

Paganini or *The Devil's Violinist*?

By Bernd Reinhardt
14 December 2013

Written and directed by Bernard Rose

The life of Italian violin virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), continues to be largely a myth inflated by legend. The German-Italian feature film *The Devil's Violinist* (scripted and directed by Bernard Rose) does little to debunk the legends or honour Paganini's genuine artistic achievements. While German actor Klaus Kinski's earlier film, *Paganini* (1989), presented the violinist as a "mad genius", the makers of *The Devil's Violinist* irritatingly portray Paganini as a "rock star of the 19th century".

In Rose's film, we see Paganini becoming an undisputed star in London in 1830. Until then he has often had to resort to cheap antics to draw attention to himself. He meets the manager Urbani (Jared Harris), who one immediately recognises is involved with "dark forces". And, in fact, Paganini sells him his soul for money and fame. Now the great concert halls are open to him. Young ladies shriek as soon as the "devil's fiddler" positions his bow—if they haven't already fallen into a swoon.

Paganini is played by German-born violinist David Garrett (born David Bongarz in 1980), who certainly has a mastery of his instrument. However, even in the concert scenes, the film fails to genuinely take off. The production is shallow and boring on the whole, including its overwrought scenes of public hysteria. Garrett's Paganini spouts clichés such as "I live only for music", and the film builds toward a kitschy love story. Paganini meets Charlotte (Andrea Deck), a young singer, not very talented but pretty. He gives her singing lessons and predictably she blossoms under his guidance.

The film's mild criticism of the commercialisation of art consists of fashionable platitudes. The message seems to be: there's a devil inside each one of us. Or, in a more secular vein, people are never safe from their unconscious hunger for wealth and fame. In the end, Charlotte also treads the same thin show business ice, which has just broken under Paganini.

Somewhere in the film a character even drops the phrase "culture industry" or "music industry". And in the person of Paganini arriving in foggy London, the viewer might momentarily think he or she sees—wearing dark glasses and holding a handkerchief to his mouth—Michael Jackson in the carriage. Paganini is confronted by a demonstration of angry women incited by the press to protest against the foreigner and alleged child molester.

At several points, *Paganini* stages scenes of crowds whipped up into fanaticism by the media. However, the filmmakers seem incapable of imagining that art itself could have the power to inspire and exalt people. The Paganini of the film becomes a megastar, thanks to clever advertising and stage management. As

his star declines, the fickle public again call on him to perform his early tricks. All of this has little to do with the real Paganini.

Niccolò Paganini was born into a poor family in Genoa. His father was a dock worker and self-taught musician who tried to supplement the family income by gambling. His mother was a simple woman who could barely read and write, but loved music. Even as a small child, Niccolò busied himself with mandolin, fiddle and guitar. He received his first lessons from his father. Aided by a Genoese merchant and patron of the arts, the boy received a number of violin lessons from a reputable musician and completed his first public performance, winning adulation from the surrounding community.

Before his father sent him to Parma to continue instruction under distinguished musicians in 1795, the 13-year-old gave a performance of one of his own compositions in Genoa. The Carmagnola consist of 14 variations on a popular French revolutionary song. Most of the inhabitants of Genoa were supporters of the Jacobins in France and welcomed the Ligurian Republic (1797-1805), which replaced the old aristocratic regime following Napoleon's invasion of Italy. Napoleon quickly proved a bitter disappointment. By the time Niccolò returned to Genoa at the end of 1797, the population had been forced to provide for the French army and was reduced to starvation.

After the fall of Napoleon, the Ligurian Republic, briefly restored in 1814, was dissolved for good by the Congress of Vienna under the leadership of Austrian foreign minister Prince Metternich in 1815. The old feudal powers were back in charge. Paganini was never again to play the Carmagnola variations. Instead, the Vienna Hoftheater resounded in 1828 to his variations on Haydn's hymn, "God Save Kaiser Franz", today known as the German national anthem. In Berlin a year later, he first performed his variations on the German emperor's hymn, "Hail to Thee in Victor's Crown", which he then conveniently presented as "God Save the King"—variations on the English national anthem—in London in 1830. (It is the same tune.) Notwithstanding its reception by the crowned heads of Europe, Paganini's music continued to express the unbridled energy of the Carmagnola.

Viennese classical music of the time reached its height in the works of Beethoven (1770-1827), which evoked the spirit of revolutionary ideals. "Be embraced, you millions. This kiss is for the whole world", declared the Ninth Symphony in the words of Schiller's poem. Napoleon's conquests had meant that this "kiss" ended in disappointment. But Paganini's music does not share Beethoven's pathos. The theatrically pompous orchestral inserts in the first movement of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 are charged with a sense of irony.

