

Woody Vasulka

THE COMMISSION

Text:

Text and character of Paganini/Ernest Gusella

Text and character of Berlioz Robert Ashley

Text and character of The Mortician Cosimo Corsano

Paganini's son ← Ben Harris

Narrator David Ossman

Voice Andrea Harris

Set design Bradford Smith

Camera Steina

Video tape editor Peter Kirby

Audio mix Baird Banner

Special electronic tools:

Vocoder Harald Bode

Scan Processor Rutt/Etra

Digital Articulator Jeffy Schier

Berlioz:

What brings us to this movie?

A commission...

...from Fandango Spagnuolo

Look at that Sheila...!

How nice...

"In the earthly copies

of justice and temperance

and other ideas

which are precious to souls

there is no light

but only a few

approaching the images

through the darkening

organs of sense

behold in them the nature of

that which they imitate".

I don't understand that.

Any way

financial support. Involved in endless litigation, lost large sums of money, and further damaged his health. Described at this time as "hardly able to

move, bent nearly double, like a half-opened penknife and evidently in great pain". Had to be carried up stairs, even to first floor.

Before his death, Paganini acquired yet another illness - the loss of his voice. Desperately, he grasped for help. He would whisper to the ear of his son, who accustomed to the sounds, would speak out for him.

(OVERTURE cont.)

Paganini with Achellino:

I have loved atrocious women in another part of the city.

Women who were so beautiful, they frightened me.

I have seen a man with no head, with wings on his back, carrying his rotten lungs in his arms.

I have seen a man dressed as a clown, with tiny fetuses dripping from his beard.

I have seen a white dog chewing on the moon.

On the moon.

I have seen a house in the middle of the ocean, with tiny octopuses inside, who tapped with their beak on the windows.

I have seen a light come down from the sky and point directly to my stomach.

B E R L I O Z:

I think of myself very much as an organization man.

It is all outside me,

If you know what I mean (she said),

I think there are either ^{two} kinds of character
or ^{two} kinds of character.

One might be called the organization man.

Another might be called the interpreter.

Another might be called the helpful woman.

Another might be called the woman of the different voice
or different way of speaking.

And so on.

Each of these characters has its equivalent, I suppose.

in the world of unlearned knowledge.

The question of whether we mold our characters
to satisfy that requirement -

is a question

I could not possibly answer here,

it could be answered,

and I could answer it,

but not here (She said)

it is enough to point out the importance of those equivalencies,

assuming that the fact has crossed every person's mind -

if only as an answer to why movies -

and to remind us that this movie,

no less than any other,

depends on the vision of archetype

for its believability.

We are not interested in skin as such,

or hair as such,

or bone structures as such,

we are not interested in those lessons.

We can hardly bring ourselves

to look into the mirror in the morning.

It is a truth

that to reconstruct our image,

of ourselves,

individually,

each day,

to return from dreams -

is difficult.

So,

it is not an interest in skin and hair and bone structure
that brings us to this movie.

PAGANINI

Narrator:

Already at the time of opening concerts in Paris, ailing in health, suffering from ravages of disease which killed him, tubercular affection of the larynx, noticeable in his voice and sparseness of diet (soup or chamomile tea). Taciturn, spoke no more than necessary.

On concert tours would hardly eat at all. No longer practiced but would lie out for hours on a sofa on the day of a concert, with a mandolin beside him.

THE COMMISSION

Paganini and son:

As one of the enigmatic geniuses
of our time
I recognize one
who speaks with the tongue of angels.
Taking advantage
of this unbelievable opportunity
I throw myself on your moment of glory
not with intent of distraction
but with an inner desire
to further illuminate
the glory of this moment.
Though money may be the devils' lucre,
it is also the food to sustain the angels.
Knowing that this money is a commission
through which my genius will be further enhanced,
I wish this stipend would send you, Hector
to boundless flight
so the union of the opposites
of thunder and lightning
can be accomplished for ever and ever more.

