

## Performance Practice Review

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Volume 15 | Number 1

Article 1

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# Correspondence: June 23, 2010

Roland Jackson

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Jackson, Roland (2010) "Correspondence: June 23, 2010," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 1. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201015.01.01

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**June 23, 2010**

**Roland Jackson**

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The recent article by Dorottya Fabian and Eitan Ornoy, “Identity in Violin Playing on Records: Interpretation Profiles in Recordings of Solo Bach” (*PPR* 2009)—which considers mainly the twentieth-century violinists Heifetz and Milstein (with reference as well to Szigeti, Menuhin, and others)—is unusual in that it generally avoids any discussion of Bach’s original performance practice. As the authors state at the outset, “when studying the performances, we are not concerned primarily with how they may relate to historically-informed performance and Bach’s intentions or presumed intentions.” In this they depart from all the studies that have appeared thus far in *PPR* from its first issue (1988), where it was stipulated that contributions are to be based on evidence from the time of a composer or group of composers, such evidence throwing light on the performance of their music.

It is not that studies of modern performers without regard to the practice of the original composer cannot in themselves be worthwhile. Much of the fascination of our concert life (and past concert life) depends on the comparing of one performer and another, and a great deal of journalistic criticism rests on this as well. But such comparisons are not really part of performance practice, although they can at times lead to insights concerning the tastes and attitudes of the time of the performance, and in this latter way contribute to knowledge in the field. Robert Philip, for example, has studied a wide range of twentieth-century recordings and has laid out broad differences between early- and mid-century realizations concerning portamento, tempo fluctuation, etc. And although Fabian and Ornoy make occasional references to such a background—e.g. Heifetz in a 1975 Adagio “is not dissimilar to what is currently regarded as historically-informed” or Milstein in the 1970s “may have been influenced by baroque performance”—their main concern is not at all with the context of the performances they describe. Rather, their descriptions are quite detached from the times in which the performers played. As they themselves indicate, “when a particular era is examined in detail, individual differences [between the performers] outweigh the significance of possible period trends.”

Aside from this, no very clear picture emerges of the individual violinists they consider. Although the authors purport to establish for each violinist what they call a “signature” or “identity,” which I take to be some kind of rationale governing the individual renditions, the article consists largely of an accumulating of details without arriving at any overriding idea

concerning the performers involved. Bowings are painstakingly reconstructed; tempo fluctuations (often measure by measure) are graphed; dotted notes (slightly elongated or shortened in the performances) are tabulated according to the smallest deviation; and minute variations in degrees of vibrato are presented in the form of spectrograms.

One might question the value of such detailed descriptions, however, when the violinists considered were simply creating a subjective and ever-changing continuity of the works being played. Why minutely go over every bowing, articulation, dynamic change, tempo fluctuation, etc. when the intent of the performers was apparently to play Bach in a continually variegated manner? For example, a 1934 fugue played by Heifetz is characterized as proceeding from semi-détaché, to spiccato, to bouncing bows, to long bow strokes, while a 1975 fugue by Milstein uses (on paired notes) light détaché, a slur, a bouncing spiccato, etc. To be sure, some general differences between the violinists are pointed out by the authors, but this depends on the selecting of details from a wide assortment of characteristics present in each of them.

By cutting themselves off from previous research on Bach performance the authors fail to regard much of value that has been established by earlier scholars concerning the playing of Bach's solo violin music. Attention is not at all directed, for instance, to the autograph score, of which a single copy survives (in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek)—and the authors are incorrect in stating that Ferdinand David's 1843 edition (the foundation of all later editions) was informed by it. This copy contains detailed articulation markings, of which John Butt, for instance, has made a penetrating study, markings that can have a profound effect on Bach's bowing. Nor do the authors take into consideration Bach's original ornaments and their execution, about which Frederick Neumann (himself a violinist) has provided invaluable and extensive information, for example about which ornamental notes should be made to stand out. And in regard to Bach's rhythm, including the questions of inequality and over-dotting, Stephen Hefling (whom the authors do mention in passing) has made important contributions; for one thing, he limits over-dotting generally to the overture and the loure (the latter represented in the solo violin works), a surmise the authors fail to take into consideration.

It also seems peculiar that Fabian and Ornoy pass over and neglect to comment on studies devoted specifically to Bach's solo string music and its performance. These include Richard Efrati's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Ausführung der Sonaten und Suiten für Violine solo und der Suiten für Violoncello solo von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Zürich, 1979) and Joel Lester's *Bach's Works for Solo Violin: Style, Structure, Performance* (New York, 1999). Lester's book is particularly valuable in regard to Bach performance. He brings out, for example, the central role of baroque rhetoric in Bach's music. Rhetoric is defined by Lester as the stating of a basic idea at the beginning followed by its increasingly intensified reworking throughout a composition. This idea can have a decided effect on the performance of Bach's compositions, and Lester provides suggestions for violinists as to how best to achieve this. The baroque manner of playing Bach, in Lester's view, was subsequently abandoned by nineteenth- and twentieth-century violinists—and this would include Heifetz and Milstein—who came under the sway of the phrase structure and balanced repetitions of the Classical and Romantic eras. This later

manner of playing, Lester feels, is actually inappropriate for Bach, which raises a serious question about the validity or usefulness of Fabian and Ornoy's study.