

Gershwin- Heifetz: An Exploration of Jascha Heifetz's Transcriptional Music

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Abstract: This paper examines Jascha Heifetz's transcriptions of George Gershwin's music as a significant case study in the cross-cultural fusion of European classical performance tradition and early twentieth-century American popular music. Following his immigration to the United States in 1917, Heifetz—already established as a virtuoso of the highest order—increasingly incorporated adapted short works into his recital programs, responding both to the technological advancements in recording and to the aesthetic preferences of American audiences. Through quantitative analysis of his performance history, program reconstruction, and close musical examination of selected transcriptions from *Porgy and Bess*, this study demonstrates that Heifetz's arrangements were not mere novelty pieces but deliberate artistic statements that challenged the perceived boundaries between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” music. In particular, his innovative use of portamento combined with tremolo bowing in “My Man's Gone Now” reveals a direct assimilation of jazz vocal techniques into violin idiom—a stylistic choice that was both technically daring and expressively compelling. Heifetz's lifelong dedication to Gershwin's music, documented from his attendance at the *Rhapsody in Blue* premiere through his final concert tours, underscores his conviction that American folk and jazz tunes possessed genuine artistic merit. Ultimately, Heifetz's transcriptional oeuvre represents a pioneering model of musical hybridity, wherein classical performance practice was expanded and enriched through engagement with indigenous American musical idioms, offering lasting insights into the dynamics of cultural assimilation and innovation in twentieth-century performance.

Keywords: Jascha Heifetz; George Gershwin; transcription; violin; jazz; cross-cultural fusion; *Porgy and Bess*; performance practice

1. Introduction

The name of Jascha Heifetz remains the greatest violinist of the 20th century for many listeners. He had a very long and successful performance and recording career, more than 60 years, in his entire life. The BMG Classics (former RCA recording company) released a set of almost his complete recordings in 1995, which includes 65 compact discs. [1]Some music reviewers commented on Heifetz's performance: “Perfection of violin playing always is realized at a Heifetz recital ...”[2] “Jascha Heifetz gave an exhibition of superior violin playing.”[3] “The eminent artist played very beautifully. The repose, the dignity and the finish of his style were matched by the exquisite taste, the perfect understanding of the nature of the composition and the immersion of the artist in the work itself.” [4]

As the most outstanding violinist in the 20th century, Jascha Heifetz's concert repertoire included almost all the violin literature in western classical music. Heifetz, a Russian violinist of Jewish descent, came to the United States in 1917, and immediately developed a strong interest in American music. In 1920-40s, he adapted some American composers' music, such as Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, *Three Preludes*, the opera *Porgy and Bess* and some folk songs. Such pieces were very popular during that time, and the music scores and recordings were published shortly afterwards. What stimulated the assimilation of the tradition of European classical music and the culture of the United States? Why did this musical hybridity achieve

great success in the early 20th century?

Within the contexts of American music and the tradition of classical music performance, this article examines the aesthetic interest and motivation of Heifetz's arrangements, followed by analytical

exploration of his transcriptional work of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in the early twentieth century. It also explores how American culture influenced Heifetz's composition and performance during that particular time and how he organized his recital and recording programs of this "hybrid" musical style between classical and American music. Additionally, it takes several musical examples as case studies to suggest that Heifetz, as the most successful classical music performer, used a special way to adapt, assimilate and integrate the different musical elements into classical music performance.

2. The musical and social background of heifetz's transcriptional music

As early as the 19th century, it was fashionable to adapt some music into small-scale arrangements for salon performances. Among them, the formation of violin solo with a piano accompaniment or an organ accompaniment specially receives the adaptors' favor. These adapted pieces greatly enriched the content and variety of instrumental performances.

The rise in popularity of these short small-scale pieces was also accommodated by the technological innovations occurring in the recording technology. In 1920s and 1930s, the recording industry had made enormous progress and development.

