

PAGANINI'S BODY AND PROJECTION OF GENIUS

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Abstract

Paganini complained to his lawyer in 1832, "Now no one ever asks if one has heard Paganini, but if one has seen him. To tell you the truth, I regret that there is a general opinion among all classes that I'm in collusion with the Devil. The papers talk too much about my outward appearance, which arouses incredible curiosity." Paganini's appearance was a point of intense focus for the crowds who flocked to see him perform. It was the image he projected, perhaps as much as the music he played, that captured their attention and stimulated their imaginations to concoct stories about a life devilish enough to match his bizarre and wasted form. I demonstrate the extent to which Paganini's physicality was intertwined with his success. It is well known that he battled ill health and had a rare physical condition that made his joints unusually flexible and suited him perfectly to the violin. Adding to this information, I present firsthand accounts and portraits of Paganini which show how his physical form was exploited for publicity and, moreover, lionized as it was interpreted by his contemporaries as displaying the outward signs of inner genius. Finally, I pull from Joseph Roach's book *It*, which explores the nearly indefinable qualities which distinguish "abnormally interesting people" from the rest of us. Paganini's body contained an extraordinary combination of contradictory attributes—tragic and comic, good nature and diablerie—making him irresistible to the public's fantasies. His body drew crowds, enabled him as a performer on the violin, and in the mind of the public, made him a vehicle of Romantic genius.

There stands the tall, lean figure in an old-fashioned dress-suit, his bow held high, and his right foot planted well in front of his body with its knee bent . . . nothing but bones and spirit in clothes that seemed too loose for him. Only so much flesh as is absolutely essential for the concentration of his fires and the holding-together of his half-dissolved body. Framed by his long black hair and curly side-whiskers, his long pale face is in repose. The immobile stony earnestness of his features is in striking contrast with the sparkling vivacity of his dark eyes. His fine, high forehead, betrays nobility and sensitiveness, the curved nose indicates courage just as his tightly-closed lips speak of cunning, obstinacy, and irony. In his cold and serious features lay intense suffering and a wonderful mixture of the tragic and the comic—even of good nature and diablerie at the same time.

—a journalist from the Leipzig *Komet*, 1829 (translated in Pulver 1970: 191)

The above quotation provides one example of the intense interest audiences took in the looks of the famed virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini. His gaunt frame and long, dark hair bred stories of his supposed wild and secretive past, and furthermore, were interpreted by nineteenth-century audiences as displaying outward signs of great inner musical creativity and intelligence. In strange contradiction, his history of illness and physical disorders stood against his skill on the violin, creating a *mélange* of contradictory attributes made him mysterious and irresistible to the public's fantasies. As testimonies from people who saw him perform and the

portraits and caricatures made of him during his lifetime demonstrate, Paganini's body and the mythologies surrounding it were integral to his success, drawing crowds, enabling him as a performer on the violin, and ultimately, in the mind of the public, turning him into a vehicle of Romantic genius.

Paganini is one of the few performers from classical music history whose name remains in popular culture today, inspiring metal bands, movies, and mystery novels. He is best known as the “demon violinist” who sold his soul to the devil while in prison in exchange for his talent. Tall tales about Paganini have become more exaggerated over the years; however, many of them originated during his lifetime, with his knowledge and sometimes through his own instigation.¹ The story of Paganini gaining his skill in prison was published seventeen years before his death, in Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini* (1823). Other stories circulated about his womanizing exploits. Gossip of course boosted his popularity among the curiosity seekers who flocked to see him perform, already drawn by his daredevil performance techniques such as playing on frayed stings that would break and force him to finish the piece on the remaining strings (or *string!*). Quite the businessman, Paganini became notorious for his high ticket prices and for his tactic of advertising his “last concert” multiple times before he would leave a city. He was the first musician to become unquestionably wealthy from his solo performances (Metzner 1998: 127-128).

Nearly everyone who saw him perform was struck by his physical appearance. Written accounts of Paganini are filled with physical descriptions. One theme in these is the ridiculous, even humorous first impression he made, his strangeness sometimes eliciting laughs and jeers when he walked on stage. The German satirist Karl Ludwig Boerne described how “awkward” he was as he swayed “like a drunken man,” as his feet got in his own way and his arms flailed in all directions. “He was the most magnificent lout that Nature ever invented. Someone ought to have painted him,” Boerne said (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer 2001: 689). Numerous people, in fact, did paint him, as we shall discuss later.

