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Development and Evolution of 19th Century Violin Repertoire

A large portion of the works in today's standard violinist repertoire were written during the Romantic Era. A distinct style of 19th century violin playing began with the flashy and revolutionary playing of Nicolo Paganini whose technical innovations gradually became integrated into more formal and serious works by composers such as Felix Mendelssohn, Camille Saint-Saens, and Pablo de Sarasate. These later pieces, while developing greater formal and harmonic complexity than Paganini's caprices, still utilized many of the original techniques he developed in his playing to enhance the sense of drama and emphasize changes in the form.

The desire for sensationalism and musical extremism in early 19th century Paris gave rise to the phenomenon of virtuoso players, the first and most popular being the Italian Niccolo Paganini. While the general attitude of 19th century Paris set the stage for Paganini's rise to popularity, there was no consistent development in violin technique leading up to Paganini; most of his innovations in technique came from his own experimentation. Up to the time of Paganini, most of the focus in terms of violin technique was in the realm of intonation and bowing. The most notable inspiration for Paganini came from Baroque era composers, as the Classical period represented a time of stagnation in the progression of complex and demanding technique. Corelli pioneered the use of the violin as a solo instrument and not just for use in ensembles, while meanwhile the Sonatas and Partitas of Bach established the polyphonic capabilities of the

violin. However, for the most part, technique requiring exceptional bow and finger agility was considered unorthodox and frowned upon. One of the major inspirations for Paganini were the 24 caprices of the 18th century violinist Pietro Locatelli, which became shunned at the time due to technical innovations.

Paganini's fame resulted from his breathtaking live performances, which often included his own compositions tailored to his particular technical strengths, as well as variations on themes of popular opera tunes of the time. His most popular and influential works by far however are his *24 Caprices for Solo Violin*. Each of them focuses on a specific effect for violin and served as a textbook for virtuosity for the rest of the 19th century. While complex in technique, these pieces remained very simple in terms of form, melody, and harmony. His most popular Caprice, Number 24, is a theme and variations piece and strongly emphasizes the tonic and dominant scale degrees. Each variation highlights a different technique that Paganini popularized throughout his career. The first variation makes use of rapid staccato arpeggiations all done on the same bow, contrasted by the second variation which makes use of slurring and rapid string changes. The third variation plays the melody in parallel octaves, a technique that on instruments with even intervals such as the piano, or fretted instruments like the guitar, are fairly easy, but on the violin are made much more difficult by the fact that as one gets higher on the fingerboard, the size of the interval decreases. This is further complicated by the fact that the only hand position an octave can be played in uses the first and fourth finger, so every note change requires a shift. The fourth variation makes use of high register chromaticism, again a technique that is particularly difficult on violin. In the high register of the E string, half steps are so close to one another that the fingers essentially have to move to make room for one another. In the fifth variation, the notes alternate from the G string to E string, which requires very quick

and clean bow changes while skipping over the middle D and A strings. The sixth variation again uses a difficult interval, the third. This interval is made even more complex by the alternation between major and minor thirds, making it so the interval size changes between major and minor, as well as getting progressively smaller higher up on the fingerboard. In the seventh variation, there is use of very rapid triplets, which although not an inherently difficult or revolutionary idea, was frequently used in later romantic violin pieces. The famous eighth variation uses three note chords which are very difficult to tune. At the same time, these stops clarify the original harmony, which at the beginning was thought to be a simple tonic-dominant relation. His ninth variation is possibly the most impressive and revolutionary, featuring alternating bowing and left hand pizzicato. This requires extreme coordination between the hands, as well as a strong left hand in order to get a solid tone out of the violin while plucking quickly in a compromised position. While many of Paganini's techniques were inspired by the aforementioned composers, this one seems to be the most original. The tenth variation uses false harmonics, giving a unique timbre, while also challenging the intonation of the violinist who must tune the bottom note and top notes perfectly, as well as use the correct amount of pressure on the top note in order for the note to sound properly. As with the other intervals, this one is constantly varying too as the violinist shifts up and down the fingerboard. The last variation alternates between more rapidly changing stops, and rapid arpeggiated 16th notes that require very fast and clean shifting. This particular caprice is important because it isolates each of Paganini's revolutionary techniques, allowing the influence of his works to be seen much more clearly. While later Romantic violin compositions vary in their forms, melodies, and timbres, the techniques used are almost always rooted in techniques that originated in the 24th caprice.

Another almost equally important aspect of Paganini was his public image and

personality. He was lividly pale, had dark eyes, and was deathly skinny, giving him an otherworldly and satanic appearance. Many gruesome rumors about his past, particularly of him selling his soul to the Devil followed him as he traveled around Europe and undoubtedly added to his allure. His popularity only benefited from this association as they were obsessed with a somewhat demonic quality among their heroes, such as had been had in Napoleon. While this quality helped benefit the popularity of Paganini, the importance of appearance and image diminished throughout the century as violinists such as Ferdinand David and Pablo de Sarasate were much more traditional in appearance and demeanor. This coincides with the overall trend of diminishing sensationalism in the realm of violin performance and composition throughout the century. The improvisations and showmanship of Paganini were abandoned in favor of structured and serious concert formats as popularized by Mendelssohn. At the same time, violin repertoire pieces became much more structured and serious as well, but at the same time continued to utilize the techniques of Paganini, though to a much more conservative degree.

