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FRANCESCA DEGGO

THE ITALIAN VIOLINIST IS GRANTED
THE RARE OPPORTUNITY TO RECORD
ON PAGANINI'S 'IL CANNONE' GUARNERI

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For Italian violinist Francesca Dego, the opportunity to perform and record on Paganini's 'Il Cannone' Guarneri 'del Gesù' of 1743 was a dream come true. She shares with **Tom Stewart** her experiences with the rarely accessed instrument – which came complete with security guards and its own dressing room



CHANCE OF A *LIFETIME*



Francesca Dego performs Paganini's First Violin Concerto on 'Il Cannone' at a celebratory concert at Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, Italy, in October 2019

The poster on the wall of Francesca Dego's childhood bedroom wasn't of just any old violin. Made by Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesù' in 1743, this was the instrument described by Nicolò Paganini as 'il mio cannone' ('my cannon') on account of its explosive sound. 'My father was a violin enthusiast and a big, big fan of all things Paganini,' Dego says. 'When I was eleven or twelve, he took me to Genoa to see "Il Cannone" in its glass case at the Palazzo Doria-Tursi, and the experience really left its mark.'

In 2008, when Dego was 19, she reached the final of Genoa's Paganini Competition, which has traditionally offered the winner the chance to perform, albeit briefly, on the legendary instrument. 'I entered to win those famous five minutes,' she says. 'But I didn't – and by then the violin was being even more carefully protected. Opportunities to get close to it were becoming even rarer.' Dego's time came at last, however, when in 2019 she was invited to play Paganini's First Violin Concerto on 'Il Cannone' for the celebrations of the arch-virtuoso's birthday in Genoa – a city with which she has always had close connections. And soon after that she persuaded the instrument's guardians to allow her just three days with it, to make her first recording for UK label Chandos.

At the very end of Paganini's will, just before he commends his soul 'to the infinite mercy of my Creator' (a blow to the theory that his dazzling skill originated in a pact with the Devil), he writes that his instrument should be given to the city of Genoa, 'onde sia perpetuamente conservato' ('in order that it be >

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‘FOR A LONG TIME
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Top and bottom Dego examines Paganini's 'del Gesù' violin



perpetually conserved’). Those last two words have had players and curators scratching their heads ever since. What does it mean to protect something for all time? ‘There isn’t an obvious answer,’ says Dego, ‘and for a long time the violin was made available to a number of soloists, as well as to the competition winners. That isn’t the case today, though.’ Part of the reason, Dego explains, is in the detail of Paganini’s bequest. “Il Cannone” doesn’t belong to one museum, collection or institution; it’s the property of the city of Genoa, which means decisions about its future involve many different parties. Understandably, nobody wants to be responsible for anything going wrong.’

After the city’s mayor and culture secretary had approved the recording project, the ultimate decision lay with Bruce Carlson, the instrument’s chief curator since 2000. ‘He has the veto,’ says Dego, ‘and he has been known to prevent the instrument from being used in a performance if he doesn’t like the way it’s being treated in rehearsal. Bruce is the one you really need to convince!’ The violin was accompanied by curators and security guards at all times: ‘They were on stage with me for the 2019 performance, when the instrument also had a dressing room that was bigger than mine. On each day I spent with it for the recording, a curator would hand it to me in the morning and I’d have to pass it back to them if I wanted to put it down or leave the room.’ Before the violin was put away each evening, its strings were loosened to relieve the tension on its body. ‘It’s as if you’ve put them on fresh at the start of each session; they don’t stay in tune for very long. Having to retune all the time is time-consuming in a recording session, but it’s much more of a problem when you’ve got a live audience and a 40-minute concerto to get to the end of.’

Before her 2019 performance on ‘Il Cannone’, however, Dego had only two hours to get to know the instrument. Rehearsing with the orchestra, she played her own violin – a 1697 Francesco Rugeri – before the Guarneri ‘del Gesù’ was transferred, along with its omnipresent contingent of guards, to the Teatro Carlo Felice. ‘It was simultaneously a dream come true and the most stressful thing imaginable!’ she says. ‘The violin feels a little longer than average, and it seems to get bigger as you work your way up the fingerboard; I would start an arpeggio perfectly happily but feel less and less secure the higher I climbed.’ Although its greater distances made playing ‘Il Cannone’ a tiring experience, other aspects of its personality were more familiar: ‘Funnily enough, I fell in love with my Rugeri because it has the depth and projection I associate with “del Gesù” instruments. “Il Cannone” is the same – its G string brings you as close as possible to the voice of the cello and its E string can really pierce your brain. I recently read a letter that Paganini sent to a friend before he was given “Il Cannone”. He asks him to look out for a violin with particular volume on the G and E. ▸



DeGo tests the instrument backstage before her 2019 performance in Genoa

It's rare to focus so much on the qualities of the E string when looking for an instrument, perhaps because it's more difficult to find one with real depth of sound in the lowest register. The violin is most distinctive when it's soaring at the top of its range, though, so for me it's just as important as the lower end.'