Electronic recording replaced the traditional acoustic recording, which allowed a wider range of sound and duration to be recorded. The maximum storage of a disc had developed from three or four minutes to a relatively longer recording time. Eventually,

each disc was able to contain nearly a dozen short music pieces and the sound quality of the recordings had also been greatly improved around 1930s. This greater recording capacity was what contributed to the derivation and the trend of composing small adapted works.

While this shift was occurring in music, another larger, social background was also developing. Since the early 20th century, international cultural exchanges have been more frequent, and musicians from all over the world were trying to enrich their performance styles. In particular, the United States, which is a country that did not suffer from the destruction of the two World Wars, was attracting all kinds of music elites in different fields from all over the world. The style of classical music performance in the US, just like science, technology, and other professions, was very syncretic and readily absorbed all the various cultures in the world.

In the first half of the 20th century, these short, delicate and popular miniature works became an important part of the repertoire in classical music solo recitals.

Almost all prominent violinists during that time, not only in Europe but also in the United States, were adapting all sorts of music works for their performances. Joseph Szigeti, a well-known Hungarian violinist, released an album of all miniature pieces called *Joseph Szigeti in Gypsy Melodies*[5]. Ukrainian-born Jewish-American Violinist Mischa Elman, who also studied with Heifetz's teacher Leopold Auer at the Saint

Petersburg Conservatory, arranged some folk tunes and popular music likewise, such as *The blue lagoon* [6] and *Alice, where art thou*[7].

Much more interestingly, many classical musicians in the early 20th century showed great interest in adapting jazz to solo instruments. Violinist Joseph Szigeti once expressed his interests in jazz. "The greatest thing in life is to feel that one is really alive, that one is full of spirit and vitality. What accomplishes that purpose more than jazz? Why, if jazz were to be taken out of American life, many people would become mummified as this King Tutankhamen, who has just been excavated after being buried 3,000 years." [8] This is perhaps an extreme opinion regarding the place of jazz in the average American's life but it colorfully and humorously expresses how fond of jazz many musicians became.

Like Szigeti, Heifetz also showed a great enthusiasm for jazz as well as folk music. After a brilliant performance career in Europe, Heifetz moved to America and became an US citizen in 1925. The rise of jazz, blues and American folk tunes immediately began to have a subtle influence on Heifetz's playing style and recital repertoire. While inheriting the classical music performance tradition, he began to think about new music forms and to add new elements to his performance, which were corresponding to American music during the early 20th century. As time passed, he continued to be deeply influenced by American culture.

Among all his concert repertoires, his transcriptions of contemporary American music were most notable. He professed his love for the folk song Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair and expressed a great desire to enrich his repertoire by adapting and performing folk and popular music: “I have never hesitated to play Stephen Foster’s ‘Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair’ ... It’s a fine song, American to the core. Why should I go hunting for its Viennese or Parisian equivalent and try to palm that off as art because it has a foreign name? Foster’s tune is art in its class. So are the songs of Kern, Gershwin and Berlin. I think Irving Berlin’s ‘White Christmas’ is a grand tune, and it pleases me to play it in concert or on the radio.”[9]

3. Solo recitals: the motivation for heifetz’s transcription

Solo recitals accounted for most of Heifetz’s performance career. Unlike playing with an orchestra, solo recitals comprised of short pieces require that performers have a broader technical range and interpretive ability, while also being able to organize the whole structure of recital programs. In order to explore the motivation of Heifetz’s arrangement of American music, firstly we need to analyze the number and proportion of different types of performance events in his career. The overview (1917- 1974) of Heifetz’s concert types below (table 1) demonstrates that recitals count for 62% of his entire career activities, indicating that they were the most important of his performance events.