Felix Mendelssohn, along with Robert Schumann, is known for heading the movement for “seriousness” in German music, as a reaction to the brilliance and grand scale of French music, which they had disdain for. Unlike the majority of Romantic composers, including Paganini, Mendelssohn had extensive music education and training, particularly in baroque forms and the works of Bach. This can be seen in his seamless use of Sonata form, as he had a much firmer grasp on this form than composers such as Schumann, who succeeded much better with smaller forms. At the same time, Mendelssohn still maintains a sense of drama and emotion in his music that is characteristic of the Romantic era. This combination of perfect form with a sense of drama can be seen in his last great orchestral work, his *Violin Concerto in E minor*. The piece was written in correspondence with virtuoso Ferdinand David, who gave him advice

while he wrote the piece.

The form of the concerto in many ways adheres to traditional sonata form, but at the same time Mendelssohn is able to introduce innovations while keeping the transitions seamless. The piece is written in the traditional format of a fast, slow, and fast movement, but each of the movements is linked together so that they are meant to be played all at once. This was partially done as a reaction to standard concert format of the time, where movements of pieces would often be interrupted by other works such as singers singing popular songs or opera tunes of the day. Mendelssohn on the other hand, wanted pieces to be played in their entirety and concerts to take place in a much more serious format. The first movement features new ideas such as the violin coming in immediately instead of an orchestral introduction, with the tutti section not coming until the entire first theme has been stated. Also, each thematic transition is signaled by the violin playing and holding out a very high register note. Mendelssohn also moves the location of the cadenza from the end of the piece, as was traditional with classical form, to before the recapitulation, adding to the dramatic effect. Another first was that the cadenza was entirely written out by Mendelssohn, instead of improvised by the performer. This can be seen again as part of Mendelssohn's desire for seriousness among German music. Instead of trying to imitate the flashiness of French virtuoso playing, Mendelssohn uses the cadenza to further develop themes, and build drama and anticipation for the recapitulation.

Melodically and harmonically, the piece is much more structured and conservative than the works of Paganini. Mendelssohn was known for his conservatism, largely out of his studying of baroque works. The first theme is Beethoven-esque in that it is based on an ascending tertian motif. The second theme is again based on a triad, with leading tones going into each triad tone.

While the melodic lines are often ornamented with chromaticism, the piece itself is for the most part diatonic and conservative harmonically. Any use of dissonance, such as diminished chords, is done for effect, and does not serve an actual harmonic purposes, such as the ascending diminished scale right before the second theme. The actual harmonic layout was very traditional and unlike the harmonic experimentation being done by his contemporaries such as Liszt.

Despite the strong tendency towards conservatism and traditional structure in Mendelssohn's music, the influence by Paganini can still be seen, and virtuosic touches can be referenced to specific variations in Paganini's 24th caprice. The parallel octaves from the 3rd variation take place before B, K, and T. Parallel thirds from the fourth variation occur shortly before D. Mendelssohn frequently uses rapid triplet patterns that were used in Paganini's music such as at A, before E, at H, and at R. The Paganini techniques of chromatic scales and rapid string changes are also frequent as well. The third movement has even more virtuosic tendencies, with constant 16th note scale and arpeggio runs up and down the fingerboard, as well as three note chords as done in Paganini's 8th variation of his 24th caprice. The genius of Mendelssohn's E Minor Concerto is that while referencing these techniques to showcase the playing ability of the violin, he is also building drama and reinforcing the form. Many of the octave runs and scales climax at points that signal a transition in the form. He also uses them to interrupt the harmonic flow, building tension and drama as the listener waits for a resolution.

Pablo de Sarasate was a Spanish virtuoso and composer of the mid to late Romantic era, known for his purity of tone and distinctly Spanish sound to his playing. Spain had experienced a period of turmoil during much of the early 19th century and as a result had no

notable composers during the early Romantic era. Most of the native influence in Sarasate's music was a result of folk music and pre-Romantic music. Sarasate also spent time at the Paris Conservatory where, despite being born after Paganini's death, he was probably exposed to his music to some degree. In works such as his famous *Zigeunerweisen*, many techniques popularized by Paganini can be found, in a much more liberal and virtuosic setting. Contrary to Mendelssohn's concept of seriousness in music, the French school of Romanticism gave birth to the concept of showpieces, short multiple movement pieces in the range of 10-15 minutes designed for a live concert setting to showcase the talent of a performer. *Zigeunerweisen* follows this format, with a dramatic Moderato intro, a slow lugubrious and improvisatory Lento, a slower muted lento section, and a very rapid Allegro molto vivace section at the end. While Sarasate integrates complex harmony and flowing melodies with technical prowess, the piece is still largely in the spirit of showmanship, compared to Mendelssohn's serious E Minor Concerto. Sarasate also introduces an element of nationalism, basing the melodies off of themes of the Roma people.

