

Nicolò Paganini

(1782-1840)

1 - 3 Concerto in D major, Op. 6* (26:10)

I Allegro maestoso (15:51)

II Adagio (4:07)

III Rondo (Allegro spiritoso) (6:12)

4 The Carnival of Venice (9:10)

5 - 10 Six Caprices (21:05)

5 No. 13, in B flat major * (2:34)

6 No. 15, in E minor † (2:50)

7 No. 21, in A major † (3:17)

8 No. 9, in E major † (3:07)

9 No. 17, in E flat major * (3:09)

10 No. 24, in A minor * (6:10)

11 I Palpiti, Op. 13 (7:59)

12 Caprice No. 20, in D major (3:04)

Zino Francescatti, violin
Artur Balsam, piano

* Arranged by Zino Francescatti

† Arranged by Mario Pilati

In the second half of the 20th century, Zino Francescatti succeeded Jacques Thibaud in the eyes of the music-loving public as the French violinist par excellence. Francescatti's suave refinement and elegant phrasing epitomised the best characteristics of French violin playing, and his immaculate technique and brilliant tone confirmed his position among the great violinists of the century.

Zino Francescatti's father, an Italian by birth, was a professional violinist whose adventurous early life reads like a chapter from a Dumas novel. After his appointment as court musician to an Italian Count, Fortunato Francescatti had an affair with the Count's daughter. When the Count denied him permission to marry her, Francescatti left Italy and emigrated to Marseilles where he became a French citizen. After settling in France, Francescatti was married at the age of 46 to his 17-year-old violin student, Ernesta Feraud. The couple had two sons; the older of the two, René Charles, known as Zino, was born on August 9th, 1902.

Zino displayed a musical talent at a young age, and studied the violin exclusively with his parents. At five he gave his first public concert, and by the age of ten he had performed the Beethoven Concerto. He played in the Colonne and Padeloup Orchestras, and made his first recordings for "La voix de son maître," the French division of HMV, at the age of 19. These first records were brought out on the green label series, equivalent to today's budget releases. Already on these early recordings Francescatti displays a powerful technique, couched within the stylistic influence of Ysaÿe and Kreisler.

By his mid-twenties, Francescatti was already regarded as one of France's premier violinists. On moving to Paris in 1924, he became acquainted with the leading French musicians of the day. He developed a close friendship with Ravel, and in 1926 the two artists gave a highly successful concert tour of England. In the next two decades Francescatti performed throughout Europe, and made a number of recordings for French Columbia. It was not until 1938 when

he toured South America, however, that Francescatti performed outside Europe. In November of the following year the violinist made an acclaimed North American debut performing Paganini's *Concerto No. 1* with the New York Philharmonic. During the Second World War, Francescatti emigrated to the United States. In 1946 he was offered an exclusive recording contract with the American Columbia label, beginning an association which was to last until the violinist's retirement nearly 30 years later.

By the mid 1950s, Francescatti had become the Columbia label's star violinist. The beginning of the stereo era in the late 1950s sparked a renewed interest in recordings, and the three principal solo violinists of the period were represented by three American record companies: Columbia (Francescatti), RCA Victor (Heifetz) and Capitol (Milstein). Because Columbia and RCA Victor had contracts with the principal American orchestras and conductors, the recorded versions of the major concertos by Heifetz and Francescatti were inevitably compared. Both violinists had settled in the U.S. after establishing their careers, and they were only a year apart in age. In terms of playing styles, however, the two violinists were vastly different. The sunny exuberance of Francescatti's interpretations was in marked contrast to the driving intensity of those by Heifetz, and as personalities the urbane Francescatti was a more approachable figure than the aloof Heifetz.

Heifetz and Francescatti bridged the playing styles of the early and late 20th century; their interpretations were highly personal yet executed with razor-sharp precision. Francescatti's vibrato was perhaps the most distinguishing feature of his playing. Like Heifetz's, it was intense and quick, but its oscillating width was much more pronounced than any other solo violinist of his time. Heifetz's fast and narrow vibrato created a focused energy to his sound, whereas Francescatti's fast and wide vibrato resulted in enormous carrying power. Al-

though Francescatti's vibrant tone was his hallmark, his remarkable intonation never allowed the vibrato to sound obtrusive. His glorious tone was further enhanced by the magnificent 1727 Stradivari violin, known as the "Hart," on which he performed for 45 years.