Table 1 Heifetz career breakdown by performance type[10]

Performance Type	Events	%
Recital	1578	67
Orchestral	483	20
Recording Radio	197	8
Chamber	82	4
	28	1
Total	2368	

Table 3.2 Heifetz performance events separated by year and by type

Year	Recital	Orchestral concerts	Chamber music concerts	Recording days	Radio broadcasts	Total
1917	8	3	0	2	0	13
1918	32	10	0	2	0	64
1919	30	7	0	4	0	81
1920	52	10	0	3	0	65
1921	47	4	0	0	0	51
1922	48	6	1	2	0	57
1923	32	1	0	0	0	33
1924	37	3	0	4	0	64
1925	48	0	0	1	0	49
1926	46	5	0	3	0	54
1927	40	1	0	0	0	81
1928	46	5	0	0	0	51
1929	29	5	0	0	0	34
1930	49	13	0	0	1	63
1931	56	13	0	0	0	69
1932	78	7	0	0	0	85
1933	32	14	0	0	2	48
1934	70	19	1	7	4	101
1935	53	19	0	7	2	81
1936	46	14	0	5	1	66
1937	39	18	0	5	3	65
1938	28	23	0	0	1	52
1939	32	10	0	2	4	48
1940	72	23	0	1	1	99
1941	15	11	0	9	1	36
1942	25	11	0	0	5	51
1943	21	5	0	0	7	33
1944	20	19	0	3	5	57
1945	1	23	0	3	7	36
1946	42	3	0	8	5	58
1947	29	21	0	6	6	62
1948	0	0	0	0	4	4
1949	36	27	4	3	5	75
1950	22	14	0	11	3	60
1951	30	33	0	8	7	78
1952	4	5	0	10	2	21
1953	36	14	0	7	3	60
1954	32	21	0	9	2	64
1955	35	10	0	7	0	52
1956	21	22	0	4	0	47
1957	0	0	0	4	0	4
1958	0	1	0	0	1	2
1959	0	1	0	3	0	4
1960	0	0	0	9	0	11
1961	0	0	4	7	0	11
1962	0	1	3	1	0	5
1963	0	1	3	11	0	15
1964	0	1	3	5	0	9
1965	4	0	2	5	0	11
1966	1	1	2	2	0	6
1967	0	1	0	2	0	3
1968	1	1	2	5	0	8
1969	0	0	0	0	0	8
1970	2	2	0	4	0	8
1971	0	0	0	0	0	0
1972	1	0	1	1	0	3
1973	0	0	0	0	0	0
1974	0	0	2	0	0	2
Total	1.578	483	28	197	82	2.368

4. The change of heifetz's recital repertoire: before and after 1917

Before his move to the United States in 1917, Heifetz was still living in Russia.

He started his professional violin training at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory under the world renowned violin pedagogue Leopold Auer. As a young prodigy, he played

Mendelssohn's violin concerto for his public debut concert in Kaunas in Lithuania at the age of seven. He toured most European cities while still in his teens.

Throughout his successful early career in Europe, his performance programs were dominated by traditional classical music. When we look through his repertoire before 1917, there were no pieces which he had adapted himself.

A sample of Heifetz partial repertoire in Russia before 1917

<u>1916 continued</u>	<u>1917 continued</u>
Beethoven-Auer, <i>Choras of Dervishes</i> , from <i>The Ruins of Athens</i> , op. 113	Glaunoy, Grand Adagio from the baller <i>Raymonda</i>
Kreisler, <i>Tumbourtn Chinats</i> , op. 3	Wienlawski, <i>Scherzo-Tarantella</i> , op. 16
October 10/Oetober 23	January 31
Mendelssohn-Achron, <i>On the Wings of Song</i> , op. 34, no. 2	Tchaikovaky, <i>Scherzo from Sonventr d'un lien cher</i> , op. 42, no. 2, od, Auer
Decenthey 13	Suk, <i>Da poco triste</i> , op. 17, no. 3
Handel, <i>Sonata no. 4 in D</i>	Suk, <i>Burlesque</i> , op. 17, no. 4
Beethoven, <i>Romance no. 2 in B</i> , op. 30	Bach, <i>Gavotte-Rondo</i> from <i>Partita no. 3 in B</i> for solo violth
Waguer-Wilhelmj, <i>Allum Leaf</i> (Romance)	Gluck-Kreisler, <i>Melodie</i> from the opern <i>Orpheue and Eurydice</i>
Waher-Kreisler, <i>Larghetto</i> from <i>Sanata no. 1 in B</i>	Pabruary 27
Paganini, "La Campanella," <i>Finale of the Concerto no. 2 in B Minor</i> , op. 2	**Bruch, <i>Concerto no. 3 in D</i>
1917	Miner, op. 44
January 9	**Tartint-Kreisler, <i>Pugue</i> from <i>Sonata in A</i>
Mozart, <i>Concerto no. 3 in A</i>	**Kreisler, <i>Scherzo (in the style of Diiteradorf)</i>
Bach, <i>Sicillane and Presto</i> (from <i>Sonata no. 1 in G Minor</i> for solo violin)	**Aleksandr Taneyey, <i>Perite Valse</i>
Cui, <i>Cavatina and Canzonetta</i> from <i>Suite concertante</i> , op. 25, no. 3 and no. 2	March 13-20
	Paganini, "God Save the King" <i>Variations</i> , op. 9
	Bruch, <i>Scottish Fantasy</i> , op. 46
	Achron, <i>Suite (in the old style)</i> , op. 24

