

An Excursion to Changing Romantic Aesthetics

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I think the only possible way to start a lecture at a viola congress is to quote William Primrose. Or what do you think? This seems to be the way everybody does these things. 50 per cent of lectures like this have something to do with Primrose...

I found an interesting article from the *Strad* magazine January 1998.

Yizhak Schotten - one of America's finest viola players - was a young student when he met William Primrose for the first time. During the previous years Schotten had been so influenced by Primrose's playing that he had listened to all his records. Schotten relates:

"I brought the Hindemith Sonata op.11 no.4 to a lesson and played it with all my heart - and all my slides. Mr Primrose asked: "What are you doing that for?" I said: "I've been listening to your recording." And he replied: "People don't play like this any more."

Primrose knew well what was old-fashioned. And for some reason he did not like this style any more.

The question is: What is meant here by old-fashioned? I think it is an interesting question. In 1980, it was not very popular to ask such questions, but nowadays we have to be much more aware of the historical ways of interpreting music. Attitudes have changed considerably. Modern musicians have started to play in ways that are historically informed. Moreover, there are also questions about the music from the Romantic age, not just any more Baroque music.

I am now going to play a historical recording from 1910. This viola player mastered the viola part of Bedrich Smetana's E minor string quartet and made the piece famous all over Europe. The same man was chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic orchestra and populariser and Dvorák's favourite interpreter of the *New World Symphony*. He played Brahms's sextets with Casals, Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* with Jan Kubelik and Bronislaw Huberman, and piano quintets with Eugéne Ysaÿe and Carl Flesch. Flesch called him 'the giant of the viola', adding that experiencing him in the Smetana quartet was like 'hearing real viola playing for the first time'.

I would like to introduce to you Oskar Nedbal! He played his own *Romantic piece* [Romantický Kus].

(Music example: Oskar Nedbal 1910. *The Recorded Viola* Volume 1, Pearl. ASIN: B000000WPD.)

In this recording he is 36 years old. This means that he is at his best age. What can we hear? We can say that "people don't play like this any more."

However, the chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic must have been a musical person in some way. However, his aesthetics are very different to those we are used to nowadays.

People don't play like this any more. Perhaps Georg Philipp Telemann said the same words to his friend Johann Sebastian Bach. We know that Bach was regarded as old-fashioned - and we know that Telemann was famous for the fact that he could compose in a new fashionable, galant style. Richard Wagner thought that Brahms was hopelessly old-fashioned.

Back to the 20th century: Violinist Joseph Szigeti explains, in his memoirs, that in 1905 it was possible to divide violinists into outdated and modern players. Modern meant using a more full and sensual tone with a new kind of expressivity.

This same divide or change described in Tully Potters words:

"...it is interesting that in the decade between the composition of the Debussy and Ravel quartets (that means about 1900), the way of playing string instruments underwent a seismic revolution. The two works should therefore not be played in the same way, although they have outward similarities. Because string teaching has always been basically conservative, the innovations of players such as Eugène Ysaÿe and Fritz Kreisler, with their new continuous vibrato, took some time to spread, so that in Paris up to around 1930 one could have heard a gamut of playing styles."

A seismic revolution. It is described in many many sources (by Carl Flesch, by William Primrose and even in memoirs of Arthur Rubinstein), but this huge change has still not valued enough by the mainstream orchestral work of the 21st century or in modern string pedagogy. We are used to performing Mendelssohn, Mahler and Shostakovits in the very same manner. I mean the way of using vibrato, the way of using bow and phrasing and so on.

From David Dalton's books we can read that Primrose was well aware of these changes. One of Primrose's first teachers had studied with Joseph Joachim and did not like continuous vibrato. However, Primrose studied later with Ysaÿe. His style was already different. Primrose had the possibility to acquire experiences from "outdated and modern players".

