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The image of the virtuoso developed extensively over time, and even at the pinnacle of the Romantic virtuoso's success in the nineteenth century, musical virtuosity was received in different, even conflicting, ways. One thing is certain: throughout the nineteenth century, the performances and performers themselves became more and more spectacular. This new level of exhibitionism, considered by some essential, and by others detrimental, was an unprecedented step in the development of music in the Romantic era. Despite its controversial nature, many contemporary writers recognized this development. A great deal of information, and diverse opinions, still remain on the varying degrees of the virtuoso spectacular.

Whether deliberate managerial attempts were taken, or whether it happened by coincidence, the virtuoso came to resemble our modern-day celebrity. Rumours circulated, sketches passed around and mythical comparisons were drawn. Paganini was rumoured to have honed his skill as a violinist while incarcerated for four years after “strangling his wife in a fit of violent rage.”¹ This was quite certainly fictitious, but it shows the impression the public had of this virtuoso performer

¹ Louis Spohr, *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 280.

and the resulting tabloid-like rumours. Other, more deliberate, steps were taken to raise this virtuoso's celebrity status. In an 1831 account of a Paganini concert, Leigh Hunt, a theatre critic writing for *The Tatler* in London, regarded obvious misinformation dubbing it his "fifth and last concert" as a "managerial trick". Hunt argues that this was something that the public was accustomed to and should be prepared for.² Clearly this was not an irregular occurrence; occasionally, manipulative measures would be taken to procure publicity for these performers.

There was a tremendous fascination with the appearance of these performers. A variety of sculptures, paintings and sketches can be found depicting the virtuoso both conventionally and, in many cases, with exaggerated features. One Viennese designer apparently stated that Liszt "might sit to every painter for a Grecian god."³ In examining some of the circulating artistic depictions of these virtuosos, one finds evidence of the effort put forth to demonstrate the virtuoso's iconic, and even mythical, status. In the sketch of Liszt in *Liszt, the All-Conquering Pianist*, a report sent in by the Viennese correspondent of Germany's leading musical journal, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, the adoring crowd is predominantly female and they throw flowers to him in admiration. Also, Liszt is portrayed with extremely long, slender fingers.⁴ Such an exaggerated portrayal of the performer's hands was very common. The 19th-century sculptor Dantan offers another example with his sculptures of Liszt, Thalberg, and

² Leigh Hunt, "Paganini, the Spectacular Virtuoso," in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed., edited by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 291.

³ Robert Schumann, *Music and Musicians: Essays and Criticism by Robert Schumann*, vol. 1, ed. Fanny Raymond Ritter (London: William Reeves, 1920), 148.

⁴ Anonymous review, "Liszt, the All-Conquering Pianist," in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed., edited by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 309.

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Paganini, all of which demonstrate exaggerated musical features. For example, Thalberg is portrayed with four hands, six fingers on each.⁵ Other images illustrate a more negative aspect of this mythical association. For instance, Paganini is portrayed in a devilish or sorcerer-like fashion, as if he sold his soul, or participated in some other dark activity to achieve his skill.

Appearance was a carefully cultivated part of the virtuoso. There was a clear desire by the public to not only hear, but also to see these performers. One account describes a concert where “a polite Lady somebody...actually rose, against all English convention, and stood on tiptoe to stare at the artist’s hands. The ladies near her imitated her example, until at last the whole audience was standing...”⁶ There was an undeniable desire to see the virtuoso, which was seen as a positive development for some and seen negatively by others. Wagner notes, “it is the work of art, purely reproduced, that should step before us, and never the distracting individuality of the performer.”⁷ On the other hand, Schumann states that the virtuoso “must be heard,—and also seen; for if Liszt played behind the scenes, a great deal of the poetry of his playing would be lost.”⁸

The spectacle of virtuoso performance resided not only in the social fame of the performer but also in their often-ostentatious style of playing. As Hunt describes: “There sits the virtuoso in the concert hall, and dazzles us purely on his own behalf: he runs, he jumps; he melts, he pines, he paws and glides, and the audience hangs on his every moment...of all that passes before your eyes and ears, you understand probably about as much as the performer there understands what goes

⁵ Kenneth Hamilton, “The Virtuoso Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, edited by David Rowland (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59

⁶ Schumann, *Music and Musicians*, 60.

⁷ Richard Wagner, “The Virtuoso and the Artist,” in *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, edited by Charles Osborne (London: Peter Owen, 1973), 139.

⁸ Schumann, *Music and Musicians*, 146.

on within your soul when music wakes in you and drives you to create.”⁹ Despite the highly developed abilities of most virtuosi, critics often found fault with virtuosic playing itself. For instance, technical focus was seen by many as opposed to, or detracting from, the portrayal of emotion in music. Hunt’s article describing a Paganini concert portrays the astounding qualities of his playing, but adds, “...we cannot help thinking that we miss, both in the style and in the composition, that perfection of simplicity...which is perhaps incompatible with these exhibitions of art.”¹⁰ Clearly Hunt is aware of the spectacle that is Paganini’s playing and, although admiring it, he also observes that there is a certain “perfection of simplicity” lacking.