Narrator:

The friendship of Berlioz was his rare intellectual adventure. Berlioz had composed his symphony "Harold in Italy" for Paganini, but the latter refused it when he discovered too many rests in the solo viola part. Later, after hearing both "Harold" and "Fantastic" symphonies, Paganini suddenly became ecstatic about Berlioz' work and surprised him by a gift of twenty thousands francs. This was an extraordinary event in artist to artist relationship in general, and some were firmly convinced, that the commission did not come from Paganini, but from someone, hiding behind this publicity stunt.

Paganini approached Berlioz after the concert, knelt on the platform to kiss the hand of Berlioz. His beloved and illegitimate son, Achillino, then a child of ten, had to stand on a chair and put his ear to Paganini's lips in order to interpret his father's inaudible words, and how he presented Berlioz, nearly destitute as usual, with a draft for twenty thousand francs as a commission for a piece of music.

The real truth about the above incident.....the donor of the money was not Paganini but Armand Bertin, the rich proprietor of the *Journal des Debats*. Berlioz was on the staff of that paper. Bertin had a great opinion of his talents and was looking for an opportunity to help him. He thought that a gift of money would be more acceptable to Berlioz if it took the form of a presentation from some other celebrated musician. He, therefore, persuaded Paganini to act as a donor. Only two f XXXX remained ignorant of his true benefactor.

OVERTURE

Narrator:

"Is that a man brought into the arena at the moment of death, like a dying gladiator, to delight the public with his convulsions? Or is it one risen from the dead, a Vampire with a Violin, who, if not the blood out of our hearts, at any rate sucks the gold out of our pockets?"

Heinrich Heine

Wildest reports of his appearance exceeded when beholding him. So thin he seemed tall, so dark his haggard features left him ageless. Fleshless body, mere bones, everything sacrificed for his long hands and talon-like fingers. Without his music, his is the soundless body of a cricket or cicada, dead with no shrill or vibrant tones. His clothes, black, bone shaped trousers of one who slept in them while ill or too drugged to bother, or who had passed the night gambling with curious partners against sinister adversaries.

A man called Levy made tours of English music halls with make-up to look like Paganini. A good violinist and an extraordinary copy of Paganini. Other people later copied this man, announcing themselves years later as the second Paganini.

Paganini hit Vienna as a sensation. A good billiard stroke was called "coup a la Paganini". Busts in butter and crystalline sugar, portraits on snuff boxes, cigar boxes, and gloves.

Paganini was an inveterate gambler, forced to pawn his violin to pay his debts, and nearly ruined himself with Casino Paganini, a gambling hell in Paris for which he was refused a license.

He never practiced. George Harris of Hanover, a young son of a rabbi spent an entire year touring with Paganini as his private secretary in order to write an account of him, and during that whole period never saw him open his violin case once.

In 1836, passion for gambling returned, and he left Parma for Paris where the "Casino Paganini" had been opened at his instigation and with his

I look forward to breakfast

I eat six cups of tea plain

Three pieces of toasted bread

Margarine and honey

And time to think about myself

Coordination of body and mind

That I can do in a single form

I don't take the tea to my table

I pour myself a cup in one place

And carry my tea to my table

Where I sit to drink it

Then I go back to the place for another cup

And so forth

Six trips more or less

Six cups of tea

Same for the three pieces of toast

The End

eventually put out of the way

by his brilliant but cruel master.

I think I understand that.

INTERMEZZO

Narrator:

Lived in Paris for the next two years. Sir Charles Halle, a young student provides best description of Paganini in those years: "The striking, awe-inspiring, ghostlike figure of Paganini was to be seen nearly every afternoon in the music shop of Bernard Latte, Passage de l'Opera, where he sat for an hour, enveloped in a long cloak, taking notice of nobody, and hardly ever raising his piercing black eyes.

He was one of the sights of Paris, and I had often gone to stare at him with wonder until a friend introduced me to him, and he invited me to visit him, an invitation I most eagerly accepted. I went often, but it would be difficult to relate a single conversation we had together. He sat there, taciturn, rigid, hardly ever moving a muscle of his face, and I sat spellbound, a shudder running through me whenever his uncanny eyes fell upon me.

He made me play to him often, mostly by pointing with his bony hand to the piano, without speaking, and I could only guess from his repeating the ceremony that he did not dislike it, for never a word of encouragement fell from his lips.