5. Adapted miniature pieces: a new aesthetic interest in heifetz's performance

1917 was the most important year of Heifetz's career. In the year of 1917, he moved to America and made his Carnegie debut, which opened his professional career in the United States. There is an interesting story to prove that Heifetz's playing level had already achieved an extraordinary level. Joseph McLellan described an exchange between violinist Elman and pianist Godowsky, who were the audiences for Heifetz's Carnegie debut, responding to Heifetz's performance that "As the concert proceeded, the audience was clearly amazed by this new talent, and its applause kept going louder and louder. Finally, Elman allegedly turned to Godowsky and there ensured

one of the great two-line jokes in musical folklore:

Elman: 'Isn't it awfully hot in here?'

Godowsky: 'Not for pianists.'

Also a prominent violinist, Elman acknowledged Heifetz's playing ability in a joking way.

It is worth noting that in this debut concert, Heifetz had even started trying to add some short pieces to the concert repertoire. From his Carnegie debut program, we can see that he opened the third section of the recital by playing Schubert's Ave Maria.

Dario Sarlo explained: "For Heifetz, the short piece genre proved integral to his concerts. After Heifetz included the Schubert Ave Maria on his 1917 debut program, it became one of the most requested short pieces in his repertoire." [14]

According to the increasing demand for performances of such short works, Heifetz not only exhibited an exquisite taste for performing these pieces but also an artistic talent for selecting, adapting and organizing such pieces. As it can be seen from Heifetz's historical recital programs, the music sources of his adaptations are diverse: from the transcription of Toccata by harpsichordist Pietro Domenico Paradies(1707-1791) of the late Baroque period and early Classical period to the composers in the mid-20th century. These composers include: Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Debussy, Gershwin and Ravel, etc. He also adapted a wide range of genres:

opera, overture, prelude, nocturne, and dance music, etc. His producer, John Pfeiffer, articulated Heifetz's noble attitude towards short pieces in a CD pamphlet: "Heifetz

endowed the preparation, performance and recording of these short works with the same refinement and nobility that he devoted to a concerto. He sings a Rachmaninoff song or rocks a Stravinsky cradle, dances to a Shostakovich tune and gives a nod to his American pride with Bennett and Shulman- all with the same commitment that he applied to the humanity of the Brahms Concerto and the super-humanity of the Beethoven."[15]

Jascha Heifetz's music program of his Carnegie debut recital:[16]

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Later, as Heifetz was increasingly influenced by the popularity of jazz and folk tunes later on, he began to add miniature pieces and adapt some popular tunes in his recitals to cater to the aesthetic tastes of local audiences. He adapted and transcribed more than 100 of these works, which greatly enriched his concert repertoire. The addition of these diverse pieces proved very popular that, for example, the historical records indicate that Heifetz performed the Dinicu- Heifetz Hora Staccato an astounding 358 times between the 1920s-50s.[17]

