

Diversity and homogeneity in contemporary violin recordings of solo Bach

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Over 20 recent commercial recordings of Bach's solos for violin were studied to examine performance trends of the last 25 years and to test the widely held opinion that style has become fairly homogenous and lacking in individuality. The main trends found were the influence of historically informed practices (e.g. in bowing, fingering, vibrato) and a move toward greater flexibility in phrasing and rhythmic delivery. Both strong and subtle individual differences were observable, but these seem less suitable for quantitative reporting.

Keywords: J. S. Bach; violin; vibrato; performance; recordings

Research into performance styles on sound recordings has been growing steadily in the last decade or so. The standard narrative that has emerged regarding trends over a century of recordings is a claim for a continued “tiding up” of performance (Philip 2004, p. 232). Commentators lament the increased uniformity of interpretations as we move from the early decades of recording to mid-century and beyond (e.g. Day 2000). Yet studies of specific repertoires show just as much individuality in recent as in old recordings (e.g. Ornoy 2008, Repp 1990, 1992, Fabian and Schubert 2008). The contradiction may stem from the fact that investigations tend to focus on earlier recordings. Few published research exists that examines in any systematic way the artistry of contemporary musicians. It is also likely that in solo or chamber music there is more room and need for an individual voice than in works involving large ensembles such as symphonies. Given the growing amount of information available regarding the history of violin playing on record (Katz 2003, Milsom 2003, Fabian 2005, Leech-Wilkinson 2009) and yet a lack of detailed information on current practices, this study aims to provide data to

fill this hiatus. To this end, it examines contemporary recorded performances of Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001-1006).

METHOD

Materials

Over 20 commercially available studio and concert recordings of the Bach solos released since 1976 were analyzed. Nine of the violinists play on period instruments, and at least five others are known to have been influenced by the achievements of historically informed performance (HIP) to some extent. Four players made more than one recording of the works during the designated period. Selected performers and dates are listed in Tables 1-3; a full discography is available from the author.

Procedure

Aural analyses of bowing, fingering, and phrasing together with software assisted analyses of vibrato, tempo, and rhythmic flexibility were conducted. The analysis aimed to distinguish between "mainstream" and "period" violinists and examined their techniques and artistic approach. Only general trends and aspects of the quantitative data are reported.

RESULTS

Bowing differed considerably across most violinists; earlier and mainstream players choosing a more seamless bowing (e.g. Perlman, Hahn) while younger players, especially those using period apparatus, a more articulated style with faster note decay. Fingering choices involving lower positions and use of open strings were more common among HIP-inspired players.

Phrasing showed great diversity reflecting the continuum from literalistic to flexible approaches. Of those with multiple recordings, Kremer seems to have changed his interpretation the most: it became much more strongly accented with slower tempi and a narrower and less continuous vibrato. The many different ways the works are delivered can be illustrated by comparing the beginning of the G minor *Adagio*. Ehnes and Kremer play it in a literal manner, while others with greater degree of freedom. Huggett plays the opening chord with emphasis on the low G followed by arpeggiation and then a pause on the high G. Wallfisch and others also arpeggiate but faster, reaching the top G in one gesture. When played chordally, it is broken 2+2.

Vibrato also provided variety. HIP violinists on recordings from after 1995 tended to use less and narrower vibrato. Among mainstream violinists, Bar-

Table 1. Vibrato rate, width, and frequency of use measured on selected notes in different movements and averaged across each selected violinist. (NB. Rate in cycle/second, width in semitones; frequency refers to occurrence of vibrato on the selected pitches.)

<i>Performer, date</i>	<i>Vibrato rate (c/s)</i>		<i>Width (semitones)</i>		<i>Frequency of use</i>
	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>%</i>
Huggett 1995 (HIP)	5.8	0.50	0.2	0.06	46.3
Kuijken 1983 (HIP)	5.9	0.60	0.2	0.07	63.3
Kuijken 2001 (HIP)	5.9	0.80	0.1	0.90	60.0
Luca 1977 (HIP)	6.8	0.10	0.1	0.08	39.5
Podger 1999 (HIP)	6.0	0.70	0.2	0.09	27.0
Schroeder 1985 (HIP)	6.5	0.60	0.2	0.06	55.0
Van Dael 1996 (HIP)	5.5	0.80	0.1	0.04	23.0
Wallfisch 1997 (HIP)	5.8	0.50	0.1	0.14	45.5
Barton-Pine 1999	6.9	0.90	0.2	0.12	62.0
Barton-Pine 2007	6.1	0.90	0.1	0.03	14.0
Hahn 1999	6.6	0.30	0.2	0.10	100.0
Kremer 1980	6.3	0.36	0.3	0.07	91.0
Kremer 2005	6.2	0.80	0.2	0.12	45.3
Mintz 1984	5.9	0.40	0.3	0.04	90.0
Perlman 1987	6.6	1.70	0.3	0.15	76.0
Ricci 1981	6.0	0.50	0.3	0.17	76.0
Szenthelyi 2002	6.4	0.28	0.3	0.10	82.0
Tetzlaff 1994	6.2	1.10	0.2	0.12	64.5
Tetzlaff 2005	6.5	0.43	0.3	0.48	91.0
Tognetti 2005	5.9	0.30	0.1	0.03	36.0
Zehetmair 1983	4.8	0.50	0.4	0.16	14.0

ton-Pine used vibrato the least and Hahn the most. Multiple recordings of violinists indicate a decreasing use of vibrato. Table 1 provides details.

