

Searching for Ludwig

by

Gidon Kremer

PRELUDE

“Muss es sein?” (Must it be?)¹

Things in life happen unpredictably.
Suddenly you are confronted with a problem.
Unexpectedly you meet a great love.
Without warning a new composer becomes important to you.

Not suspecting what lay ahead, I set off – somewhat reluctantly – on my quest for the perfect performance ...

The task – to review a selection of archive recordings of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto – was not one of my own choosing.² To be honest, in the past few decades, I have barely listened to any recordings by violinists. The very idea of doing that always made me feel decidedly uncomfortable. I was so intensely preoccupied with playing that it seemed a fruitless pursuit, one with no immediate relevance. The worst thing of all, however, was the occasional necessity to “confront” my own recorded sounds. Whenever possible I consciously avoided it. You might wonder why.

At the back of my mind, I am probably aware of all the imperfections in my playing – despite the very best intentions. Most likely, I am also more than mindful of the many great players of the past, including those who still give concert performances today. I am not obsessive about violin playing (as it is, too much “violin” is in my genes as a result of being born into a family of violinists and feeling part of a kind of dynasty).³ Since my late teenage years, for enjoyment I have actually preferred to turn to various other kinds of music and art – opera, symphonies, jazz, the theatre, the cinema, literature.

When I was asked to listen to and compare different versions of archive recordings of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, my first thought was that I needed to find a polite excuse not to do it. To protect myself, I am used to coming up with polite but truthful excuses. This would have been just one more of them.

The intensity of my life as an artist, the need to take care of “my” orchestra, Kremerata Baltica, and touring 11 months a year are all valid reasons why I never seem to have enough time.

In many ways I feel as if I have lived many lives – both on and off stage – but one thing stands out: I never had (or took) enough time for myself, my personal aspirations, my feelings, my

¹ Beethoven wrote these words under the opening chords of the finale of his String Quartet in F major, Op 135, before concluding the “hard-made decision”, as he called it, with the cheery Allegro that follows: “Es muss sein!” (“It must be!”).

² The request to review a selected list of recordings came from the editor of the French classical music magazine *Diapason*.

³ Gidon Kremer was born in Riga (Latvia). His father Markus Kremer, his mother Marianne Kremer and his grandfather Professor Karl Brueckner were all distinguished professional violinists.

friends, my daughters or my family. Professional duties and commitments always seemed to be more important. How could I possibly indulge in the “luxury” of “stepping into the shoes” of other musical interpreters or their “observers”?

The pressure eased a little four years ago, when I gave up the Lockenhaus festival, which I ran for 30 years and which, on top of my concert performances, became a labour of love that kept me busy for many seasons. Apart from that, my passion for sharing not just my sounds but also my experience as an artist and a human being has led to my involuntarily becoming a kind of a “writer”. I never had any desire to be a “professional writer” but I allowed the flow of authentic memories and emotions to be recorded in scores of folders full of faxes (in the past) and emails (these days), which in turn led to book publications, often conceived while touring and even worked on during short holidays.

There is no secret or pride in realising that to make the material readable, far more is needed than merely jotting occasional ideas or experiences down on paper. Behind each publication lies an enormous amount of work on the manuscripts.

Each thought, word, line and paragraph has to be checked.

This leads imperatively to the need for partners – friendly consultants and editors who are attuned to my thinking plus – as I write in a number of languages – translators.

This process doubles or even triples the initial work. In retrospect, as what I have written is adapted for the target readership and its particular linguistic-cultural setting, some sentences and pages almost inevitably seem to be an improvement on the original and others in the original drafts a disappointing waste of time. Each language imposes its restrictions in terms of vocabulary and style. Am I really saying what I want to?

Having spoken Russian most of my life (although my mother tongue is German), I have not forgotten the Latvian I learned at school in Riga and “returned” to it in 1997 after founding Kremerata Baltica, the ensemble of young players from the three Baltic states. Our basic working languages are Russian and English, although I am happy to communicate in Latvian with colleagues from my native country. All in all, I therefore use many languages these days – the ones I was “born” with and others I have “picked up” throughout my globetrotting career – English and some limited French included. German along with Russian, the language I probably speak most, are still the languages I feel most “at home” with.

The first practical “hurdle” in agreeing to tackle the matter of reviewing a set of performances was therefore the choice of the language that it would be most appropriate to use.

All this is an attempt to provide a little insight into why the task in which I was asked to participate – choosing a favourite from among a dozen or so old recordings – did not actually thrill me. It seemed odd and inappropriate for me to slip into the skin of those professionals or music-lovers who do such things as a daily duty, a “passion” or a hobby.

As it was, I was also just about to leave on a rare extended holiday ...

However, we cannot predict where a “chance” word or phrase will lead. Once in a taxi in Moscow, I asked Sofia Gubaidulina if she had ever thought about writing a violin concerto one day. Some years later, I was surprised to receive the score of a new work that she had composed. The world and I received the gift of her great “Offertorium”.

At other times, a piece of music leads to a serious infatuation – much as my recent “preoccupation” with Mieczyslaw Weinberg, a greatly underrated composer, who was highly esteemed by Shostakovich, Rostropovich, Gilels, Kogan, Oistrakh and Barshai along with many other artists who lived in Russia, but still has to be discovered by the world.

Inspiration can come in so many ways; interest in something can emerge unexpectedly. It can even happen as a result of an unanticipated or even humorous question. Take the one once asked by an interviewer in Singapore: “What would you like to be written on your gravestone?” The answer? “Gidon Kremer, who was born, played and died.”

Each question or request – by a stranger or a friend – becomes an “invasion” with a potential positive or negative impact.⁴ If you are sensitive – and artists usually are! – even the smallest facial expression or gesture, an abrupt conclusion, the discovery of a name or a fact known to everyone but yourself can invade your mind – with a number of possible outcomes. One of them can be temptation; as Oscar Wilde said, “I can resist everything except temptation!”⁵ Any statement or suggestion is capable of triggering a chain of thoughts or plans. I wonder just how often “invisible” question marks have influenced my thinking or repertoire! Any creative artist with a big bag of “doubts” (doubt often being the start of further investigation) is more likely to understand a question rather like a pair of large feet trampling over his cherished ideas and a prompting to develop them than as a sign of assurance that he is pursuing the “right” path.

In short, I have learned to keep an open mind and to try to share this attitude with others. Life is too short to hold on to prejudices.

One thing is sure, “open mindedness” and flexibility, combined with the desire to go with the beat of the day, can be costly in terms of time and attention to other things. However, it remains part of my life’s “philosophy” – which many of my friends and business partners find uncomfortable since it never stops leading to changes. I am probably known for postponing answers and modifying programmes. At the same time, being a man of my word and needing to adjust things do not – to me – seem a contradiction in terms. In fact, I see the initial impulse (negative or positive) only as a point of departure.

In many cases – and the request to review archive performances of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto became yet another – my immediate reaction, the most natural and sincere, would be simply to say, “Sorry, I have no time” or even “I’m just not interested in that kind of experiment.” However, what often happens is that a day or two later (or after a sleepless night) I find that the “bug” has surprisingly caught me. And I change my response to “I’ll try”.

All in all, I had every reason to turn down the friendly request and ... enjoy my holiday.

⁴ See Aron Bodenheimer, *Why? On the Obscenity of Questioning*, Stuttgart University Press, 1984.

⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Act I, 1891.

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But instead, I said, “OK. Send me the recordings and let me see ...”

I have to say, my answer met with respect and no one put any pressure on me. I just allowed the recordings to be sent to me. They arrived – and I was hit by the first shockwave! There were ten of them and the kaleidoscope of familiar names among the soloists and conductors who have earned a place in history could not have been more embarrassing.

From: Diapason

To: Gidon Kremer

Re: Beethoven’s Violin Concerto

Dear Gidon,

Thank you so much for agreeing to look at the recordings. Here is the list, as promised.

- 1 Joseph Szigeti / Bruno Walter / British Symphony Orchestra, 1932
- 2 Bronislaw Huberman / George Szell / Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, 1934
- 3 Fritz Kreisler / John Barbirolli / London Philharmonic Orchestra, 1936
- 4 Jascha Heifetz / Arturo Toscanini / NBC Symphony Orchestra, 1940
- 5 Yehudi Menuhin / Furtwängler / Berlin Philharmonic, 1947
- 6 Christian Ferras / Karl Böhm / Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, 1951
- 7 Zino Francescatti / Dimitri Mitropoulos / New York Philharmonic, 1955 (live)
- 8 Nathan Milstein / William Steinberg / Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, 1955
- 9 Jascha Heifetz / Charles Munch / Boston Symphony Orchestra, 1955
- 10 Leonid Kogan / Constantin Silvestri / Paris Conservatoire Orchestra, 1959

Best regards.

I took a deep breath, set off on holiday and started (not without a fair amount of inner resistance) ... to listen. Let’s not forget that the interpretations were all exceptional. Apart from the artists, even the orchestras were among the “crème de la crème”. What had I let myself in for?

Besides the personal arguments that I have already outlined, I had plenty of other reasons to steer clear of this particular challenge – and the doubts were still struggling for attention. Not least of the “hurdles” was that we were not talking about a new or even an ordinary piece. It was Beethoven, who has become one of my most valued composers – especially after having the good fortune some decades ago to record all his ten sonatas with the unique pianist Martha Argerich and then, some years later, starting to “enter” the world of his late quartets.

To top it all, I had done my share of recording his “concerto of concertos” – three times during my career, in 1974, 1980 and 1992. That did not make the task any easier – on the contrary. Each time the challenge was bigger than before, each time I tried to overcome the short-sightedness of my previous attempts, each time I embellished the performance with another

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cadenza, one that I felt closer to at that particular time. As time went by, I always knew that all my attempts, however sincere, were like Ben Nevis compared to Mount Everest.

In fact, I still perform this work. I explored its depths recently with distinguished musicians such as David Zinman, Roman Kofman and Gustavo Dudamel and also gave special performances – without a conductor – with my own Kremerata Baltica.

Of course, my outlook on this eternal score has changed over the decades and I would not want (and cannot!) play it now as I did 40 years ago. Yet each note of this precious masterpiece still floods my inner being and the intensely charged experiences of the past – performances and recordings – weigh heavily on my own psyche and soul. And all the time I am all too conscious of a simple piece of wisdom: there cannot possibly be any *ideal* interpretation of this work. All the great masters of the past and we artists who are still living can only be mesmerised by its perfection.

We can only try to get as close as possible to its meaning. Among interpreters, there cannot be a “winner”.

The very idea of creating an ideal collection of recordings seemed impossible and doomed to failure. I was sorely tempted to switch on my laptop and write a belated excuse after all, suggesting that the job should be done by someone else, someone who had the “guts” to question milestone interpretations or was cold-blooded enough to look at them through a microscope or to enforce a strict limit on the time allowed for each one.

But ... I started to listen. In other words, I had already dipped my toe into the river and I was undoubtedly going to get wet.

