

THE ART OF THE VIOLIN-PIANO TRANSCRIPTION

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“The reason that some pieces are world famous is because they’re just...so...good.” -Jacob Avshalomov (1919-2013, American composer and conductor)

“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 someone 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 decide whether or not something will be great. Surely there are unsung pieces that have abnormal trajectories (example: Goldmark Violin Concerto). The great works don’t go unnoticed though. Some pieces are more popular in other parts of the world than in the US.

People go to concerts 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"/"Nocturnes"/"La Mer", Dukas "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", Bartok "Concerto for Orchestra", or any number of other popular showpieces for orchestra

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' "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 Khatchaturian.
- Many others. One of the many great things about our instrument is that if we lived several lifetimes we still wouldn't have time to learn everything written for it.

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.

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

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 Heifetz did (perfectly!)

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 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.

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 Finale™ and Sibelius™.
5. Write the violin part, 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 and revise until it's good enough. "Music is written to be erased."
9. Premiere it! Publish it!

Can all music be transcribed or arranged? No!

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.

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?

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!! If it's too clumsy, it doesn't work. 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 and appropriately accompanied by the piano.

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).

How to find music that can be transcribed? 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.

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. But, obviously, where it is placed on the program must make musical sense. There should be at least one transcribed work 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.