Paganini and Beethoven represented very different musical traditions. Beethoven's work expressed the high level of development reached by instrumental music in Austria-Hungary. His music unfolds to the listener in complex musical patterns. Paganini was influenced by the artistically and technically demanding culture of Italian opera. His virtuoso compositions appeal directly and spontaneously, often more improvised than composed. Like other Italian composers, he incorporated catchy folk music themes, as in "Il Carneval di Venezia". He was more concerned than was Beethoven with the development of melody. The orchestra essentially served to accompany the soloist.

Paganini explored the possibilities of the solo violin, developing new playing techniques and sounds. He often tuned the instrument to a higher pitch than usual. Exploiting his breathtaking virtuosity, he expanded the violin's conventional tonal range. (Several works, like the "Sonata Napoleone" or "Le Streghe [Witches Dance]", are played on a single string.) He employed reinforced harmonics (*flageoletttöne*) and developed a whole system of artificially generated harmonics that often seem to consist of two sounds. His handling of the bow was as impressive as it was dynamic. His trademark was a virtuoso plucking technique.

The effect of this music could be overwhelming. In the wake of the Congress of Vienna and the restoration of various European monarchies, at a time of considerable disillusionment, an individual managed to do the apparently impossible: create a new world—through art. Goethe, who heard Paganini in Weimar, referred to his music as "meteoric", a "flaming column of cloud".

At the same time, many so-called serious listeners were outraged by his alleged "bad taste" and lack of respect—for example, Paganini's habit of arbitrarily reinterpreting the works of other composers (not that this was unique to him during this period). Nor was he considered to have shown the Catholic Church the required reverence. During solemn mass in Lucca Cathedral, the "Jacobin" Paganini played—as was noted in contemporary records—not only for an indecently long time. He also imitated various musical instruments and animals on his violin.

Paganini loved making such jokes. His repertoire included a Spanish dance in which he imitated bird calls. This would have been nothing unusual in the 17th or 18th century. His attitude toward the audience was communicative, even provocative. He imitated the braying of a donkey in a concert in Ferrara, and dedicated it to a member of the audience who had insulted a female vocalist. In the "La Campanella" section of the Violin Concerto No. 2, a little bell rings from the audience several times, and each time receives a friendly answer from the violin on stage.

This juxtaposition of the "divine" and the profane played a major role in creating Paganini's reputation as a "charlatan". This was unfair. Music for him simply had nothing to do with elitism. He was certainly influenced in this respect by the Enlightenment. His concerts were invariably memorable social events. He also refused to compose so-called "utility music" (*Gebrauchsmusik*) for domestic amateur music-makers. According to music historian Edward Neill, this made Paganini—together with a few others—a real pioneer. Paganini liked playing for fun and was always ready in friendly company to pick up a mandolin, guitar or violin.

Paganini influenced European music as a whole and a great

number of musicians and composers, including Liszt, Chopin and Schumann. Both human and artistic humility are evident in his public genuflection in Paris to the young composer Hector Berlioz, whose talent he recognised earlier than others, whose *Symphonie Fantastique* he venerated, and whom he supported with a generous donation. Despite his rough edges, Paganini was not the eccentric egoist of Rose's film, who prefers to spend the day in bed—that is, when he is not plodding dreamy-eyed through the various locations.

The Church took revenge on Paganini for his disrespect. When he died in Nice in 1840, the church refused to bury the "infidel". The odyssey of his remains continued for more than thirty years, until he was finally interred in Parma in 1876, thanks to close friends and his son, Achille. Paganini's birthplace in Genoa sadly fell victim to highway construction some years ago. His favourite violin is kept in the Genoa town hall. Paganini's 24 Caprices for Solo Violin, dedicated to "all artists", are known by every violin student. His marvellous, invigorating music still inspires many violinists, including David Garrett, all around the world.

Rose's film fails to capture the spirit of Paganini's times and the qualities of this exceptional artist even in their basics. Striving to cater for modernity, *Paganini* prefers to recycle hackneyed notions about the backwardness of the masses and mass audiences. Its feeble criticism of show business is actually directed against the public. The masses constitute a bloodthirsty vampire that sucks the artist dry and deserts him at a whim. This standpoint aligns with the thinking of much of the nobility of the time, which virulently opposed artistic democratisation. In the view of the aristocracy art that touched the hearts of the people, ceased to be art.

YouTube links: "God save the King", Interpreter: Frank-Peter Zimmermann Violin Concerto No.1, Interpreter: Leonid Kogan Il Carneval di Venezia, Interpreter: David Garrett Sonata Napoleon, Interpreter: Salvatore Accardo Variazioni sull Mosé, Interpreter: Antal Zalai Dal tuo stellato soglio, G. Rossini Duo merveille Sonata per violino solo, C major, Ning Feng La Campagnella, Mario Hossen Capriccio No. 5, Nathan Milstein

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>