TEMA E VARIAZIONI 1-5

ONE: Partnerships

I had made a commitment and it was too late to wriggle out of it now. I set my face to the wind and began my investigation.

Faced with so many examples of exclusive partnerships (violin/conductor), my first temptation was to put the emphasis of my assessment (or call it “choice”) on something that I would tend to call “dialogue”.

I am well aware that there are conductors who “follow” soloists. Kirill Kondrashin, for example, was considered to be a wonderful “accompanist” – a term that is by nature alien to me and to my understanding of the necessary “dialogue” between soloist and conductor.

No doubt there are soloists who are so ambitious that they try to take the role of a leader literally into their hands. My conductor friend, the late Woldemar Nelsson, once told me that Nathan Milstein, whom he certainly admired, presented him with this kind of challenge.

We know all too well that string quartets include some *first* violins who are tempted to “run the show”. On occasion, I, too, have probably been guilty of that when playing chamber music. That is the source of many conflicts if the group partners disagree with the violinist or are equally ambitious. No wonder the word *primarius* is used.

As it is, “fights” over chamber music – and particularly its highest genre, quartets – are not only distasteful but destructive when they are not about musical issues but personal ambition. All creativity disappears out of the window.

An anecdote comes to mind. It took place during a “Music from Lockenhaus” tour, when we were preparing for a performance of a flute trio by Carl Maria von Weber. The wonderful flautist in the ensemble (Irena Grafenauer) had “dared” to suggest that in her view the tempo was too fast and pointed out that she could hardly breathe – an unquestionable statement from a wind player! Waving the score in his hands, the “primarius pianist” explained that he had the dominant role in the piece. “Just look!” he said. “Can’t you see that you have only *one* line and I have most of the music in *my* part?” Generally speaking, soloists can be even more overbearing when playing concertos.

A concerto should be a “conversation” and in no way a “competition” between a soloist and an orchestra that is controlled and led by a conductor – a genuine demonstration of *concertare*. It must be clear that in a major work such as Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, the protagonists should be equally important. What then becomes interesting for a listener (as well as for all participating musicians) is *how* (on what terms) the expected “conversation” takes place. An ideal performance should provide space for all participants to feel part of the presentation.

We can be sure that if a conductor were to decide that *he* were more important than the soloist, it would be considered an affront and an indication of profound disrespect for all the work by

the soloist to read the dots and strokes left by the genius creator (occasionally meaning months or even years of work to master the extremely difficult solo part).

In my own experience of having played a large variety of works, I have also seen “disrespect” assuming a different guise. Nowadays (although I wonder if it really was different in the past), some conductors – even some truly gifted ones – have no compunction about turning up at the first rehearsal shamelessly underprepared. It is as if the ability to “manage” rehearsals efficiently and quickly, not to mention the following concerts, takes precedence over matters of artistry.

I recently witnessed an artist (who is best left unnamed) literally sight-reading Alban Berg’s mysterious violin concerto – with absolute ease ... but zero meaning. Cases like that reinforce the necessity of establishing a “pact” for a harmonious reading of any great score.

In the selected recordings of Beethoven’s masterpiece, I had to consider relationships between famous “names” such as Menuhin and Furtwängler, Szigeti and Walter, Kreisler and Barbirolli, Ferras and Böhm, Francescatti and Mitropoulos.

Would it be fair to assume that *all* those well-known musicians – and indeed all the artists in the selection of recordings – had a great deal of mutual respect and enjoyed each other’s approach? I want to believe that in past generations disrespect (shown to the score or the partner) was simply unimaginable. Am I still an idealist? Probably ...

Mutual respect is certainly a key ingredient. It can also create the space needed for the partners not only to *follow* each other but also to “dare” to approach the work from an unexpected angle. That kind of “daring” allows new insights and leads to what can be rightly called – by artists and audiences alike – an “interpretation”.

Even in my youth, my natural inclination was to search for a personal approach to the tempo, articulation, rhythm or whatever. I remember how my father forced me to listen to many recorded examples from his collection of interpretations of Bach’s solo works.

At that time Henryk Szeryng was considered *the* grand master of all living violinists, along with many of those who dared to leave a trace of their passing with a Bach “Sei” recording.⁶ While I appreciated Szeryng’s playing – in which every note and bar was flawless – I tended to prefer the recordings by Menuhin. To me, an ambitious youngster in search of myself, Yehudi Menuhin seemed to demonstrate greater “freedom” in his playing.

Not attempting to copy his way of playing, but definitely profoundly in awe of the great master, I fearlessly played the *bourrée* from Bach’s first Partita in a school audition. The “punishment” was not long in coming. Contrary to my expectations, the jury reduced my usually high grade, referring to the very “freedom” that I had taken as something unacceptable. My “freedom” was denounced as not fitting Bach’s style. It was a pronouncement that had to do not only with music – the entire system ran on conservatism. Freedom was the last thing that was tolerated in the Soviet Union. That attitude extended to teachers, too. Students had to follow *their* parameters for mastering any repertoire. Fortunately, over the years I improved my

⁶ In Bach’s manuscript, his Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin (BWV 1001–1006) are referred to as the “Sei” (Italian for “six”) because there are three of each, making a total of six works.

presentational style and without claiming that – to quote my favourite poet and singer Leonard Cohen – I know “how it goes”,⁷ I gained at least the right to play and express myself freely.⁸

In all these musings, had I found some important evidence to support my case or was I being side-tracked by my own experience? Experience can quickly obscure the obvious. Which is why, I suppose, an innocent child can sometimes see things that we adults spend hours puzzling over. It was time to shift my focus back to Beethoven and partnerships.

The 45 minutes that it takes to play a concerto have to be filled with some kind of common understanding, a shared view of style, tempo, articulation, rhythm and many other things (all of them aspects that I was going to have to look at more closely).

One of these facets is the space between the notes – pauses, fermatas, cadenzas and so on. I insist that music-making implies more than just playing “the right notes at the right time”. It includes the ability to deal with a particular freedom granted to each interpreter by the composer who places a *fermata* sign at specific places in the score. A similar freedom also extends to the choice of articulation.

Playing with a good partner does not mean that one of them has to “wait” for the other to end a note, a phrase or a movement. Nor does it require him to adapt his “vision” or phrasing. What is needed is something more profound – that a soloist and an orchestra are able to *breathe* in harmony. As I have found when working with Oleg Maisenberg, Martha Argerich and Daniil Trifonov, for instance, this saves a great deal of time that is otherwise spent in discussing any number of issues – quite apart from being intensely satisfying.

As I began to listen to the recordings – and determined not to write a “scholarly dissertation” on the subject – I did my best to be impartial and yet pick out those partnerships that were better “matches” and those who were less evenly balanced.

Without going into too much detail or making too many comparisons, I simply tried to identify the dialogues that “struck a chord” with me and those that I found unconvincing.

It has been one of my life’s privileges to have played with many wonderful partners (some of them conductors, such as Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Carlo Maria Giulini and Nikolaus Harnoncourt). I learned to distinguish between those who spoke “my language” (or let’s be more modest, “whose language I tried – while I was still ‘learning the ropes’ – to understand and speak”) and those who, for all their greatness or mastery, remained “estranged” from me. They included some of the members of the “Premier League” (Lorin Maazel, Claudio Abbado and Pierre Boulez, for example) – and possibly the feeling was sometimes mutual!

My search for the most genuine and intense dialogue became one of the parameters of my comparison. I wanted to find a recording that would demonstrate an ideal “partnership”. Did I

⁷ From the song “Everybody knows” by Leonard Cohen (*1934).

⁸ This freedom is documented in my last recording of the “Sei”, which was released on the ECM label in 2002.

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actually need to look further – wasn't it bound to be Heifetz and Toscanini? I decided not to jump to conclusions. There were many more important facets to consider ... as I soon realised.

TWO: Tempo

Glenn Gould once said in a television programme that Bach's Fugues can be played in *any* tempo without ever losing their greatness.⁹

Could we say the same about Beethoven's Violin Concerto?

Possibly. But there are time factors that nevertheless apply to this work, too. I am not speaking just of the period (and style) in which it was written (we will never know how Clement played it at its premiere or the tempo he chose). We also need to be aware that most of the interpreters in these archive recordings lived *before* "our" time – and that means *my* time, too.

The recent wave of "authentic interpretations" by baroque adepts simply confirms it – the pace of time and the approach to it were different. All these scholars and musicians base their assumptions on theoretical and often deep "knowledge". Nonetheless, some of them really do lack imagination and generosity in their interpretation of the music's deeper meaning. Somehow that has to be connected to the artistic vision, regardless of the period in which the recording was made.

To make it clear, the best leaders in the "authenticity movement" have definitely allowed us to shed certain prejudices and changed our general approach to *tempi*. It seems to me that outstanding artists such as Heifetz and Toscanini were instinctively able to feel this ahead of time!

The best contemporary artists, along with the best of the past, are able to blend their ability to read "formulas" and "symbols" of the past with a lot of imagination and great freedom. There it was again! Why did I keep "stumbling" over the word "freedom"? There had to be a reason ...

Each era has its own pace and its own "metronomes". It is common knowledge that Beethoven's metronome was "broken", which also makes me question the validity of some metronome marks by other composers such as Shostakovich, Bartók or Stravinsky. In the recordings of their own music they do not always adhere to the markings in the scores.

Of course, the history of music and the content of compositions cannot be explained away by "broken" tools. Life itself often dictates the pace, the anxieties, the pulse and breath. This holds true for creators as well as for us, their interpreters, and indeed for all living creatures. Or don't people realise that the pace (tempo) of life is different these days?

Clearly, for centuries (or at least in recent decades) some music was generally played at a *slower* pace.

Was this "slower" because the music was written like that or "slower" because people took life more slowly? Was it because some interpreters (like myself when I started to play the

⁹ The question of tempo is discussed by Glenn Gould and Bruno Monsaingeon with particular reference to the Fugue in C sharp major from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIZbVSqcsUQ>

Beethoven concerto) thought that a piece can be given more “meaning” if it is taken at a slower tempo?

It is no “secret” that adepts of the “historical” baroque movement initiated a tendency to play everything faster. Was that right or wrong? It is not for me to judge.

Whatever the reason, as I pursued my quest for the perfect partnership, I soon felt that the interpretations by Menuhin and Furtwängler or by Kreisler and Barbirolli, for example, were simply too slow for my more modern sense of tempo. Was I right to make my subjectivity a decisive criteria? “Well,” I thought, “I have been given a kind of ‘licence’ to explore my senses” and so I allowed myself to continue to pose questions.

This sober statement about tempo does not diminish in the slightest the beauty of the slow movements in those two interpretations and indeed some others, such as the one by Ferras/Böhm. The slowness becomes a powerfully effective, heavenly platform for the most sincere and exquisite presentation of the substance in the incomparable *Larghetto*.

Nonetheless, the questions would not go away ... Would the pace have been too slow for Beethoven himself? Was he sentimental to such an extent?

