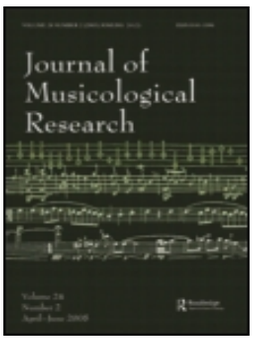

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Playing the "Unplayable": Schoenberg, Heifetz, and the Violin Concerto, Op. 36

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The legend of the difficulty of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto (1936) originates in Jascha Heifetz's supposed declaration of it as "unplayable." Since then, the question of what was so formidable about this work has not been adequately addressed. How various technical difficulties of the work have been surmounted by other violinists can be documented by analyzing specific "impossibilities" in the violin part and examining recordings made between 1954 and 2008. The true reasons for Heifetz's refusal to play this concerto lie in the fundamental incompatibility between the modernist ideology of performance as "objective" interpretation and the romantic virtuoso tradition epitomized by Heifetz. The lack of acceptance for Schoenberg's work, when considered alongside contemporary violin concertos (Bartok, Stravinsky, etc.), can be seen to stem from the composer's rejection of idiomatic writing for violin as a consequence of rejecting tonality and the conspicuous absence of a soloist muse.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) composed his Violin Concerto, Op. 36, between February 1934 and September 1936, a period during which he also wrote the String Quartet No. 4, Op. 37, for the Kolisch Quartet. The Concerto was originally intended for the quartet's leader, Rudolf Kolisch (1896–1978), the brother of the composer's wife, Gertrude. Kolisch was enthusiastic but turned it down, because he was too overextended with previous engagements to take on the concerto.[1] Schoenberg then asked fellow emigré (and fellow Los Angeleno) Jascha Heifetz (1901–87) to play the first performance.

[1] Kolisch wrote in a letter dated March 15, 1937, to Schoenberg: "Finally the Violin Concerto has arrived! I cannot really say yet whether I am going to be able to play it next year already; it depends on the programs that [Mrs.] Coolidge prescribes . . . You cannot imagine how much I've got to do and I will do my utmost." Ernst Hilmar, ed., *Arnold Schönberg: Gedenkausstellung 1974* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1974), 340. "Endlich ist das Violinkonzert eingetroffen! Ich kann wirklich noch nicht sagen, ob ich es werde im nächsten Jahr schon spielen können; das hängt von den Programmen ab, die uns die

The story goes that, when the two met to go over the score, Heifetz struggled with a certain passage—which one is not known—and had to stop. After the third attempt, he is said to have protested, "Sir, hasn't it occurred to you that one needs six fingers in order to play this?" Schoenberg supposedly responded, "Well, I can sit and wait."[2] Thus, the legend of Schoenberg's "unplayable" violin concerto originates in Heifetz's surrender. But what was so difficult about it to have left the great virtuoso confounded?

The legend escalated further on the publication of the score in 1939, which prompted a series of articles in *The Strad* the following year. The objections raised by the articles to certain "impossibilities" in the violin part were refuted both in print (again, in *The Strad*) and, perhaps more importantly, by the fact that the concerto actually came to be played—by Louis Krasner (1903–95) in Philadelphia, under the baton of Stokowski, on December 6, 1940. So the concerto turned out to be playable, after all. Why then did Heifetz declare it to be "unplayable" when it clearly was not? And why did the charges of "unplayability" linger far longer than similar charges leveled initially against the violin concertos of Brahms and Tchaikovsky?

The task of answering these questions calls for musical analysis, performance history, performance aesthetics, and genre contextualization. Beyond the legend, the true historical significance of this complex work has eluded scholars for two main reasons. First, traditional Schoenberg scholarship has understandably attended to other priorities, such as analysis of the score as an exemplar of twelve-tone technique, thereby placing the composer within the context of the Second Viennese School and modernism.[3] Second, approaching the work from the perspective of performance, with Schoenberg as a composer of music for violin (an instrument he himself played), and placing the concerto not in the context of his oeuvre but in the context of other contemporary violin concertos, necessarily delimits some of the types of sources available to nontraditional texts. The story of this concerto needs to be pieced together from a variety of sources, including personal accounts of violinists, liner notes, and other modes of discourse that contribute to continuing perceptions among professional musicians today.

MANGEOT'S ANALYSIS OF "IMPOSSIBILITIES" IN SCHOENBERG'S VIOLIN CONCERTO

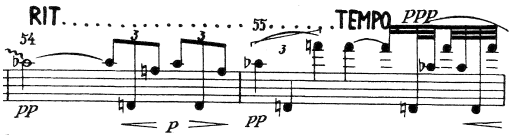
In 1939 Schirmer of New York published Schoenberg's Violin Concerto both in full score and in a violin and piano reduction by Felix Greissle

Coolidge vorschreibt . . . Ihr könnt euch nicht denken, wie ungeheuer viel mir daran liegt und daß ich mein Möglichstes tun werde." Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

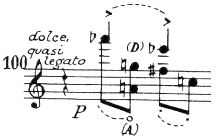
2 Artur Weschler-Vered, *Jascha Heifetz* (New York: Schirmer, 1986), 180.

3 For an analysis of the row, pitch-class relationships, and the formal design of the work see, among others, Andrew Mead, "Large-Scale Strategy in Arnold Schoenberg's Twelve-Tone Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 24/1 (Fall–Winter 1985), 120–57.

(1894–1982), a former student of Schoenberg's, who supplied a limited number of fingerings in the violin part.[4] In the spring of 1940 André Mangeot (1883–1970), a British violinist of French origin, published a long article in *The Strad* analyzing in depth the solo violin part.[5] Mangeot had established himself in London as a professional orchestral musician; he founded two string quartet ensembles, premiered contemporary British music, and gave the English premiere of Fauré's String Quartet in 1925.[6] In the late 1930s Mangeot had published his own edition of Mozart's string quartets with Schirmer in New York.[7] It may have been through Schirmer that Mangeot acquired the score of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, which he analyzed scrupulously, identifying about a dozen examples of impossibilities he had found—any of which could have been Heifetz's stumbling block. These are summarized in Examples 1 through 8.



