MUSIC IN THE WESTERN WORLD

A History in Documents

Selected and Annotated by

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Schubert did not get the recognition he deserved in Vienna. The great majority of people remained, and still remain, uninterested.

Nor are his songs suited to the concert hall or stage. The listener, too, must have a feeling for the poem and enjoy the lovely song together with it; in a word, the public must be quite a different one from that which fills the theatres and concert halls.

When publishers told him that people found the accompaniment to his songs too hard and the keys often so difficult, and that, in his own interest, he ought to pay attention to this, he always replied that he could not write differently and that anyone who could not play his compositions should leave them alone, and a person to whom one key was not as easy as another was, anyhow, not in the least musical.

Schubert's music must either be performed well or not at all.

His incredible wealth of melody remains a treasure for all time, and musicians yet unborn will gather spoils from this rich mine. In the span of time he was vouchsafed he wrote 600 songs, of which no one is like another, so rich was he in melodies.

Schubert was an affectionate son and brother, and a loyal friend. He was a kind, generous, good man.

May he rest in peace, and thanks be to him for having beautified the lives of his friends by his creations!

O. E. Deutsch (ed.), *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends* (London: A. & C. Black, 1958), 126–27, 127–28, 133, 134, 135, 140–41. Reprinted by permission.

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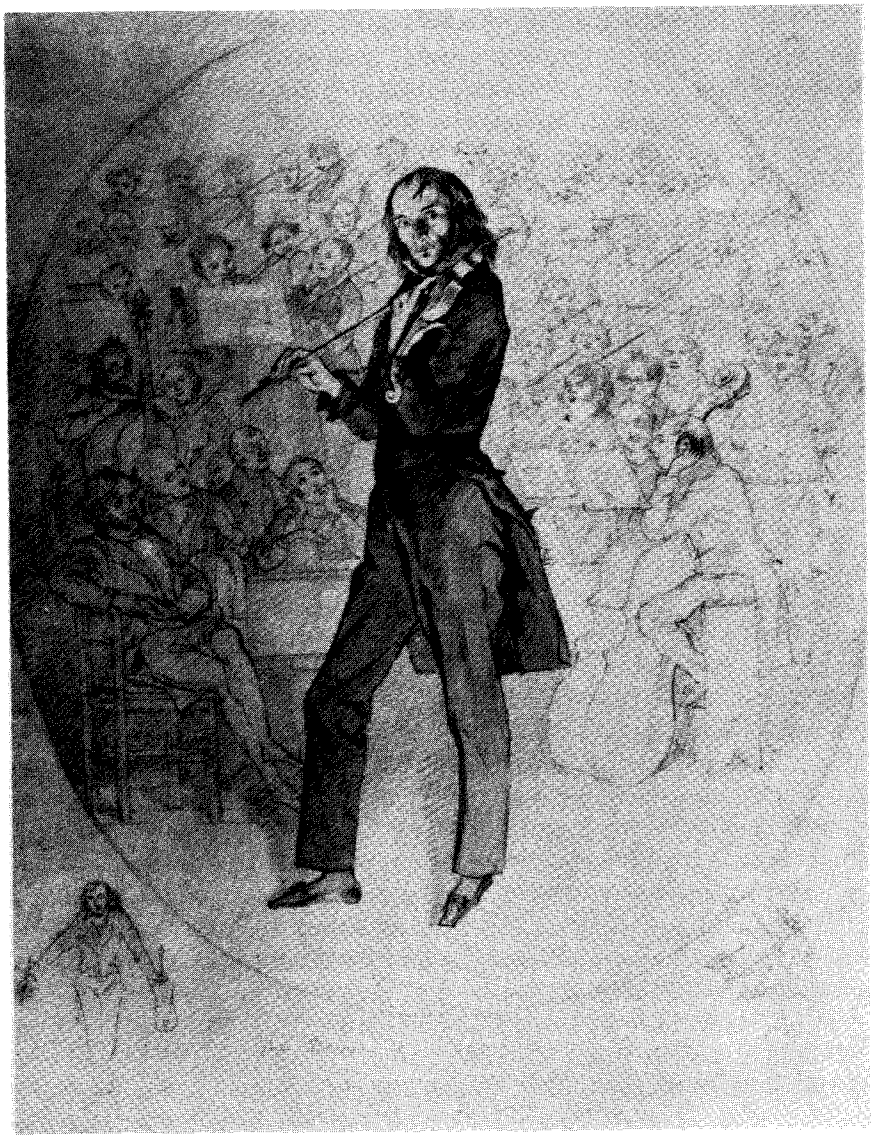
Paganini, the Spectacular Virtuoso

A "virtuoso" was, originally, a highly accomplished musician, but by the nineteenth century the term had become restricted to performers, both vocal and instrumental, whose technical accomplishments were so pronounced as to dazzle the public. Virtuoso singers, of course, had been the mainstay of Italian opera almost from its beginnings. Virtuoso instrumentalists, on the other hand, really came into their own in the nineteenth century, with the spread of public concerts designed to cater to the vast new middle-class audiences. Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840), the greatest violin virtuoso of the century, emerged from his native Italy in 1828. Beginning in Vienna, where he created a sensation, he eventually took all of Europe by storm, leaving his audiences openmouthed at the unprecedented effects he produced on his instrument. "Unfortunately," wrote the Vienna correspondent of *The Harmonicon*, "the worst parts of his performance seemed to call forth the loudest applause, such, for instance, as his imitation of bells, his laborious performance upon a single string, &c., all of which, in the



