

# Paganini Violin Concerto

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Program Notes

by Tom Strini ©2017

"I have gotten to know Simone Porter over the past couple years as not only a prodigious talent on the violin, but also a delightful personality who brings as much joy to her music making as she does fire and passion. I have no doubt you are in for a treat with her performance of Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1. It's a concerto that takes the idea of "virtuosity" to the level of absurd and where the dazzling technical heroics make you hold your breath at moments. The work was a guilty pleasure of mine back when I was a young aspiring violinist and I still find its showboating and bombastic fanfares completely charming!

It is also a pleasure to welcome back guest conductor Laura Jackson who led the Eugene Symphony in its SymFest II concert last June. As Music Director of the Reno Philharmonic, she brings a wealth of experience and creative ideas to our orchestra, which you will witness during Dvořák's Seventh Symphony—a staple in the orchestral repertoire and one of the composer's most performed works, alongside his 'New World Symphony.'"

— Francesco Lecce-Chong

## HECTOR BERLIOZ (1803–1869) Roman Carnival Overture, [1844]

*Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in February 1986 under the direction of Adrian Gnam, and last performed in September 2007 under the direction of Giancarlo Guerrero. Performance time is approximately eight minutes.*

Hector Berlioz, like generations of cultivated Europeans, read the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571). In addition to his prodigious skills as a sculptor, goldsmith, draftsman, musician and poet, Cellini was an infamous street brawler, a celebrated raconteur, bon vivant and decorated soldier. He claimed, and is widely believed, to have killed Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, during a French siege of Rome.

The stuff of opera, certainly. Berlioz thought so, too, and in 1834, plotted *Benvenuto Cellini* on the creation of *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, a monumental sculpture commissioned by Pope Clement VII—in the opera, not in history. Berlioz's librettists ginned up a story that was 90% fiction and, apparently, 100% failed comedy.

Performances of *Benvenuto Cellini* are rare, but the sun never sets on the Roman Carnival Overture.

Roman Carnival Overture, the opener of tonight's Eugene Symphony program, derives from tunes from *Benvenuto Cellini*, especially a scene set in a carnival. However, it is NOT the overture to the opera, but a separate piece, originally intended to introduce Act II but reworked for concert performance.

The Opera Comique rejected the opera outright. Berlioz revised it into something more serious and shopped it to the Paris Opera. The company said yes, but censors intervened and caused more revision. At last, in 1838, *Cellini* hit the Paris stage and bombed utterly.

Franz Liszt, a friend, admirer and sometime mentor to Berlioz, took up its cause, suggested further revisions, and produced it in Weimar. "Meh," said Weimar—then London, then Weimar again. Berlioz gave up: "I had been greatly struck by certain episodes in the life of Benvenuto Cellini," he wrote.

“I had the misfortune to believe they would make an interesting and dramatic subject for an opera.”

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“It’s upbeat, energetic and full of beautiful melodies, many of which sound like Italian folk songs,” said guest conductor Laura Jackson. “He was so about color, about orchestration. He was so forward-looking. You could say that Berlioz did for orchestration what Paganini did for the violin. They were in a different universe from what had come before.”

### NICOLÒ PAGANINI (1782–1840)

#### Violin Concerto No. 1, Opus 6 [1817–18]

*In addition to the solo violin, this work is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, and strings. This is the first Eugene Symphony performance, and performance time is approximately 35 minutes.*

Early in his career, Nicolò Paganini held a respectable job, as the court violinist in Lucca, Italy, for Napoleon’s sister, Elisa Bacciocchi. After three years of that, he hit the road as an independent, itinerant composer-performer and invented the Rock ‘n’ Roll lifestyle.

He gambled. He drank. He ran slowly when women pursued him. He stoked rivalries with other violinists, and was slow to deny an alliance with the devil as an explanation for his astounding virtuosity. And in keeping with the Rock ‘n’ Roll image, he composed for and played the guitar, his “constant companion.” But he played it only in intimate settings, never on the concert stage. (He gave Berlioz, a friend and something of a kindred spirit, a guitar as a gift.)

In addition to amazing all of Europe by developing violin techniques to lengths no one had imagined, he was a brilliant and, some would say, shameless showman. His bag of tricks included breaking one string after another, until he soldiered on through difficult passages on that last remaining string. He would retune strings to make the impossible possible.