EXAMPLE 1 Adjacent thirty-second notes to be slurred from the D string to the E string (m. 55). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



EXAMPLE 2 A unison double stop slurred to a triple stop while holding the top note (m. 100). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

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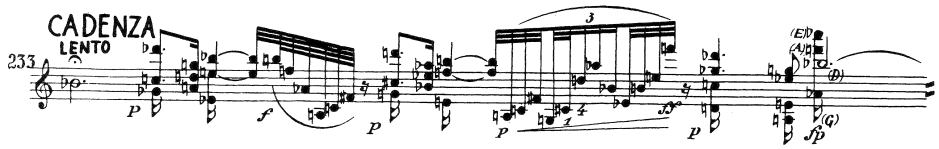
4 See Arnold Schoenberg, *Violinkonzert*, Op. 36 (New York: Schirmer, 1939) and *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, Op. 36, Edition for Violin and Piano, ed. Felix Greissle (New York: Schirmer, 1939). There are a few small discrepancies between these sources. For instance, at measure 31 in the full score, the solo violin has a double stop, A♭5–C6, misprinted in the violin part as F5–A♭5.

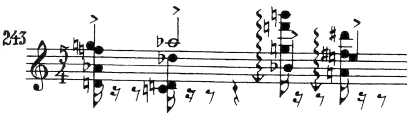
5 André Mangeot, "Arnold Schoenberg's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, op. 36 [Review]," *The Strad* 50/599 (March 1940), 420–24, and 50/600 (April 1940), 450–56, reprinted in Arnold Schönberg, *Sämtliche Werke* (Mainz: Schott, 1988), Part IV, Series B, Vol. 15, xxv–xxix.

6 Michael Kennedy and Joyce Bourne, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 453.

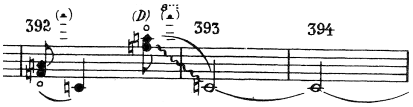
7 Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 135.



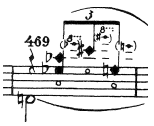
EXAMPLE 3 Four-note chords for which there is no possible fingering (m. 233). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



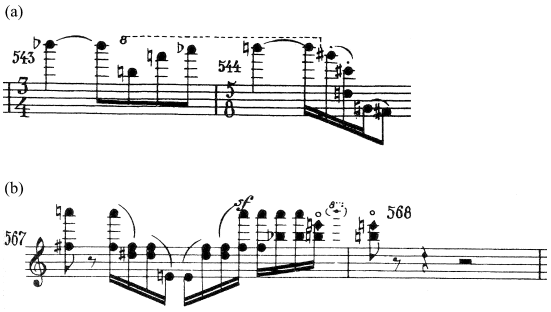
EXAMPLE 4 A four-note chord to be bowed top-down while holding the second highest pitch (m. 243). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



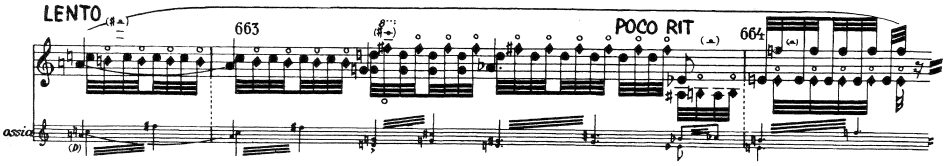
EXAMPLE 5 Harmonics that are theoretically possible but virtually unplayable in practice, especially those played a third above the base note (m. 392). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



EXAMPLE 6 A harmonic on the E string to be double-stopped with an open D string (m. 469). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



EXAMPLES 7a and 7b A high B supposedly beyond human hearing range (mm. 544 and 568). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



EXAMPLE 8 A trill between a harmonic and a normal note double-stopped with another harmonic (mm. 662–64). Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

In addition to these alleged violations of violin technique (to which we will return later), Mangeot objected to a passage in the finale on entirely different grounds: "I must quote bars 714–717; they are fairly easy to play but, to my mind, they sound as ugly as any progression of sound can on a violin."[8] Thus it was not only Schoenberg's transgressions of violin technique but also his use of dissonance to which Mangeot objected—the first clue to unraveling Heifetz's objection.

KRASNER TAKES ON THE PREMIERE

Krasner had commissioned and premiered Alban Berg's Violin Concerto in 1935. The composer was initially hesitant to write the work, telling him "you are a young violinist in the beginnings of a promising concert career. What you require for your programs are brilliant compositions by Wieniawski and

8 Mangeot, "Arnold Schoenberg's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, op. 36 [Review]," xxviii.

Vieuxtemps—you know, that is not my kind of music!"[9] Nonetheless, Berg asked Krasner to "prelude" (improvise) virtuoso effects on the violin so that he could gain insight into the possibilities of the instrument.[10] Berg worked closely with Krasner and eventually dedicated the concerto to him.

Krasner had learned of the existence of Schoenberg's concerto, even before its completion, via a chance encounter with Kolisch on a steamship from New York to Europe in April 1936. He recalled that his friend "broke the sensational news to me that Schoenberg himself was working on a violin concerto. My eyes almost devoured the fearsome looking notes when Kolisch brought to my cabin a number of photostat pages of Schoenberg's manuscript."[11] Krasner later became aware of the story that Schoenberg was waiting for a six-fingered violinist to appear. Upon approaching the composer directly, Krasner received the following response:

> The difficulties of this work are different ones and greater than those of the Berg Concerto. Also you do not know whether this kind of music suits you. . . . Should you believe that you ought to play the piece, we could then make arrangements over a certain period of time, and then it would interest me to hear your suggestions. . . . I can say that I would be very happy if you were the man to play the work.[12]

Krasner took on the challenge, well aware of the work's demands:

> Schoenberg's pointed reference to the differences both in the kinds and the degrees of difficulties encountered in the two works [i.e., his and Berg's] is in itself significant. Quite rightly, he raises the question of his concerto's suitability, that is, whether it "lies well," for me. The implication is that suitability in Berg does not necessarily mean suitability in Schoenberg.[13]

Krasner practiced the part for a year and, in the days and weeks leading up to the date of the premiere, he "continuously devoted all [his] waking (and sleeping) hours to the violin and to Schoenberg's music."[14]

Of the premiere, *Time* magazine reported: "Krasner fiddled so hard, he almost dropped his bow. The bewildered audience couldn't tell whether all

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9 Quoted in Louis Krasner, "The Origins of the Alban Berg Violin Concerto," in *Alban Berg Symposion, Wien 1980*, ed. Rudolf Klein (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1981), 110.

