

Modern history and the future of Japanese violin music

INTRODUCTION

Recently, Japanese female violinists have been playing active roles both at home and abroad. Midori Goto (MIDORI), after her shocking debut, and Akiko Suwanai, the Tchaikovsky competition winner, have been invited by world first-class orchestras to appear as soloists, and charmed the audience presenting conventionally interpreted music — in other words, the music which the audience does not feel out of place. These violinists, including many other players such as Yuzuko Horigome, Kyoko Takezawa, Teiko Maehashi and so on, will surely grow and become what is called virtuosi. Of course I appreciate their virtuosity, however, I am doubtful that even one artist who has an innovative attitude towards the interpretation of the works, which can only make it possible for musical performance and music itself to evolve, might appear among them. Without this creative interpretation, and the technique required to play sophisticated modern works, music might cease its development. This would mean the degradation of music.

As to the concert programming, it has becoming more and more colorful, and a good example was shown in the recital held by Takumi Kubota: it began in Arvo Parto's "Fratres", next appeared Mozart's Sonata K. 304 and Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1, after the intermission, Thuille's "Conversio", Mozart K. 378, and "Le Grand Tango" by Astre Piazzolla were played. Two Austrian composers, Mozarts and Thuille, one Estonian, another Russian, the other Argentinean. Ten years ago, no one had an idea of this sort of programming but a few innovators. Both of the last two works, Parto's and Piazzolla's were introduced by Gidon Kremer, weren't they? Without him, the new wave in violin music might over ten years be late in coming. It will not be too much to say that every modern violinist owes pretty much to this innovator, Gidon Kremer.

VIRTUOSI

One of the most representative modern virtuosi of the violin is Itzhak Perlman. Although his most brilliant days have passed, when he was in his day, no one could equal him. Fortunately I have the air-checked tapes of his concerts in the 70's, when he played the Tchaikovsky concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Sir Georg Solti, and the Sibelius with the Vienna Philharmonic and Lawrence Foster. His technique left nothing to be desired, and the phrasing was as if he had been possessed by the spirit of composer. When I listen to these performances

again, I can not help from thinking how much happiness he would give to his fans and the audience.

I have to take up **Kyung Wha Chung** as another virtuoso. She plays the violin as if she devoted her entire self to the Muse, the god of music, and so her passionate performance leaves everyone speechless. Is there anyone who listens to Chung's Tchaikovsky, Bartok, Prokofiev, Bruch and other performances without being most deeply moved ?

If I praise these virtuosi, it does not necessarily mean that I am a hundred percent satisfied with their music. The essence of this essay lies here. Yes, they play the violin almost perfectly, which, however, can only be said when it is heard in a conventional way. When we consider how music is evolving at present, we realize that we need truly innovative, creative musicians. Here I mean violinists who will be able to foresee the musical currents which will flow into the 21st century.

MODERN INNOVATORS

I shall have to take up **Gidon Kremer** first. When he released **Bach's "Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin"** in the '80's, few, including the music critics, could appreciate this performance. His innovative interpretation far surpassed the conventional way of understanding by which they had evaluated the musical performances(not the music itself).

Fortunately, I air-checked his '80's concerts both at home and abroad. When he held his recital at Salzburg, the Strauss's Sonata, which was then totally unknown among violinists, to say nothing of among listeners, was listed in his program. After Chung made a record album of this sonata, it has become one of the most favourite in the repertoire, both for violinists and for the audience. When I listen to Kremer's performance now, I am still struck with his unique but musically advanced interpretation. Of course he did not lose the essence characteristic of the composer, the romanticism which, however, is on the verge of degradation.

It was also Kremer who had taken **Astres Piazzolla**, a tango composer and player, into the classical music field, wasn't it? There ought to have been many who heard Kremer play Piazzolla's small pieces as encores again and again, because it is not too much to say that he took up Piazzolla every time he gave concerts in the '80's in Japan.

At that time, Piazzolla was only known as one of the players in the field of popular music, and the last time when he came to Japan he did accompany the chanson-canzone singer, Milva, as the leader of his quintet.

I enjoy virtuosity just as the common listener does, but I would like to stress that those who help music evolve are a few especially talented artists.

YOUNGER INNOVATORS

Christian Tetzlaff. This German violinist, famous for his progressive interpretation, gave a recital in 1998 in Japan when he played Witold Lutoslawski's "Partita". In it, he expressed what is modern music.

In "Driades et Pan", from Karol Szymanowski's tryptich "Mythes", he expressed the true impressionistic style in violin music. He also played Mozart and Brahms, moreover, showing that quite a new approach still remained even in these conventional works. That year, Tetzlaff released Bach's "Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin". In it, he overcame the difficulties of multi-stop playing, which had been said to be impossible on the modern instrument, presenting Bach's unaccompanied violin works to listeners beautifully. The word "beautiful" has been used seldom to describe the performance of these austere works of Bach. Tetzlaff ought to be regarded as a really creative artist who is able to anticipate the 21st century.