Several scholars (Clive Brown, David Milsom, Robin Stowell, Sir Roger Norrington) have researched the 19th century and found that the performing practices concerning the phrasing, the portamento, and especially the sparing use of vibrato remained surprisingly fixed before the beginning of the 20th century i.e. before the seismic revolution. It was first then that Ysaÿe and Kreisler started to conquer the world with a more continuous vibrato and new expressive sound ideals.

However, the study of old recordings is an established activity in the 21st century. Robert Philip, the progenitor of the study of recordings, remarked upon the change in attitude to Joseph Joachim's performances:

"Thirty years ago, a recording of Joachim playing a Brahms Hungarian Dance, if played to an audience, used to make them laugh. It was a completely unfamiliar and, from the perspective of the 1970s, a ludicrous manner of playing, and it was impossible to imagine that this was the great violinist for whom Brahms wrote his Violin Concerto."

Much of this change of attitude comes from an increasing familiarity and, indeed, acceptance that what one hears is not quaintly and irrelevantly "old fashioned" but respectably and indeed fascinatingly "historical".

Joachim was born in 1832. Let us listen to him performing Brahms *Hungarian Dance*.

(Music example: Hungarian Dance No.1 in G minor [arr. Joachim]. Joseph Joachim 1903. *The Great Violinists. Recordings from 1900-1913*. Testament SBT2 1323.)

Between 1900 and 1920, there occurred a considerable number of fundamental changes in the society. These changes included wars and revolutions, Sigmund Freud, new ideas of capitalism etc. Modernism extended to every genre of art; soon came Futurism, Marc Chagall and Arnold Schönberg. These transformations rapidly changed peoples visions of the outdated Romanticism from the 19th century. Jazz music was born. From Hollywood came the new idea of glamour. The new aesthetics in the sound ideals of stringed instruments must have been a part of these numerous transformations. Modern people were thirsty for more sensual sounds.

The famous process by Lionel Tertis - born 1876 - of pushing the viola onto the map must also have been a part of these seismic revolutions. His crusade for more modern viola playing is strongly linked with the birth of these new sound ideals.

(Music example: Bach: Air. Lionel Tertis 1922. *The Recorded Viola Volume 1*, Pearl. ASIN: B000000WPD.)

Tertis was affected by the richer 20th century sound aesthetic, disseminated by Fritz Kreisler. The original romantic "pure, crystalline" sound, and perhaps the ascetic performing practice of Brahms and Joachim must still have been something different.

Viola playing was not very highly appreciated at the turn of the century. Several sources can describe for us that good viola players did not exist very many. Lionel Tertis relates in a doctoral thesis by Bernard Kane:

"When I first began to play the viola as a solo instrument,...the consensus of opinion was that the viola had no right to be heard in solos, indeed the consideration of its place in the string family was of the scantiest...A wretchedly low standard of viola-playing was in fact accepted simply and solely because there was no alternative."

There were not many successful viola players. We can mention Maurice Vieux and perhaps Theophile Laforge. Oskar Nedbal concentrated more on his conducting. In Tertis' words: "Viola playing was just a necessary evil".

Tertis was the first virtuoso of the viola. He did more than play the instrument marvellously; he put it on the map. True, there were always viola players in orchestras and string quartets but they were rarely either good or distinguished performers—obviously there must have been some exceptions—and the beautiful sound one now expects to hear from viola sections was unimaginable until the results of Tertis's teachings and examples became evident.

Tertis brought us viola players the amiable legato and continuous vibrato of Kreisler's style. And because he wanted to reach these singing ideals, he used to change the composers ideas a lot.

"...he tends to manipulate the bow in order to create a bigger, fuller sound; in cantabile, quieter passages he uses a broad, sustained, connected bow-stroke which produces his beautifully warm tone. (In the treatise) Tertis addresses the following: FIRST the left hand and intonation; vibrato and *portamento*; SECOND the right hand and bowing; and cantabile playing. The right hand involves the use of the bow, bowings, and articulation. Phrasing and articulation are the two main areas..."

Nevertheless, from historical recordings we can hear that in the 1930s his style also started to become outdated. What was old-fashioned was his *portamento*, his way of sliding.

