

THE ART OF THE VIOLIN-PIANO TRANSCRIPTION

Jascha Heifetz Symposium of Individual Style Presentation, New London CT – June 2018

One of the greatest things about our instrument is that even living more than one lifetime would not allow us to totally exhaust the resources available in the violin repertoire.

We choose music that we like to play. All great concertizing artists, choose repertoire that suits their artistic temperament and technique. And, so do we, even those of us who are not necessarily concertizing violinists or regularly employed as musicians.

When I was in my teens, one of my teachers was a composer named Jacob Avshalomov. This was in Oregon, many years ago. Probably not a name that most people here know. I didn't study composition with him, but I played in his orchestra, the Portland Youth Philharmonic, the oldest youth orchestra in this country and possibly the world, now about 100 years old. Many world tours and recordings. Mr. A, as we called him, was a professor at Columbia University, and among his teachers were Aaron Copland, Howard Hanson, Roger Sessions, Leonard Bernstein – all of whom wrote major works for the violin, incidentally. Mr. A had all kinds of quotations and anecdotes and stories about his friendships and encounters with musicians and other composers. But my favorite of all – and the way he delivered this line whenever he said it, was always priceless:

“The reason that some pieces are world famous is because they're just...so...good.”

And that's exactly right. If something is good enough, everyone wants to play it. Some pieces take awhile to find their audience, but if a piece is really and truly a bestseller, the whole world will know about it eventually.

One of the nicest things about coming to a program like this symposium is that we can find out what others are playing. We can hear them practicing something or having a lesson on it and not even know the name of the piece or who wrote it, and we can ask our colleagues what it is, and then get the music perhaps and learn it. There is literally so much music out there that even if we lived a few lifetimes, we couldn't get around to playing all of it.

“I know that the twelve notes in each octave and the variety of rhythm offer me opportunities that all of human genius will never exhaust.” – Igor Stravinsky

What makes a great piece of music?

Partial definition:

1. It has withstood the test of time (generations), and has had many performances and more often than not, it's been recorded a lot. It has won its place in the world. How many times has somebody played the Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn Concertos? Hundreds of thousands. There's a reason for that. Another way of saying this is that great music is timeless. It doesn't become dated.
2. It is memorable. It stays with us long after we hear it. “What we learn with pleasure, we never forget”, or “What we hear with pleasure, we never forget.” We remember great performances

by great artists. We remember musical themes and melodic passagework from great works of music.

3. It often has healing power. It resonates within us and can uplift, transport, transcend...and make us contemplate our own existence.
4. It is marketable. It sells concert tickets and sells records/CDs/iTunes/downloads. It generates revenues for copyright holders (publishing companies, or the estate that owns it.) If you look at a symphony orchestra's subscription concert series, you'll decide if you want to attend those concerts mostly based on what they're playing. This goes for any music, not just classical!
5. "The true test of a masterpiece is that no performance can harm it." -Janos Starker, cellist. So, no matter what the quality of a particular performance may be, the greatest works always survive.

The reason that music written 200-300 years ago by Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart has survived is because it obeys all of the above.

The People – the masses – the population – decide whether or not something will be great. Surely there are unsung pieces that have abnormal trajectories (example: Goldmark Violin Concerto).

People go to concerts and recitals expecting to hear "popular" classical music. Examples:

- Stravinsky: "The Firebird", "Petrouchka", and "The Rite of Spring" – his three most notable ballets, although we hear the music in symphonic concerts.
- The Big Beethoven Symphonies (#s 3, 5, #7, #9) and some of the Piano Concertos
- Tchaikovsky's music – all great, but the later Symphonies (#s 4, 5, 6), "The Nutcracker", and "Swan Lake" especially
- Mozart's later Symphonies (#'s 35-41)
- Richard Strauss' tone poems ("Death and Transfiguration", "Don Juan", "Don Quixote", "Ein Heldenleben", etc.)
- Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos. #2 in C minor was at one time the most played in the world and probably still is; #3, aka "The Rach Three" is one of the most difficult ever written for the piano; the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini is one of his best-known.
- Shostakovich Symphonies #5 and #7 "Leningrad"
- Mahler Symphonies
- Respighi – "Fountains of Rome", "Pines of Rome", "Roman Festivals"
- Brahms 4 Symphonies, "Variations on a theme of Haydn", Piano Concertos
- Gershwin – many, but "Rhapsody in Blue" and opera "Porgy and Bess" are most popular
- Khatchaturian "Sabre Dance", Ravel "Bolero", Barber "Adagio for Strings", Debussy "Afternoon of a Faun", Dukas "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", Bartok "Concerto for Orchestra", or any number of other popular showpieces for orchestra

For the Violin:

- Franck Sonata! Everyone plays it, everyone knows it.
- The Big Four or Five Violin Concertos - Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Brahms, (the Sibelius is usually on this list too)
- Saint-Saens' two big showpieces – "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso" and "Havanaise" plus the Sonata in D minor, op. 75 and Violin Concerto #3

