

How to Play the Rode Caprices

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Rode's Caprices are more than a mere violin study - learn to appreciate the musicality in these 24 marvelous miniatures - by Axel Strauss

The 24 Caprices for solo violin by Pierre Rode have been a staple in violin training ever since they were written in the early 1800s. In my own upbringing as a violinist, I used to look at these works as a necessary evil, like some leafy green that tasted awful, but was supposedly good for you. It was only when I recorded the entire set for Naxos recently that I began exploring the musical value of these pieces, discovering much beauty in them.

Thinking about musical shapes, phrasing, and sound colors can make practicing them a lot of fun and very effective.

Indeed, the Caprices—there is one for each key—provide not only great material for working on basic elements of violin technique, such as intonation, coordination of the hands, various bow strokes and bow distribution, they also can help you develop a well-balanced, singing tone, something for which Rode was reportedly famous.

In terms of difficulty, these pieces fit well between the Kreutzer and the Jakob Dont études.

Études tend to have a reputation for being monotonous, repetitive, and boring. While repetition is the very essence of an étude, Rode infused his studies with enough musical imagination to make them artistic and to keep them interesting. While the Rode Caprices don't feature the type of violinistic fireworks that Paganini perfected, such as left-hand pizzicato and artificial harmonics, they can help you to develop balance, evenness, and sound quality, which is why I like to use them in my own teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

I hope that this overview will underscore their musical qualities and rekindle your interest in this valuable set of violin caprices.

Caprice No. 1

Experiment with sound colors in the slow introduction. Produce a sweet, singing sound and play the fast embellishments with rhythmic flexibility, especially in mm. 10 and 11. Play the moderato section in the upper half of the bow with an elastic and elegant *martelé* stroke. The notes with trills should be slightly longer than the ones without. Create phrasing and dynamics by varying the length of the stroke, without compromising the crispness of the articulation.

Caprice No. 2

The tempo marking is only *allegretto*, but this caprice needs a lot of energy. Play in the upper half and use fast bow speed on the fort pianos. Think double-stops for the left hand wherever possible, and in patterns like mm. 5 and 6 do the string crossings with a circular motion of the right wrist while keeping the elbow fairly low.

Caprice No. 3

This is to be played entirely in second position. The marking *comodo* means “comfortably,” which refers to the tempo as well as to the character. Play with a warm, sweet sound and with great evenness and fluidity. The bow should feel like you are “weaving” in between the strings. Keep fingers on the string wherever possible; for example, the fourth finger in m. 25 or the first finger in mm. 26 and 27.

Caprice No. 4

Imagine the beginning of the Siciliano being played by two oboes, followed by two French horns in mm. 5 through 8. Try to emulate the legato and the singing quality of the oboes and the rich and deep resonance of the horns. Measures 19 and 20 should be played at the tip with small, elastic *martelé* strokes. The allegro is a nice workout for the third and the fourth finger. Play at a brisk pace with a singing forte and ringing sound. In mm. 33, and m. 55, when you go up on the D string, be sure to reach back with the first finger before shifting up to the fourth finger. In m. 45 keep the fourth finger on the string. At the end, in m. 68, fade out to nothing without slowing down.

Caprice No. 5

Play this piece with energetic bow strokes and crisp articulation. The bow should stay on the string throughout this caprice. Treat 16th notes with dots as *martelé* strokes. Note the *moderato* marking at the beginning of the piece. Playing too fast will make it difficult to play such measures as 24 and 25 with clarity. Whenever you see a 16th rest, stop your bow abruptly, without interrupting the rhythmic flow of the figure.

Caprice No. 6

Opens with a passionate tenor aria, to be played on the G string up to m. 16. Play fairly close to the bridge and balance bow speed and weight to obtain a rich, glowing sound that is not forced. Use slow shifts to create a vocal line. The *moderato* brings scales and broken triads in all keys. Play with a broad, energetic *detaché*, mostly in the upper half of the bow. For the big leaps in mm. 37 and 39, stop your bow to give the left hand time to reach the high F[#].

Caprice No. 7

The key of A major lends brilliance and openness to this piece, which is the only staccato study in the set. You can play this with either up-bow or down-bow staccato. I play mainly up-bow staccato, except for mm. 25–28, m. 30, and the corresponding measures in the second half of the piece. Up-bow staccato tends to work well with the bow tilted toward the fingerboard while pulling the frog toward you. For down-bow staccato it is helpful to tilt the bow toward the bridge and push the frog away from your body.

Caprice No. 8

Despite the wedges in the first measure, I play this caprice with a resonant *detaché* in the upper half of the bow. Keep the fingers on the string whenever possible.

Caprice No. 9

Begins with a bright and sunny introduction, which gives you another opportunity to experiment with sound color and pacing. Compare this opening to the beginning of Caprice No. 1 and see

how the key influences the character of the music. The elegant and dance-like *allegretto* is to be played entirely in fourth position. Play in the upper half with good articulation.