In most firsthand accounts of Paganini, however, words such as “gaunt,” “diabolical,” and “grotesque” are the dominant descriptors. Maximilian Julius Schottky, who published a Paganini biography in 1830 when Paganini still had ten more years of life ahead of him, confirmed that his appearance was troubling:

It is true that at the first glance his appearance is discouraging rather than attractive . . . [some] compared him with the distorted portrait of a fallen angel . . . He is so thin that no one could scarcely be thinner with decency; and with it he has a pale, yellow, complexion, a large curved nose, and bony fingers. He looks as if he were hardly held together under his clothes, and when he bows his acknowledgements his body moves in so extraordinary a manner that one fears to see his legs part from his trunk at any moment, and the whole frame fall together as a heap of bones. When playing . . . his face does not lose any of its death-like immobility—except when thunders of applause shift it into his peculiar smile, and his eyes flash, not without good humour, in all directions. (Pulver 1970: 164-165)

1- Mai Kawabata published an excellent book devoted to Paganini's “demonic” reputation (*Paganini: The “Demonic” Virtuoso*, 2013 [Woodbridge: Boydell Press]). She traces the history and roots of the legends and offers her interpretation of his role in their creation.

He was compared with a cadaver, a ghost, or a demon. The poet Heinrich Heine called him a “vampyr with a violin” and described his “pale, corpse-like face, on which trouble, genius, and hell had graved their indelible marks” (Pulver 1970: 203-205).

Stories such as the one spread by Stendhal resulted as people tried to make the personality of the man consistent with the image they saw onstage. According to Franz Liszt,

The excitement he caused was so unusual, the magic that he practiced upon the fantasy of his hearers, so powerful that they could not satisfy themselves with a natural explanation. Old tales of witches and ghost stories came into their minds; they tried to . . . fathom the marvel of his genius in a supernatural way; they even whispered that he had dedicated his soul to the Evil One and that the fourth string of his violin was made of his wife’s intestines which he himself had cut out. (Sheppard, Axelrod 1979: 112)

Portraits and caricatures show us more about Paganini’s image in his contemporary culture and the perpetuation of these outlandish stories. I have examined nearly two hundred portraits dated within his lifetime. Paganini wrote that he found portraits, “faithful resemblances or not,” covering the wall of Paris (Sheppard, Axelrod 1979: 72). His image was nearly everywhere. In 1828 Vienna all the new fashions were à la Paganini. The men wore hats à la Paganini; walking canes bore casts of his head; snuff-boxes, buttons, buckles, ribbons, tea-cloths, and fans were adorned with his portrait. His face was imprinted in sugar, chocolate, and cakes, and bread was made in the shape of fiddles (Pulver 1970: 142-143).

Many of the portraits from his last twelve years follow the same morbid theme of the written descriptions. He sometimes looks corpse-like or crazed or is depicted in prison or with a witch’s broomstick. Figure 1 shows Paganini practicing in his jail cell, with a specter-like hand protruding from the wall to supernaturally guide his playing. In figure 2 Paganini performs a death dance, surrounded by various symbols of the occult: skeletons, a serpent, a nun, prostrated as if possessed.

Art historian Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer describes Paganini’s portraits, particularly the one by Eugène Delacroix, as belonging to a “self-consciously grotesque-abject aesthetic” cultivated by a small number of romantic modernists during the time. The grotesque abjection they sought “aimed to abolish the normative by inverting it or replacing it with marginalized and suppressed liminal notions,



Figure 1: Louis Boulanger, “Paganini en prison” (1831), lithograph, from *L’Artiste* (photo: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes).



Figure 2: Johann Peter Lyser, “Karikatur auf die Wiener Konzerte” (c. 1828), from the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

including the horrific and the uncanny” (ibid.). These portraits, and Paganini’s image in general, played into this foregrounding of the morbid.

Paganini noticed that his appearance was receiving attention to the point of overtaking notice of his playing. Writing from England in 1832, he observed in a letter to his friend and lawyer Luigi Germa, “Now no one ever asks if one has heard Paganini, but if one has seen him. To tell you the truth, I regret that there is a general opinion among all classes that I’m in collusion with the Devil. The papers talk too much about my outward appearance, which arouses incredible curiosity” (De Courcy 1957: 89).

How seriously should we take his despair over the attention given to his appearance? Did he really disapprove of the stir? Or did exploit it? Since at least the 1830s his observers recorded suspicions that he intentionally promoted a wayward image for publicity.² Scholars since then have debated this issue, in particular Mai Kawabata, author of *Paganini: The “Demonic” Virtuoso*, who upholds Paganini’s innocence of doing anything to initiate his sinister public presence. However, even scholars who maintain Paganini’s unintentionality recognize that his appearance fed public curiosity. According to Kawabata, “The focal point for the swirl of speculation and aura of mystery was Paganini’s decrepit body. It was a source of endless fascination to his

public: contorted, cadaverous, and disease-ravaged, it spoke of abnormality, alterity, excess” (Kawabata 2013: 36).