- Sarasate's showpieces, with "Zigeunerweisen" and "Carmen Fantasy" the most popular
- Chausson "Poeme"
- Strauss - Sonata in E flat
- Bruch's Violin Concertos, and the "Scottish Fantasy"
- Beethoven "Kreutzer" and "Spring" Sonatas
- Bach – Sonatas and Partitas and Concertos (the Double Concerto is best-known)
- Bartok – Roumanian Folk Dances
- Debussy Sonata, plus other shorter pieces transcribed by Heifetz
- Ravel – "Tzigane"
- Bazzini – "Round of the Goblins"
- Paganini's compositions (many of them, with Caprice #24 being most popular...royalties for Paganini family?!)
- Brahms Sonatas 1, 2, and 3 plus the "Hungarian Dances" (transcribed by Joachim)
- Heifetz's transcriptions, including "Hora Staccato" by Dinicu, "Beau Soir" by Debussy, "Valse Nobles e Sentimentales" by Ravel, "The Swan" by Saint-Saens, "Estrellita" by Ponce, "Sabre Danse" by Khachaturian.

This music is all standard repertoire, globally known. Non-musicians know this music too, and expect that they can find it at a concert near them at any given time.

One of the greatest things about our instrument is that even living more than one lifetime would not allow us to learn the entire violin repertoire.

Some of this great music was not written for our instrument...so, can we possibly transcribe or arrange? YES!!

How many of you perform transcribed works? Have any of you written your own transcriptions, and do you perform them?

The world of transcriptions and arrangements

We may wish to perform a piece in a form different than the one in which it was conceived. The original work may call for instrumentation that we don't have. Example – we don't have a full orchestra, but we still want to perform Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance". How do we do it? Arrange it, which is what Jascha Heifetz did (perfectly!)

Some people have said that transcriptions go against the grain of what the composer originally conceived. This is a matter of opinion. It might be more valid if the transcriptions were not any good, but look how many great ones are out there?? Some people don't play transcriptions (they're missing out!)

What is the difference between a transcription and an arrangement?

A transcription doesn't deviate from the original score significantly. The transcriber may have to modify some things in order to make it playable on another instrument or combination of instruments. But, the original score remains mostly, if not completely, intact – except for the instrumentation. A successful

transcription worthy of publication and performance has stayed within the boundaries of what the composer originally wrote. Examples: many of Jascha Heifetz's transcriptions.

An arrangement often has significant departures from the original score. For instance, melodies might be altered or completely changed, or variations of what was originally written might be in the arrangement. This is why some arrangements are not as successful as others. Examples: Brahms Symphony #1 or the Tchaikovsky 1812 Overture abridged for a junior orchestra.

There is also something in between these two forms, where an entirely new composer may write something that has characteristics of both. An example would be the various Fantasies on themes from Bizet's opera "Carmen" written for the violin by Hubay, Sarasate, and Franz Waxman (among others). Certain elements of the original score do remain in these pieces. However, they are often not usually true to Bizet's original intentions, because they were conceived as virtuoso showpieces. They have more characteristics of arrangements than transcriptions.

Why arrange? Why transcribe?

- As mentioned originally, an arrangement or transcription can be done if you lack the resources of the original instrumentation.
- If you need another piece of music for a recital program, you can always play something that you arranged or transcribed for the violin.
- Sometimes pieces are needed 'ad hoc' – for a special occasion. Classic example was in 1927...Heifetz was in Mexico and he needed a Mexican piece. Hence, Jascha Heifetz, op. 1 was born – "Estrellita."
- Transcribe or arrange music not to gain acceptance, but to make a difference! By doing so, you're adding to the repertoire. And hopefully, more people will play your transcription/arrangement.
- Publish or perish?!

Steps:

1. Identify a possible piece to transcribe or arrange.
2. Get the score.
3. Run a test...can it be transcribed or arranged? If so, then start.
4. Use a software program if available. Good softwares include FinaleTM and SibeliusTM.
5. Create the violin part in rough form, from the score.
6. If it will have a piano part, write the piano part. Use the piano while writing it.
7. The software usually has a playback feature. See how it sounds!
8. Make changes. "Music is written to be erased."
9. Premiere it! Publish it!

Can all music be transcribed or arranged? No!

Examples (to be played on CD or ipod):

Sinding "Rustle of Spring" for piano solo (does not work)

Mahler “Adagietto from Symphony #5” – may work.

Mussorgsky “The Hut on Fowl’s Legs – Baba Yaga” from “Pictures at an Exhibition” – works! Play the piano version, then the Ravel version (orchestra), and my version (violin/piano).

Enesco – Rapsodie Roumaine No. 1 (works and has been transcribed for violin.)

Hovhaness – Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints for Xylophone and Orchestra (does not work!)

