

PABLO de SARASATE

'there were many composers of music for the violin, there were but few composers of violin music' George Bernard Shaw

By Eric Wen

In the wake of Niccolò Paganini, virtuoso violinists blossomed in the late-19th century. Dazzling audiences wherever they played, these larger-than-life figures came from every corner of Europe: Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (Moravia), Henri Vieuxtemps (Belgium), Henryk Wieniawski (Poland), and Ole Bull (Norway). The last of these was Pablo Martín Melitón de Sarasate y Navascués (10 March 1844 – 20 September 1908) from Spain.

From all contemporary accounts, Sarasate was unique. The distinguished playwright and music critic George Bernard Shaw declared that the violinist "left criticism gasping miles behind him," and the violin pedagogue Carl Flesch described the effect of the Spaniard's playing as "putting his audience into astonishment, admiration, and highest rapture." But it was the Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe who recognized Sarasate's lasting influence on violin playing, proclaiming that "it was he who taught us how to play exactly."

Pablo de Sarasate was born in Pamplona, the capital city of the Navarre region of northern Spain. His father was a bandmaster, and was the young violinist's first teacher. Soon after giving his first public concert at the age of eight, Sarasate was awarded a scholarship to study with Manuel Rodríguez Saez at the Madrid Conservatory. The boy's extraordinary talent was soon recognized throughout Spain, and he was frequently invited to perform at the Royal Palace. Queen Isabella II became especially fond of the young prodigy, and, as well as

sponsoring his musical studies, presented him with a gift of a fine violin. In 1856, at the age of twelve, Sarasate went to France to continue his studies with Jean Delphin Alard at the Paris Conservatory. Within a year he won the *premier prix* in both violin and solfège, followed by another in harmony in 1858.

Although renowned throughout Spain and France while he was a student at the Paris Conservatory, Sarasate made his official Paris debut as a concert violinist in 1860. He made the first of many visits to London the following year, and subsequently toured the major cities throughout Europe. In 1866 he acquired a Stradivari violin made in 1724, and the following year he embarked on an extended tour to the United States and South America. Upon his return he had established himself as an international celebrity, and eventually toured Russia and the Middle East. In 1879 he founded an orchestra in his home town of Pamplona, and in 1886 he acquired a second Stradivari violin (made in 1713, during the maker's "golden period"). Sarasate was active as a performer throughout the rest of his life, giving his last concert just four days before he died. In his will he left all his music and possessions to the city of Pamplona. He also

bequeathed his two Stradivari violins to the institutions where he studied: his first to the Paris Conservatoire (now housed in the Musée de la musique), and his second to the Madrid Conservatory, where he also established a scholarship fund for young violinists.

Sarasate's playing emphasized elegance rather than power. Leopold Auer, the teacher of Mischa Elman and Jascha Heifetz, described Sarasate as "the master of a perfected technique for both hands; he played without any effort at all, touching the strings with a magic bow in a manner which had no hint of the terrestrial." The American violinist Albert Spalding wrote further that Sarasate's "violin sang like a thrush, and his remarkable ease tossed aside difficulties with a grace and insouciance." Fortunately for posterity, Sarasate's dashing, yet refined, playing style can be heard on the nine records he made in 1904 at the age of sixty.

Sarasate frequently performed the Beethoven Concerto and the solo works of J.S. Bach, although, curiously, he refused to perform the Brahms Concerto. The Mendelssohn Concerto, however, was one of his specialties. According to the British conductor George Henschel: "[Sarasate's]

interpretation of the Mendelssohn came to German ears like something of a revelation, creating a veritable *furor*, and indeed I doubt if in lusciousness of tone, crystalline clearness of execution, refinement and grace that performance has been, or ever will be, surpassed." Furthermore, Sarasate's eloquent playing inspired a host of his musical contemporaries to create works with him in mind. Bruch's Concerto No.2 and *Scottish Fantasy*, Wieniawski's Concerto No.2, Saint-Saëns's Concertos Nos.1 and 3, as well as the *Introduction and Rondo capriccioso*, Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* and Concerto in F minor, and Joachim's Variations in E minor were all dedicated to the Spanish master.

The violinist himself made a significant contribution to the repertoire for his instrument, with no less than 54 works published in his lifetime. He was particularly fond of the opera fantasy genre, arranging the well-known melodies from Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette* and *Faust*, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Verdi's *La forza del destino*, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*. Undoubtedly, the most successful is his dazzling Fantasy on themes from Bizet's *Carmen* that begins this CD. Sometimes Sarasate would just adapt a single aria into a violin miniature, such as his charming

arrangement of the sparkling Gavotte from Ambroise Thomas's opera *Mignon*.

Zigeunerweisen, Op.20 is perhaps Sarasate's most famous original composition. Cast in the form of a traditional Hungarian *csárdás*, opening with a slow section, replete with improvisatory flourishes, and followed by a fast, sparkling dance. Between these two contrasting sections, Sarasate inserts the poignant melody from the song *Csak egy szép lány van a világon* composed by the Hungarian composer Elemér Szentirmay in 1873. Sarasate's less well-known *Airs Écossais*, Op.34, draws from several Scottish folk melodies, producing a delightful pot-pourri of memorable tunes.

Sarasate's affinity with folk music is most evident in his eight original Spanish dances, published in pairs in four separate books with distinct opus numbers. Three of the most beloved ones – *Zapateado*, *Habanera*, and *Romanza Andaluza* – are included here. The *Zapateado* is a dance incorporating the tapping together of shoes, the Spanish word *zapatear* literally translating as "to strike with a shoe". The *Habanera* is a popular Spanish dance that originated from Cuba, and is characterized by a 2/4 meter with the rhythm of a triplet division on the first beat followed by a duple division on the second.

The *Romanza Andaluza* is not, strictly speaking, a dance, but an evocation of the sunny relaxed atmosphere of Andalusia, the most southern region of Spain.

The dance idiom is recalled in several other of Sarasate's compositions. Although the *Introduction and Tarantella* draws from the Italian dance in 6/8 meter, the tarantella is believed to be related to the Spanish fandango. The Basque county in northern Spain, immediately to the west of the Pyrenees mountain range, is evoked by the *Capricho Vasco* (*Caprice Basque*) and *Zortzico*. The *Capricho Vasco* is cast in two parts, the second being a set of variations on a haunting theme; the *Zortzico 'Adiós Montañas mías'* is a dance in 5/8 meter with a distinctive dotted rhythm from the Basque region (it is the most famous of three such dances that Sarasate composed). The brilliant duo *Navarra*, the word deriving from *Navarre* where Sarasate was born, is a delightful piece full of high spirits with both violins playing in the stratospheric region. Not all of Sarasate's music is rousing and virtuosic, however. His ethereal *Song of the Nightingale* Op.29, with its imaginative evocation of the nightingale calls, reveals the scope of Sarasate's wide-ranging compositional gifts.

