally appeared in Issue 40:3 (Jan/Feb 2017) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

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