This recording of works by Paganini from a live concert at the Library of Congress in 1954 is a particularly fitting program as Zino Francescatti was a direct musical descendent of the legendary Nicolò Paganini. Francescatti's principal teacher was his violinist father who had studied with Camillo Sivori, the only pupil of Paganini. The performances on this all-Paganini CD therefore represent a direct link to the violinist generally regarded as the greatest the world has ever known.

The music and figure of Nicolò Paganini has fascinated musicians and listeners for nearly two centuries. With his astonishing technique and magnetic stage presence, Paganini's performances have come to epitomise the relationship between virtuoso and adoring public. Born in Genoa 1782, Paganini was initially taught the mandolin by his father, but switched to the violin at the age of seven, studying with Giacomo Costa. In 1795 he played for Alessandro Rolla, one of Italy's leading violinists. Rolla declared that he had nothing further to teach him, but advised the young prodigy to further his musical education by studying composition instead. Upon his return to Genoa in 1796 Paganini developed interest in the guitar, applying many of its techniques to the violin, and discovered Locatelli's *L'arte del violino*, a set of 24 caprices which were to provide a model for his own.

After leaving the dominating influence of his father at eighteen, Paganini went to Lucca where he was appointed concertmaster of the town's orchestra. Five years later he was engaged as solo violinist to the newly-established court orchestra of Princess Elisa Baciocchi (a sister of Napoleon) at Lucca. In 1809, after three years with the court, he decided to become a "free artist." He

performed throughout Italy, refining his technique and developing his showmanship, and made his first appearance in Milan in 1813. Thereafter his fame began to spread. He further enhanced his reputation by triumphing in head-to-head violin competitions with Lafont (1816) and Lipinski (1818).

Paganini's remarkable prowess on the instrument as well as his cadaverous appearance gave rise to rumours that he was in league with (or sold his soul to) the devil (his name means "little pagan"). Furthermore, his disappearances for several months on end inspired many rumours about his dissolute life. Paganini did have a passion for gambling and women, but he exploited these stories to his own gain. Paganini's first concerts outside of Italy took place in March of 1828. His début in Vienna caused a sensation, and marked the beginning of a six-year period of fanatical obsession by the public. He toured throughout Germany, and made both his Paris and London débuts in 1831. At each performance he mesmerised his audience, and such diverse artists as Schumann, Chopin, Liszt and Berlioz, as well as the poet Heinrich Heine, fell under his spell. In 1834 Paganini returned to Italy. His health had deteriorated, and he drastically curtailed his public appearances. By 1838 he completely lost his voice before dying of cancer of the larynx in Nice two years later.

Paganini raised the technique of violin playing to new heights, and exploited to their fullest such effects as artificial harmonics, ricochet bowings, sul ponticello, left-hand pizzicato, playing on one string, multiple stopping and scordatura tuning. However, Paganini's art did not consist exclusively of virtuoso tricks. Franz Schubert declared: "In Paganini's playing I heard the angels sing." Throughout his life Paganini jealously guarded his playing secrets. He never practiced within earshot of others, and published only a handful of his compositions. Of the five opuses published in his lifetime, the only one which exploits the virtuoso capabilities of the violin was his *24 Caprices* published in 1820 as Opus 1.

(Paganini's other four published opuses are chamber works: two sets of six sonatas for violin and guitar, Opp. 2 and 3, and two sets of three quartets for guitar and string trio, Opp. 4 and 5.)

On this CD Francescatti performs seven of the 24 caprices, not as solos but with piano accompaniment. Francescatti had commercially recorded eight of them with Mario Pilati's piano accompaniments, and three of these are included here. Three other caprices, however, are performed with Francescatti's own piano accompaniments. (The performance of *Caprice No. 17* is a new addition to the Francescatti discography as he never recorded it commercially.)

Francescatti is partnered at the piano throughout this disc by the Polish-born Artur Balsam. After studying in Berlin where he won the Mendelssohn prize, Balsam performed for a number of years as a soloist before distinguishing himself as a chamber musician. He was highly sought after as an accompanist, and became the regular partner of such renowned violinists as Menuhin and Milstein, as well as Francescatti.