10 "Among the sketches preserved in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek are notations of virtuoso technical effects—artificial harmonics, double stops and so forth—taken from the concertos of Glazunov and others." Anthony Pople, *Berg: Violin Concerto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28–29.

11 Louis Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 2/2 (1978), 87.

12 Letter from Schoenberg to Krasner of February 11, 1938, quoted in Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," 85.

13 Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," 88.

14 Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," 90.

of Schönberg's 'unplayable' notes were played or not."[15] A more elaborate account appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:

> A scattering of hisses from the audience at the conclusion of the first movement of the much-debated Arnold Schoenberg Violin Concerto—a composition which most critics seem to agree sounds like an exaggerated version of the testing room at an abrasive plant—was the occasion for the mild "calling down" that Stokowski delivered.
>
> Louis Krasner, the soloist, had completed the first movement of the work, given its world premiere here on Friday, and had received a meed of applause from the listeners when the hissing of the music itself began.
>
> Stokowski stepped to the front of the stage and said: "Shall we forever make the same foolish, narrow-minded, unsportsmanlike blunders, upon only hearing a thing once? . . . Certainly Schoenberg is one of the greatest musicians alive today. His music is extremely difficult to understand. We don't ask you to like it or dislike it, but to give it a fair chance. That's American. But to condemn it after one hearing—that simply cannot be done . . . Three-fourths of you are open-minded. As for the others, they can't help it—and perhaps they are right. We won't know for about 24 years, so we'll wait."[16]

We can surmise from the published reports that (1) the public was in no position to judge whether Krasner had in fact technically executed all the "fearsome looking" notes and (2) the public did not care for the music. From Krasner's memoir, we know that the management of the Philadelphia orchestra did not support the idea of a Schoenberg premiere to begin with. Not only did they withhold Krasner's soloist fee (Stokowski paid it out of his own pocket) they also refused to publicize the concerto until the week before the premiere; they also programmed with it the Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde*, most likely in hopes of retaining subscription patrons.[17] On the evidence of the premiere, "unfeasible," "unpopular," and "not lucrative" had become variations on the theme of "unplayable"—yet more clues to explaining Heifetz's aversion to the work.

"THAT DAMN HEIFETZ!"

Heifetz, meanwhile, was living in Beverly Hills, a darling of the Hollywood studios—*They Shall Have Music*, a motion picture in which he appeared as himself, came out in 1939—enjoying exactly the kind of career Adorno

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15 Anonymous, untitled article, *Time*, December 16, 1940, quoted in Schönberg, *Sämtliche Werke*, Part IV, Series B, Vol. 15, xxiv.

16 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 8, 1940, quoted in Nuria Nono-Schoenberg, ed., *Arnold Schönberg 1874–1951: Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen* (Klagenfurt: Ritter Klagenfurt, 1992), 375.

17 See Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," 90, 92.

would have condemned as pandering to the fetishism of mass culture.[18] Heifetz was the kind of violinist who treated all the music he performed as a vehicle for the display of speed and virtuosity—even the music of Bach.[19] William Walton dedicated his Violin Concerto to Heifetz, who premiered it in 1939; when asked why he had written such a difficult work, Walton replied "it's not my fault—it's that damn Heifetz!"[20] Heifetz thrived on raising the level of technique in concertos of the time, going so far as to ask "that Korngold should if possible increase the technical demands of the concerto" before the work was completed in 1945.[21] Clearly, upping the technical ante posed no obstacle for Heifetz and was indeed welcomed by him.

The concertos by Walton and Korngold exemplify neoromanticism not only in their harmonic language but also, crucially, in their conception of soloistic virtuosity inherited from the great nineteenth-century works in that genre. To defiantly overcome the difficulty of execution was one facet of the heroism of the romantic virtuoso tradition to which Heifetz adhered. Violin soloists were exalted when they managed to perform concertos deemed "impracticable" (Auer rejecting Tchaikovsky) or "against the violin" (Josef Hellmesberger rejecting Brahms).[22] Vladimir Jankelevitch once theorized heroic virtuosity in terms of the ability and power of the virtuoso to surmount obstacles—as "difficulty vanquished."[23] More recently Jim Samson has defined "romantic virtuosity" as the composer-performer's claim to a liberal ideology—"free, isolated, striving, desiring"—underpinning the values of heroism and individualism.[24] Difficulty made sense to Heifetz, was

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[18] Archie Mayo, dir., *They Shall Have Music* (Hollywood, CA: Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1939).

[19] He added *glissandi* and harmonics for virtuoso effect; for example, at measure 39 in the C-major fugue, he slides from an A4 to a D5 harmonic in his 1952 recording "Heifetz: Bach Sonatas and Partitas" (RCA Victor reissue, 1988).

[20] From BBC Radio 3, broadcast on June 19, 2000, quoted in Stephen Lloyd, *William Walton: Muse of Fire* (New York: Boydell, 2001), 169, note 70. Walton had expressly visited the violinist "in order to develop the violin writing to Heifetz's standards and liking" in the spring of 1939, according to Calum MacDonald in his liner notes to *William Walton, Violin Concerto*, Joshua Bell, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, David Zinman (Decca 1997), 3. Heifetz also commissioned concertos from Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Korngold, and Gruenberg.

[21] Giselher Schubert, "Preface" to *Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra Op. 35* (Mainz: Eulenburg, 2006), trans. Lindsay Chalmers-Gerbracht, iv–vii, at v. Korngold had originally begun the work for Bronislaw Huberman, with whom he lost patience for taking too long to learn it, and rehearsed with Bronislaw Gimpel, for whom the challenges proved to be too great.