The Debut of Paganini in London. Friday, 3 June 1831, at the King's Theatre. (Drawing by D. Maclise.) *Crown Copyright Victoria and Albert Museum*

eyes of the true amateur, savour more of charlatanism than of the legitimate objects of art." The demonic command, however, with which Paganini summoned forth whatever he wished from his violin had an enormous impact on the imagination of some young composers who were soon to make a name for themselves. "Paganini," wrote Schumann in 1832, "represents the turning-point of vir-

tuosity." And Liszt, in a letter of the same year, exclaimed: "What a man, what a violinist, what an artist! God, what sufferings, what misery, what tortures in those four strings! And his expressiveness, his phrasing, his soul!!" Leigh Hunt (see above, p. 336), writing as theater critic for *The Tatler* in London, presents a vivid, admirably balanced picture of a typical Paganini concert, seen as both a musical and social phenomenon.

June 23, 1831 *King's Theatre*

Signor Paganini favoured the public with his "fifth and last concert at this theatre," last night, but not, it seems, with his fifth and last appearance; for he is to play this evening for the benefit of [the bass singer] Lablache, besides the four other performances, we suppose, which he is to be prevailed upon to bestow upon us, and the forty elsewhere. Well: the public are accustomed to these managerial tricks, and ought to be prepared for them; which does not seem to have been the case with some persons last night, by their hissing at the commencement of the benefit. Besides, Paganini is fine enough to make the public wish to hear him again and again, at some little expence to the perfection of his *morale*. Whether he would not be finer still if his proceedings were as straight-forward as his bow is a question of refinement, which it may be hard to urge in a matter of violin-playing.

Let us not belie the effect however which this extraordinary player had upon us last night. To begin with the beginning, he had a magnificent house. We thought at first we were literally going to *hear* him, without seeing his face; for the house was crammed at so early an hour that, on entering it, we found ourselves fixed on the lowest of the pit stairs. It was amusing to see the persons who came in after us. Some, as they cast up their eyes, gaped amazement at the huge mass of faces presented in all quarters of the house; others looked angry; others ashamed and cast a glance around them to see what was thought of them; some gallantly smiled, and resolved to make the best of it. One man exclaimed, with unsophisticated astonishment, "Christ Jesus!" and an Italian whispered in a half-execrating tone, "Oh, Dio!"

Meantime we heard some interesting conversation around us. We had been told, as a striking instance of the effect that Paganini has produced upon the English musical world, that one eminent musician declared he could not sleep the first night of his performance for thinking of him, but that he got up and walked about his room. A gentleman present last night was telling his friends that another celebrated player swore that he would have given a thousand guineas to keep the Italian out of the country, he had put everybody at such an immeasurable distance. These candid confessions, it seems, are made in perfect good-humour, and therefore do honour to the gentlemen concerned. Envy is lost in admiration.

The performances commenced with Haydn's beautiful symphony, No. 9 [i.e., no. 102], the fine, touching exordium of which, full of a

kind of hushing meaning, appeared admirably adapted to be the harbinger of the evening's wonder. A duet between [the singers] Santini and Curioni followed; and then, after a due interval, came in Signor Paganini, and "brought the house down" with applause.

As it was the first time we had seen the great player, except in the criticisms of our musical friends, which had rendered us doubly curious, we looked up with interest at him from our abysm in the pit. A lucky interval between a gentleman's head and a lady's bonnet favoured our endeavour, and there we beheld the long, pale face of the musical marvel, hung, as it were, in the light, and looking as strange as need be. He made divers uncouth obeisances, and then put himself in a masterly attitude for his work, his manner being as firm and full of conscious power when he puts the bow to the instrument as it is otherwise when he is not playing. We thought he did not look so old as he is said to be; but he is long-faced and haggard, with strongly-marked prominent features, wears his black hair flowing on his neck like an enthusiast, has a coat of ancient cut which astonishes Fop's Alley; in short, is very like the picture of him in the shops. He is like a great old boy, who has done nothing but play the violin all his life, and knows as much about that as he does little of conventional manners. His face at the same time has much less expression than might be looked for. At first it seemed little better than a mask; with a fastidious, dreary expression, as if inclined to despise his music and go to sleep. And such was his countenance for a great part of the evening. His fervour was in his hands and bow. Towards the close of the performances, he waxed more enthusiastic in appearance, gave way to some uncouth bodily movement from side to side, and seemed to be getting into his violin. Occasionally also he put back his hair. When he makes his acknowledgments, he bows like a camel, and grins like a goblin or a mountain-goat.

His playing is indeed marvellous. What other players can do well, he does a hundred times better. We never heard such playing before; nor had we imagined it. His bow perfectly talks. It remonstrates, supplicates, answers, holds a dialogue. It would be the easiest thing in the world to put words to his music. We are sure that with a given subject, or even without it, Paganini's best playing could be construed into discourse by any imaginative person.

