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MUSIC REVIEW

## For Paganini, a Wild and Devilish Lifestyle Fueled Some Virtuoso Compositions

Rachel Barton Pine Performs at Rockefeller University

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER Published: March 22, 2012



With his sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll lifestyle, Paganini (1782-1840) provided plenty of fodder for 19th-century gossipmongers. A womanizer and gambler, he further fueled his legend by frequent concert cancellations, often stemming from a range of ailments including syphilis and depression. His prodigious technique gave rise to rumors that he was in league with the Devil.

As the violinist Rachel Barton Pine said during her performance of Paganini's 24 Caprices (Op. 1) at the Caspary

Auditorium of Rockefeller University on Wednesday evening, audience members even claimed to have seen witches turning pages for him onstage.

Playing all 24 of these virtuoso showpieces in one concert is a rare feat and an arduous task. Ms. Pine carried it out with aplomb, interspersing the caprices with her engaging commentary.

The caprices, written in the early 19th century and published around 1819, were initially deemed unplayable. Paganini was inspired by earlier composers, including Pietro Locatelli, whose 24 Caprices were published in the 1730s as "L'Arte di Nuova Modulazione: Capricci Enigmatici" ("The Art of the New Style: Enigmatic Caprices"). The technical innovations of August Duranowski, including his use of harmonics and left-hand pizzicatos, also fueled Paganini's imagination.

Ms. Pine said that the uncanny flexibility and dexterity of Paganini, who had unusually long, thin fingers, might have been caused by Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connective tissue.

Two hours of Paganini can lead to fatigue for the listener (to say nothing of the performer), but Ms. Pine illuminated the poetic moments within the bombast of the caprices, each of which focuses on a different technical element.

She played with soulful élan in No. 2 and in No. 4, with its multiple stops, and deftly conquered the frenetic arpeggios of the fiendish No. 5, which uses a bouncing ricochet bow technique. The weeping trills sounded beautiful in her expressive rendition of the lamentlike No. 6.

Ms. Pine said she used to find No. 12 the "most awkward and annoying of the caprices," and it is easy to see why, although she played it gracefully. She displayed a lovely tone in the operatic melodies of No. 21. The set concluded with No. 24, which inspired Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.

In keeping with 19th-century virtuoso spirit, Ms. Pine offered her own composition as an encore, the nimble Intro, Theme and Variations on "God Defend New Zealand," one of that country's two national anthems.