Overall tempo choices showed no clear trend but varied most in fast and fugal movements, as well as in the C major *Adagio*. Table 2 provides an example.

Variety was discovered in relation to ornamentation as well. Luca, Podger, Huggett, Gringolts, and Tognetti added graces and embellishments (e.g. A minor *Andante*, E major *Gavotte*). Their solutions differed radically from each-other both in terms of quantity and type of added ornaments. Rhythmic flexibility was more obvious in the most recent and HIP versions, where the articulation of metrical groups and the inflection of hierarchically important

Table 2. Tempo choices in selected G minor sonata recordings. Mean metronome values were calculated from movement duration. SDs marked as negative indicate variance that is slower than the mean. $SD > 2$ is italicized.

<i>Date, performer</i>	<i>Adagio</i>		<i>Fuga</i>		<i>Siciliano</i>		<i>Presto</i>	
	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1977 Luca	27.0	1.28	69.0	-0.16	19.0	-2.61	65.0	-1.22
1980 Kremer	20.0	-1.16	86.0	2.31	27.0	0.26	87.0	1.54
1981 Kuijken	27.0	1.14	70.0	-0.06	24.0	-0.69	75.0	0.11
1983 Zehetmair	28.0	1.33	80.0	1.43	31.0	1.76	81.0	0.82
1984 Mintz	19.0	-1.38	63.0	-1.06	24.0	-0.79	73.0	-0.15
1986 Perlman	20.0	-1.14	69.0	-0.16	26.0	-0.14	80.0	0.62
1993 Tetzlaff	27.0	1.16	69.0	-0.18	29.0	1.01	95.0	2.52
1995 Huggett	22.0	-0.65	56.0	-2.10	24.0	-0.92	63.0	-1.44
1996 Poulet	23.0	-0.15	77.0	1.03	28.0	0.79	74.0	-0.11
1996 van Dael	27.0	1.01	69.0	-0.25	29.0	0.92	66.0	-1.06
1997 Wallfisch	24.0	0.13	65.0	-0.77	28.0	0.48	66.0	-1.06
1997 Podger	23.0	-0.21	68.0	-0.34	27.0	0.19	72.0	-0.27
1998 Gähler	24.0	0.31	64.0	-0.91	25.0	-0.64	72.0	-0.31
1999 Ehnes	17.0	-2.06	67.0	-0.52	27.0	0.08	80.0	0.62
2001 Szenthelyi	28.0	1.43	73.0	0.34	30.0	1.25	67.0	-0.89
2005 Tetzlaff	24.0	0.13	74.0	0.55	25.0	-0.45	83.0	0.98
2005 Kremer	22.0	-0.44	82.0	1.78	26.0	0.02	80.0	0.72
2005 Tognetti	21.0	-0.96	68.0	-0.40	23.0	-1.27	76.0	0.20
2001 Kuijken	25.0	0.55	67.0	-0.49	24.0	-0.69	67.0	-0.95
1999 Barton-Pine	23.0	-0.18	72.0	0.20	28.0	0.72	69.0	-0.74
2004 Barton-Pine	23.0	-0.15	69.0	-0.25	28.0	0.72	75.0	0.06
<i>Mean</i>	24.0		70.0		26.0		75.0	

notes created easily detectable rhythmic irregularities. The analysis of dotting ratios revealed under-dotting in the D minor *Corrente* movement. This reflects the view that dotted rhythms within fast triplet motion are to be assimilated into long-short swings. In contrast, ratios in the C major *Adagio* were found to be universally over-dotted (see Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The analyses indicate great diversity in approach, along the continuum from literalistic to flexible. Several mainstream violinists are influenced by current beliefs about HIP. This can be seen in the declining use of vibrato; the more

Table 3. Dotting ratios calculated from IOIs in selected D minor *Corrente* and C major *Adagio* recordings. A ratio of 0.75 indicates literal dotting (3:1).

<i>Performer, date</i>	<i>Dotting ratio</i>	
	<i>D minor Corrente</i>	<i>C major Adagio</i>
Barton-Pine 1999	0.76	n/a
Barton-Pine 2004	0.74	n/a
Barton-Pine 2007	0.70	0.82
Brooks 2001 (HIP)	0.72	0.88
Ehnes 1999	0.80	0.81
Hahn 1997	0.78	0.81
Huggett 1995 (HIP)	0.69	0.79
Kremer 1980	0.76	0.80
Kremer 2005	0.76	0.85
Kuijken 1983 (HIP)	0.71	0.86
Kuijken 2001 (HIP)	0.71	0.86
Luca 1977 (HIP)	0.74	0.80
Mintz 1984	0.78	0.81
Perlman 1987	0.65	0.80
Podger 1999 (HIP)	0.72	0.77
Poppen 2001 (HIP)	0.76	n/a
Schroeder 1985 (HIP)	0.72	0.78
Szenthelyi 2002	0.74	0.77
Tetzlaff 1994	0.77	0.78
Tetzlaff 2005	0.78	0.82
Tognetti 2005	0.72	0.81
van Dael 1996 (HIP)	0.73	0.81
Wallfisch 1997 (HIP)	0.72	0.85
Zehetmair 1983	0.78	0.85

articulated and “lifted” bowing style, and the use of lower positions and open strings. Multiple recordings of artists, especially those of Kremer, show this tendency clearly. Apart from this broad stylistic fashion no real homogeneity was found. Rather, the examination showed diversity in tempo choices, ornamentation, and approaches to phrasing and expressive flexibilities. These qualitative differences do not lend themselves easily to quantitative reporting and can be better explained through detailed individual comparisons.

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