In general, trying to take a piano concerto or a piece for organ and transcribe it for an instrument that can only play on one clef does not work for obvious reasons.

If you have a symphonic work, the ones that work best are those with (especially) strong violin, oboe, or clarinet parts that can be written as the violin solo part of the transcription.

Interestingly, the guitar has had a good number of transcriptions from violin pieces! The Paganini Caprices and the Bach Sonatas and Partitas have all been successfully transcribed and recorded on the guitar. But, guitar pieces are not often transcribed for violin, possibly due to the fact that guitars have six strings and hence, 6-note chords that are not easy to play on the violin. Paganini, whose violin compositions often have a lot of chords (including broken chords), wrote for the guitar as well. Anyone here ever played the violin-guitar duos by Paganini?

Positive characteristics of a piece that can be transcribed:

- A solid, characteristic melodic line that will sound appropriate on the new instrument(s)
- The same character of the piece can be retained in the transcription
- Can potentially give a new spin on an old piece – one that an audience would appreciate, and not have them thinking totally about the original composition (if the piece is a warhorse one that audiences know). Analogy: a movie sequel. We want to basically see the same movie, or a continuation, of Part 1 – we don’t want a completely new movie with new characters. Or, not a new song with old lyrics.
- A piece that, when transcribed, stays true to composer’s original intent.

Some negative characteristics:

- The original score has too many chords to make for a reasonable solo part
- Excess of polyphony, or not enough of a melodic line
- Too much might have to be ‘lost in transcription’ in order for it to work
- Can the original piece be identified easily, or does it have to be changed so much in the transcription that it might not be “the same piece”?
- If the character of the original composition can’t be retained in the transcription, it won’t be successful as a transcription.
- If the transcription is with piano accompaniment, can a piano accompaniment be successfully constructed?

So, you have to develop an ear for what would work well on the violin and what wouldn't. If you have doubt – get the score and try to get it to work. It doesn't always, but when it does...you really have something valuable on your hands!

One big no-no in transcribing/arrangement is having to make so many cuts of unplayable material that the musical line of the original work is broken...again, "composer's intent" must be maintained.

Little-known fact: Heifetz wrote many unpublished transcriptions. Some of them, he threw out after months of work. If they were worthy of having his name on them, they had to be good!

"It is highly doubtful that much of the music written in the classical style after 1950 will ever enter the standard repertoire." Is there still good music being written nowadays? Yes. It's just harder to find. Music reflects the times – and these are very weird times in the world! The demand for classical-style music is not as great as it was 50 to 100 years ago and longer.

For a transcription to work, it must be **Efficient** (conserve technical resources) – i.e., you (and your pianist) don't break your fingers while playing it!! It must also be **Effective** - it has a positive effect...audiences like it and can feel the rightness of the melodic line, and if they know the original composition, it has to sound right on the violin.

Having a background in composition and music theory (especially harmony) and the ability to play the piano are helpful if you plan to write transcriptions. You don't have to be a fluid pianist but you need to be able to write, and identify, chords and chord progressions (I-IV-V-I, etc).

Heifetz wrote the piano accompaniments for all of his transcriptions! Most people don't know that he learned the piano before he learned the violin! He knew the piano parts to literally everything that he performed and his students were always told to study and know the piano parts, even if they couldn't play them proficiently.

While many transcribers over the past few centuries have identified transcribable music, there is always more out there that can be transcribed – it just requires more effort to find it. How to find it?

- Libraries
- Radio – listen to local classical station
- Online – IMSLP.org has tons of scores available for free download
- Recordings – Youtube has become king of recordings, especially of obscure pieces, many of which await transcription/arrangement.
- Concerts and recitals.

Where to put transcriptions on a recital program? If it is your own, then preferably at the end as an encore or one of the last pieces you perform. We have to be humble and put the work of the great masters ahead of ourselves! But, obviously, where it is placed on the program must make musical sense.

BUT, we can't give everything away to our audience. We can give them the Franck Sonata, a Brahms Sonata, a Bach Sonata/Partita, a Sarasate or Kreisler or Saint-Saens showpiece, which they will enjoy immensely. But at least one number on the program should be one (preferably more!) that they aren't familiar with, one that they have not yet heard – so they hopefully walk away from the recital thinking

about it, more than the other pieces. Choose something that will result in audience coming up to you afterwards and ask about “That piece you played by [composer] was gorgeous...where did you find it or first hear it?”

There should be at least one transcribed shorter works on a recital program – originally written for another instrument or orchestra but which has an equal place as a violin-piano piece.

Publishing your own transcriptions... (1) Upload them to www.imslp.org – they will be free for all to download. (2) Try to sell them to an interest publisher...get an agent to negotiate terms of contract with publisher if you think yours might net the publisher some serious profits! (3) Put on a website and charge for downloads.

Performance of either of “Elfentanz” by Popper-A.R. or “Fantasie Pastorale” by Bozza-A.R.