[22] Auer is quoted in Michael Steinberg, *The Concerto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 485–86, from the *Musical Courier*, January 12, 1912). Hellmesberger's comment appears in Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 452.

[23] Vladimir Jankelevitch, "La Difficulte Vaincue," in *De la Musique au silence. Liszt et la Rhapsodie. Essai sur la Virtuosité* (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1979), 15–29.

[24] Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75. Romantic virtuosity also emphasized the visual element, of course—the performer's body on display and the role of the viewing, whose reactions set cults and fetishism into motion. See chapter 3 of *Virtuosity and the Musical Work*, "Composing the Performance," 66–102, esp. 75–79.

even appealing to him, as long as it was contained within the frame of (neo)romanticism.

A CLOSER LOOK AT OP. 36

Schoenberg's Violin Concerto is surprisingly traditional in its retention of the three-movement, fast-slow-fast structure inherited from the Baroque era (unlike Berg's two-part structure and Stravinsky's four-movement structure): It features a sonata-form Poco allegro, a lyrical Andante grazioso, and an Allegro march finale, continuing a venerable tradition of dance types in concerto finales. We also note in passing that the first two notes in the solo part are identical to those in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (A3–B♭3). In every other way, Op. 36 departs radically from the 300-year-old tradition of violin concertos; its use of a strict twelve-tone technique is only the most obvious characteristic. The orchestration is enormous, including a large percussion section. The soloist plays nearly continuously throughout, with no more than eight measures' rest at a time, apart from two substantial tutti sections (at m. 152 and m. 485). In addition to the solo cadenza (m. 233) are accompanied cadenzas where the violin is joined by percussion, woodwinds, or strings.

Each of these features plays a role in upsetting the traditional tutti-solo balance, which at least since the romantic era had pitted a heroically striving autonomous individual against the collective. Drawing on the logic of Susan McClary's argument that a Mozart concerto can model a "dialectic of the Enlightenment" through the unfolding of themes and key structure and applying it here, we see that, in the absence of tonality, the narrative impetus is missing.[25] In the first twenty-four bars alone the solo violin plays the entire twelve-note row on which the piece is based several times in its original form as well as inverted and transposed down a fifth.[26] When only part of the row appears in the solo part, it is immediately completed in the orchestra. Thus, the harmonic structure is a repetitive sequence of the row in various permutations, at odds with the goal-oriented structure of tonal concertos, in which harmonic design and tutti-solo relations align. The significance of filling up a traditional concerto structure with twelve-tone language thus extends well beyond the familiar idea of "new wine in old bottles." As the musicologist Friedhelm Krummacher has observed, "the basic model of violinistic virtuosity, which doesn't get along very well with strict dodecaphony, is based on the open strings as reference tones and on

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[25] Susan McClary, "A Musical Dialectic from the Enlightenment: Mozart's *Piano Concerto in G Major, K. 453*, Movement 2," *Cultural Critique* 4 (Autumn, 1986), 129–69.

[26] See Rudolf Stephan's preface to Schoenberg, *Violinkonzert,* Op. 36, 7.

the constancy of consonant sounds, with their conditions of resonance."[27] In other words, what Krummacher calls "Geigerische Charakter" (violinistic character) gets compromised in dodecaphony.[28]

Schoenberg's Violin Concerto raises important questions about soloistic autonomy and identity, as do Berg's and Stravinsky's. While Schoenberg composed accompanied cadenzas, thereby crowding the soloist's solitude, Berg blended the solo line little by little into the orchestral violins, thereby camouflaging it (Part II, mm. 170ff); Stravinsky wrote an obbligato part for the concertmaster to be performed in duet with the solo line (movement 4, figure 117).[29] These concertos brought the previously assured individuality of the solo violin into question each in their own way, in line with the fractured subjectivity of modernist works.

Yet Schoenberg's is unusual among violin concertos of the 1930s in three respects. First, it lacks an overt extramusical reference, whether it be to nationalism (Bartok, Szymanowski), the Spanish Civil War (Britten),[30] an antiwar statement (Hartmann), or the unforgettable story of Manon Gropius's tragic early death and the image of an angel (Berg).[31] Second, Schoenberg did not collaborate with a violinist during the compositional process, whereas Berg worked with Krasner, Stravinsky with Samuel Dushkin, Bartok with Zoltán Szekely, Britten with Brosa, and Szymanowski with Pawel Kochanski.[32] Third, while most other composers dedicated their concertos to their muses, Schoenberg's inscription reads "Meinem lieben Freund und Kampfgenossen Dr. Anton von Webern" ("My dear friend and comrade-in-arms Dr. Anton von Webern").[33] What attraction could such a work have possibly held for Heifetz?

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[27] Friedhelm Krummacher, "Virtuosität und Komposition im Violinkonzert: Probleme der Gattung zwischen Beethoven und Brahms," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 10 (1974), 612. "Sodann vertragen sich mit strenger Dodekaphonie schwer die elementaren Muster violinistischer Virtuosität, die auf den leeren Saiten als Bezugstönen und auf der Konstanz konsonanter Klänge samt ihren Resonanzbedingungen beruhen."

[28] On the "Geigerische Charakter" of the A-minor theme in triple stops with the open E upper pedal in Brahms first movement, bars 164ff, see Krummacher, "Virtuosität und Komposition im Violinkonzert," 611.

[29] See Alban Berg, *Violinkonzert* [1936] (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1996) and Igor Stravinsky, *Concerto en Ré pour Violon et Orchestre* [1931] (Mainz: Schott, 1959).

[30] The first soloist of Britten's concerto, the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa, recalled that "Spanish elements" (such as the opening rhythm) referred to this war of 1936. Christopher Headington, *Britten* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 48.

[31] As Konrad Küster has also noted, violin concerto composers of the 1930s (many of whom wrote more than one) drew on contrasting musical traditions: historical elements (i.e., looking back to the Baroque, as in the concertos by Stravinsky and Hindemith) and folk elements of different kinds (Bartok and Hindemith in particular, although even Berg used a Kärntner folk-song melody); Konrad Küster, *Form und Forum der Virtuosität* (Kassel: Bärenreiter 1993), 176–77 and 180–81.