Last night he began a composition of his own (very good, by the way)—an *Allegro Maestoso* movement (majestically cheerful) with singular force and precision. Precision is not the proper word; it was a sort of peremptoriness and dash. He did not put his bow to the strings, nor lay it upon them; he struck them, as you might imagine a Greek to have done when he used his plectrum, and "smote the sounding shell." He then fell into a tender strain, till the strings, when he touched them, appeared to shiver with pleasure. Then he gave us a sort of minute warbling, as if half a dozen humming birds were singing at the tops of their voices, the highest notes sometimes leaping off and shivering like

sprinkles of water; then he descended with wonderful force and gravity into the bass; then he would commence a strain of earnest feeling or entreaty, with notes of the greatest solidity, yet full of trembling emotion; and then again he would leap to a height beyond all height, with notes of desperate minuteness, then flash down in a set of headlong harmonies, sharp and brilliant as the edges of swords; then warble again with inconceivable beauty and remoteness, as if he was a ventriloquizing-bird; and finally, besides his usual wonderful staccatos in ordinary, he would suddenly throw handfuls, as it were, of staccatoed notes, in distinct and repeated showers over his violin, small and pungent as the tips of pins.

In a word, we never heard anything like *any* part of his performance, much less the least marvel we have been speaking of. The people sit astonished, venting themselves in whispers of "Wonderful!"—"Good God!"—and other unusual symptoms of English amazement; and when the applause comes, some of them take an opportunity of laughing, out of pure inability to express their feelings otherwise.

June 25, 1831

Our wizard's *Allegro Maestoso* was succeeded by an *"Adagio Flebile con Sentimento"*—a composition with a very "particular fellow" of a title, by which we are to understand a strain of pathos amounting to the lachrymose, and disclosing a deep perception of the delicacy of that matter. If we are inclined to doubt the perfection of Signor Paganini's playing it would be upon this point. He has a great deal more feeling than is usually shewn by players of extreme execution: his supplication in particular is admirable; he is fervent and imploring; you would think his violin *was on its knees;* the very first note he draws, in movements of this character, is the fullest, the gravest, the most forcible, and the most impassioned we ever heard; it is wonderfully in earnest. And yet, though there is a feeling of this kind throughout, and we never heard notes so touching accompanied with such admirable execution, we cannot help thinking that we miss, both in the style and in the composition, that perfection of simplicity, and of unconsciousness of everything but the object of its passion or admiration, which is perhaps incompatible with these exhibitions of art.

Upon the whole, our experience of the playing of this wonderful person has not only added to our stock of extraordinary and delightful recollections, but it has done our memories another great good, in opening afresh the world of ancient Greek music and convincing us of the truth of all that is said of its marvellous effects. To hear Paganini, and to see him playing on that bit of wood with a bit of catgut, is to convince us that the Greeks might really have done the wonders attributed to them with their shells and quills. What if he is but a poor player to the least of them? For now that we see what such instruments can do, there is no knowing how much they can do beyond it.

But even after what we have heard, how are we to endure hereafter our old violins and their players? How can we consent to hear them? How crude they will sound, how uninformed, how like a cheat! When the Italian goes away, violin-playing goes with him, unless some disciple of his should arise among us and detain a semblance of his instrument. As it is, the most masterly performers, hitherto so accounted, must consent to begin again, and be little boys in his school.

L. H. Houtchens and C. W. Houtchens (eds.), *Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism: 1808–1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 270–74, 275–76.

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The Virtuoso Conductor

Conditions of orchestral execution, in the early nineteenth century often deplorable (see above, p. 323), greatly improved under pressure of the ever-increasing demands made by composers of complex and colorful Romantic scores. A necessary part of that improvement was the introduction of orchestral conducting in the modern sense. This was pioneered by such German composer-performers as Beethoven and especially Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826), and soon spread to other musical centers. In his autobiography, the German violinist and composer Louis Spohr (1784–1839) claimed to have been the first to conduct an orchestra in England (where conservatism in matters of orchestral performance had already disconcerted Haydn), during a guest appearance with the London Philharmonic Society in 1820. His description of the revolutionary effect of this innovation is vivid:

Meanwhile my turn had come to direct one of the Philharmonic concerts, and I created no less sensation than with my solo play. It was at that time still the custom there that when symphonies and overtures were performed, the pianist had the score before him, not exactly to conduct from it, but only to read after and to play in with the orchestra at pleasure, which when it was heard, had a very bad effect. The real conductor was the first violin, who gave the *tempi*, and now and then when the orchestra began to falter gave the beat with the bow of his violin. So numerous an orchestra, standing so far apart from each other as that of the Philharmonic, could not possibly go exactly together, and in spite of the excellence of the individual members, the *ensemble* was much worse than we are accustomed to in Germany. I had therefore resolved when my turn came to direct, to make an attempt to remedy this defective system. Fortunately at the morning rehearsal on the day when I was to conduct the concert, Mr. *Ries* [1784–1838, a former pupil of