An over-the-top playing style was an indispensable element of many virtuoso performances, and an integral element of what made them spectacular. Many virtuosi are depicted showing their warlike dominance over their instruments with an extreme use of loud dynamics.¹¹ The critic Baughan laments: “This violence is now considered dramatic and impassioned...but to my mind there is a decided point beyond which dramatic expression loses its force...”¹² This excessive and spectacular use of volume also led, in many cases, to the destruction of instruments: “After the concert, [Liszt] stands there like a conqueror...vanquished pianos lie about him, broken strings flutter as trophies and flags of truce, frightened instruments flee in their terror into distant corners...”¹³ Surely it was a spectacular sight to see the likes of Liszt destroy

⁹ Wagner, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," 140.

¹⁰ Hunt, "Paganini," 293.

¹¹ For more on the associations between virtuoso performance and themes of war, see Dana Gooley, "Warhorses: Liszt, Weber's *Konzertstück*, and the cult of Napoleon," *19th-Century Music* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 62-88.

¹² Edward Algernon Baughan, "The Hooligan in Music," in *Music and Musicians* (London and New York: John Lane, 1906), 133.

¹³ Anonymous, "Liszt, the All-Conquering Pianist," 310.

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instruments with his powerful technique, but although the public likely enjoyed it, many felt that he was merely showing off and not demonstrating musicality.

It was when the desire for spectacle took precedence over the music that many writers saw fault in the virtuoso. Chopin's *Minute Waltz* is a favourite showpiece for many virtuosos, but when performed with the spectacular elements that many virtuosos often employed, the pull towards spectacle often caused critics to give an unfavourable review. When describing a performance of the piece by virtuoso pianist Moriz Rosenthal, Lawrence Gilman remarks that "Mr. Rosenthal is capable...of butchering a charming and inoffensive little waltz of Chopin's...by tricking out the gracious and unpretentious little melody with every variety of vulgar pianistic ornament that his ingenuity could suggest."¹⁴ Similarly, in a performance of *Don Giovanni*, the famous Italian tenor Rubini "merely lisped" the first part of his aria until he "only [became] divine on the high B flat" and quickly slipped away again. The audience applauded enthusiastically for the high B flat, leaving Wagner to mock: "The rule is: be inaudible for a while, then suddenly alarm the audience by a husbanded explosion, and immediately afterwards relapse into a ventriloquist effect."¹⁵

Many see this spectacular style of performance as a major deterrent from the music and an insult to the composer, despite how the public admires it. According to Wagner, "Undoubtedly a good deal of satisfaction derives from watching a virtuoso at work....It is at least doubtful if this has anything to do with music, which does not mean that it is bad; simply irrelevant."¹⁶

¹⁴ Lawrence Gilman, "The Bane of Virtuosity," in *Moriz Rosenthal in Word and Music: A Legacy of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Mark Mitchell and Allan Evans (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1906), 52.

¹⁵ Wagner, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," 148.

¹⁶ Abraham Veinus, "The Romantic Concerto," in *The Concerto* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1944), 151.

Wagner felt that the performer's purpose should be to perfectly reproduce the composer's vision. He regards the spectacle that many virtuosi make of their playing as "corrupting the executant artist, and making him finally forget his own true mission."¹⁷

The clearest way to see how the virtuoso concert became a spectacle is to look at the reactions of the audience and how they were achieved. Writings of the time describe packed concert houses, as in the writings of Schumann, which state, "The multitudinous audience was so crowded together, that even the hall looked altered."¹⁸ Hunt depicts a similar situation, where "the house was crammed at so early an hour that, on entering it, we found ourselves fixed on the lowest of the pit stairs."¹⁹ The obvious influence of the virtuoso can be seen in more than just the nightly packed halls, it can also be seen in the thunderous applause that is described in so many sources. Hunt's article quotes a Viennese correspondent of *The Harmonicon* who wrote, "Unfortunately, the worst parts of [Paganini's] performance seemed to call forth the loudest applause...all of which, in the eyes of the true amateur, savour more of charlatanism than of the legitimate objects of art."²⁰ The subject of applause was a common theme in accounts of virtuoso performances. Schumann describes the applause at one of Liszt's concerts in a similar fashion: "Here indeed he resembled that great commander to whom he has been compared, and the tempestuous applause that greeted him was not unlike an adoring 'Vive l'Empereur!'"²¹

¹⁷ Wagner, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," 139.

¹⁸ Schumann, *Music and Musicians*, 149.

¹⁹ Hunt, "Paganini," 291.

²⁰ Hunt, "Paganini," 290.

²¹ Schumann, *Music and Musicians*, 151.

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Abraham Veinus describes the virtuoso as “one of the essential and corroding institutions in music history.”²² Critics have had differing opinions on the legitimacy of the spectacular performances of the virtuoso, but despite varying levels of support and opposition, spectacular virtuosity is undoubtedly an essential part of the musical development of the nineteenth century. Throughout the Romantic era – through the personae of the performers, the performances themselves, and the responses they generated – virtuosity developed an unprecedented degree of spectacle which, despite its influence on subsequent generations, would never again be matched by performers of Western art music. Whether they supported or opposed this development, many writers and critics of the time commented upon this trend. Perhaps Veinus’s argument can be extended to apply not only to the virtuoso in general, but also to the element of spectacle within the nineteenth-century virtuoso tradition.

²² Veinus, “The Romantic Concerto,” 151.

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