

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 29 January 2024
1.00pm

Fabio Biondi violin
Giangiacomo Pinardi guitar

- Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840) Sonata No. 6 in A from *Centone di sonate* (after 1828)
I. Larghetto cantabile • II. Rondo. Allegro assai
- Sonata No. 7 in F from *Centone di sonate* (after 1828)
I. Allegro giusto • II. Polacca. Andantino allegretto
- Sonata concertata in A (1804)
I. Allegro spiritoso • II. Adagio assai espressivo • III. Allegretto con brio, scherzando
- Sonata in A minor Op. 3 No. 4 (c.1805)
I. Andante largo • II. Allegretto motteggiando
- Sonata No. 2 in D from *Centone di sonate* (after 1828)
I. Adagio cantabile • II. Rondocino. Andantino morendo. Tempo di polacca
- Sonata No. 12 in D from *Centone di sonate* (after 1828)
I. Andante cantabile • II. Rondo. Allegretto



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The legend of Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840) as a violin virtuoso, as a cultural icon, as a demonic cult-figure, has eclipsed the life of the musician. His reputation as a composer resides in a mere handful of works - the *24 Caprices*, one or two violin concertos including *La Campanella*, the *Moto Perpetuo*. Yet behind the familiar public image of technical wizardry and of his rise as the archetypal hero (or anti-hero) of Romanticism, there was a more private side to the violinist. He was equally comfortable picking up the mandolin or the guitar and equally at home in intimate surroundings. As a boy, Nicolò had received his first lessons on the violin and the mandolin (instruments which share the same tuning) from his father, Antonio Paganini, who was a dock worker in the port town of Genoa. One of his earliest compositions was a set of variations on the French revolutionary song 'La Carmagnole' for violin and guitar. Nicolò went on to compose about a hundred works for solo guitar; among his first published works, by Ricordi in 1820, were sonatas for violin and guitar and several guitar quartets, i.e. violin, viola, cello and guitar. One of his last compositions was a set of variations on the Genoese song 'Barucabà' for violin and guitar. The guitar was a constant presence throughout his life.

The *Sonata concertata* (1804) and the 6 Sonatas Op. 3 (c.1805) date from a period when the young Paganini was employed in the court orchestra at Lucca by Napoleon's sister Elisa and her husband Prince Felice Baciocchi. In contrast to the technically demanding *Sonata Napoleone* (to be played on one string, scordatura or 'mistuned'), which also dates from around this time, these violin and guitar sonatas are light and conversational in tone, devoid of the flashy technical display that has become synonymous with Paganini's name. The epoch-making tours which made Paganini a household name were still more than 20 years away.

The *Sonata concertata*, in A major, comprises three contrasting movements (a fast movement in sonata form; a slow movement with singing lines; and a dance-like rondeau) with a structure that is Classical, even Mozartian.

The 6 Sonatas Op. 3 were dedicated to a certain 'ragazza Eleanora' which instantiates the composer's characteristic obsession with young women; the sonatas follow the pattern slow-fast, again providing opportunities for both players to demonstrate lyrical

and dance-like playing. The fourth sonata in the set is in A minor and includes a polacca, a favourite dance type of Paganini's.

The *Centone di sonate*, meaning 'Potpourri' or 'Anthology', refers to 18 sonatas (three sets of six) for violin and guitar. The title was not the composer's own and was probably added after his death. Paganini's manuscript carries only the indications Letter A (for the Sonatas Nos. 1-6), Letter B (for the Sonatas Nos. 7-12) and Letter C (for the Sonatas Nos. 13-18). The Sonatas were possibly composed in Prague sometime after 1828 - the year Paganini set out on his first Europe-wide tour. Again, each sonata comprises two contrasting movements in which singing lines give way to a dance such as a polacca or a rondeau. It is unknown why Paganini composed these sonatas, especially at a time when he was preparing to conquer Europe's concert halls with his exceptional soloism and virtuosity. They might have been composed for a specific patron - for instance, we know that back in 1824, Paganini had stayed with retired general Domenico Pino, an amateur guitarist, at his villa on Lake Como, playing duets together while the violinist was undergoing various treatments for venereal diseases.

With the exception of two sonatas in C major and one in F major, the *Centone di sonate* are all in keys based on the open strings of the violin. While the violin and guitar sonatas are idiomatically written, with opportunities for improvised or semi-improvised flourishes in both parts but especially for the violinist, they are not primarily vehicles for virtuosity. They do not call for scordatura, playing on one string, double harmonics, runs in parallel intervals, perpetual motion, ricochet, or flying staccato. Neither are they expressions of Gothic supernaturalism associated with the 'demonic', 'devilish' or 'death-like' characterisations that followed Paganini in his hey-day. Rather, these sonatas are atmospheric and divertimento-like.

There is no evidence that Paganini ever performed his violin and guitar sonatas in public settings. Rather, the sonatas were probably intended for private soirées and, following publication, for a market of domestic music making in 19th-century households where chamber music was cultivated.

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