Did the composer, as he wrote those melodic lines in the *Larghetto*, think of himself (or his sounds?) as being “beyond” this world? Was the temptation to “Tarry awhile, you are so beautiful”?¹⁰

Or was it just my “contemporary” (related to *tempus praesens*) outlook rooted in my personal genetics, in the musical traditions that I have taken on board and in the sheer sense of living in our – much faster (and noisier!) – times.

I had got this far but felt as if I had covered no ground at all. My investigations seemed to taking me nowhere; I felt well and truly “stuck”. I still felt uneasy with tempos that I was labelling as “too slow”, but I started to question my own attitude.

What right do I have to judge the performance of others? Wouldn't it be better to try to learn something from them? Wouldn't this enrich me and broaden my own style of playing? Who am I to oppose these great readings? Self-criticism can, after all, be a salutary experience.

Facing a different (for me “wrong”) tempo was starting to feel like prejudice, even though the question of tempo continued to bother me. It reminded me of the “aftertaste” left by some concerts. The next morning, and sometimes even several days after the performance, my mind suddenly starts replaying my rendering over and over again – with all its deficiencies, all its faults. There is nothing I can do about it! There is no “delete” button for emotions.

I pulled myself together and reviewed my brief. I was supposed to find an interpretation which would be close to *my* ideal, and so I allowed myself to listen to my “internal iPod”. There was no other way to be sincere in my choice and not betray my instincts.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I* (line 1700): “Verweile doch, du bist so schön”.

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I had to bring “Round 1” to an end. The recordings that I crossed off the list included those (Kreisler/Barbirolli and Menuhin/Furtwängler) whose sheer beauty was evident but which were clearly out of time with my own heartbeat. And I have to add, as it is today.

As it turned out, the alien *tempi* were just the start. There were many more issues and confused notions that I had to confront. The “search for Ludwig” was going nowhere fast. Even more “clues” had to be turned over, many more “witnesses” to be called in for questioning.

THREE: Slides

The next “clue” to be investigated concerned *glissandi*. The examples in the archive recordings were just as alien to me as the *tempi* that I found disturbing.

It goes without saying that tastes and sensibilities become more nuanced over time. They are an indication of our own changing nature as human beings. As I noted in my investigations into tempo, attitudes to the pace of a performance have altered. The use of slides can also make the approach to a work appear “out-dated” and therefore less “palatable” today.

Of course, as most of us realise, “slides” in Beethoven’s masterpieces – or in the works of any classic composer – are in no way connected to the music. They are just a kind of mannerism, which may have its roots in the following inadequacies.

First, they are a way of “covering up” imperfect shifts from one note to the next. This might seem to be a useful tool for instrumental players who have less than perfect control over their left-hand fingering positions. In seeking to conceal their imperfections, however, players merely introduce another!

Second, excessive use of slides may also stem from a false understanding of the Romantic tradition and can be every bit as disturbing as another matter that is revelatory of inadequate technical mastery – overuse of the sustain pedal on the piano.

Finally, even today, many young violinists try to imitate the “oldies” by using *glissandi*. This is, however, a very disturbing practice that it is often “justified” by claiming to be respecting “traditions”. *Glissandi*, as I have said, have a number of functions, including allowing a musician a (rather cheap) display of “intense feelings”.

However, I had been asked to consider performances by some of the “grand masters” of the past, which meant that none of those three reasons could apply.

The use of slides had to be traced back to earlier tastes, to a sense of style that prevailed in a past era – roughly equivalent to an “overdose” of *vibrato*.

There is no evidence to prove it, but the core of the problem might have to do with attempts to copy “*bel canto*” features. I would not wish to deny that the best features of “*bel canto*” relate to imitating and highlighting something very precious – the noble qualities of the human voice. Nevertheless, the negative consequences reflect a wrongly understood (or misinterpreted) approach to the issue. If performers have shifted their focus from their duty to serve a score to the “embellishments” that flourish in the breeding ground of their own egos, a certain audible shift occurs and casts a shadow over the “cleanest” manuscript. As a result, instead of the humblest, deepest, noblest and most multi-layered Urtext, we hear a kind of “variation” on it.

Interestingly enough, this observation can even be traced in the way some musicians approach almost any style of music – including compositions by Astor Piazzolla. On one occasion, I had good cause to oppose those mannerisms by comparing a “flirtatious” reading of his works with “real love” for this important composer – which does not allow an excessive use of slides (even

though some of them fit the tango tradition perfectly). Love is not the sum total of displays of coquetry but a far deeper emotion – and its demonstration.

It may well be that a great artist in the past used them very skilfully and sensitively and everyone else tried to “jump on the bandwagon”. Or perhaps people thought they “belonged” to the authentic Romantic traditions.

It is consequently not surprising to find that in the twentieth century composers started to indicate in scores precisely where they *wanted* a slide. Yet even marked slides can be performed with or without taste and understanding of what they “mean”.

Even Piazzolla’s slides can differ in what they convey. They can be used with a fine sense of authenticity; for example, Piazzolla’s favourite violinist, Fernando Suarez Paz, who was a member of his last quintet, approaches them with immense commitment and emotional depth. However, performed by mediocre musicians they are immediately reminiscent of a restaurant band.

I recalled how, when I was a student, David Oistrakh reflected on my rendering of the very romantic “Poème” by Ernest Chausson. I was seriously in love for the first time and indulging my emotions. My teacher interrupted me soberly with a comment on my *glissandi*. “Gidon, you can’t use so many slides – that’s how violinists played 30 years ago.” Somehow, though, many youngsters still seem to feel that they have to fill in shifts between notes and that greater effect is produced by introducing slides. I am tempted to comment, “80 years too late.”

Interestingly, in his study of even more archive recordings of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, Professor Mark Katz also observes that less use is generally made of *glissandi* these days; the emphasis is more on letting music “speak for itself”.¹¹ Now that’s a point I agree with! But what does it really mean in connection with Beethoven’s concerto?

To sum it up – times have changed. Bearing in mind that the late twentieth century accentuated the absolute need to focus on published manuscripts, what was permissible (or even “in”!) some decades ago has left us with many examples of *glissandi* – albeit employed with sincerity, great authority and full technical command – which have turned out to be slightly ... wrong.

Of course, we still have documents of wonderful approaches by giants of the profession but these days we must distinguish between “sweet lies” and sober, but no less attractive, emotional “truth”.

¹¹ Mark Katz, “Beethoven in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The Violin Concerto on Record” in *Beethoven Forum*, Vol 10, No 1, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

FOUR: The mystery of detail

A visual reading of the score may lead to questions of articulation becoming quite an issue if the soloist has different ideas from the conductor. Here, another pact needs to be “signed”. At the same time, a soloist and the conductor (or indeed, the orchestra) could be in total agreement about the approach to phrasing, but the solution could still be at odds with the intentions of the composer.

For example, most of the interpreters (of the past and even today) place *two* accents on the theme in the concerto’s finale (its first and second bars), while the composer clearly asks for a *tenuto* on the first beat and does not place an accent on the second beat of a 6/8 bar.

Nearly all violinists and conductors – except George Enesco (one of my great past “heroes”), who was not on the list of recordings sent me – pursue this path. Are they right?

I am not sure ... The dancing rhythm and the beats of the timpani at the beginning of the finale certainly “allow” the interpreter to handle it like that – rightly or wrongly. To my way of hearing it, however, there is a discrepancy here.

Only Beethoven himself could say to what extent that phrasing reflects his intention. The genius of Enesco – who was also a great composer – merely allows us to conclude that there may be other justified readings of the theme.

I am not trying to present myself and my way of seeing this small detail as of vital importance. That would be more than arrogant. Nevertheless, most of the conductors with whom I have played this concerto (Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Yevgeny Svetlanov, Lovro von Matačić, Eugen Jochum and Christoph Eschenbach, to name just a few) seemed to be convinced that my suggestion that the first and second bar (in contrast to the third bar) contain just *one* strong beat – the first one (marked *tenuto* in the solo part) – seemed to tally with what Beethoven may have intended. We were then able to progress successfully along our “common” path.

A small, unimportant detail? Maybe ... But it is one of those details that allow us at least to engage in a discussion about what really *is* important. This prompts a more general question – to what extent do we have to follow the indications in the score and to what extent are we free to ignore them?

Let me give you another example. This time relating to instructions in the score about *dynamics*.

With so many great violinists to listen to, it might be justified to expect most of them to follow the few marks left by the creator of the work – but that is not the case.

To be more specific, in the first movement Beethoven placed no indication of a crescendo over bars 134-137 but most of the interpreters introduce one. It might make sense dramatically but, again, is this something the author wanted? Did he “forget” to write down a crescendo, was he following a certain tradition which presumed that a crescendo would be played or did he want a clear contrast with bar 138? The same applies to bars 355-364 of the first movement. We will never receive an answer from Beethoven, so we artists (and not editors) should at least be allowed to “interpret” the missing markings.

Are we betraying a composer if we change a marked *piano* to a *forte* or simply “assume” that a crescendo is needed when one has not been written in the score? Whom do we follow, the author (as synonymous with the score) or our “intuition”? My pedantic “German” approach would always prompt me to hold on to what is written, while Mikhail Pletnev, an outstanding musician and pianist with whom I recently had the privilege to play, followed his intuition and ... convincingly changed the dynamics at some points in our reading of Beethoven’s last sonata for violin and piano in G major. Was that what I understand by courage or freedom?

Then there was another point ... Something has to be said about *bowings*.

These days we are probably closer to a “cleaner” reading of the scores because the Urtext publications provide us with “textbooks” based on detailed work carried out by very precise and meticulous editors. They help us to “see” the original manuscripts in an uncluttered form.

We should therefore probably not wonder why so many of the violinists of the past used bowings – *staccato* or *spiccato* – which were never ostensibly part of Beethoven’s thinking.

What is interesting is that some of them use those rather “weird” bowings at the *same* places (for example, in the first movement in bars 463-468). Did they use the same old edition when learning the piece almost one hundred years ago? Which edition was it? Could it be tracked it down? Or were they enchanted by a colleague’s playing? I assume that most of them must have heard Heifetz’s pyrotechnics live ... But that is just speculation. Perhaps his way of dealing with the score goes back to Leopold Auer (whose cadenza he used most of the time).

Was there a kind of tradition in a past era of embellishing the articulation and demonstrating impressive bowing techniques by using “flying” arpeggios? That was a question I asked myself recently when I heard them brilliantly performed by another great artist, the cellist Emmanuel Feuermann in a recording of his 1930s performance of a Haydn concerto.

Of course, I am being “picky”. My intention is not, however, to be overly judgemental. I simply feel that – despite having the highest respect for all interpreters of the past – certain details do not fit the score. Perhaps that was why they were ignored for decades.

As I had not listened to many recordings for a number of years, was my sensitivity being “distracted” by miniscule details? Nonetheless, I could not simply ignore what was staring me in the face. In my understanding of interpretation and the way I listen to others (and to myself), details play an important role.