[32] In fact, these collaborations are acknowledged on the title page of Stravinsky's and Szymanowski's scores. See Stravinsky, *Concerto en Ré* and Karol Szymanowski, *Concerto No. 2 for Violin and Orchestra, op. 61* (Moscow: State Publishers Music, 1971).

[33] Schoenberg, *Violinkonzert*, Op. 36.

SCHOENBERG, THE VIOLIN, AND PERFORMANCE IDEALS

Schoenberg hardly set out to compose an unplayable concerto; the work's difficulty, while considerable, was exaggerated and sensationalized by the press. *Modern Music* claimed, for instance, that "several reputable violinists" had declared it unplayable.[34] As late as 1961 musicologist Hans Keller referred to the legend when he wrote in an introduction to a BBC radio broadcast that the concerto's "enormous difficulties . . . prompted [Schoenberg] to suggest it called for a six-fingered violinist."[35] After Krasner succeeded where Heifetz had "failed," *Time* magazine reported Schoenberg as saying, "now I will have to write a still more difficult concerto."[36]

As a violinist himself, and as a composer concerned with the practical aspects of performance, Schoenberg knew very well what was possible and idiomatic on the instrument—as evidenced, for example, by the violin writing in *Verklärte Nacht* and the string quartets. Schoenberg received violin lessons from the age of eight, grew up revering Kreisler and Huberman, and composed a number of violin duets by the age of seventeen.[37] Why would someone who declared that "anyone writing for piano should bear constantly in mind that even the best pianist has only one pair of hands" demand a six-fingered violinist?[38] Clearly he was referring to the extra digit in jest.

Schoenberg commented specifically on the violin in a concerto setting in his *Style and Idea:* "A solo violin stands out so strongly from the orchestra," he explained, because of "individuality, a personal kind of variation between different notes, of intonation, of coloration" against the homogenous sound of the collective.[39] Clearly he believed that the solo violin was already individuated on the basis of timbre alone.

Schoenberg's ideas on performance centered on the actualization of musical structures in sound, which entails the technical business of executing the score plus the artistic layer of interpreting it. As he wrote, "interpretation is necessary, to bridge the gap between the author's idea and the contemporary ear, the assimilative powers of the listener at the time in question."[40] This modernist ideology of "objective" performance already overturns the liberal romantic ideology of virtuoso performance to which Heifetz subscribed.

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[34] Henry Pleasants, [untitled article], *Modern Music* 18/2 (January/February 1941), 120; quoted in Schönberg, *Sämtliche Werke*, Part IV, Series B, Vol. 15, xxiv.

[35] Hans Keller, "No Bridge to Nowhere: An Introduction to Stravinsky's Movements and Schoenberg's Violin Concerto," *The Musical Times* 102/1417 (March 1961), 157.

[36] *Time*, December 16, 1940. Schoenberg was probably joking—if, indeed, he really did make such a comment at all. The article goes on to claim that the composer had "listened with gloomy amazement" to Krasner's private rendition—and how could the author have known that?

[37] Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 79, 319. Schoenberg was even pictured with Kreisler and three other musicians in a humorous photo portrait of the "Fröhliches Quintet" around 1895, reproduced in O. W. Neighbour, "Schoenberg, Arnold," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22:578.

[38] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea,* 349.

[39] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 332–33.

[40] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 328.

Performance ideals were even more severe among others in the Schoenberg circle. Adorno wrote that "true interpretation is an x-ray of the work; its task is to illuminate in the sensuous phenomenon the totality of all the characteristics and interrelations which have been recognized through intensive study of the score."[41] Adorno referred to performing as the "uncovering" of the compositional process, likening the act of performance to analysis.[42] Kolisch concurred: The performer's role was to "actually reconceive the compositional working"; that is, to present the work as if in the process of being composed.[43] Kolisch believed that objective interpretation should be devoid of subjective interference from the performer; he did not mean by this that performance should be devoid of emotion but, rather, that all the expression needed in performance was already present in the work.[44]

Clearly, these tenets of performance framed difficulty in a way counter to romantic virtuosity, with its sense of a hero overcoming effort. Difficulty composed needed to be actualized as difficulty performed, without interference. (Since making difficulty look easy would constitute interference, Heifetz was out of the picture.) Certainly, Schoenberg's violin concerto contains difficulties that are tremendous, wide-ranging, and numerous. Kolisch even joked in 1950 that "Schoenberg is never quite aware of the difficulties of his music as far as performance is concerned."[45]

"IMPOSSIBILITIES" MADE POSSIBLE (*PACE* MANGEOT)

A couple of months after the publication of Mangeot's analysis, Sol Babitz (1911–82), an American violinist based in Los Angeles, published a retort—also in *The Strad*—refuting Mangeot's charges of unplayability and ugliness.[46] For the "impossible" four-note chords (see Example 3) Babitz proposed a wacky "back-handed" fingering whereby the third finger crosses over the fourth in a contorted hand position that goes beyond the boundaries of

41 Theodor W. Adorno, "Bach Defended against His Devotees" [1950], in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 135–46, at 144.

42 "What you fulfill in performance is actually none other than the uncovering of the integration process that is played out in the music itself," Adorno said to Kolisch in a public speech on July 20, 1956. This is quoted in the conference-paper version of David Trippett's "The Composer's Rainbow: Rudolf Kolisch and the Role of Interpretation in Performance" (AMS Quebec City, 2007).

43 Kolisch, speaking in a joint radio broadcast with Adorno (1954), quoted by David Trippett, "The Composer's Rainbow: Rudolf Kolisch and the Limits of Rationalization," *Musiktheorie* 3 (2009), 231.

44 Trippett shows that, taken to their logical conclusion, Kolisch's claims regarding objectivity in performance are extreme—privileging robotic playing over the risk of human error and reifying a definitive, objectively correct performance (which, with the advent of recording technology, would render all subsequent performances superfluous). Yet Kolisch himself steered clear of extreme conclusions and even came to soften his stance in his old age. See Trippett, "The Composer's Rainbow," 228–37.