To a certain extent, Paganini couldn’t help his morbidity: he looked ill because he usually was. His hollow-cheeked visage resulted from having all of his teeth pulled (see figure 3) because of an inflammation and dying of cells in the jawbone (Sperati, Felisati 2005). He was treated for an ulcerative lesion in the soft palate of his mouth, for tuberculosis, and for syphilis, which he may not have actually had, but he certainly suffered from the mercury treatment (Kendall 1982: 129-130). He was an insomniac and malnourished, often going straight from traveling carriage to bed taking only black coffee (Sheppard, Axelrod 1979: 30). All these conditions contributed to his wasted form.



Figure 3: Fr. Hahn, “Niccolò Paganini” (1829), reproduced in Sheppard, Axelrod 1979: 102.

2- See an example in Ludolf Vineta, 1830, *Paganini's Leben und Charakter nach Schottky* (Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe), 23-24.

Though Paganini may have little control over the effects of his illnesses, he could, however, control other aspects of his appearance. Audiences frequently observed the eeriness of his dressing in dark, shabby, and ill-fitting clothes. Heine wrote a particularly graphic caricature:

At length a dark form appears on the stage, looking as if it had risen from the underworld. This was Paganini in his black gala-clothes: his black coat and vest of a terrible cut, such as is probably dictated by the hellish etiquette of Proserpine's court; his black trousers flapping disconsolately against his bony legs. (Pulver 1970: 203)

His wealth would have enabled him to dress fashionably, but he chose a Bohemian aesthetic instead (Sheppard, Axelrod 1979: 107). He wore his hair long and down in his face, flouting current men's fashion for clean, short cuts (see figure 4). He wore blue-tinted glasses while he performed. The Norwegian violinist Ole Bull recorded a vivid account of the show he made of putting on when he came out on stage, and the effect of the glasses making his face even more skull-like, with hollow caverns in place of eyes (Bull 1882: 375-376).



Figure 4: Image from a London–Paris fashion periodical, *Le Bon Ton*, 1840.
<http://www.rare-posters.com/p1935.html> (accessed 18 October 2014).

Athanassoglou-Kallmyer is one scholar who believes that Paganini purposefully played up a macabre image. She cites his visits to Paris to give concerts in 1832 when a cholera epidemic broke out. Visiting the city at this time was tantamount to suicide, as from March to September 18,000 deaths occurred in the city because of the disease (686). Paganini did not cancel his tour, but came for three months in the thick of it, March to June. He boasted to a friend, “Everybody is fleeing Paris because of the cholera . . . I amuse myself by watching them bury the victims at the cemetery” (ibid. 700). Again, public perception associated him with roguery. The *Journal des Débats* made his arrival synonymous with the epidemic: “Paganini . . . this black man, reappears in these days of plague” (ibid.).

Paganini himself spread his deviant image further when he wrote, on multiple occasions, to newspapers, retelling stories of his supposed time in jail and of the devil guiding his arm during performance. He claimed he was denying the “injurious reports propagated” against him, but his action was interpreted as yet another publicity stunt (Shepperd, Axelrod 1979: 71-77).

Some scholars believe that Paganini’s odd appearance, awkward movements, and unusual skill on the violin were attributable to a genetic abnormality called Marfan’s Syndrome, which results in a thin and bony figure, pale skin, and unusually flexible joints (Sperati, Felisati 2005; Schoenfeld 1978: 40-42). Marfan’s Syndrome was first medically described fifty-six years after Paganini’s death, so it is impossible to know if he had this syndrome or any similar condition, but his unusual flexibility certainly gave him the perfect physical build for his virtuosity. He is known to have been extremely flexible, especially in his hands. His physician Francesco Bennati reported that his hands could spread to twice their width. He could touch his thumb to his pinky behind his hand, and on the violin he could finger three octaves over three strings (see figure 5). His hand could also be especially compact—he could touch his thumb to the center of his palm, for instance (Kendall 1982: 52-53). All of these feats were useful for executing his iconic virtuosic tricks, such as quick, double-stop passages of harmonics, and playing left-hand pizzicato while simultaneously playing other notes with the bow.



Figure 7-1. The note span achieved by Niccolò Paganini on the violin compared to that of the author. The bottom note is controlled by the index finger while the upper note is accessed simultaneously by the fifth finger. The author’s finger span falls eight half tones short of that attained by Paganini.