Paganini's *Concerto No. 1* was originally cast in E-flat, with the violin tuned up a half step for extra brilliance. The concerto was reconstructed from the solo and orchestral parts after Paganini's death and published as Op. 6, the first of Paganini's many works to be brought out posthumously. Up until the 1930s the concerto was mostly performed in August Wilhelmj's truncated version of the first movement alone. Francescatti was one of the first violinists to champion the complete three-movement work, and it virtually became his signature piece. His 1950 studio recording with Dimitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic remains a benchmark performance.

The two other Paganini works, *Carnival of Venice* and *I Palpiti*, are in the popular genre of virtuoso variations on a well-known theme. Although Paganini rarely played works by composers other than himself, he often adapted

popular melodies of the day in elaborate variations for the purposes of virtuoso display. The *Carnival of Venice* is a popular song for which several other virtuoso violinists made further sets of variations. *I Palpiti*, on the other hand, is based on a soprano aria from Rossini's two-act opera *Tancredi* composed in 1813. This work begins with an introduction featuring an original cantilena melody with elaborate figuration by Paganini himself. This popular arrangement of Rossini's aria was made in 1819, and published posthumously as Paganini's Op. 13.

Notes by Eric Wen

Eric Wen began his musical training as a violinist before attending Columbia and Yale Universities. After being awarded a research fellowship at Cambridge University in 1986 he lived in London, where he was Editor of The Strad and The Musical Times, and Producer at Biddulph Recordings. He has taught at the University of London and the Mannes College of Music, and is currently on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He is also a free-lance writer, and edits the violin music publications for Carl Fischer.

The Gertrude Clarke Whittall Foundation Collection of the Library of Congress contains a large collection of materials relating to Nicolò Paganini. The holdings include autograph music, letters and documents, paintings, drawings, engravings, and memorabilia. A selective exhibit of Paganiniana was on display in the Whittall Pavilion and the foyer of the Coolidge Auditorium for this concert.

Artur Balsam was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1906. Balsam's early studies were at the Conservatory at Lodz, and later at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin (1928-31). He won the International Piano Competition in Berlin in 1930, and received the Mendelssohn Prize in Chamber Music, with violinist Roman Totenberg in Munich (1931). Balsam left school to accompany the 14-year-old violin prodigy, Yehudi Menuhin in 1932, touring Europe and North America. By 1938, he was touring the world as partner to the violinist Nathan Milstein. Balsam and his wife Ruth escaped Europe just before the Nazi Holocaust, and settled permanently in

the USA in 1940.

Artur Balsam performed with many of the great musicians of the 20th century. In addition to Francescatti, Menuhin and Milstein, he partnered with violin virtuosos Szigeti, Kogan, Oistrakh, Fuchs, Shumsky, Goldberg and Stern, as well as cellists Rostropovich, Fournier, Nelsova and Parnas. In the 1940s, he was pianist with the NBC Orchestra under Toscanini. In the 1950s Balsam appeared as a soloist with the Royal Philharmonic, the London Symphony, the Philharmonia of London, Milan and Warsaw, the radio orchestras of Berlin, London, Zurich and many others. In 1956 he was invited by the BBC to play six piano concerti for the Mozart bicentenary. During the same period he was a frequent guest with the Budapest and Juilliard String Quartets. He toured in the 1960s with the Albeneri Trio, and was engaged by The Concerto Soloists in Philadelphia, The Beethoven Society, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Mostly Mozart in the 1970s. His last public appearance, at age 87 was with The Music Project at Carnegie Recital Hall in February, 1993.

The Balsam discography comprises over 250 works, including the complete solo works of Haydn and Mozart, ten Mozart piano concerti, the Hummel A minor Concerto, the Beethoven violin and cello sonatas, and the violin sonatas of Mozart, Brahms, Schumann and Prokofiev. Balsam had a significant influence on several generations of young musicians, including pianists Murray Perahia and Emanuel Ax. Balsam performed and coached chamber ensembles at festivals including Banff, Aldeburgh, Music Mountain, Orono and for 35 seasons, Kneisel Hall in Blue Hill, Maine. In addition, Artur Balsam taught at the Eastman School of Music, Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music (1965-1992). In a 1971 *New York Times* review, Harold Schonberg wrote, "It is not for nothing that Artur Balsam is generally recognized as the best (as well as the dean) of American accompanists."

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