

Review

Dario Sarlo, *The Performance Style of Jascha Heifetz* (Ashgate, 2015). Includes 18 b&w illustrations and 8 music examples. 284 pages, hardback, \$109.95.

Over the past few decades, there seems to have been a growing consensus among researchers focusing on performance analysis regarding the distinctive playing characteristics of prominent performers as reflecting the unique stylistic hallmarks featured in the works of eminent composers. Such a view, founded on the overwhelming dominance of documented music performances in our cultural life, seeks to pursue individual performance traits in a manner equivalent to the way we examine (and value) the distinctive compositional signatures of, say, Beethoven or Brahms.

Clearly, it stands as a natural process. First studies of historical recordings have aimed at revealing the quite broad, all-inclusive characteristics of early twentieth-century violin playing, extrapolated as being representative of nineteenth-century performance traditions. Analysis has mostly focused on recordings made prior to World War II, whereas later performances were investigated on a much smaller scale, serving more as prototypes to emphasize the significance and peculiarities of the early recordings.¹ Gradually, as research developed, studies began to focus on specific prominent performers seen as being representative of their generation, elaborating on their individual idiosyncrasies and personal imprints.

Coinciding with this approach, Sarlo's new book on Heifetz's performance style opens by stating its attempt to "investigate individual performer styles much in the way musical analysts...study the styles and output of prominent historical composers" (p.1). This is to be done by a thorough and comprehensive study of Heifetz's output, viewed from a number of aspects.

The opening chapters of the book deal with the artist's career, explored through an examination of critical reviews, audience descriptions, and comments on his playing, together with a study of his performative and physical gestures. They also include a general overview of his performance events and professional pursuits (outlining 2368 chamber and orchestral performances, recordings, recitals, and radio broadcasts), and a survey of his choice of repertoire and programming aspects.

Analysis of Heifetz's performance style, which comprises the bulk of the manuscript, is viewed almost solely on the basis of his interpretative approaches to one musical piece, namely J.S. Bach's Prelude from the Partita in E for solo violin, BWV 1006. This includes the manner of execution of tempo and duration, articulation, bowings, fingerings, portamento, vibrato, use of harmonics, structural layouts, phrasing and dynamics. A survey of 136 recordings of the Prelude made by

¹ See Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1950–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); "Traditional Habits of Performance in Early Recordings of Beethoven," in *Performing Beethoven*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 195-204; Joel Lester, *Bach's Works for Solo Violin: Style, Structure, Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

performers of different periods and instruments serves to establish what could be considered as performance trends as regards tempo and duration, hence to observe Heifetz's approach in its appropriate historical context.

The overview of Heifetz's lifelong output is undoubtedly impressive: a detailed and quite innovative examination of concert programs and flyers, correspondences, newspaper articles, radio-broadcast transcripts, concert reviews, public chronicles, biographical accounts, and other related documents—although mostly viewed in relation to Heifetz's Bach performances—provide an exciting insight into the master's musical persona and public image.

The analysis of performance style is also effective, aided by an examination of Heifetz's own scores, editions, and arrangements of the Bach violin set (with special emphasis given to the Prelude). Since some of these documents contain Heifetz's own interpretative choices, manifested through various markings and comments, they are a valuable resource for the researcher interested in deciphering the artist's individual performance attitudes. Together with the vast accumulation of diverse recordings made of the Prelude by various performers, they provide a wide platform for comparison.

Yet, with all its virtues and praiseworthiness, Sarlo's project seems to lapse in one of its most essential features. As mentioned, of the vast recording output of one of the most recorded violinists of the twentieth century, attention is focused almost exclusively on Heifetz's recordings of Bach's Prelude.

The reasons for such a choice are fairly presented, and come as no surprise to those of us who have long been examining recordings made of the Bach set. These include: multiple renderings of the piece made by the artist throughout the years (including, in this case, four audio recordings and two films—one of which, unfortunately, is unavailable); the vast amount of editions and arrangements made of this repertoire (including Heifetz's own 1938 arrangement of the Prelude for violin and piano), which enables juxtaposition between "formal" editor's directions and his interpretation choices made in practice; Heifetz's clear preference for Bach's music over any other repertoire (summing up to a total of 546 performances throughout his career, out of which 175 featured the Partita in E); the advantage of using monophonic repertoire during computer-aided analysis rather than polyphonic music of varied textures; and the large body of related academic studies that serve as a firm basis for comparison.