Figure 5: The reach of Paganini compared with that of a more typical violinist today (Lewis 2010: 107).

Paganini's colleagues acknowledged that the fluidity of his hands enabled his skill, but they went beyond this and believed that the rest of his anatomy was strewn with telltale signs of genius. In the nineteenth-century, faith was strong in physiognomy, the pseudoscience corresponding psychological temperament and to anatomical features. Bennati described the physical attributes he considered indicative of Paganini's talent:

I will not analyze the features of his face, nor speak of the lump of melody, which is strongly developed at the outer angle of his forehead; I will merely show him in his entirety as an organism made expressly, one might say, for attaining the highest perfection as an executant musician, which he has reached, and based on this I hope to demonstrate the truth of an opinion which I have given, *namely*, that the superiority of the celebrated violinist is less a result of continued practice, as has been averred, but rather of special physical fitness . . . His head alone should have made Paganini a distinguished composer, a musician of the highest standing; but without his delicate sense of rhythm, the build of his body, his shoulders, arms and hands, he could never have been the incomparable virtuoso whom we all admire. (Prod'homme 1927: 16)

Bennati's report shows that Paganini's propensity for melody was apparent in the shape of his forehead, which gave him a special physical fitness for being a performer and composer. He continues to describe the overall impression Paganini gave:

A high forehead, broad and massive, an aquiline and very characteristic nose, beautifully arched eyebrows, a mobile, malicious mouth, slightly resembling Voltaire's, large protruding ears, standing well off from the head, long black hair falling carelessly to his shoulders and contrasting with his pale skin, gave Paganini's appearance an extraordinary case, and to a certain degree testified to his undeniable genius. (Ibid.)

Berlioz, in his *Mémoires*, also describes Paganini's striking physical appearance, in particular his "piercing eyes" and "strange and ravaged face," as a testament to his "genius" (Kendall 1982: 98).

It was the particular kind of genius that Paganini embodied which made him all the more interesting to his audience. He was the Romantic ideal of the tortured genius, a creature delicately hovering in the balance between physical deprivation and inner greatness. The Romantic genius sacrifices his body to his gifts, fighting debilitation, even receiving inspiration from it. Paganini's overcoming his wide range of physical illness to perform with such ability made him a hero. Liszt could hardly contain his impressions of Paganini when he wrote, "What a man! What a fiddler, what an artist! Heavens! What suffering and misery, what tortures dwell in those four strings!" (Pulver 1970: 216).

Paganini was indeed tortured, in body and in soul. In an internal war, he fought against the image that gave him so much success. He was conflicted over the disapproval meeting his reputation, the same reputation that brought him professional success. "I don't do anyone harm," he confided in a friend, "and yet people who don't know me make out that I am an utterly wicked, greedy and objectionable person" (V born 1961: 348). In some ways, Paganini had molded himself into this tragedy.

The duality of Paganini's wasted appearance and godlike skill relates to the characteristics described in Joseph Roach's 2010 book simply titled *It*. "It" is the quality distinguishing "abnormally interesting people" from the rest of us and bestowing on them the rare ability to capture the public's attention (Roach 2010: 1). People who have "It" contain opposing qualities within themselves in a

way that intrigues and attracts observers. Roach explains, “‘It’ is the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality” (Ibid. 8). This involves carrying a set of charismata and stigmata—charismata being qualities of strength, and stigmata being qualities of weakness. Paradoxically, the stigmata work in a person’s favor because because deficiencies must be there to fight against, or else the player becomes boring. The tension between strength and weakness creates a “mesmerizing interplay” for the audience (Ibid. 36). Paganini’s audience understood that he conveyed this push and pull, as he posed the charisma of supreme musical skill against the stigma of physical weakness.

Paganini housed a perfect combination of elements to make him a sensation. He was a true virtuoso of his own right: he had incredible technical facility, he sight read like none other, he improvised, he performed violinistic tricks that tickled his audience’s thirst for thrill. But added to this, his physical body played a crucial role in the creation of his image. His singularity was in part naturally endowed by illness and malformation, and in part effected by dress and gossip. His body adapted to its malformations to create its own advantages, helping him play violin, but also creating a visual representation of creative genius. According to Schottky, Paganini’s early biographer, he would not have been as effective if he had not battled against his body: “[His] peculiarities make of him an original, reminiscent of the spiritual and of all that is antithetical to the everyday . . . it would have been a real error if Nature had given him more flesh” (Pulver 1970: 165).

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