45 At a preconcert lecture in Madison from "Concert Series on Schoenberg," archived at Harvard University's Houghton Library (1950), quoted in Trippett, "The Composer's Rainbow," 236. Kolisch avoided recording the Violin Concerto until 1956.

46 Sol Babitz, "Where There's a Will There's a Way," *The Strad* 51/602 (June 1940), 54, 56.

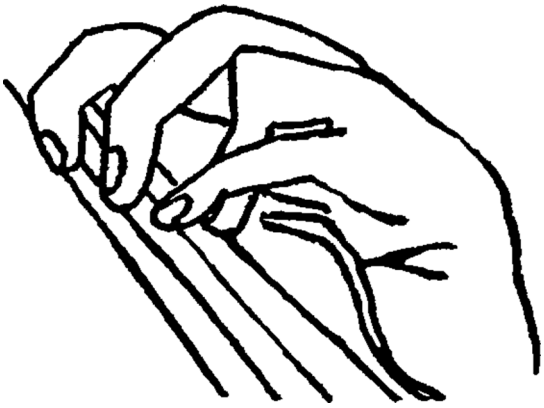


FIGURE 1 Sol Babitz's "back-handed" fingering. From "Where There's a Will, There's a Way," *The Strad* 51/602 (June 1940), 54, 56. © Newsquest Specialist Media, *The Strad*. Reproduced by permission of Newsquest Specialist Media, *The Strad*. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

conventional violin technique (see the illustration in Figure 1).[47] Awkward harmonics (as in Example 6) could be prepared by means of a "silent" early placement of the base note. The slur from the D string to the E string (as in Example 1) could be avoided by playing the upper note on the A string instead. Babitz did not address all of Mangeot's points, and one of his suggestions concerning the bowing direction of a chord contrary to the held pitch makes no sense, because the direction indicated in the score would have to be reversed. Nonetheless, Babitz's solutions stemmed from an impulse to "think outside the box" in extending received techniques, and from his conviction that Schoenberg's innovations mandated chartering unfamiliar violinistic territory. "The violinist must accept the challenge," he wrote, "suppress his traditional technique and adopt unforeseen methods of playing," which included transgressing "traditional standards of violinistic beauty."[48]

Babitz, however, never performed the concerto. Nevertheless, documented cases of professional performances of the work, either in concert or recording, reveal nineteen performances, including those by Krasner and Kolisch (see Table 1).[49] The evidence of the sixteen available recordings (by all performers listed in Table 1, except for Marschner and Bress)

[47] "Back-handed" was the coinage of Dika Newlin, in *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections 1938–76* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1980), 212.

[48] Babitz, "Where There's a Will, There's a Way," 54, 56.

[49] This table does not include student performances, such as the one that was part of "Focus! The World of Arnold Schoenberg," Juilliard's contemporary music festival, given by Wolfgang Hasleder (b. 1965), then a Master's student, with the Juilliard orchestra conducted by JoAnn Falletta (January 26, 1990), which was attended by Krasner's widow.

TABLE 1 Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto (1940–2014)

Date	Violinist	Performance Type	Details
1940	**Louis Krasner (1903–1995)**	Concert (Premiere)	Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski
1945	Louis Krasner	Concert	Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, Dimitri Mitropoulos
1952	Louis Krasner	Recording (Columbia)	New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos
1954	Louis Krasner	Recording (Orfeo)	Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Dimitri Mitropoulos
1954	Louis Krasner	Recording (GM)	West German Radio Orchestra Cologne, Dimitri Mitropoulos
1949	**Tibor Varga (1921–2003)**	Concert	[Darmstadt]
1956	**Rudolf Kolisch (1896–1978)**	Recording (Archiphon)	Hessischen Rundfunks Orchester, Otto Matzerath
1958	Tibor Varga	Recording (Treasure of the Earth)	RIAS Sinfonieorchester, Ferenc Fricsay
1959	**Wolfgang Marschner (b. 1926)**	Concert	[Edinburgh Festival]
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Wiener Symphoniker, Michael Gielen
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Pierre Boulez
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Hans Rosbaud
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Dresdner Staatskapelle under Otmar Suitner
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Leipzig, Herbert Kegel
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	London Symphony Orchestra, Alexander Gibson
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	BBC Symphony Orchestra, Norman Del Mar
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Concert	Philharmonisches Orchester der Stadt Freiburg
?	Wolfgang Marschner	Recording	SWF-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden, Michael Gielen
1961	Tibor Varga	Concert (Proms)	BBC Symphony Orchestra, Eugene Goosens
1962	**Israel Baker (1919–2011)**	Recording (Columbia)	CBC Symphony Orchestra, Robert Craft
1964	**Zvi Zeitlin (1923–2012)**	Concert	[Buenos Aires]
1967	Rudolf Kolisch	Recording (Music & Arts)	Wisconsin Festival Orchestra, René Leibowitz
1968	**Hyman Bress (1931–1995)**	Recording (House of Artists)	Prague Symphony, Jindřich Rohan

1971	**Christiane Edinger (b. 1945)**	Recording (SWR)	Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart, Bruno Maderna
?	Christiane Edinger	Concerts	[Berlin, Saarbrücken, Hannover, Bochum, Venice, Rome, Milan, Bratislava, Kopenhagen, Bergen]
1972	Zvi Zeitlin	Recording (Deutsche Grammophon)	Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Rafael Kubelik
1980	**Liana Isakadze (b. 1946)**	Recording (Melodia Moscow)	USSR St. Symphony Orchestra Alexander Lazarev
1984	**Pierre Amoyal (b. 1949)**	Recording (Erato)	London Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Boulez
1988	**Christian Tetzlaff (b. 1966)**	Concert	Sergiu Celibidache
?	Christian Tetzlaff	Concert	Cleveland Orchestra, Christoph von Dohnányi
?	Christian Tetzlaff	Concert	Munich Philharmonic, James Levine
?	Christian Tetzlaff	Concert	Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart, Daniel Harding
1989	**Michael Erxleben (b. 1960)**	Recording (edel classics)	Berlin Symphony Orchestra, Claus Peter Flor
1999	**Rolf Schulte (b. ?)**	Recording (Naxos)	Philharmonia Orchestra, Robert Craft
2001	**Ernst Kovacic (b. 1943)**	Concert	BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Joseph Swensen
2008	**Hilary Hahn (b. 1979)**	Recording (Deutsche Grammophon)	Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Esa-Pekka Salonen
2008	**Kolja Blacher (b. 1963)**	Concert	Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Kent Nagano
2010	**Benjamin Schmid (b. 1968)**	Concert	Opernorchester Zürich, Ingo Metzmacher
2011	**Michael Barenboim (b. 1985)**	Concert	La Scala, Daniel Barenboim
2011	Michael Barenboim	Concert	Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Pierre Boulez
2011	**Ilya Gringolts (b. 1982)**	Concert	City Side Sinfonia, Steven Joyce
2013	Michael Barenboim	Concert	Chicago Symphony, Asher Fisch
2014	Ilya Gringolts	Concert	Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Ilan Volkov