This preference for the connected phrase is also reflected in his comments on the use of *portamento*, a technique in which a shift on the same string is linked with a very slight, expressive slide, giving the performer the ability to play a phrase on a single string only, helping to avoid breaking a phrase.

The famous conductor Sir Adrian Boult was describing *portamento*. In an interview made in 1977 when he was 88, Adrian Boult described the demise, the death in the 1930s of the *portamento*, a symbol of Romanticism:

AB: It just seemed to go out of fashion. Quite suddenly. People didn't talk about it, you know. It just happened. And one suddenly realized after a few years that the string playing was much cleaner and, uh, . . . musical than it had been, and this sloppy *portamento* just disappeared.

(PW:) Why was it actually used?

(AB:) It was a way of conjuring up, putting, bringing tears to the eyes of the young ladies.

Not very many violists in this room are using *portamento* very much, or what??? (Markus Sarantola addresses Finnish violist Tommi Aalto, Principal Viola of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, present at the lecture at the IVC 2014 Porto)

"Tommi, are you sliding a lot?"

"I am sliding every day."

"So you are old-fashioned."

Before about the year 1900 we do not have any recordings to help in the research of earlier playing styles. That means we have to rely more on literary material. Several pedagogues, such as Louis Spohr, Charles de Bériot, and Andreas Moser in cooperation with Joachim have written details about the practices of the 19th century, in which we can see a coherent main thread.

It is interesting that so much fantastic chamber music (Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorák, Fauré) existed in the 19th century but not so many proper viola players for interpreting them. First Maurice Vieux and Lionel Tertis were among the first real pioneers.

Who gave premieres of chamber works by Schumann? The *Märchenbilder* is dedicated to violinist and conductor Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski (who had tight connections with Brahms and Joachim) and the *Märchenerzählungen* was premiered by Joseph Joachim himself. That means that the performing practice of the sparingly vibrato using but musically honest *innig, internal, inward* Joachim school dominated in performing that kind of viola repertoire.

How was the viola played in the age of Schumann or Brahms? Is it possible to research that period? Tertis found the sound of the C-string in most violas unsatisfying. Had its sound been more pleasing in the 19th century? Maybe the Joachim-ideal was very different from the ideals of Ysaÿe or Tertis.

Were Schumann and Brahms happy with the original performances of their own compositions? What can we know about the string sound Johannes Brahms had in his mind? We know, for example, that Clara Schumann, "one of the most soulful and famous pianists of the day", according to Edvard Grieg, had close relationships to Schumann and Brahms and she played with Joachim often.

We know also, that the great violin pedagogue Leopold Auer studied with Brahms' close friend Joseph Joachim. From Auer's book from the year 1921 we can find what these men thought about continuous vibrato:

"The excessive vibrato is a habit for which I have no tolerance, and I always fight against it when I observe it in my pupils – though often, I must admit, without success. As a rule I forbid my students using the vibrato at all notes which are not sustained, and I earnestly advise them not to abuse it even in the case of sustained notes which succeed each other in a phrase."

From the same treatise we can find information of their sound ideal: This ideal is called pure tone.

"The question of tone production...is not primarily a matter of the hairs on the stick, of rosin, of change of bow on the strings, nor of change of position by means of the fingers of the left hand. All these really signify nothing, absolutely nothing, when it comes to the production of a pure crystalline and transparent violin tone."

Pure tone is described in many sources. For example, the playing of Pablo de Sarasate is sometimes described with that same ideal. We can find equal descriptions from violin schools written by Pierre Baillot and even by Leopold Mozart.

The pure tone is a central aspect both in solistic and orchestral playing. Nowadays the foremost advocate of pure tone in modern symphony orchestras is British conductor Sir Roger Norrington. He writes in an article:

"...we seem to have become entirely used to an orchestral sound which not a single one of the great composers would have expected or imagined. For when

Berlioz and Schumann, Brahms and Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler, Schönberg and Berg were composing their masterpieces, they were quite clear how they would sound on the orchestra. Because there was only one sound in that great era, - a warm, expressive, pure tone, without the 'glamourised' vibrato we are so used to."