Before playing 'Il Cannone' for the first time, DeGo had heard from Salvatore Accardo about a notorious wolf note around the high C on its G string. 'The sound is so loud and powerful until, all of a sudden, you hit a weird gurgle. It's as if one of the notes just doesn't exist. There's a long section in the first movement of Paganini's First Violin Concerto that sits right up there on the G string. It's like a suicide mission.' Since Paganini wrote the piece around two decades after he began playing on 'Il Cannone' (c.1802), might this hold a clue to his attitude towards the instrument? 'The thinking seems to be that something like the wolf note would have been lurking on the instrument from the beginning,' she says. 'Our perception of perfection today is different. "Il Cannone" was Paganini's favourite violin; if he hadn't thought it was up to scratch, he wouldn't have spent 40 years playing on it.'

The instrument features on recordings by Massimo Quarta of Paganini's violin concertos and by Ruggiero Ricci of his 24 Caprices; Ilya Gringolts, Gidon Kremer and Isabelle Faust are among those who have had the chance to play a work on it; and the violin made its jazz debut in 2002 when US artist Regina Carter recorded her album *Paganini: After a Dream*. In 2004, an investigation into the physical condition of the violin concluded that the instrument was

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spending more time out of its case than is good for it. 'That was the cut-off,' DeGo says. 'The decision was taken not to allow it to travel except in very special circumstances' – one recent example of which was in May 2019, when it was the jewel in the crown of a cultural exchange between Genoa (birthplace of Christopher Columbus) and its sister city Columbus, Ohio. On this occasion it was played by Columbus Symphony concertmaster Joanna Frankel, though nowadays it generally is heard in public only once per year, in celebration of Paganini's birthday on 27 October.

There is a consensus among players and luthiers alike that to keep an instrument in playing condition – to preserve its >

‘DEL GESÙ’ AND ‘IL CANNONE’

‘Il Cannone’ is probably the best-preserved Guarneri ‘del Gesù’ violin in the world today. It reacts surprisingly well to the player and is always ready to roar again.

The varnish is immediately striking – so rich and deep is the colour and ground, and so sensitive and pure, since it was never spoiled by polishing varnish.

The scroll represents the late ‘del Gesù’ style very well due to its wild carving and a certain disregard for the Cremonese tradition. ‘Il Cannone’ retains its original neck, which is slightly shorter than usual, and long stop length, which is peculiar on a fairly small violin and ensures that the long asymmetrical f-holes of Brescian inspiration are particularly striking. The high ribs and full arching of the plates, which still bear the original graduation, create a solid soundbox, enhanced by spontaneous edge work mainly achieved with a knife.

The relationship between this bold structure and the instrument’s sound remains amazing to this day, and reveals the maker’s attitude to sound engineering. ‘Del Gesù’ was experimenting with personal and innovative solutions which have yet to be fully investigated. **Alberto Giordano**



music making abilities – it must be played at least semi-regularly. But however well a violin is looked after, there is a limit to how long it can be played before it has been repaired so many times that it bears little resemblance to its original state, or the whole thing crumbles completely. The decision to stop violinists, no matter how distinguished, from performing on ‘Il Cannone’ reflects a shift away from the belief that antique stringed instruments must be played to be preserved. If we truly want them to last forever, might a museum plinth be the best place after all?

At one end of this spectrum is Stradivari’s 1716 violin known as the ‘Messiah’, which has reposed beatifically in its case at Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum since 1939, when it was donated by the Hill family as ‘a yardstick for future violin makers to learn from’. The gleaming violin has barely been played since Stradivari applied his final coat of varnish, and as a physical object it could hardly be any better preserved. But while the impact of countless silent decades on the instrument’s tonal qualities remains unknown, it is widely suspected to have been severe.

The evolving policies of the politicians and curators in Genoa reflect an eagerness to keep ‘Il Cannone’ sounding as good as it did under Paganini’s fingers, and at the same time to follow the letter of his bequest. Among the repairs carried out by Alberto Giordano in 2004 under Carlson’s watch to keep the violin in proper working order was the replacement of Paganini’s bridge with a new one that would make it easier for the player’s bow to clear the treble C-bout (whose edge was ‘worn, just as Paganini had left it’, according to Carlson).