He also organized his recital repertoire by different themes and groups. It is worth noting that between November 1938 and April 1947, Heifetz frequently performed American transcriptional music and grouped these short pieces together as a coherent whole. The repertoire group included: Deep river, Levee Dance by Clarence Cameron White, Giant Hills by Cecil Burleigh, A la Valse by Victor Herbert, From the Canebrake by Samuel Gardner and Perpetual Motion by Louis Kroll. [18]

Among all his transcription works, the most famous are six songs based on Gershwin's opera Porgy and Bess, a jazz-influenced orchestral piece An American in Paris, Debussy's prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, and Romanian composer Grigoras Dinicu's Hora Staccato. Irving Kolodin praised these pieces as "extraordinary talismans of personal identification" .[19]

6. Gershwin- heifetz: jazz elements in heifetz's transcriptions

As a Russian Jewish immigrant assimilating into his cultural surroundings in America, Heifetz's thoughtful selection of his adapted recital programs was a hybrid product of his life experience and musical identity. After Heifetz established his performance career in the United States, George Gershwin's music drew Heifetz's attention.

Looking back on Gershwin and Heifetz's first meeting, Gershwin's original goal was to write something that would raise people's interest in jazz and bring it to more of high-brow community. In the premiere night of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue on February 12th, 1924, the audiences at Aeolian Hall for this performance were: Jascha Heifetz, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Fritz Kreisler, and Victor Herbert, who represented the big names in the "classical" community at the time. [20] Heifetz remembered that their meeting happened probably soon after the premiere of Rhapsody in Blue. Although Heifetz could not recall the detail of their first meeting, listeners were easily connected these two great representative figures together, who had many similarities in their lives. Gershwin was also a descendent of Russian Jews living in America. He composed for varied performance venues including Broadway, Hollywood, Tin Pan Alley, and Carnegie Hall. His compositional style was influenced by European classical music, especially the French school. He was the rare American composer known by many famous European composers. Heifetz still remembered their last meeting clearly:

"It was in front of the Beverly Wilshire Hotel shortly before his death, ' Heifetz

reminisces. 'For years I had been pestering him to write something for the violin, and I brought up the subject again. He had done a piece but it was early, before he found his own style, and really not Gershwin at all. ' " [21] Heifetz once also expressed his hope for a specific violin concerto composed by Gershwin and stated his regrets that, "We should be ashamed that we didn't appreciate this man when he was here in our midst." [22] In fact, Gershwin was experienced with criticism by many famous contemporary composers and other American concert reviewers. Because of this reason, Heifetz adapted several of Gershwin's pieces to compensate for the regretful fact that Gershwin was not able to write a dedicated violin piece for him.

Functioning as of a bridge between Gershwin's composition and violin literature, Heifetz's transcriptions of Gershwin's music were finally performed and recorded for the public and Porgy and Bess was considered by the audiences as the finest American opera transcription to date. It reveals Heifetz's fondness for Gershwin in general and Porgy and Bess in specific.

Heifetz, as one of the biggest names in the classical music community in that particular time, was at the first performance of Rhapsody in Blue. He was also in the premiere evening of the opera Porgy and Bess.[23] Schuyler Chapin, Heifetz's concert manager, states that his enthusiasm of performing Gershwin's music in his last three concerts tour: "Night after night, recital after recital, Jascha Heifetz would announce his encores and always play one or another of the three Gershwin preludes he had

transcribed for violin and piano ... I know because for the last three concert tours of his career I was his tour manager. We traveled the length and breadth of America and a large swatch of Canada, alternating between orchestral appearances and recitals. In big cities or small towns it was always the same; when he stepped onto the stage, he was, simply, the greatest violinist of his time, perhaps of any time.”[24] Although nearly 70 years old, Heifetz still had a great passion for playing Gershwin’s music.

Heifetz’s adaptations of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* are among the most famous of his recital works. In the adaptations and interpretations of this enormous symphonic and operatic work, Heifetz manifested almost all the possibilities of music characters, colors and techniques within solo violin pieces accompanied by the piano, which included a wide variety of all his creative transcriptional approaches, such as pizzicato, trill, glissando, double stops, harmonic tones, complex chords, etc.