It is not in my nature to be an archivist or a “collector of mistakes”. I was just sifting through the possible clues on my way to finding the most truthful answer to the question about what I liked most. In my life, I have always felt that the first step to knowing what I want is to figure out what I do *not* like, which direction I do *not* want to take, those with whom I would *never* want to play, and so on. So the next logical step seemed to be to eliminate those performances that contained details with which I felt at odds for some reason or other.

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To get to the point, what really matters most in performances and recordings? What is it that makes the voices of the past touch us even today?

And so I turned to some further issues ...

FIVE: More details – fermatas

Many of the classical concertos (by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven) include (fairly small) spaces that are consciously “implanted” into their structure. They invite a performer to “fill” them – at his discretion – with something, a pause, grace notes or miniature improvisations. I am speaking about the *fermata*, a prolonged note, which precedes the further development of the musical material. A *fermata* can be seen as an option given to the interpreter by the composer – or as a necessity – for the following development. It can be enjoyed in silence or filled with a few spare notes (or overtones) to encourage reflection on the music that has just been played and heard. We can see this “filling” as a virtual “question mark” or “affirmation”.

I have always considered pauses, i.e. silence, as much part of the performed music as all the notes. Mozart even gave supremacy to silence: “The music is not in the notes but in the silence between the notes.”

Pauses can be as “imprecise” as wrong notes or over-elaborate slides. Maybe the most creative moments in a concert hall can be experienced when we “stop breathing”. It is not unusual for this moment to be preceded by, or to occur within, a pause. Silence in the hall can be very rewarding for both the composer/performer and the listener. The best audience is one that is actually able to enjoy the silence as much as the sounds. No wonder present-day composers such as Arvo Pärt and Giya Kancheli are particularly disturbed by the different kinds of noises in the hall that threaten to undo the “magic” of their lean sound. Would Franz Schubert or Anton Webern be any less upset?

I will never forget the silence that followed a couple of performances (of Haydn’s “Seven Last Words of Christ” and Shostakovich’s fifteenth and last string quartet) *instead* of applause. It greeted us performers as a sign of a more profound recognition of the immense value of the great works and of our rendering.

But I am again too much in *tempus praesens*. In searching for Ludwig I would rather turn the virtual clock back. The “time machine” set in operation by the recordings to which I was listening showed me that most of the performers under review prefer not to fill the space created by *fermatas* with another tool commonly used in the past, the *arpeggiatura*. This was the typical device of opera singers and instrumentalists in pre-Beethovenian times. They must have felt that Beethoven had already parted with the classical tradition as it was and that each of his written notes had to be respected – without any additions. The composer himself, however – in the concerto’s piano transcription – contradicts this assumption by placing a very clear “improvisation” on the theme at one *fermata* in the finale.

I need to underline something else, too. Whether the interpreter “fills” the space with additional grace notes or improvisations is actually less important than what he or she does with the notes under the *fermata*. Some performers prefer to extend the space by playing the few “authentic” grace notes far more slowly. Others (such as Jascha Heifetz) are very strict with the chosen tempo for the movement and rush without a pause into the continuation of the material.

Who is right? I make absolutely no claims to be the “high court judge”. My intention as the “investigator” is simply to raise the question of the most appropriate solution for this concerto?

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Whatever else, I was asked to give my subjective opinion. That let me off the hook! But would one man's opinion stand up in court? For the prosecution or for the defence? I decided to stand up for myself.

In their interpretations, performers are inclined to leave "fingerprints". But it would be probably wrong to consider them as committing a "crime". After all, most of them are sincerely following their instincts when trying to "read" and understand the score. Among the archive recordings, there was not the slightest trace of any attempt to destroy a masterpiece. The worst thing of which performers can be accused is of imposing their ego on it.

I recalled the review by Professor Joachim Kaiser of my performance of the Violin Concerto at the Salzburg festival, "Has Gidon Kremer butchered Beethoven?"¹² After I had recovered from the initial shock of that title, I realised that the author actually concluded that that was *not* the case. What was the reason for such a "hot" title? A cadenza. In this case the cadenza written by Alfred Schnittke in 1975. I was ready to tackle the next subject, but an unexpected flashback interrupted my plans ...

¹² Joachim Kaiser "Hat Gidon Kremer Beethoven vergewaltigt?", published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 1977.

INTERMEZZO

Scherzando

I suddenly realised that I had been thinking of my search for the ideal performance among the archive recordings (as requested) in terms of “rounds”. Had I become infected with the competition bug?

At the end of last season and the start of my holidays, I somehow gradually became involved in listening to the 15th Tchaikovsky Competition, which took place in Moscow. Thanks to modern technology, I became one of the millions of people following this “Mini-Olympics” on the internet.

In no way was I interested in the competitive element – competitions in the arts generally seem out of place to me, although obviously they cannot be avoided completely. As each round went by, I picked out my “favourites” and without any selfish interest (not a single student of mine was taking part as I do not teach at any institution), I started to compare the different ways in which all these talented youngsters handled the very stressful situation. I even wondered how on earth I had managed to survive such an ordeal 45 years ago, when I became a winner at the same competition! Had I just been singled out by Lady Luck?

What interested me most of all was how particular competitors dealt with the music itself. I remember how I had tried to motivate myself all those years ago by putting a note in my concert jacket on which I had written “Play the first round for the judges, the second for the audience and the third for *yourself* (meaning music)”. Of course, it sounds rather odd now and cannot be taken as a recipe for success. At the same time, we are talking about something that is very important in any context – the questions “Why do we play at all?”, “What is the motivation behind being a performer?”.

Obviously, many musicians are victims of the aspirations of their family members or teachers.

They are not the only ones.

Take tennis players such as Maria Sharapova. It is not difficult to see that, for all her gifts and willpower, she is also a “victim” of her father.

Many musicians are the product of similar backgrounds – the violinists Midori or Maxim Vengerov, for instance. So often you can literally *hear* the dependence on someone else’s expectations (converted into an emotional display of willpower). I have even wondered whether, like them, I was a victim of my father’s aspirations. This question bothered me to such an extent that in 1990 it led me to write a huge manuscript – by hand! Parts of it were later published in my first book of memoirs, “*Kindheitssplitter*” (“Splinters of Childhood”).¹³

Nonetheless, apart from some neurotic cases, performers often choose a “role model” among the great interpreters, someone in whose footsteps they would love to follow. It is no secret

¹³ Gidon Kremer, *Kindheitssplitter*, Piper, 1997.

that Leonid Kogan (among many others) was always inspired by Jascha Heifetz, just as these days so many violinists (including Anne-Sophie Mutter) draw inspiration – not without good reason – from the recordings of David Oistrakh.

In the past, I have actually encountered a couple of students who admitted to being so fascinated by my recordings that they literally imitated not just my fingerings and bowings but even my gestures.

Instead of being pleased or flattered, I always feel the need to warn youngsters like those not to try to imitate anyone, but rather try to find their own path in life and their own style.

Thanks to the recording industry and the possibility of reaching millions of people through the internet, the notion that copying is a useful tool for success is a very tempting prospect for young people who are not yet mature as artists. Instead, they should be encouraged to resist the “karaoke mentality”.

As for me, I never wanted to accept that the first step in *interpretation* is to copy the playing of your favourites. After all, interpreting is a secondary profession to the creation of a work. If people try to imitate another interpreter’s personal feelings, they become even more alienated from the source of inspiration. The interpreter’s quest for his or her own personal reading starts by letting inspiration flow from the source of the creation – the piece itself and its composer. To copy your role model’s interpretation for better or for worse is simply wrong. It becomes an “imitation”, a kind of forgery.

Listening to the participants in the competition, I also found myself thinking that I was trying to distinguish between sheer “mechanics” (which many of them demonstrated extremely well) and “music-making”. For me personally, music as such has always held pride of place (even at competitions) – although at the beginning of my career I was admittedly not yet mature and lacked many ideas about how to approach styles, structure, harmonic twists, etc. This became evident at my first appearance in the West – the Queen Elisabeth Competition held in Brussels, Belgium, at which I was awarded the third prize (my first great success) while my best friend, the incredibly gifted violinist Philip Hirschhorn, with whom I grew up in Riga, Latvia, and who sadly died much too early, became the winner.

For me, it was a battle between our approaches. It seemed to me that my adversary’s goal was to seek the utmost “perfection” (which he reached brilliantly in the finale of Paganini’s Concerto), while “my” Elgar concerto was a “confession” of my most intimate feelings. At that time I was 20 years old and still completely under the spell of Menuhin’s unbeatable recording with the composer himself that I had heard at the age of 16, although my aim was definitely not to imitate the interpreter!

Many times later, while listening to others play and observing other ways of dealing with sounds, I had reason to question “intellectual” approaches or – another extreme – successful but soulless readings whose goal was clearly “fame” and which used all the “tools” that would guarantee it. Once in Kronberg, where I take part in regular “dialogues” with young students (replacing the term “masterclasses”, which I find not quite appropriate to my “non-teacher” approach), I had to tell one gifted violinist that his performance of Elgar’s concerto (!) was

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“doomed to success”. I am not sure that he understood the irony of my words; perhaps he just felt that the outstanding qualities of his playing had been confirmed.

Listening to performers in different categories at the Tchaikovsky Competition – piano, violin and cello – I slowly started to form an impression of those among the many accomplished young performers who were for me the most interesting *musicians*. Before the results were announced, I already had my clear favourites. As it turned out, *none* of them won the top prizes.

While the drama of conflicting temperaments and abilities became more and more obvious among the participants, I could not help wondering which of the jurors (so different in their own approach on stage) would win the day in imposing their views of the “best”. Finding a common denominator among the diversity of tastes of jury members is always a controversial process. And – let’s be honest – it does not necessarily lead to the best result. It is obvious – an individual approach will always go *against* the trend and established prejudices; that is what makes it “special”. Opinions differ and it was clear to me that there was little chance that most of the judges would choose their “darling” from among those whom I liked. The appreciation of *different* qualities leads to the necessity to agree on some common denominator. And that is exactly what often leads to the fact that the chosen winner is anything but a “personality”. Exceptions do occur – take, for instance, the outstanding pianist Daniil Trifonov, who won the Grand Prix in Moscow in 2011, or Yulianna Avdeeva, who won the Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 2010.

The results were announced. And then I really had to laugh! Was it a coincidence, the judges’ logic or had a leaf been taken out of the book of Eurovision contests and the jurors’ votes been manipulated in connection with some “political” issues? *All* the competitors I would have wished to see on the pedestal won ... *fourth* prize! By the way, my personal list of the best included the cellist Pablo Ferrández, the pianist Lucas Debargue and the violinist Clara-Jumi Kang – all of them exceptionally gifted young musicians. For fun, I started to call the fourth prize the “Kremer Prize”.

I was not the only one, however. Very recently, I was amazed and amused to find that two of my new Kremerata Baltica colleagues had singled out the exactly same participants as I had.

There must be some reason why that happened.

Despite insisting on my right to my own taste and judgement, there is no way that I can deny the great accomplishments of the actual winners. Most of them were actually brilliant and convincing. It seemed to me that the answer lay rather in questioning and analysing my own priorities.