Caprice No. 10

This *allegretto* is to be played entirely in third position. Produce a singing *detaché* in the upper half of the bow and measure the bow weight carefully to create a luminous and resonant sound.

Caprice No. 11

Explore the virtuosic and the lyrical sides of this effective caprice. Areas with eighth notes generally have a more lyrical quality, which is emphasized by the swells. Measure 7 and similar measures should be played across the string, as broken double-stops.

Caprice No. 12

This piece has the same *comodo* marking as Caprice No. 3 and requires a similar fluidity and smoothness in the bow. But where the Third Caprice is more bubbly in character, this piece has more of a rocking quality. It is excellent for intonation work.

Caprice No. 13

Play this piece with grace and a singing tone and try to preserve the long slurs. The key of G^b major provides a mild character and soft edges, and the pitch should be on the low side. This caprice would feel quite different, had Rode notated it in F[#] major instead.

Caprice No. 14

Begins with a somber introduction. To underline its lamenting quality, play the sforzatos with heaviness and depth, sinking into the string slowly. In contrast, the appassionato section should project dark, passionate unrest. You can show that character by counting in one rather than in three and by closely connecting your dynamics with the shape of the eighth-note patterns.

Caprice No. 15

In this lively and dance-like piece use a light *detaché* for the 16th notes and an elastic *martelé* stroke for the eighth notes. I recommend playing mm. 100–107 off the string in the lower half of the bow. Count in one rather than in three to emphasize the dance quality of the rhythm.

Caprice No. 16

This piece is quite an endurance test for both hands. The bow arm needs to play a smooth legato most of the time, while the left hand alternates between trills and fast-moving notes. Vary the speed of the trills according to the character of the phrase. For example, the trills in mm. 13 and 14 can be slower than the ones in m. 15. In mm. 104 and those that follow, it helps to play with a slight *portato* to help the left hand prepare the next double-stop.

Caprice No. 17

Is extremely lively and energetic. Count in one and play off the string, observing the sometimes sudden changes in dynamics.

Caprice No. 18

This stormy and virtuosic piece should be played as fast as possible, with a vigorous *detaché*

stroke. Make sure to keep the high energy level in the softer dynamics, as well.

Caprice No. 19

Play the arioso with a warm, singing sound. Keep a smooth legato also in the double-stop passages. The *sforzati* should be round and expressive. The *allegretto* is an infamous octave study. Keep the string crossings small and shift as slowly as possible, lifting the finger pressure during the shift. This caprice moves through a lot of keys, so change the sound according to the harmony: the phrase starting in m. 48 could be more dolce, whereas the section after m. 72 sounds quite dramatic and intense.

Caprice No. 20

Has quite an orchestral beginning. Play the fortes with a lot of weight and connect the double-stops smoothly. In the triplet figures beginning in measure 9, hold the bottom note a full quarter and create the articulation of the triplet by briefly leaving the upper string in between the repeated notes, without disturbing the lower note. The same technique applies in mm. 17–19. The fast notes beginning in m. 22 are all played on the G string, with a sustained and resonant sound. Use the finger drop of the left hand to add crispness to the fast notes.

Caprice No. 21

Has a bit of a pompous character. Play in a deliberate tempo with a heavy *martelé* stroke in the upper half of the bow. Cross strings when the bow is not moving.

Caprice No. 22

Is similar to Caprice No. 18 and requires the same energetic bow stroke and a fast tempo to create drive and a stormy character.

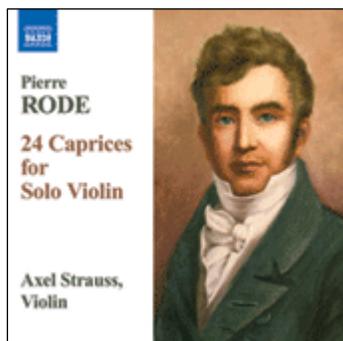
Caprice No. 23

Is excellent for establishing independent finger movement of the left hand while keeping a smooth legato with the bow.

Caprice No. 24

Brings another orchestral beginning. Play all three voice chords deliberately and with weight, starting the strokes on the string. The *agitato* calls for a fiery *detaché*. Play with a lot of drive and bring out all accents with a fast bow speed.

Axel Strauss has recorded Pierre Rode's Caprices for Naxos:



The first German artist to win the international Naumburg Violin Award in New York, Axel Strauss was acclaimed for his recording of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* (8.570213) as 'an excellent violinist who plays these with wit and verve'. On this disc he revels in the virtuosic and expressive opportunities offered by Pierre Rode's 24 Caprices, which preceded those of Paganini by several years. Rode's Violin Concertos Nos. 7, 10 and 13, performed by Friedemann Eichhorn, are also available in the 19th Century Violinist Composers series (8.570469).

Naxos 8.570958