Indeed, over the years, a substantial amount of research has focused mostly on recordings made of J.S. Bach's six sonatas and partitas for solo violin. As one of the central pillars of violin repertoire, literally hundreds of recordings have been made, either of specific movements—incorporated into the canon from the earliest of recordings—or of the entire set. Such a unique phenomenon, almost unparalleled in the history of string-recorded repertoire, was bound to attract scholars interested in tracking performance traditions, diversions, or transitions of style.²

² Only a partial list of studies could be presented here. See Dorottya Fabian, "Towards a Performance History of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin: Preliminary Investigations," in *Essays in Honor of László Somfai: Studies in the Sources and the Interpretation of Music*, ed. László Vikárius & Vera Lampert (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 87-108; Montserrat Puiggròs i Maldonado, "Comparative Analysis of Expressivity in Recorded Violin Performances. Study of the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin by J. S. Bach" (MA Diss., Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2007); Eric Cheng & Elaine Chew, "Quantitative Analysis of Phrasing Strategies in Expressive Performance: Computational Methods and Analysis of Performances of Unaccompanied Bach for Solo Violin," *Journal of New Music Research* 37 (2008): 325-38; Eitan Ornoy, "Recording Analysis of J.S. Bach's G Minor Adagio for Solo Violin

However, other than the Prelude, one cannot avoid reflecting on the unexploited opportunity for a more ample investigation into the relatively uncharted recorded repertoire made by this celebrated artist. True: focusing on but one work enables a detailed, in-depth examination rather than a restricted and partial overview. Nevertheless, Heifetz's immense recording oeuvre was mentioned at the very beginning of the book (p.14), where we are told that even the 2011 Sony Classical release of 103 CDs and 1 DVD still fails to comprise the artist's entire recording output. Alas, all we are left with is an allusion.

From this perspective, the book's promising title is problematic: establishing an artist's "performance style" on the grounds of several recordings made of one specific piece is precarious, to say the least. Again, meticulous work employing a vast amount of data certainly has served to accomplish a most comprehensive and admirable document. Yet, taking into consideration its exclusive object of investigation, one is bound to renounce the overarching stature of the book's heading. To be sure, lack of methodological congruence or mere caution are not the sole reasons for suggesting that we stand on shaky ground here: previous studies have indicated that performers tend to modify the nuances of their playing according to their choice of repertoire, varying their approach to portamento, vibrato, dynamic shadings or articulation in response to distinctive musical styles. Consider, for example, Joachim's moderate use of portamento in his 1903 recording of the Adagio from Bach's Sonata in G Minor, in contrast to its extensive use in his recording of his own Romance in C Major, made at the same time³; or Kreisler's light vibrato in his 1910 recording of the Gavotte from Bach's Partita no. 3 in E Major, BWV 1006, as opposed to its wide and fast execution in his recording of Smetana's *Bohemian Fantasia*, made two weeks earlier⁴; or Grumiaux's use of stable tempo, constant vibrato, and lack of audible portamento in his 1956 recording of Mozart's Violin Sonata in A Major, K.526, as opposed to the rhythmic freedom, constant use of portamento and occasional absence of vibrato in his recording of the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto made during the same year⁵—such examples serve as just a few representatives of a general trait, for which there is no reason to assume that Heifetz was an exception.

Putting this aside, the author presents several interesting findings that certainly prove insightful. Such is the evidence of Heifetz's uniformity of practice in playing the Prelude throughout its various renditions: analysis of the four audio recordings made of the piece (dated 1946, 1950, 1952 and 1972) found consistency in the interpretative approaches toward tempi, fingerings, bowings, vibrato and portamenti,

(Excerpt): A Case Study," *Journal of Music and Meaning* 6 (2008), section 2, <http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=6.2>; Tomislav Dimov, "Short Historical Overview and Comparison of the Pitch Width and Speed Rates of the Vibrato Used in Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin by Johann Sebastian Bach as Found in Recordings of Famous Violinists of the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries" (PhD diss., University of West Virginia, 2010); Dorottya Fabian, "Ornamentation in Recent Recordings of J.S. Bach's Solo Sonatas and Partitas for Violin," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online*, 11 (2013): 1-21, <http://www.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/>; Dorottya Fabian, *A Musicology of Performance: Theory and Method Based on Bach's Solos for Violin*, DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0064 (2015).

³ Clive Brown, "Joachim's Violin Playing and the Performance of Brahms's String Music," in *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style*, ed. Michael Musgrave & Bernard D. Sherman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48-98.

⁴ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performance* (London: CHARM, 2009).