The Tchaikovsky Competition was over and I could find no more excuses not to deal with the list of archive recordings. Was I going to be good enough to choose the best? Are my values too individual to build up an “ideal collection of recordings” that is intended to please the majority?

I began to explore the depths of my ability to choose and to assess performances by others.

Suddenly, the idea of “reviewing” Beethoven’s Violin Concerto as recorded by great masters of the past was placed in a new light. Their playing probably initiated reflections on the same

problems, while I continued to search for an answer to the same question, “Why do we play?” Or rephrasing it: “What do we want to achieve by becoming performers and interpreting masterpieces on CDs or on stage? Why should anyone want to listen to us?” And as I said once after listening to a student’s colourless presentation of a Bach movement, “Why should people pay to attend your concert?”

Obviously, different artists have different goals. They differ in concert, in their lifestyle and in their approach to the press and publicity. It has always been like that and will remain so.

We all strive for excellence but even the word “excellence” means different things to different people. Some of the greatest performers are shy and modest, while others go all out to be “winners”, have the highest rankings and ratings, and are the subject of much debate – not just in competitions and “talk shows”.

The most modest musicians want to “serve” composers and works; the most ambitious ones are primarily interested in themselves, their own fame, their own recognition. It is probably this that motivates them to take part in competitions, hoping that “laurels” and a lot of interviews and publicity will help them to “conquer the world”. Others hire expensive PR agents. For those who love and cherish music itself, that is probably the most dangerous approach.

If we are speaking about the “substance” of a musical piece, there is no place for ambitions of that kind.

Music written out of inner need and suffering will never find an eloquent performer if he or she is striving for “glamour”.

By the way ... with regard to “substance” (and demanding it from a performer, regardless of whether he or she has won a famous competition or not, is an “oldie” or a youngster) examples can always be found in works such as Alban Berg’s “In Memory of an Angel”, in Shostakovich’s violin concertos and of course ... the Violin Concerto by Ludwig van Beethoven.

And then suddenly it hit me! I had been saying for some time that the concept of “winners” – and indeed competitions! – was not applicable to the world of the arts. How, therefore, could there be a “winner” among the recordings on the list that had been sent to me? I had been gradually forgetting about the subjective aspect of my brief. That was it! Now I really was going to make progress!

TEMA E VARIAZIONI 6-9

SIX: Cadenzas

I have allowed myself the luxury of an “intermezzo” but it is time to continue the investigation. I was planning to look at cadenzas ...

The classical tradition demanded that each soloist play his own cadenza on the spot. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were probably able to improvise them – much like jazz musicians. At some point performers started to write down their creations. An extension of the concerto (if not a new “genre”!) was born.

In most cases the material of the concerto itself was developed to demonstrate the soloist’s virtuosity. The cadenza had strong ties with the concerto itself. One of the first composers to challenge the world with a new approach was Mozart (who often performed his creations himself). One of the next was ... Beethoven! No wonder he wrote many cadenzas to Mozart’s concertos – building a bridge between the “classics” of the day was an act of respect and admiration and ... a challenge. Imagine today someone like Pierre Boulez composing a cadenza for a composition by Thomas Ades, for example, or vice versa.

On one hand, not being a violinist, Beethoven did not write a cadenza for the Violin Concerto. The original score was therefore devoid of any additional material. However, when he transcribed the work for the piano instead of the violin, he added a cadenza and took the liberty of including timpani and *new* themes in it.

Soon after the original work was “rediscovered”, the great violinist Joseph Joachim wrote an exquisite cadenza in the Romantic style but still based on the Beethoven idiom. Without any hesitation he even went a step further. Joachim felt free to use all new violin-playing techniques developed by such Romantic virtuosos as Josef Slavik, Niccolò Paganini, Heinrich-Wilhelm Ernst and others.

This legitimate creativity opened up a whole “can of worms”! Every violinist approaching the “concerto of concertos” seemed to feel the need to write his own cadenza, based on his own abilities to play the instrument and his own ambition to “show off” and “outplay” his peers. We should not forget that “showing off” did not start with people such as David Garrett. Liszt and Paganini are famous examples of musicians who, because of their outstanding personalities, created a real tradition of “hype”. (“Lisztomania”, the film by Ken Russell, is a brilliant visual document of it.)

I do not need to mention the dozens and dozens of musicians who followed the cadenza-creating path successfully (or otherwise). Among them were many respectable violin virtuosos such as Jenő Hubay, Louis Spohr, Eugène Ysaÿe and Henryk Wieniawski, to mention just a few.

Ruggiero Ricci, one of the best known virtuosos of the twentieth century, even recorded a whole CD of 14 cadenzas for the Beethoven Violin Concerto. It is still no more than a mere “splinter” of the history of cadenzas as a means of paying tribute to Beethoven.

The selected recordings on “my” list give us a small but very objective insight into the issue.

Strangely enough, in the twentieth century, like Joachim, most of the violinists (apart from its creator) used another Romantically oriented cadenza written by Fritz Kreisler. One could call it “the most successful” one.

True, it is a wonderful example of a metamorphosis of Beethoven’s themes. My great teacher David Oistrakh was not the only one to play it – I did so, too. Back in 1974, when the concerto became part of my repertoire, the natural thing seemed to be to play it. I also used Kreisler’s cadenza in my first recording of the concerto.

The selected recordings nonetheless make it clear that other solutions were also sought. Josef Szigeti and Nathan Milstein have bequeathed us brilliant examples of their “handicraft” – not only as violinists, but also as creators. Their pages are full of splendid violinistic “tricks”, showing not just their command of their instrument, but also their best intentions in converting Beethoven’s themes into pieces in their own right. If they had not been so closely tied to the concerto and performed as part of it, they might be referred to as excellent “paraphrases” or (without intending any negative criticism) “pot-pourris” that have always proved so popular among audiences.

Yet as I listened, full of admiration, to those attempts to “embellish” the concerto, I found myself unable to deny that most of them did not “belong” to the concerto. They did not seem to fit its style or its dramatic concept, let alone reflect Beethoven’s spirit. Rather, as documents of a particular (later) era, they retain their validity as valuable *signatures* of the performers, who created them as a kind of a “self-portrait”.

This should not be understood as my revealing a hidden personal conservatism – far from it! I am actually known as someone who spent years championing the cadenza written in 1975 by my friend Alfred Schnittke for the same concerto. What I wanted to do was to approach the “open space” of a cadenza with an open mind. Of course, Schnittke’s cadenza met with many objections because its innovation was that it progressively departed from Beethoven’s style. Apart from Beethoven’s themes, its basis comprises quotations from many sources, but mainly from twentieth-century violin concertos that were linked to Beethoven’s – Bartók, Shostakovich, Berg, etc. The “justification” for this was – and still is – to show their melodic, rhythmic and even dramaturgical “roots” in Beethoven’s masterpiece. It also gave performers a wonderful opportunity to display not only their virtuosity but also the concerto’s “place” in the contemporary world.

Some of the conductors with whom I played the Schnittke cadenza fully endorsed it. Lovro von Matačić said that it sounded “like Corelli”, while Kondrashin thought it “very logical”, and Eugen Jochum and Klaus Tennstedt showed a lot of respect for my choice. That was more than generous coming from an old master such as Eugen Jochum, who had once reminded my teacher David Oistrakh, “Young man, you have to do what you believe in.” The remark contrasts with the reaction of Claudio Abbado, who claimed that it was an invasion of the score. On the day of the concert in Salzburg Festival, he still wanted me to play another one. I held “stubbornly” onto my convictions. After all, the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights surely applies to choosing cadenzas, too!

The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced of my view of the cadenza as a “frame”, a bridge built between the time when the original piece was written and the date of its performance. I assume that Benjamin Britten and Ferruccio Busoni, who wrote a number of cadenzas for known classical concertos, must have had something similar in mind. Busoni, by the way, left a valuable clue about approaches to Beethoven’s Violin Concerto. Interestingly enough, he also included the timpani added to the piano version by the composer himself.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the multiple attempts to transcribe Beethoven’s original piano cadenza for the violin. Probably the first one was by Wolfgang Schneiderhahn. Others followed.

I, too, was among them and even performed two versions of my own – one that involved creating a score and using a tutti orchestra and another that added a piano positioned backstage. The latter version was inspired by Alfred Schnittke’s use of an “invisible piano” in his Concerto grosso No 5, which was created for the Carnegie Hall Centennial (1891-1991) and premiered by me with the Cleveland Orchestra and Christoph von Dohnanyi.

I later recorded the version with the “invisible piano” and enjoyed full support for the validity of my idea from Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the youthful and enthusiastic Chamber Orchestra of Europe, an ensemble with which I have always enjoyed working.

Maybe the most successful – transcription of Beethoven’s own cadenza was recently made at my request by the wonderful composer Victor Kissine. In it, he takes the unusual step of drawing on some of the additional enrichment that comes from incorporating the orchestra. I was happy to use it on a recent tour in Asian countries with the Tonhalle Orchestra and the remarkable musician David Zinman.

Why did I bother to return so often to the same subject? The most sincere answer – it was all born of a wish to get as close to the composer’s creativity as possible. I was privileged to have so many “willing helpers”, to whom I will always remain grateful.

So a cadenza can be a “window” – one that opens up to shed light on more than a demonstration of an interpreter’s abilities and to reveal a (contemporary) comment on the work being performed – regardless of whether it is a spontaneous improvisation or has been composed in advance.

To what extent, then, do most of the cadenzas to which I have been listening have a mission to “comment” on the substance of the piece itself? Probably and regrettably, in most of them their connection to the main work is rather limited.

For all of Alfred Schnittke’s “audacity”, he somehow succeeded in expressing the composer’s personality through the polystylistics that are his “hallmark”. At the same time he actually moved much closer to the idea of building a bridge between eras, showing within five minutes a “digest” of musical history and the development of ideas *directly related* to Beethoven’s masterpiece.

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Most of the traditionalists among the great masters of the past – and especially those who “stand out from the crowd” – can be fully admired for bringing to light their capacity as performers (or even as creators), but I had not yet found a single virtuoso who, from my subjective viewpoint, managed to tie the creation (composed or improvised) to the inner substance.

In fact, the opposite tends to be the case – the perfection of Beethoven’s score is endangered by most of those virtuoso impositions. Instead of finding a way to build a “bridge”, many of the efforts by performers to demonstrate their extraordinary ability for juggling notes, double stops, harmonics and many other violin-playing “devices” alienate me from the unique “minimalism” of the composer, who has created a masterpiece without using any gimmicks. Let’s remember the simplified description of this work as “scales and arpeggios”, which make some aficionados – and many true music-lovers – (there are plenty of examples among the comments on YouTube) think that this piece is not difficult at all.

In fact, the very opposite is true. The miracle and the greatest difficulty of the piece lies in the total absence of any unnecessary notes, something to which I lately (a sign of my age?) feel increasingly attached and something that interests me profoundly when approaching both old and new compositions.

