



Intervista a Massimo Quarta

What differences in performance did you find in the Cannon (timbre, power, balance) when you played it with the historical fittings?

As regards the power, I have to say that to give a more accurate evaluation, the instrument would need to be played in a large room with someone listening even from far away.

The first impression one has is that the instrument, from my point of view, is extremely changed: the timbre is even darker. As the violinmaker Alberto Giordano underscored, this could also depend on the quality of the strings. In fact, contrary to what happens with metal strings, with the current coated catgut strings, it is hard to create output that is uniform enough from string to string, exactly because catgut is a natural element. It would be interesting to try the instrument with different types of gut strings. With those used for this trial, I found an extremely sweet instrument, a first string that was very sweet, not so easy to play, but this is in good part due to the fact that we are not used to playing with that type of string. I remember that after a trial period that served to warm the instrument up, as I played, I started to be on the same wave length and find synergy with the instrument, and therefore I got a much more immediate response. The greatest difficulty was due to the fact that it is not so easy to be on the same wavelength as the strings, that have their own different response.

In my opinion, the fourth string resisted a bit more negatively, in the sense that there are a few more impurities, so much so that you lose that minimum of brightness that in any case, in an instrument of this kind is necessary, if you ask me. However, I repeat, it is something that would be better checked out with strings that are settled in and probably even with various sets of strings. From the point of view of the power, I think that it is more or less the same. This type of violin, like all the great instruments, apparently seems to have an inferior output to the ear of the violinist playing it, with respect to how the sound projects in the room.

The immediate sensation is that of a magnificent first string and a very beautiful second string. The timbre I would say is close to that of a viola, a little darker.

In your opinion, what is the difference in approach between the modern fittings and the historical fittings?

Let's say that this answer can be linked to the preceding one. In theory, apparently, it should be easier to play with natural gut. In practice, for what I can recall, that's not the case, in the sense that probably the settling in of the strings takes longer or is at least more subject to changes in temperature and humidity, while the strings used today have a more immediate and constant output.

Personally, I find that the way of playing has to change a little in that with the current strings (both in coated gut and in metal) probably you can push the instrument more. Maybe we need to find a way of playing that is directed at finding a timbre of a certain quality, more than looking for big power. In Paganini's day, there were instruments that were more or less powerful, but this needs to be inserted in the context of the age, without the noise that we are used to today (telephones ringing, the stereo on very high volume, etc.). Let's not forget that Stradivarius and Guarneri's instruments were already famous in their day for having a big sound, and Paganini himself called his violin the Cannon. It would be interesting to be able to check (something that's impossible) the sound of the instrument in Paganini's day and compare it with how it is today. Certainly the fact that the violin was not touched since Paganini's day with respect to dimensions, mensur and neck would lead us to believe that the instrument sounded pretty much as it does today. But it is clear that more than 100 years have passed and you have to take this into account. The instrument should be tried at regular intervals, left to rest and then tried again over and over because instruments change very much as a function of who is playing, in function of the strings and the bow. The limits therefore are not so much in the violin as in the violinist who plays it. The instrument moves, varies, lives and changes mood just like a person. So it is very difficult now to give an opinion that is unequivocal. I think, in any case, another trial should be done. What I noted is minor power with respect to the modern strings, but I repeat, the way of playing is completely different.



Do you think that these fittings may contribute to explaining or at least better understanding Paganini's technique?

Frankly, I am not so convinced. Here a parenthesis should be opened on how the concept of precision has changed from Paganini's day to today. Everything must be seen in the context of the age. There are recordings, executions by great instrumentalists that maybe for what is asked for today in the way of recordings, would probably be discarded because they are full of errors, forgetting that they were executions done in one take. Paganini was known as a great virtuoso, but it would be interesting to know how much the listener dwelled upon a possible error or possible imprecision. I read a very curious review of a Paganini concert performed in Germany where the critic writes literally that Paganini during the performance (I think it was the *Palpiti* or the Fourth Concerto, I don't recall right now) was frustrated in creating the harmonics that were coming out with great difficulty. Probably even he ran up against phenomena of humidity with strings that were deteriorating, and evenings that were less successful than others. After all, he, too, was a man.

I think that having played the instrument on many occasions with the modern fittings, I found myself more at home with these compared to the historical fittings, that I only had the opportunity to play with for about a half an hour. So I hope to be able to have the occasion to try the instrument for a longer period of time in order to be able to express a more accurate opinion. For me, what was important was establishing a harmonious relationship with the instrument.