⁵ Eitan Ornoy, "The Masters' Voice: Recordings as Documentation of Performance Practice," in *The Violin*, ed. Robert Riggs (University of Rochester Press, 2016) (in press).

thus corresponding to previous observations as to Heifetz's unwavering performance features.⁶ Consistency of interpretive approach is surely not exclusive of Heifetz's performance style, as recently traced in an analysis made of multiple renditions of works by Bach and Prokofiev by Casals and Rostropovich.⁷ Yet, in a study aimed at deciphering an artist's individual imprint and personal traits, its clear-cut identification in Heifetz's praxis is undoubtedly worth emphasis. Sarlo concludes: "Heifetz's audiences were very familiar with his recordings, so they no doubt found the concert interpretations familiar...for those after a more spontaneous performance, Heifetz's machine-like ability to replicate an interpretation probably contributed to the general view that he was 'cold' and 'imperturbable'" (p. 130).

Another finding is the gradual slowing down of the Prelude over recent decades, observed as a general trend through an analysis of a vast number of recordings made by various performers and arrangements of the piece. The intricate issue of tempo has fostered several contrasting views over the years: early twentieth-century recordings display greater divergence between slow and fast movements than their "modern" peers; performances of the later decades present a more moderate pace during fast movements; or the opposite view that post-World War II recordings actually display faster tempos than those made in the early decades of the last century. More recent analysis, focused on recordings of a diverse repertoire, has shown how varied is the manifestation of tempo, both within inner-line phrases and overall duration.⁸ Sarlo's conclusions, based on a much wider pool of recorded data than is usually investigated for any one piece, surely adds valuable information, adding yet more confusion to the overall jumble....

Another significant observation denotes Heifetz's endeavors toward fidelity to Bach's score. Acquiring a facsimile of the work at a time when such an enterprise was uncommon, adding special markings and corrections to his Marteau edition so as to fit the composer's assumed intentions (including his deliberate elimination of the trill, appearing in most contemporaneous editions as a requisite for the cadential bar 135 of the Prelude), or his increased penchant for playing the complete set rather than some of its selected movements—all serve as evidence of the artist's inclination toward "authenticity" long before this somewhat loaded concept and its related practice began to emerge. Interestingly, previous research, targeted at determining the personal styles of Heifetz and Milstein through in-depth examination of their recordings of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, suggested possible influences of early HIP approaches on

⁶ For a review of the subject see pp. 128-30.

⁷ See Ju-Lee Hong, "An Empirical Analysis of Musical Expression in Recordings by Selected Cellists" (PhD diss., Goldsmiths University of London, 2014).

⁸ See Richard Pulley, "A Statistical Analysis of Tempi in Bach's D Minor Partita," in *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition*, ed. Catherine Stevens, Denis Burnham, Gary McPherson, Emery Schubert, & James Renwick (Adelaide: Causal Productions, 2002), 108-11; Fabian, "Towards a Performance History..."; *Idem*, "Is Diversity in Musical Performance Truly in Decline?: The Evidence of Sound Recordings," *Context: A Journal of Music Research*, 31 (2006): 165-80; *Idem*, "Diversity and Homogeneity in Contemporary Violin Recordings of Solo Bach," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Performance Science 2009*, ed. Aaron Williamon, Sharman Pretty, & Ralph Buck (Utrecht: Association européenne des conservatoires, académies de musique et Musikhochschulen, 2009), <http://www.legacyweb.rem.ac.uk/cache/fl0019947.pdf>; Janet M. Levy, "The Power of the Performer: Interpreting Beethoven," *The Journal of Musicology*, 18/1 (2001): 31-55; Mark Katz, "Beethoven in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The Violin Concerto on Record," *Beethoven Forum*, 10 (2003): 38-54; Milan Milisavljevic, "The Evolution of Viola Playing as Heard in Recordings of William Walton's Viola Concerto" (PhD Diss., Rice University, 2011).

Milstein's 1970s version of the Bach set.⁹ In this respect, Sarlo's observation of Heifetz, who was Milstein's close contemporary and classmate under Leopold Auer's tutorial, sheds curious light on the influence of a shared background on interpretive attitudes. Auer's high esteem for the Bach's solo works and his aspiration toward their seemingly appropriate way of playing, gathered from his books and recollections, surely paved the way for his students. Both Heifetz and Milstein seemed to have held a special significance for Bach's music and its apt manner of execution, despite their clear differences of performance style.

To conclude, this is a valuable book for people interested in Heifetz's career and performance features, with special emphasis on the artist's interpretation of Bach's solo violin works. While gaining complete, all-inclusive insight into the master's "performance style" is far from fully attained, it surely stands as a unique, thorough, and well thought-out endeavor.

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⁹ Dorottya Fabian and Eitan Ornoy, "Identity in Violin Playing on Records: Interpretation Profiles in Recordings of Solo Bach by Early 20th-century Violinists," *Performance Practice Review* 14 (2009), doi:10.5642/perfpr.200914.01.03