Note. Boldface indicates the first appearance of a violinist's name in the table.

suggests that there are solutions, sometimes multiple ones, to each of the problems identified by Mangeot in the previous examples.

Example 1: The "bad writing" in measure 55 presents no obstacle for any of the violinists; it goes by very quickly. In some recordings, there is a hint of the A♭5 sounding while the violinist tries to skip over the A string, but it is negligible (as at 2:26 in Amoyal's recording, for example). According to Edinger, this kind of string skipping is in any case a required bow technique for the contemporary violinist.[50] In fact, it is not at all uncommon to find this kind of jumping across strings even in the standard orchestral violin repertoire: to pick a rather arbitrary example, in Bruckner's Symphony No. 6 movement 4, measure 267, the second violin part jumps from G♯2 to E1, skipping over the A string.

Example 2: The "clever" writing that Mangeot doubted would sound (m. 100) is easily tackled by all the performers by not taking the notation literally; they leave out the unison and play the top notes as eighth notes rather than quarter notes, as anyone would do with Bach.

Example 3: The quadruple-stopped chord in the first movement cadenza (m. 233) is difficult; indeed, there is a question mark instead of a fingering in pencil on Schoenberg's piano reduction manuscript.[51] Yet it is playable, even without Babitz's wacky fingering, by way of three different approaches among the violinists surveyed: (1) Krasner and Hilary Hahn play it as written (which is ideal); (2) Isakadze and Amoyal take the *ossia* (which is satisfactory—the former unfortunately with wrong notes); and (3) Edinger and Schulte divide it into two double stops (which is sensible but not the most satisfying version). It should be noted that playing the chord itself presents only part of the difficulty—getting there, from the previous quadruple stop, is the other part. Hahn sensibly takes plenty of time with the massive shift (at 8:44).

Example 4: Similarly, the quadruple stops at measures 243–44 are also playable. Again, Hahn's are the cleanest (at 10:28), as she takes her time placing the left hand and drawing the bow in the direction Schoenberg indicated, carefully coming back to the quarter note.

Example 5: The "theoretical" harmonics (mm. 391–92) are possible in practice, even if tone quality is compromised. We can note,

[50] Private interview in Berlin, 12 July 2012.

[51] The fingerings appear to be in a different hand than Schoenberg's, possibly Greissle's or Kolisch's. See http://www.schoenberg.at/compositions/manuskripte.php?werke_id=236&id_quelle=720&image=MS40_Fa_21.jpg&groesse=100&aktion=blaettern&bild_id=20&sharpen=&weite=800, accessed 24 July 2014.

however, that Schoenberg prescribed unnecessarily difficult artificial harmonics (requiring two fingers) where natural ones are possible (requiring only one finger): for example the F♯7 at measure 599. It is true that the fortissimo artificial harmonics at measures 598–99 are, as Mangeot claims, difficult to hear over the forte in the orchestra.

Example 6: The harmonic double-stopped with the open D string at the end of the second movement (m. 469) is literally unplayable as written. Almost every violinist breaks the open D to play the harmonic. Another solution is to ignore Schoenberg's fingering, and take the G♯7 harmonic on the A string, which enables the open D to be sustained as written (Edinger and Hahn). This raises the question of why Schoenberg would deliberately notate an unplayable harmonic when a perfectly playable alternative was available.

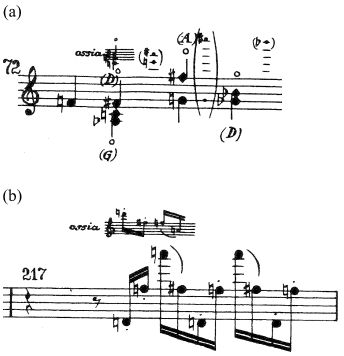
Example 7: The B7 "beyond the musical range of any ear" turns out to be quite audible in all cases (mm. 544, 568). In fact, Paganini had written a higher note (C8) in his seventh Caprice (m. 18).

Example 8: The trill between a harmonic and a normal note double-stopped with another harmonic is truly impossible to execute as written. It takes one step further the technique of double-stopping a harmonic with a normal note, which had already been done before, in Ernst's solo violin transcription of Schubert's *Erlkönig* (mm. 58–71, where in the original *Lied* the "Erlking" of the title first attempts to entice the boy away from his father). It also occurs in Schoenberg's *Phantasie*, Op. 47, at measure 26.[52] With the sole exception of Schulte, who manages an ingenious compromise by opting for the harmonic but thereby sacrifices one of the double-stopped notes in each three-note cluster (at 7:36 on his recording), everyone takes the much simpler *ossia*.

Thus, we see that each of the objections raised by Mangeot has been answered, in some cases by recourse to *ossias*. It is curious that Mangeot neglected to mention them since they had appeared already in the original 1939 publications. Everyone takes the *ossia* at measure 72, which is much more practical than the original, while no one takes it at measure 217, because the original is eminently playable (see Example 9).

Mangeot did however miss an opportunity to attack Schoenberg on the issue of tempo. Measures 388–89 in the second movement are really impossible at quarter note = 52. Even the meticulous Hahn seems to leave out some notes (playing only the top note of some of the double stops)

[52] Various solutions are arrived at by Nona Liddell, Maryvonne Le Dizes, Yehudi Menuhin, and others in executing this passage.