These days, the “minimalism” of Anton Webern, Luigi Nono or Arvo Pärt is closer to my heart than many scores by composers whose works I have played in the past. That includes those who posed enormous technical difficulties – for example, Heinrich-Wilhelm Ernst and Niccolò Paganini or (in the contemporary period) Edison Denisov, Aribert Reimann or Kaija Saariaho – as well as those contemporary composers who belong to the “new complexity” or to any other “school”. When I was a youngster the “hard nuts” to crack often seemed to be related to technical difficulties. Overcoming them was the challenge. Lately, I have become far more aware of the fact that the real difficulty is in reading, understanding, playing and conveying to audiences everything that lies behind the bar lines. The surface (the score) may be transparent or sophisticated, but that does not automatically ensure that we are able to see, experience, understand and emotionally “transfer” its transcendent content to listeners.

In Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, as in his late quartets, and in Schubert’s songs and piano sonatas, every note is in the right place. That makes them monuments of modesty, substance and purity. Rather than food for enjoyment, entertainment or leisure, they strike me as a source of reassurance – an ocean of positive energy whose waves will continue to break upon our shores for eternities to come.

And that is something we all can profit from – along with many generations in the future.

As I wrote the last sentence, I suddenly felt as if I had moved a little closer to Ludwig. Had I just caught a glimpse of his shadow around the corner? I looked up – but it turned out to be an illusion. I had to take another deep breath, plunge once more into “interpretations” of all kinds and hope for the clouds to lift soon.

SEVEN: Substance

I next focused on a topic which is probably the most difficult of all to define. Leaving aside plenty of other works of music that allow speculation about their “programme”, their technique, their origins, their style or its background, I returned to the fact that Beethoven’s Violin Concerto contains mainly “scales and arpeggios”. Was there something *behind* them that related to content? Isn’t “substance” simply the product of the precise execution of every note in the score *in accordance with* the vague, vulnerable and realistically indefinable “imagination”?

Yes and no. It was not the first time that I had stumbled across something that so many interpreters try to achieve and only a few (among them, Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh) are able to accomplish.

I am speaking about *perfection*.

Why “stumble”? Isn’t perfection the peak of an achievement?

The question is nevertheless whether we can equate perfection with substance.

My honest answer is “no”. Which is probably not enough to convince everybody.

Striving for perfection – and even reaching it – can only be a step towards discovering something more precious.

Sometimes perfection can even be an obstacle to making discoveries. If instrumentalists give priority to perfection (perfect pitch, perfect sound, perfect articulation, perfect phrasing), they might *mislead* listeners by putting on the “disguise” known as brilliancy. Unless it forges a link to a deeper layer (or dimension) of the score, perfection can easily be self-defeating. Instead of reaching out for the unreachable, it masquerades as the final goal. The perfect performance of a work becomes its death sentence. Perfection kills art!

Music is a part of everyday life for most people. But music as a language is so enigmatic that it would be wrong to assume that performing it without an element of mystery can ever be complete. The same must be said about all music that is devoid of *personal* reading and feelings. Only performances that include those “ingredients” can be truly classified as “interpretation”.

The words of my father and my early teachers echoed in my ears: “You have to sing on the violin.” In the education of all instrumentalists and especially violinists, the prevailing idiom was – and still is – “*bel canto*”. Is that enough?

Would an example of someone beautifully “singing” a Beethoven concerto (an impossible task!) be convincing enough to project all the layers of this opus?

I doubt it. We are privileged to be able to hear how some wonderful old masters (followed by contemporary talents) left traces of precious “voicing”. (I am thinking, as an example, of

Christian Ferras' incredible approach to the Larghetto – what could be more heart-breaking?) Even the most sincere attempt to focus on the colours, flawless articulation, warmth and – the absolutely essential – silence might not reach through to the sought-for perspective.

These days, perfect delivery has become a goal for many young instrumentalists. Their mastery of the obstacles in the most difficult scores is simply astounding.

At the same time, when I started to analyse the approach to Beethoven pursued by many violinists, it became evident that that the general standard of playing has always been extremely high. These days, however, personal readings seem to have become rare, while the technical command of the instrument unquestionably shows a far wider spread of the “perfection idiom” than ever before. Are we perhaps witnessing the musical equivalent of the dominance of English as the main language of communication? It is obvious that more people than ever before are able to use that language for their everyday needs. But what has happened to the finer nuances of style and vocabulary or even of grammatical accuracy? Don't these things matter any more? Aren't people aware that developing a deep sensitivity and being persuasive in any language (including music) is about more than mastering its technicalities?

What is more, by limiting our linguistic horizons we are losing sight of the treasures inherent in other languages such as French, Italian and Russian. We may have more information these days, but at what price? The same happens if interpreters of music deprive their playing of the invisible but necessary “overtones”, while trying to be splendid and persuasive.

That is why some of the astonishing readings by violinists of an older generation will always be remembered (despite their deficiencies) as incredibly accomplished. We are struck not just by their mastery, but by their ability to “speak” (Harnoncourt's book “Music as Speech”¹⁴ comes to mind). Many of them had something important to “say” with their sounds. Their playing was not just a demonstration of amazingly polished instrumental abilities.

In some ways, the new generation is even more secure in its playing. Yet are the command, the fluency and the brilliance of the “stars” of today actually taking them closer to what I am calling “substance”? Substance has no age. It has to sound just as “alive” today as it did when the piece was created. This is where I often feel that something is missing. Nowadays many performers seem to “hide” behind the bar lines or – for all their “glamour” and burning desire to speak with “angelic voices” – parade their complete inner “emptiness” and inability to reach out to the core of the work, its message. Thankfully, there are exceptions here, too.

That is where “perfection” reveals its own inner flaw. For all its claim to be “untouchable”, it somehow fails to produce the very “vibes” that will touch our hearts. The golden bowl¹⁵ has a flaw after all.

¹⁴ Nikolaus Harnoncourt, *Baroque Music Today: Music As Speech: Ways to a New Understanding of Music*, Amadeus Press, 1995. First published in German as *Musik als Klangrede: Wege zu einem neuen Musikverständnis*, dtv, 1986.

¹⁵ A reference to the hidden flaw in the antique golden bowl in the title of Henry James' novel, *The Golden Bowl*, 1904.

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Of course, human beings are not perfect and it would therefore be wrong to expect what they do (including music-making) to be perfect.

As an interpreter – old or young – reaches out for the “immortal sounds”, they have to go through their own “trial”. The verdict is pronounced by music itself. Some of today’s “rising stars” are able to play absolutely “flawlessly” – even matching Heifetz’s standards of perfection. Are they therefore closer to Beethoven or to the idioms of other composers? I doubt it.

Are there different forms of perfection? One which serves eternal values and an introverted form that describes only the interpreter himself and loses sight of the connection to the music?

Don’t we realise that “narcissism” can become a poison when it comes to presenting a masterpiece?

As I have already written elsewhere, the danger starts if instead of endeavouring to serve a score, performers *use* it to serve their own ambitions.

The clue to defining that kind of process might be found in the term “*time*”.

I remember an amazing moment when, in a rehearsal with Kremerata Baltica, the great diva Jessye Norman reacted to the conductor’s proposal: “Jessye, if you need more time, we’ll wait for you.”

After two or three seconds of silence the great singer replied majestically and with a smile on her face, “My dear, I do not *need* time; I *take* time.”

Somehow – while being fully aware that many musicians (and especially opera singers) misuse time with no respect for the score – or regard for “substance” – I find this answer very appropriate and revelatory.

Minuscule *rubatos* might introduce the necessary tension into a performance. The decision to do so can be justified at a deep level, while being perfectly “in time” can be honest but empty of any message hidden behind the manuscript.

The same applies to any *accelerando* or *ritardando* that is not marked in the score. It can be either fitting or a display of a reading that is out of keeping with the music.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt repeated the following “formula” a couple of times in my presence: “There is no such a thing as playing too fast or too slow. There is only *one* tempo – the right one!” It reminded me of another of Oscar Wilde’s famous sayings: “I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best.”

All things only functions in relation to each other.

I have no desire to mystify the “task” of interpreters. Nonetheless, it surely consists of displaying what appears on the “surface” – the notes actually printed – honestly and truthfully *and* of discovering and exposing the substance.

How should we define “substance” in our “concerto of concertos”?

Maybe, without hoping to find an ultimate answer, we might get closer to it by assuming that what “makes” music is to be searched for not just in the notes played but *behind* bar lines, *above* played pitches or double stops, *along* dancing rhythms and *within* the framework of multiple *fermatas*.

In looking for the real Beethoven (as in his late quartets), a “magnifying glass” has to be used to explore the tiniest signs in the handwritten (or published) score. However, placing too much emphasis on minuscule details may destroy a reading, too. Sight should not be lost of the grander perspective of the work as a whole. For performers to understand why they are playing at all, they need to explore what motivated the composer to write his masterpiece.

If we approach the work of a genius, we find there – as in a mathematic formula – only the notes and comments that he thought necessary. Anything *added* to it – a wrong understanding of a prescribed tempo, a slide, an attractive bowing, cascades of double stops in the cadenzas, additional dynamics, wide vibratos borrowed from alien stylistics to embellish the humble melody line and many more features – actually makes it difficult for us to listen to the author’s “message” and to allow them to be heard by others. As a kind of exception to the “rule”, a well-chosen and well-played cadenza can make an enlightening comment on the work.

To discover the substance, we must, despite all our ambitions, be humble enough to understand that performers and their handicraft are secondary to the composer and his intentions.

Without wishing to contradict that statement, I still have to say (not least in defence of my own profession) that performers who do not sense the need to deliver the music in a personal way, filling it with their own emotions and experience, are obviously failing to reach out for the work’s true substance. In the hands of artists who make that effort, some of those “embellishments” actually become justified, as is the case with Schnittke’s cadenza.

The “magic” happens when a performer becomes a “live ambassador” of the creator. Imperfection can then be tolerated since we all are human beings and therefore fallible.

Would it be going too far to say that Heifetz – who of all the violinists could be said to be the most “perfect” and was often called the “king of violinists” – might occasionally leave the impression of being “coldly dispassionate”?

It is no wonder that another common way of describing his style and way of presenting is “Apollonian”, the divine representation of the beauty inherent in music and poetry. If “beauty” is the key to the mystery, perhaps I was getting closer to completing my investigation. Remembering, of course, that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”!

There were now only three recordings left on my list. One of them was the one made by Heifetz and Munch

As I listened to Heifetz’s performance, I was mesmerised by its completion and perfection. But can I say that it “moved” me? Not really.

Nonetheless, for many lovers of music and violin-playing Heifetz will forever remain the “champion”. I have even heard him called the “Messi of violin playing”!¹⁶

Do we really have to limit our choice to just *one* performance? Aren’t we better served by admitting that there are many different ways of approaching a score? On our life’s journey, we surely do not need to stop at one station and stay there forever but are “allowed” to enjoy the “democracy” of different opinions and readings.

