Tomás Cotik: ***Paganini: Capriccio***
Centaur

Having issued volumes featuring music by Piazzolla, Bach, Telemann, Mozart, and Schubert, Argentine violinist Tomas Cotik now presents scintillating renditions of predominantly solo violin works by the Italian legend Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840). Pianist Monica Ohuchi joins Cotik on the opening and closing pieces, but it's otherwise all him, and that's more than enough. Bookended by two pieces for violin and piano are excerpts from Paganini's *Caprices for solo violin, Op. 1*, written during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Non-sequentially ordered on the album, the seventeen vary in duration, a few two minutes long and a couple seven to eight but the greater majority in the three-minute vicinity.

In liner notes, Cotik fleshes out the familiar portrait of his revolutionary precursor with fascinating biographical details. As his reputation as a violinist grew, so too did his insatiable appetite for gambling and womanizing. With such stories circulating, talk about a Faustian pact with the devil emerged, and, as Cotik reports, Paganini was alleged to have “served a lengthy jail sentence for murder, during which he taught himself to play the violin.” A theatrical and flamboyant performer renowned for his extraordinary facility on the instrument, Paganini admired, as Coitk notes, “the castrati's expression, control, and pathos” and incorporated many of the singing voice's qualities into his own delivery. Adjustments in tempo and dynamics plus the use of dramatic pauses, theatrical gestures, and vibrato are a mere handful of the vocal-related aspects he drew upon.

It's fitting, then, that the opening number on the seventy-six-minute release should be titled *Cantabile in D major, Op. 17* considering the singing character of Paganini's music. Published in 1916 and believed to have been written around 1823, the three-part aria is marked by a singing tone that beguiles from the first violin phrase. With Ohuchi enhancing his playing with attentive support, Cotik's rich, vibrato-enhanced tone and meticulous articulation amplify the music's rhapsodic beauty at every turn. At album's end the duo treat us to a swooning rendition of *Mosè-fantasia*, *Op. 24*, which Paganini based on an aria from Rossini's 1818 opera *Mosè in Egitto*. With Ohuchi's gentle arpeggios as a backdrop, Cotik entrances by voicing the song in multiple registers and presenting it both playfully and rapturously.

The violinist clarifies that “Capriccio” musically refers to a piece that's typically free-form, fast-paced, and virtuosic and characterized by a liveliness, playfulness, and spontaneity. In the seventeen caprices presented, a panorama of emotions is presented, extending from joy, sweetness, and humour to drama and melancholy. Naturally, a vast array of techniques is encompassed by the material too. Each of the seventeen impresses in different ways. Whereas the ornate sixth in the series, the caprice in G Minor, engrosses for its never-ending stream of trills, the E Major ninth follows declamatory horn flourishes with darting upper-register gestures.

Double-stops in the A Major twenty-first, C Major eighteenth, and regal E-Flat Major twenty-third magnify the music's romantic side, while other episodes impress for Cotik's precise pitch and use of staccato. Memorable too are the work's opening number, the E Major “L'arpeggio,” for the way patterns ricochet across the instrument's strings, and the E-Flat Major seventeenth for its to-and-fro between double-stopped figures and light-speed runs. The B-Flat Major thirteenth's dubbed “The Devil's Laughter,” and sure enough satanic cackles punctuate its runs—even if the G Minor tenth might even be more demonic.

During the D Major twentieth, a drone underscores bagpipe-like melodies before the music lunges into a series of dazzling staccato flourishes, whereas the spikiness of three- and four-note chords distances the E-Flat Major fourteenth from the others. A huge part of the recording's appeal is, of course, Cotik's playing, which repeatedly stuns—see his breathtaking execution of the A Minor fifth and A Minor twenty-fourth, to cite two examples. The latter's a particularly comprehensive showcase, what with its double- and triple-stops and use of pizzicato, harmonics, scales, and arpeggios.

Hearing the name Paganini, one immediately thinks of virtuosity; Cotik's release reminds us, however, that he was a composer too. This portrait, while not an exhaustive account of his predecessor's material, presents a splendid overview, while also providing another sterling example of Cotik's artistry as a violinist, scholar, and interpreter.

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