The virtuosic elements inspired by the playing of Paganini are much more prominent in *Zigeunerweisen* than in the E Minor Concerto. As is with Mendelssohn's E Minor Concerto, the creativity behind the piece comes from taking the techniques from Paganini and using them to enhance the drama and atmosphere of the piece. The rapid scale runs in *Zigeunerweisen* are based off gypsy modes as opposed to major and minor scales. The parallel thirds popularized in the 4th variation of Paganini's 24th caprice are used in both the lento and allegro sections to enhance the gypsy flavor of the piece. Sarasate also makes use of false harmonics, left hand plucking, rapid staccato 16ths on the same bow, and chromatic scales in the high register. In the lento, he alternates long flowing melodies with these technical passages, designed to

showcase the tone and expressiveness of the player, their technical prowess, and their ability to rapidly transition between these two contrasting styles. The allegro section in particular appears to be in homage to Paganini. While not in strict theme and variation form, he reiterates the first theme partly through the movement using false harmonics, followed by the second theme which this time uses left hand pizzicato. The allegro movement also uses predominantly tonic-dominant harmonic relations, also in the vein of Paganini's 24th caprice.

Saint-Saens' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, although it premiered 15 years earlier than *Zigeunerweisen*, can be seen as a blend between the showmanship quality of Sarasate's compositions and the Germanic emphasis on form and motivic development. While *Zigeunerweisen* is essentially formless, particularly in the improvisational lento section, the form for *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* is set out in the title. Despite having a set form, this form is much smaller than many other serious compositions of the time, with the piece at just under 10 minutes long. The motivic nature of the piece is introduced from the start, with the first 15 bars of the introduction based on a descending fifth alternating between a four note ascending minor arpeggio. While the rondo section is also based on a series of motifs, they are interwoven to create dramatic contrasts in character and tone. This creates a sensational and brilliant quality in the music, while keeping a sense of well-planned motivic development behind the piece. While the character of the piece may change rapidly at times, everything seems natural and in its right place due to Saint-Saens' mastery of form and motivic development. Every melody that is introduced is actually made up of smaller motivic building blocks, a significant contrast from the original works of Paganini which were based upon ornamentation. Much as Mendelssohn did in his E Minor concerto, Saint-Saens uses bursts of technicality and high register in his pieces for dramatic and formal effect, to signal a climax as well as a transition in

the music. His use of parallel octaves to build to a peak in the music is reminiscent of Mendelssohn, as well as false harmonics to create a unique tone on the highest notes of cadences. Just as Sarasate did in *Zigeunerweisen*, Saint-Saens uses parallel thirds to color the music and give an exotic taste to it. One notable passage that sounds as if it came straight from Paganini's 24th caprice is the mini cadenza before the Capriccioso section. This cadence is made up of three note chords reminiscent of the 8th variation in Paganini's 24th caprice. Saint-Saens utilizes this technique to build drama by delaying the natural harmonic progression and cadencing of the piece. When the violin plays a high register note on a dominant chord, the listener, from previous experience expects a cadence into a new section of the form. Instead, drama is built by delaying the cadence and varying spellings of the dominant chord on the violin. Because of this, there is much more of an impact when the dominant chord finally cadences into the Capriccioso.

The final capriccioso section of the piece runs counter to standard violin compositions of the time in that it abandons the flowing lugubrious melodies and novel techniques and instead consists of a barrage of 16th notes much more reminiscent of a Bach etude or partita than anything Romantic. Because Saint-Saens was also schooled at the Paris Conservatory and was from a young age proficient in music, he was undoubtedly exposed to baroque music unlike many of his contemporaries. While the playing style has a distinct influence from Bach's violin works, the tonality is much more modern, with the initial line outlining a descending chromatic harmonic progression. By drawing from the virtuosity of Paganini, the motivic and formal mastery of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and a concluding section reminiscent of Bach, it is easy to see why this piece has become one of the most famous and frequently played pieces in modern violin repertoire. *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* tests a violin player's ability to play

highly technical passages with extreme contrasts, as well as be able to shape lines made out of motifs in a unique manner. At the same time, it displays Saint-Saens' mastery of form and ability to unify multiple influences into a unique and comprehensive piece.

Development of Violin Repertoire during the 19th century started with the innovations of Paganini, which while harmonically and formally dry were highly influential in violin compositions for the remainder of the century. Composers in the French and German schools of Romantic composition both began integrating these techniques into their music and using them to both enhance a sense of drama and bring clarity to form. The main differences that can be seen are that while Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor* emphasized motivic and formal strength while using virtuosic effects conservatively, Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* focused more on melody and using virtuosity to create an effect in the music. These two pieces are indicative of the greater trends of the time in German and French music respectively. Saint-Saens' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* can be seen as an integration between these two schools of thought, creating a formally and motivically unified piece while also developing a distinct atmosphere. All of these pieces have become standard in modern repertoire due to their extensive testing of a violin player's technical ability, tone, and ability to uniquely interpret a formally complex work of music.

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