There must be something that makes a performance “personal”, “human” and “deep”. It became obvious to me that these qualities had to be sought somewhere other than in perfection. They may well “unlock” the true nature of “substance”.

Perhaps it has to do with the fundamental question, which I have already asked, of *why* we play at all.

What motivates us to go through the process of learning the “text”?

Practising, polishing, controlling stage fright ... all this toil and trouble – for what?

Is it solely the ambition that speaks from within us? Ambition that strives to convince others that we are “special”? Is it the wish – so popular these days – to become “rich and famous”, visible, talked about and loved?

There is probably no one answer, one approach. We are dealing with multiple choices – for those who are ready to search for the answers and take well-founded decisions and do not become victims of another’s will or approach. I suddenly understood that –regardless of my chosen “ideal”, it would just be *one* possibility in a dozen or so. After Glenn Gould had decided to give up playing in concert and to make studio recordings only, he was asked if he missed audiences. For him, the exploration of a one-to-one relationship with the score was more fulfilling than the presence of listeners. Personally, I would not wish to adopt Gould’s solution of retreating into the music studio, but I understand what Gould said to mean that an interpreter has the right to engage in a “conversation” with any composer on his own terms. One to one. Independent of audience reaction. Set free from prejudices, schools or traditions, he can “tune in” to even familiar works with a completely fresh ear.

With Gould’s statement ringing in my ears, I began to see that the ordeal of having to choose *one* interpretation was doomed to failure. The implicit objectivity was jeopardised from the outset. The choice that I would finally make would be *my* choice – a choice coloured by *my* personality and *my* tastes.

The urge to be in the “limelight” (which infected me, too, in my youth) is and remains a big temptation. Not everyone will agree that stages should be “reserved” only for those who can be said to have a “personality” and a unique voice and who have a clear urge to *say and share* something important. The latter quality was exactly what Isaac Stern was referring to when

¹⁶ Lionel Messi is a professional footballer from Argentina who is a forward in the Spanish club Barcelona and the Argentina national team. Many consider him the best player in the world and even the greatest of all time. Messi is the only football player in history to have won four Ballons d’Or.

speaking about young musicians and what interests him in them. For him, the most important thing was to focus on serving music rather than on building a “career”.¹⁷

It seems to me that “deeper” values are all too often replaced by an outward show. We are frequently overwhelmed by glamorous appearance, by a flawless demonstration of skills – until we realise that what we are seeing is a kind of *fake*, a “faceless” presentation without a signature or a message.

The most substantial part of an artistic appearance or service is nowadays often being replaced by public relation mechanisms and overall “noise” without the subtlety of overtones or true commitment to the author. By contrast, the chosen set of recordings presented me with a picture in which, whatever else might be said about them, musical values prevailed. It was just that I could not get away from wondering which of them was closer to Beethoven himself? What instruments or measurements can be used when facing different people, different artists, different religions? Statistics are the last thing to refer to; otherwise – if we look at examples from political history – the values of majority holders such as the Bolsheviks or the Nazis would be beyond question. History, scientific achievements and discoveries as well as the variety in arts are “made” by great individuals and not just by “masses”.¹⁸ Why is it then that some of them become “heroes” attracting big crowds, while others have far fewer admirers. In our commercially oriented world, “blockbusters” have their power and are additionally manipulated so as to “conquer” the world. The same happens in music – if an artist gets the full range of PR support, his value is thought to be higher. How wrong. A sobering thought is that in many cases, the peak of a career is followed by the onset of the “fall”.

The “numbers game” still needs to be observed with caution today, when “ratings”, Facebook “likes” and social media statistics appear to have an enormous impact on people’s judgement. Are “numbers” the absolute criterion when it comes to assessing quality? Why, for example, does an interpretation of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto by one or other of the present-day “stars” have up to half a million “hits” on YouTube, while “hits” for most of the archive recordings of the supreme masters in the history of music only number a few thousand? Is this another case of “following the crowd”?

The “substance” gets lost in the loud applause of those who have been cheated and do not realise it. As Artur Schnabel reputedly claimed, “Unfortunately, the audience claps even after bad performances.”

It is time to return to our “search for Ludwig” (and his values). It is not that “distinguished old masters” never made mistakes but that they were obviously less infected by modern technology and mass enthusiasm about “riding the tide”. All the masters to whom I had the privilege of listening took the matter of music-making seriously. That they also had their limits cannot be considered their “fault”. Whether they came closer to the substance of Beethoven or not, most of them tried as honestly as they could to serve the master.

¹⁷ Interview with Norbert Hornig on the occasion of his 75th birthday, published in *FonoForum* in July 1995.

¹⁸ For further thoughts on this subject, see the writings of José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955).

EIGHT: Personal and personality

By now it must be clear that I have always felt an affinity with artists who have had a “signature”. I still do! I call “signature” something you can recognise within 20 seconds – something that immediately identifies a composer, a musician or a photographer. A whole host of examples come to mind – Bach or Beethoven, Chopin or Schubert, Mapplethorpe or Cartier-Bresson, Piazzolla or Glass. The same applies to performing artists.

I have always known that Heifetz’s playing *is* recognisable. For me, this immediately singles him out as a personality.

No doubt music lovers or professionals, all those who listen to a lot of recordings, might say the same about some other violinists. I will not argue. Let’s just take the example of Heifetz and his Beethoven concerto recording to define what exactly it is that makes Heifetz’s signature “recognisable”.

The first thing to mention is the tempo. Heifetz was known to play everything faster than many other “giants” of the violin. Interestingly enough, he plays at a tempo (not necessarily related to his better understanding of Beethoven’s style) with which I personally feel much more “at home” – even almost 80 years after the recording was made.

Secondly, Heifetz is in absolute command of every pitch, every bar, every phrasing. Each element can be identified easily and justly as sheer “perfection”.

Nathan Milstein exhibits a similar quality. He also has his own “recognisable” sound. It is as if the clarity of his playing stems to some degree from the fact that his bow and the instrument seem to become one.

Do any of those features make their playing more personal? I am not sure...

Menuhin’s visit to Moscow while I was studying there has remained firmly engraved in my memory. Some phrases of his playing in the second movement of his (somewhat “imperfect”) Beethoven concerto have stayed with me ever since. As he played, it was as if time and tide stood still. Another dimension was reached. You could literally “hear” the silence. What makes “silence” so special?

At this juncture, it is appropriate to think about the difference between “personality” and a “personal approach”. For me they are not the same.

The “personal approach” of a great artist allows (within the frame of an adequate feeling of style, rhythm and tempo) far more freedom. Creative fantasy does not sit well with a rigid adherence to rules, principles or knowledge. As I understand creativity, it often has to swim against the stream, against the prevailing “schools” of thought. It has to take risks; it must have “wings to fly”.

Otherwise any perfection runs the risk of being “earthbound”.

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Some of my opponents would argue with me here and sincerely describe Heifetz's playing as "heavenly", "out of this world" (comments of this kind can easily be traced in the reflections posted on the internet by enthusiastic listeners) but *my* senses still fail to find the link to the "divine". Despite the astonishing reading by the "King", I still prefer personal subjectivity to Heifetz's perfect mastery of his instrument and the score as displayed through his personality.

Thinking of the selected recordings up to 1963, this subjectivity in the approach to the work can be heard particularly clearly in the playing of Zino Francescatti, Yehudi Menuhin and Christian Ferras, for example.

Are they playing *better*? No, they are not. Yet for all their flaws, they create an atmosphere that somehow moves me more.

Maybe I should question my own views ...

How do I dare to reach such conclusions, when objectively Heifetz (and probably Milstein) demonstrates a *standard* of playing that has rarely been achieved in the whole history of the violin?

My brief was to look for an "ideal violinist" or an "ideal musician" (which, of course, is not the same thing).

We are back to the original question – what is it that makes sounds produce a sublime, personal statement?

Imperfections? Irregularities?

It cannot be that simple.

We will probably not find an answer in the way a performer "manages" a score – note by note or bar by bar. The explanation lies more likely in his or her personal "daring", a sense of freedom and a very individual feeling of time.

Finally, it is a kind of metaphysical "soul", something unique to each person and each performer, readily shared with us through music. It is that which has the power to lift us into "another world".

Can I find the right words to express what I mean? Can the dimension to which I am now referred ever be adequately explained in a language that is tied to earthly dimensions? Isn't that precisely what is different about the language of music – that it expresses the otherwise "inexpressible"?

I do not believe in mystifications. Nonetheless, to me it seems undeniable that we carry within ourselves something that can be called a "soul". We may have doubts about where a soul comes from and goes to but it seems foolish to me to attempt to deny that each of us has within the core of our being something that is "higher" and "richer" than the body within which we live.

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Some may quarrel with the very concept of “soul” and feel more comfortable with the notion of “substance”. I ask myself, however, where this substance comes from. What is it about great music and great art that lifts us above everyday reality and into a sphere that is beyond vulgarity, statistics and the small talk that threatens to fill our lives?

There are too many examples of this happening for it to be a flight of my own personal imagination. Inspiration has something to do with it. So, too, do our emotions and our feelings of empathy.

Sadly, there would seem to be many musicians who are *pretending* to be inspired, *imitating* inspiration. Despite this they are often loved and admired by crowds of listeners and even experts. Counterfeit art work is occasionally a matter for a criminal investigation, but performers get away with it – and are even paid high fees for their efforts!

Yet for the discerning that will never do! Most people are still able to tell whether someone is playing “with his heart and soul” or not. Could it be that some listeners do not wish to be challenged at that level?

Why is it that so many people, so much music (or performances of it), leave us “cold”? And, to take the opposite perspective, why are we uplifted by those geniuses who are able to “open up our hearts”? For example, I have never forgotten a concert given by Jacques Brel in Moscow. He put everything he had into his performance, which completely captivated me and has stayed with me ever since.

I firmly believe that we are marked by something “higher” than our human existence. Is it a “lost connection”, the “missing link” that is momentarily restores to us through music? Pierre Fournier’s rendering of Gabriel Fauré’s “Elégie”, for example, makes me feel that I am touching the eternal. It is as if my soul responds to something in the artist’s soul, something in the very essence of his personality, that lifts me to a higher dimension.

Just a few hours ago I discovered some more readings of “Beethoven”, which, for all their imperfections, spoke to my heart and confirmed the values of a personality that seems rare these days: George Enesco and Fritz Busch, for example. Pierre Fournier, whom I have just mentioned, was another. In my youth I heard him live in Riga – what an impression his manners, his warmth and his nobility left on me!

The genius of Ludwig van Beethoven has shared with us a score that will eternally inspire listeners. However, it does not mean that everyone mastering it will be able to become a “vehicle” for this inspiration. Surely those performers with a reach and generous “soul” – as the ones just mentioned – will let the overtones “fly” and “transfer” them to listeners with open ears.

As Beethoven himself wrote in a letter to his close friend, the writer Bettina von Arnim (15 August 1812), “A musician is also a poet; he also can feel himself transported by a pair of eyes into another and more beautiful world where greater souls make sport of him and set him quite

difficult tasks.”¹⁹

As I listened to all those wonderful recordings from the past, my goal remained unchanged – to find the one that I consider especially “inspiring”.