Retuning comes into play in tonight’s Violin Concerto No. 1. He composed the orchestra part in E-flat, a difficult key for violin. But he wrote the violin part as if it were in very comfortable D Major, and tuned the violin a half-step high to give him



Berlioz (left) and Paganini together, 1834. Paganini originally commissioned Berlioz’s Harold in Italy as a viola concerto. (Paganini had just acquired a Stradivarius viola and wanted a showpiece for it). The virtuoso abandoned the project in a huff when Berlioz’s composition wasn’t flashy enough. Years later, when Paganini finally heard the piece (with someone else playing the solo part), he bowed to Berlioz and kissed his hand. The next day, Paganini sent his son to Berlioz, to pay the 20,000-franc commission he’d withheld years earlier.

open strings sounding in A-flat, E-flat, B-flat and F, just what you need in the key of E-flat. It’s sort of like putting a capo on a guitar neck. These days, both orchestra and soloist play in normal D Major.

Late in his life, he taught and published violin methods and his compositions. At the peak of his career, Paganini kept his tricks top-secret. The present concerto didn’t go into print until 1851, over a decade after his death.

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“The Concerto No. 1 served as a pivotal moment in my life,” said Simone Porter, tonight’s violin soloist. “I needed it to improve, as a necessary challenge. It’s so hard, but it was obviously written by a violinist. Everything fits.”

Given the composer’s over-the-top Romantic life, you might expect extravagantly emotional music, and he wrote some of that. That’s not the case here, according to both Porter and conductor Laura Jackson, who have previously performed this concerto together with Jackson’s Reno Philharmonic. In separate interviews, they pointed out that, violin fireworks aside, the concerto sounds a lot like Rossini.

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## Program Notes

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“It’s Romantic in its virtuosity and athleticism,” Jackson said. “On the other hand, it’s Classical in its proportions and transparency. It’s all about the soloist. We lay down the easy light stuff, and she’s all over the place, just tossing it off. It’s supposed to sound easy. It’s not a hyper-Romantically emotional work.”

“The point of the concerto is to show off,” Porter said. “The lightness, the buoyancy, are important. It’s like *opera buffa*—all enjoyment and laughter. It’s like one long diva solo for violinists.”

**Antonín Dvořák [1841–1904]**

**Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Opus 70 [1885]**

*Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in April 1984 under the direction of William McLaughlin, and last performed in April 2002 under the direction of Uriel Segal. Performance time is approximately 37 minutes.*

Dvořák seized upon the London Philharmonic Society’s 1884 commission for his Seventh Symphony, along with an invitation to conduct the premiere, as a great opportunity. He was emerging from his status as a respected regional, Czech nationalist composer, and a big London success would elevate him to international stardom.

The Society had, after all, commissioned Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. That wasn’t lost on Dvořák. He cast his Seventh in D minor, the same key as Beethoven’s Ninth. And he strove for that same depth, that same sort of gravitas. He eschewed his customary Czech and Bohemian dance motifs and rhythms and worked in a more international style. In his mind, London was no place for Central European local color, much less comic relief.

“The Seventh is dark and utterly dramatic,” said conductor Laura Jackson. “Dvořák is searching for something. In certain places in the first movement, it’s as if he doesn’t even know what he’s searching for. This music is somehow conflicted. That’s what I ponder when I perform it.”

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The composer aimed to create music that was not only deep, but pure and essential. In the Symphony No. 7, he pared down when other Romantic composers—e.g., Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss, after Richard Wagner—were sprawling to ever-greater lengths. It runs a modest 37 minutes in four movements. After the premiere, Dvořák promptly cut 40 measures from the *Poco Adagio* movement and wrote to his publisher, Simrock, that “I am convinced that there is not a single superfluous note in this work.” Likewise, as other composers inflated the orchestra to 100 or more players and introduced new instruments, Dvořák scaled back to the orchestra of Beethoven.

He packs a great deal of meaning into these relatively narrow confines. Exquisite melodies bloom everywhere, like lilies sprouting from freshly abandoned battlefields. Conflicting rhythms, sixes and twos against threes, tug at one another amid mostly dense textures. He rarely comes to rest on the tonic (the DO of DO-RE-MI). All of that partly explains what Jackson mentioned: The searching, the restlessness, the tension that holds taut to the very last measure. 🌀

Historical sources:

*The Hector Berlioz website (www.hberlioz.com); Wikipedia page on Berlioz*

*Acta Otorhinolaryngol Italica, April 2005; Wikipedia pages for Paganini and the Concerto No. 1; www.paganini.com; The Strad magazine, April 2016*

*http://www.antonin-dvorak.cz; Wikipedia page on Dvořák*