How I longed to hear him play, it is impossible to describe, perhaps even to imagine. From my earliest childhood I had heard of Paganini and his art as something supernatural, and there I actually sat opposite to the man himself, but only looking at the hands that had created such wonders.

On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion, after I had played and we had enjoyed a long silence, Paganini rose and approached his violin case. There passed in me what can hardly be imagined; I was all in tremble, and my heart thumped as if it would burst my chest; in fact, no young swain going to the first rendezvous with his beloved could possibly feel more violent emotions. Paganini opened the case, took the violin out, and began to tune it carefully with his fingers without using the bow. My agitation became more intolerable. When he was satisfied, and I said to myself, "Now, now he will take the bow", he carefully put the violin back and shut the case. And that is how I heard Paganini".

DEATH OF PAGANINI

Narrator:

On the morning of Paganini's death, the bishop of Nice gave instructions prohibiting the tolling of the "passing bells".

A few days later, when it had been embalmed, his body, dressed in the black coat and trousers in which he appeared on the concert platform, was put in a coffin with a glass pane above his face.

A dealer in second hand objects offered the Comte Cessole, who had been appointed trustee for Achillino, the sum of 30,000 francs in order to exhibit the corpse in England.

The body, shabbily embalmed was left on his death-bed for the two following months, then removed down to the cellar for a year and eventually on the order of the health authorities expelled from the city, ending in a cell

of an abandoned leper house on the Rocky Coast.

Soon stories began to circulate: the wails of a violin... other terrifying noises. The body was moved again, first to a cement vat of an olive oil factory, then into the garden of a private house.

Four years after that the body was encased into three coffins. Taking no chances, friends transported the body by ship to Genoa (there had been a cholera epidemic in the French Riviera), then by vagon to his family house, where as a boy he helped to plant the vegetables.

Still, the church refused to receive him. Thirty years later the body was finally transferred from the private garden to the cemetery in Parma.

THE MORGUE

The Mortician:

Ecce homo.

E' una povera creatura morta! Corpo morto.

Poverino.

Morto?

Toh, vedo corpo morto.

Ecco l'uomo.

Nulla! Morto.

Ma che noia. Cervello. Misuriamo.

Cervello... tre. Povero cervello che non canta piu.

Il naso? Due e il naso. Che bellino.

La boccuccia? Pure due!

Facciamo un piccolo duetto.

Ma che noia.

Affanculo.

Sto povero cretino morto. Misuriamo sto petto.

La coscia e cosi lunga, figlio mio, la coscia che non ti serve; mettiamo un quindici. Eppure l'altra coscia. Puo essere differente. E chi lo sa?

Eh si. La coscia destra e molto piu lunga!

Quindici e mezzo.

Le povere ginocchia. Oh, ginocchia.

Son due; son altre due. Due. Due.

E sti piedi, sti piedi di sto povero cristo.

Son lunghi, pero quanto ha camminato! Uffa! Undici.

E sara lo stesso, no? Undici.

Misuriamo l'uomo. Ah, sto povero uomo che e

crepato.

Facciamo un tre.

Cerebrum: Unum duum treum. Eh!

Nasum: quantum? Dum! Tambien!

Os: dos.

Tettine: octo.

Pectum: unum duum treum quattrum circum, etcetera.

Quattro l'ombellico. Sto povero cristiano.

L'anca: Undici. Cazzo! (niente).

Aspetta, aspetta. Chesta e 'na sturbatina.

Me so stufato.

Acqua santa.

La gamba: venti pollici, la gamba.

E il ginocchio me sembra de due.

Mettiamo due.

E sti pedini, sti poveri pedini.

Son de dieci e mezzo.

Tutt'e due te li vendo per un poco.

Ecce homo. Morto. E ube. ?

Chi se ne frega?

later
from Sceptis
says Strabo
came Metrodorus
a man who changed from his pursuit of philosophy
to political life
and taught rhetoric
for the most part
in his written works
and he used a brand new style and dazzled many.
He seems to have played
a considerable political
as well as cultural
role
at the court
where he was
for a time
in high favor
though Plutarch hints that
he was