¹⁹ *Beethoven: the Man and the Artist, as Revealed in his own Words*, edited by Friedrich Kerst and Henry Edward Krehbiel, was translated into English and published in 1905 by BW Huebsch.

NINE: Authenticity, sincerity, popularity

All the soloists and conductors of the past who featured on my list were and still are “famous”. Most of them were also popular (in today’s meaning of the word) and had their audiences and followers.

Nowadays the number of music lovers who are able to appreciate performances of classical music has grown immensely thanks to live broadcasts on the internet and YouTube archives.

The exposure to so much good music has made us much more able to appreciate those musicians who sincerely do their professional duty and genuinely seek to serve compositions.

At the same time, we are aware that others exploit the media for their own selfish interests, their ego. We might name a few of them, but why give them any more exposure than they already have?

I suddenly thought about something that is sadly all too evident in today’s music business. This very morning I overheard a conversation with an influential manager. He claimed (and I am afraid he was right) that today’s audiences have been manipulated by the mass media to such a degree that people pay more attention to *visual* details than to what they actually *hear*. A sad development for anyone who is still trying to hold on to the concept of music as the unique, universal language of emotions. That is exactly the reason why I oppose “stardom”, a view of artistry that is nurtured at many famous festivals.

With the visual virtually elbowing the audio out of the way, as even some experts admit, it is not just the pretty singer with the figure of a fashion model who has better chances of success. It applies to instrumentalists as well!

I was interested to see that all the violinists in the selection seem to have “neglected” the way they appeared in public. Of course, they dressed appropriately, but most of them focused on dealing with the musical material. Some of them even looked rigid and tense on stage. The current hysteria of popularity (which, as I have already mentioned, is definitely not a new “invention”) did not affect their playing. What a blessing!

Something else seems to infuse the playing of exceptional masters – the ability to be sincere with their feelings (which is apparently the case with Francescatti, Ferras and Menuhin). Other interpreters, such as Kogan or Szigeti, prefer to stay within the sphere of authorial *authenticity*, which allows them to avoid risks of over-exposure. Some (and among them the strongest violinists, Heifetz, Milstein and Huberman) focused on their instrumental abilities. We still can be amazed at the extent to which they mastered their “journeys” on the fingerboard and controlled their superb bowing techniques. As in a circus we might be justifiably enchanted by jugglers and their art, we are inclined to contemplate the surface of sheer instrumental virtuosity with no less excitement. The trouble is ... we are not in a circus!

Music has a different meaning and function than the art of juggling. It is a language that speaks from *within* and should be able to enter our “soul”. Without that kind of depth, an elegant, brilliant, accomplished performance still ends up demonstrating the surface of a composition

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and the performer who challenges it. Standing ovations are not necessarily more than a public recognition of outstanding features.

Popularity is not a “currency” that makes anybody “rich”. It often even cheapens our efforts.

What means much more are performances, books, films, monologues, stagings that – occasionally breaking all the rules – lead us to deeper feelings and new discoveries. Loud words, bright colours, fast notes, high ratings, good reviews and a multitude of words are not guaranteed to be the key to overwhelming experiences or to a “secret garden”.

My ongoing wish is that the ideal reading of a musical masterpiece could be associated besides appreciation with something “unexpected”, with some kind of a discovery.

Looking back at past times and performances and recognising their qualities can be a way of opening our eyes and ears. My investigation was almost over. I was glad that I had done it after all. All that was left was to sum up my findings. And that seemed easier said than done.

FINALE

“Es muss(te) sein!” (“It must (had to) be.”)²⁰

I had come to the end of my quest – without being able to choose one of the selected recordings that – despite the excellence of them all – would “satisfy” me in terms of the majority of the (self-set) parameters.

When I was starting to occupy my mind with the problem of choosing an ideal interpretation, I received an encouraging letter saying:

“You see now that it’s not that easy. But fascinating – yes. I have always thought that the task of a critic is not an egotistical ‘accident’ in our passion for music but a way to understand more precisely what moves us and allows us to become sensitive to the wide range of the performances and performance styles that exist today.”

Unfortunately perhaps, that is not how I see it at all! I feel that listening, comparing and choosing – especially when dealing with recordings – reminds me of the work of a “dissector”. It is like taking a magnifying glass and trying to look at healthy parts of a once-living creature. Then using chemical analysis to define exactly what they are.

I remember a colleague of mine replying to a comment during a recent rehearsal: “We played it differently in the last concerts.” With ardour, she said, “How can you motivate yourself to keep looking back? Music-making has nothing to do with something in a tin. It must be *alive*.”

Recordings – even the best ones are unfortunately “tins”. Of course, they are also precious documents of the past. A cynic might call them “graveyards of past achievements”. I would not want to go as far as that. Perhaps a more “politically correct” description would be “museums”. Museums after all function as tributes to greatness and reminders of the fact that humanity has always had geniuses and always will have them – in art, in science, in literature and in other fields. Reminders of this can be found in music and the performing arts, too. One of the wonderful advantages of technology is that it allows us to document more and more “signs” of our mortal existence.

Do I want to be an employee in a cemetery? I don’t think so. Do I want someone else to dig into my own grave? Certainly not.

Taking a positive view, we can be happy to have such a virtual museum of the past, accessible to future generations and documenting the fact that masterpieces are, after all, part of eternal music, which survives its creators and performers and allows multiple readings. That museum contains the most perfect of the most inspired performances, evidence of performers who are able to move – if not mountains – at least some listeners like ... myself.

Some works of art are still “alive” because we are able to react to them, to appreciate them

²⁰ See footnote 1.

emotionally and to learn things that we never heard (or saw) before and perhaps never even thought about. We are privileged to hear how some of the greatest musicians dealt with the problems that we are still trying to understand and resolve. How many people “raving” these days –rightly or wrongly – about splendid (but sadly “overhyped”) young pianists know the recordings of Dinu Lipatti or Maria Yudina?

At the same time, music is a language of the emotions and no recording will be able to replace a live performance. We also have to accept that language is not the only thing that goes through transformation; the sense of time does, too. What changes along with it is the style. Traces of this process can be found in literature and paintings. They are also evident in music.

With all those issues buzzing round my mind, I became more and more desperate as time went by. Repeated listening added to my confusion. One day it seemed that my favourite was Francescatti after all. On the next it seemed, that Szigeti – especially with his authority and cadenza – had won my heart. Then I again returned to the impeccable readings of Heifetz and Milstein. Their sheer perfection was a factor I could not ignore.

I also had notions that the cadenzas by Szigeti/Milstein and even Huberman deserve to be published as a kind of a bonus to the set of “ideal recordings”.

And then ... something unexpected happened. It came to me “out of the blue”.

As I explored the realms of YouTube, I discovered a recording which progressively intrigued and then overwhelmed me. Slowly it became not only my preference above all those I had spent weeks listening to, but clearly my “choice”. The discovery made my day! I felt relieved to recognise my own set of values and was able to dismiss the idea of being so fixed on my own reception of the concerto that none of other interpreters would ever be able to convince me.

It was such a relief because my dissatisfaction with so many great interpretations which I certainly appreciated but did not *love* had taken me almost to the point of thinking that my listening abilities were very limited, that I was simply unable to differentiate clearly enough.

I felt that I had failed to give a clear professional explanation. Why I couldn't I pick out a favourite among so many jewels? Was I too snobbish? Too “choosy”? Too narrow-minded?

Like a dark cloud on a sunny day, all this frustration suddenly vanished. I had stumbled over one performance which gradually “entered” the space within me that I have called my “soul”.

Something else happened, too. There was something more interesting about the discovery itself. I became aware that many of things that I had described as too disturbing for an “ideal” reading suddenly became “secondary” considerations.

As I have referred to them repeatedly, let's take time to look at some of them as applied to my “choice”.

The pairing of conductor (orchestra) and soloist is less than ideal; there are very obvious faults in intonation from some wind players; the soloist occasionally uses *glissandi* that distort the purity of the score; there are some intonation problems in the execution of the solo part (which were difficult to trace in the most perfect readings among the recordings and which, where they did occur, had so disturbed me); there is a certain inconsistency with *tempi* (not a fundamental flaw but one that failed to work in some of the readings). ***Yet none of these things had a serious impact on my appreciation of the performance.***

Additionally, the articulation of the main theme in the finale is not quite what I always tried to establish and had hoped to hear – reflecting, of course, my personal reading of the work. Nonetheless, the playing of the theme was so clear and full of character that, despite it not being what my “inner ear” had sought, it did not disturb me in the slightest.

Finally, the limitations of the technical quality of the recording itself – being a “live-recording” might have been another “hindrance” but, much as in the case of the Francescatti/Mitropolous version that I had listened to before, it actually became something of a “plus”.

Probably the most surprising element of my discovery was that the interpretation that I came across “by chance” was totally unlike my own imagined “ideal” reading of the work.

What I appreciated, loved, adored – and despite the deficiencies referred to above, always will! – was the fact that this performance was the most *personal* one. It was not just a display of instrumental capacities at the highest level that was completely devoid of narcissism; it was genuine and very human music-making that also displayed the highest level of commitment to the creator. It simply matched my ideal notion of “inspiration”.

So what was the recording that had dispelled the gloom of my indecision and brightened my day?

For me the best, warmest, most human, most personal performance and the one most dedicated to music – one that everyone should listen to – is **the live-recording of Ginette Neveu with the South-West German Radio Orchestra under Hans Rosbaud, dated September 1949**, one month before, at the age of 30, she and her pianist brother died in an air crash while on their way to a concert tour in the USA.

More than any other, this performance is filled with plenty of emotion (but not emotionalism), clarity and an individual approach. Re-releasing this unique document of a human soul audibly “breathing” (literally and as well musically) would be a reminder of many things at once: the tragedy of life, the eternal power of artistic creations by geniuses, the multitude of possible approaches to a masterpiece (bearing in mind that “next to it”, the same set would include *Diapason’s* own choice, a recording by David Oistrakh – Ginette Neveu’s rival in the Wienawski competition, which she won! To hear *both* of them playing the *same* cadenza would not be to enter them into another “competition” but would display something of the variety of different approaches to it. For me, the cadenza played by Ginette Neveu demonstrates the closest relationship to ... Ludwig. Another reason why this, and no other recording, would be my choice.

The recordings by Heifetz and Milstein will doubtless remain as peaks of almost unachievable perfection but, in many ways, I am more impressed by musicians who are not tied to the

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fingerboard in their thinking and playing but have set their sights on the distant horizons of the realm where music dwells in its fullness. However, the Ginette Neveu recording would be a wonderful document for all those who cherish not just great playing of an instrument but all that goes with it – an attempt to place a composer’s transcendent intention in a different dimension through a performer’s “soul”, one that will live on in the hearts and minds of those who hear it.

Rediscovering the magic of Ginette Neveu in performance became the greatest reward of the adventure on which I had embarked.

Gidon Kremer

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