Before the age of recordings we have the possibility to find out from many writings how were the ideals (rubato, balance, tempi, some special wind instruments) of admired composers.

But why is there no mention of locomotives in the Bibel? Why is there no mention of using vibrato in orchestras in the 19th century treatises?

How to tell about vibrato which does not exist? I do not mean vibrato as an embellishment or a tiny little shimmer.

The Paris Conservatoire *Méthode* of 1803, overseen by Rode, Kreutzer, and Baillot, deals with tone, style, and embellishment in considerable detail, but makes no mention of left-hand vibrato, though it describes a vibrato produced by the bow alone.

It seems that this aesthetic was going to last until Brahms and Joachim and Leopold Auer. Ysaÿe, Kreisler, Tertis, and of course Jascha Heifetz started to vibrate continuously. Carl Flesch tells in his *The Art of Violin Playing*:

"Sarasate started to use broader oscillations while Ysaÿe's Vibrato became the ideal goal of the generation around 1900. But it was Kreisler who, driven by an irresistible inner urge, started a revolutionary change in this regard, by vibrating not only continuously in cantilenas like Ysaÿe, but even in technical passages. This fundamental metamorphosis has put his indelible stamp on contemporary Violin-playing, no matter whether one agrees with it, or not."

About the viola: Lionel Tertis and Primrose were working hard for the more modern aesthetics, for a more modern way of playing the viola. Primrose was remarkably more modern than Tertis.

I do not try to give completed answers. But if we are using less vibrato, it is important to add something to our playing. That means an increasing responsibility of the right hand. We must be especially aware about phrasing. The habit of vibrating continuously has unfortunately made us somewhat deaf to some basic elements of music.

Primrose says: "If there is no vibrato...that can be sheer torture to our contemporary ears."

Our contemporary ears...

Primrose continues:

"What it must have been like in the days of Joachim, I'm not sure. However, I have a little idea because my first teacher was a pupil of Joachim, and he was constantly admonishing me not to use vibrato."

Roger Norrington is describing the 19th century very differently:

"...there was only one sound in that era, - a warm, expressive, pure tone, without the 'glamourised' vibrato we are so used to."

Were the ears different? Primrose says it aptly when he is speaking about contemporary ears. But "outdated" composers - Bach and Brahms - uncontemporary composers - made the best compositions. Do we know enough of phrasing and tempi and instruments and strings of them? Their way of interpreting and listening music?

Primrose did not specially like Joachims style. However, Joachim was famous because of his warm and especially deep interpretations. One important thing: "warm" does not necessarily mean just a continuous vibrato.

Are we able to imagine the sounds before the age of glamour or jazz music? Are we able to imagine what the listeners or composers of the 19th century wanted to experience?

We have to agree that viola was often played badly before the advent of Lionel Tertis. But there is also question about the aesthetics which changed radically during these early years of the 20th century.

About the Future Theme in Porto

The trend is clear: In the future, we will be more and more aware of old performing practices. This will lead into an increasing interest in the original 19th century romantic ideals as well. For our grandfathers, it was still possible to see the music of the past with nostalgic glasses towards Fritz Kreisler and Lionel Tertis. Our generation took the basic sound ideal from these grandfathers. But perhaps it was not the entire truth about the romantic performing style?

Is it important to know about the original sound ideals of composers like Mendelssohn, Schumann or Brahms? Research is going on. And all we modern viola players - in this room, too - are a part of this great history.

There is question about interpreting music historically informed from every century. Only very few musicians are any more questioning totally that kind of thinking. Violinist Pinchas Zukerman has been at the centre of a row after branding / calling the period instrument movement 'complete rubbish'.

In recent years only very few people have any more heard him performing music composed by Johann Sebastian Bach in public. Today we have to say to Mr Zukerman: "People don't play like this any more."