EXAMPLE 9 Schoenberg's *ossias*: (a) measure 72 and (b) measure 217. Arnold Schoenberg, Violin Concerto, Op. 36. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

while Krasner plays his double-stopped *glissandi* in fifths rather than the written tritones, under pressure to play up to tempo. Similarly, the harmonics at measures 603–4 in the third movement go by too quickly to have any chance to sound distinctly. Blacher told me that, under tempo constraints, he leaves out the bottom note in the first double stops of measures 683 and 684, and plays *arco* instead of *pizzicato* in measures 697–98.[53] In fact, of the violinists surveyed only four (Baker, Edinger, Isakazde, and Hahn) manage to complete the first movement in under 11:30 (only the latter two begin at the written tempo, half note = 64), while all the others take longer (Krasner and Amoyal at 12:30, and Erxleben at 13:30).

The most recent recording by Hahn with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (2008) echoes the spirit of Babitz, since she described learning the piece as follows: "I had to train my hands to adopt positions completely new to me. . . . [the process] push[ed] my technique and interpretive concepts to a different level."[54] The resulting recording prompted a reviewer to refer to Heifetz: "What I wonder would he have made of this magnificent recording by Hilary Hahn?"[55] It is an encouraging sign that three of the four most recent advocates of the concerto, Hahn among them, are also the youngest soloists ever to play the work.

Schoenberg did not live to see more than two violinists bring his concerto to life. The first was Krasner, according to whom the composer remarked, "you see, I knew it could be played because actually I was able to

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53 Private interview, Berlin, 21 May 2012.

54 In the Foreword to the liner notes of her recording, 2–4, at 4. Hilary Hahn, notes to Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Esa-Pekka Salonen, *Schoenberg–Sibelius–Violin Concertos* (2008), CD, Deutsche Grammophon 0028947773346.

55 Rob Cowan, "Where Heifetz Warily Trod, Hahn Strides to a Triumphant Performance" [Review], *Gramophone* (June 2008), 69. http://www.gramophone.net/Issue/Page/June%202008/69/999902/, accessed 6 November 2014.

manage every note of it on the violin with my own hands."[56] The second was Varga, who gave the German premiere in Darmstadt in 1949, and received an enthusiastic letter from Schoenberg:

> I wish to be younger to be able to write more music for you. Your performance resonates as if you had known the work for 25 years. Your whole interpretation is mature, expressive, marvellous. I can assure you that I have never heard a performance which so precisely reflected my intentions in every detail.[57]

CONCLUSION

When Heifetz dismissed the concerto as "unplayable," he could not have meant it literally. Instead, the jarring of modernist difficulty against romantic virtuosity upended traditional conceptions of violin virtuosity in general and the violin's role as a solo instrument in the concerto genre in particular, even while retaining a traditional concerto form. Jack Pfeiffer, a producer at RCA, recalled that "every now and again, Jascha Heifetz would open the score of Schoenberg's Concerto only to close it again with a perplexed shrug."[58] Heifetz died in 1987, leaving the concerto unplayed.

Even though Joseph Szigeti, Gustav Lenszewski, Andre Gerthler, Ivry Gitlis, Henryk Szeryng, and Isaac Stern had all performed Berg's concerto by 1962,[59] none of them ever performed Schoenberg's, and it has never become established in the repertoire. Viktoria Mullova (b. 1959) was learning the Schoenberg concerto in the late 1980s, "wanting to die, I was struggling so much," as she recently recalled; "the music wasn't good enough for me to put up with the pain."[60] The legend of the concerto's unplayability lingers in the form of resistance by soloists, conductors, and orchestras to perform a work that causes perplexion and suffering, written in a musical language unsoftened by tonal touches. The dissonance of twelve-tone music has stood in the way of its acceptance by the public as well. Even Pierre Boulez, one of the relatively few conductors to champion the concerto, wrote "it must be admitted that Schoenberg inspires more respect than affection."[61] Adorno,

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56 Krasner, "A Performance History of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36," 88–89.

57 Quoted in Philip Blomm, "Obituary: Tibor Varga. Hungarian-born Violinist Loved by Composers and Musicians," *The Guardian,* October 28, 2003. http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2003/oct/28/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries, accessed 6 November 2014.

58 Quoted in Cowan, "Where Heifetz Warily Trod, Hahn Strides to a Triumphant Performance."

59 See Pople, *Berg*, 44.

60 "Asked to take it back into her repertoire for the 2001 Schoenberg festival in Los Angeles, she refused. 'Despite the perfect circumstances, it wasn't worth it.'" Viktoria Mullova, "News & Press," http://www.viktoriamullova.com/newspress.php?nid=53, accessed 6 November 2014.

61 Pierre Boulez, "Schoenberg the Unloved," in *Orientations: Collected Writings*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (London: Faber, 1990), 325. This quote sums up an attitude shared by British

Schoenberg's greatest apologist, believed that "dissonance as a symbol of disaster and consonance as a symbol of reconciliation are neo-romantic relics."[62] He saw the mutually dependent relationship between dissonance and consonance as no longer relevant to modern music; in other words, he wished to see the ugly freed from its negative comparison to the beautiful. Heifetz would have shrugged. In the history of violin playing, there has hardly been a greater mismatch between fundamental aesthetic assumptions concerning the purpose of music.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is dedicated to the late Leonard Stein, who worked indefatigably to spread an understanding of, and appreciation for, Schoenberg's music. I would like to thank Daniel Harding, Berthold Tuercke, and violinists Kolja Blacher, Christiane Edinger, Theodor Flindell, Wolfgang Hasleder, and Benjamin Schmid for sharing their insights with me while I was researching this article. Thanks also to Dr. Julia Heimerdinger for help with translations and revisions and to Schirmer and *The Strad* for permission to reprint materials.

composers and musicologists, as characterized by Ben Earle in "Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand Op. 36: British Attempts to Popularize Schoenberg," *Music & Letters* 84/4 (November 2003), 608–43.

62 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Sheed & Ward, 1973), 108.