Choosing which repertoire to record, Dego didn’t take the all-Paganini path of her predecessors Quarta and Ricci, but she still kept him at the heart of her selection. ‘I’ve been envisioning a recording of homages to Paganini for a long time – I just never expected to be playing it on his violin,’ she says. She has already recorded a significant body of his music, beginning with two caprices on her 2005 debut disc (on the Sipario Dischi label), and releasing a complete cycle of 24 Caprices in 2012 followed by the composer’s First Violin Concerto in 2017 (both DG). ‘Paganini is someone with whom I have a very...’ she pauses, ‘a very close love–hate relationship. I grew up with the idea of his music being the violinist’s “Mount Everest”, and that’s still how I feel today – he was a revolutionary who transformed the relationship between player and instrument. Playing Paganini is like playing Mozart: everything has to be crystal clear. With Paganini, though, you might feel you have something worked out but it will go on to

‘PAGANINI WAS A REVOLUTIONARY WHO TRANSFORMED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLAYER AND INSTRUMENT. I GREW UP REGARDING HIS MUSIC AS THE VIOLINIST’S “MOUNT EVEREST”’



DeGo listens to her latest take with pianist Francesca Leonardi (standing) during recording sessions for the 'Il Cannone' album

betray you. I've played his First Violin Concerto so many times but it's still the piece I fear the most.'

Paganini might not have written them, but the number of works with the title 'caprice' on DeGo's new disc are perhaps testament to his influence. John Corigliano's *The Red Violin Caprices* (1999) appear alongside Kreisler's op.6 *Recitativo und Scherzo-Caprice*, Szymanowski's *Three Paganini Caprices* op.40 and Schnittke's hair-raising 1982 work *A Paganini*, which takes the older composer's caprices as its starting point. As well as a world premiere, *Come d'autunno* (2019) by Italian composer Carlo Boccadoro, the album features the first recording of Paganini's op.17 *Cantabile* and a little-known work by Rossini titled *Un mot à Paganini*, written a couple of decades after Paganini's death in 1840. 'It's a very sweet, touching piece that rarely gets played,' DeGo explains. 'Paganini and Rossini were great friends – and Paganini learnt a lot from the bel canto operatic style of people like Rossini. Knowing that, you get a completely different impression of Paganini from the usual "devil's fiddler" cliché.'

Another friendship at work on the disc is that of DeGo and pianist Francesca Leonardi. 'We've been playing together for 16 years now, and when I mentioned to Fazioli that we were recording with Paganini's violin, straight away they were emphatic the piano had to be one of theirs. They wanted a modern Italian instrument next to a legend of Italian glory. No way could it have been a Steinway!'

After she and Leonardi had finished their recording of *La campanella* (a familiar showpiece arrangement by Kreisler of the last movement of Paganini's Second Violin Concerto), DeGo headed into what was, for 'Il Cannone', uncharted territory. 'The Schnittke is a real spiral of craziness, and it wasn't what the curators and security guards were expecting to hear. I had a feeling they would hear one bar and stop me right there, so I thought the best thing was just to go for it. Right at the end, when I have to tune the G string down to a C sharp, they shot me a look as if to say, "OK, now you're really testing us."'

Writing (with characteristic hyperbole) in the November 1917 issue of *The Lotus Magazine*, Scottish violinist William C. Honeyman imagined a grim future for the 'Il Cannone' Guarneri 'del Gesù':

The magic violin, it was found, Paganini had bequeathed to his native town, Genoa, with the fatal request that it was never to be played upon by any other, which, alas! was simply signing its death-warrant. A peculiarity of wood is that as long as it is handled and used it lives, and wears but little; but whenever it is laid aside it immediately begins to decay, and become the prey of insects. This magic violin, for which ten thousand pounds were offered and refused, and which might have thrilled the world for hundreds of years to come with its heart-searching tone, is becoming worm-eaten in its grand glass case in the Municipal Palace of Genoa, and will soon be a little heap of worthless dust. So passeth away the glory of the world.

A little heap of worthless dust? Well, not quite (and despite the best efforts of Schnittke's scordatura). Since Honeyman's time, the spruce and maple of 'Il Cannone' have been reanimated again and again by some of the world's finest players. DeGo's new disc might be the last to capture its famous sound for the time being, but it seems unlikely that the city of Genoa will allow the violin to fall victim to woodworm any time soon. During her few days with the instrument, DeGo was struck by how tenderly it was regarded by its security personnel. 'They had a lot of questions about the violin they guarded but could never touch,' she says. 'It even had a code name, so after the curator finished putting it back into the case you would hear a guard say into his walkie-talkie, "We're on the move with Pinocchio." It struck me as the perfect fit – a little boy made of wood who one day comes alive.' ●

WIN FRANCESCA DEGO'S 'IL CANNONE' RECORDING

DeGo's recording on Paganini's 'Il Cannone' violin with pianist Francesca Leonardi is released by Chandos on 26 February. To win one of ten signed copies, submit your details at bit.ly/3t3vrft
Closing date 30 April 2021