Another artist is Thomas Zehetmair. He also recorded Bach's unaccompanied works for violin in 80's, but when he played some excerpts from these works in the Luzern Easter Festival last year, his interpretation and realization highly advanced comparing to the performance recorded almost twenty years ago. During this time interval he must have considered what is music and what is the best way to realize his own way of interpretation. It is no doubt that now he interprets Bach from quite a different point of view from other violinists, of course from Tetzlaff. Basically, he plays Bach non-legato. The modern instrument is not adequate for this manner of playing, only tormenting the audience with creaking sounds and noise. Zehetmair has overcome this drawback, giving minute articulation to each phrase, and presenting a "beautiful" Bach, as Tetzlaff did, and adding to it, his Bach is full of life. He can really extract the essence of the music from the score.

Zehetmair has recorded Szymanowski's two concertos with Simon Rattle, and it deserves applause, because he succeeded in expressing an impressionistic style as accurately as possible in spite of an inadequate accompaniment by the conductor. If these two

progressive soloists share the same interpretative characteristics, such as using non-legato in playing Bach, their idea of musical realization differs basically.

Tetzlaff seems to extract a kind of androgynous style from it, while Zehetmair appears to make the best of the characteristics of the modern violin.

Playing Bach non-legato may attribute to the influence of the performance played on period instruments, however, the modern instrument whose rich and mellow tone and the wide-range dynamics alone will make it possible to realize the essence of the various kinds of composers' works that will demand unpredictable techniques, expressions and interpretations.

It is interesting that both of these young innovators devote themselves to performing works of Bach and Szymanowski. The latter, famous for his characteristically impressionist style, leaves much to be thought better of. Szymanowski is an underrated composer of today, the reason for which might be that he was born in Poland which in some ways is isolated from the global musical current, however, produced Witold Lutoslawski and Krzysztof Penderecki.

PAST INNOVATORS

When the 20th century passes in just two more years, it will have become obvious who has played the role of precursor during this century. Fritz Kreisler, who is famous as the composer of small pieces full of Viennese spirit, left recordings of the two great violin concertos by Beethoven and Brahms. In these historical performances it can be heard that Kreisler played more loyally to the score of the composer than might have been expected from his romantic small pieces.

The violinist who really deserves being called the innovator of the 20th century, however, is no other than Jascha Heifetz. While most of his contemporaries played the violin in the romantic style of the 19th century, Heifetz alone performed according to the original score which only reflects the essence of the composers' work. His great genius prevented him from becoming a model for modern violinists though. No one at the time could play the violin as he did, and his interpretation and realization in some works even now is sometimes superior to those of modern violinists.

David Oistrakh. He is the ideal violinist to serve as a model for younger ones. Of course, he was also a genius and virtuoso. It is far easier for younger musicians

to play music as he did though, because his manner of treating the string instrument is more sensible and playable than that of Heifetz.

When one refers to the history of violin music, he/she cannot do without taking Franco-Belgian School into consideration. The conventional German music considers "the theme and its development" most important, in other words, it regards the formation firsthand, while the music of this School makes more of emotional taste in its works, and calls performers for the entire emotional devotion to them. In this emotionally-oriented music, there does not exist a model and lives 19th century's romanticism.

So, the historical recording of Ernest Chawson's "Poem" played by Ginette Neveu, Cesar Franck' Sonata by Jacques Thibaud, and the other French works played by the School have been still made much of.

However, the new current of the times has been reaching to this School. Gidon Kremer recorded "Poem" with the taste of neo-romanticism, and the French Sonatas have been recording by Tetzlaff and other young lions. The historical recordings will continue to be heard hereafter, but it cannot avoid being surged by the new wave of music and being interpreted from advanced viewpoint.

CONCLUSION

There were and are many distinguished violin virtuosi, such as Isaac Stern, Nathan Milstein, Henryk Szeryng, Arthur Grumiaux and so on. Of course, I have never had any opposition to an appreciation of these and other virtuosi. I cannot help wondering whether they have indeed contributed to the evolution of music by presenting new interpretations.

That is the the reason why I took up Heifetz and Oistrakh as the past innovators, Kremer, Tetzlaff and Zehetmair as the modern ones in the 20th century. They in fact abandoned conventional interpretations to re-examine the original score from quite a new point of view, realizing what they extracted only from the score. This attitude deserves being called innovative, and they, innovators.

A virtuoso is an artist who offers listeners the happiness of listening to musical performance of high quality. Music is not a corpse however, but a living thing which evolves. Only those artists, who are able to realize from a new perspective what they extract from the composer's score, can go ahead of the times. Without such innovators, music will cease to evolve, in other words, die.

Looking over the energetic activities of Japanese distinguished female violinists, I cannot but wish that real innovators would develop among them and procede ahead of the times.

"When a young soloist made her debut she was called a genius, but when she grew older she still played no better than when she was young."

I have heard this kind of comment too often, and I want to hear it no more.

No more, please!

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