"My Man’s Gone Now" is one of the most famous songs from Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Compared with Gershwin’s original music score, Heifetz added double stops in bars 22- 30, to make the music even more intense. Followed by harmonic tones in the violin solo in bar 31- 34, this special violin color expresses the heroine’s most deeply helpless feeling. The very fast vibrato of the left hand conveyed a strong, appealing feeling that made the audiences feel strong empathy as if they themselves were melancholic.

In this song, see the music example below, Heifetz not only implied the common techniques which I have mentioned in the last paragraph to show sad emotions, but

also used a very special violin technique- a "slide" cooperating with the tremolo bowing- in order to make the emotions as tearful as possible. This violin technique in

the piece was assimilated from the singing techniques of jazz musicians. As a way of musical expression, it thrilled the audiences, and was extremely rare or even unheard of at the time.

Music Example:

Since the 20th century, the sound of a “Slide” or “Shifting” was deliberately emphasized to underscore an affecting expression. Violin pedagogue Demetrio Constantine Dounis emphasized: “There was a reason for making the physical motion of gliding and pulling your finger from one note to another rather than just the word ‘shifting.’ There were connections and when you put notes together, you would start to think of it in connection with music, making phrases.”[25] Heifetz not only regarded “slides” as an isolated technical issue, but also as an important means of musical

7. Expression

Heifetz’s sliding sound combined with right hand tremolo was a special jazz- influenced product of this particular period. According to the performance practice of classical music today, too many “slides”

would imply “bad” taste. As Stowell explains in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: “However, toward the end of the second half of the twentieth century, although more freedom of presentation was allowed than at any other period, ironically, contemporary young players tended to avoid musical shifting in order to produce a clean sound. This cleaner and more articulated sound, made possible with the introduction of the modern extension and contraction, was attributed to a change in training.”[26] However, Heifetz dared to challenge the norms of classical music performance and tried to use “slides” as a technical feature, to express the emotions of the characters in the opera *Porgy and Bess*. We can see that he clearly marked a large number of notes that need to be slides not only in *My Man s’ Gone Now* but also in his transcriptional score of the entire six songs from *Porgy and Bess*. Without the influence of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, it would have been impossible for Heifetz to develop such a special “slide” technique, which was the phenomenal integration of Jazz music and classical music tradition.

This particular era had created an incomparable Heifetz.

8. Conclusion

All the above and study findings may be summarized in five core points: First, the adaptation trend of short music works in the late 19th century and the development of recording industry in the early 20th century provided the objective conditions for Heifetz’s bold and experimental transcription music. Second, as one kind of performance type that occupied the largest proportion in Heifetz's performance events, Heifetz’s solo recital repertoire needed to be largely enriched in order to adapt to the American culture and the appreciation taste of the local audiences. Third, Heifetz's playing quality and performance tradition of classical music was based on his rigorous violin training in his early age in Russia. After immigrating to the United States in 1917, influenced by jazz, folk songs and the other popular music at that time, he began to adapt such works and played them in his concerts very frequently. Fourth, Heifetz was very enthusiastic and fond of the short adapted works of jazz or folk songs, and regarded them as genuine artistic music works. Fifth and finally, among Heifetz’s transcriptions, Gershwin's music was his favorite. He endowed them with his great reverence for jazz and the perfect integration of violin techniques and jazz music elements.

By invoking Gershwin’s music and other jazz songs in the early 20th century, Heifetz’s playing style suggested that classical music found its place in a new performance form. His transcriptional music had already become a symbol of cultural crossing and assimilation. This hybrid musical trend also informs an understanding of these transcriptional miniatures as a product of both the demand to reinterpret jazz and the wish to accommodate both classical music and American culture. He fully challenged the inherent prejudice of the boundary of “highbrow” and “lowbrow”

music. Heifetz’s concept of jazz and folk tunes incorporates both the finest classical performance tradition and innovative passion for his musical fusion in a new cultural environment.

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