## Was Heifetz the greatest virtuoso? A meta-analysis of Heifetz as a performer

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary classical performance is characterised by unprecedentedly high standards. International fame is achieved by only a select few, yet records of the twentieth-century violinist Jascha Heifetz remain synonymous with technical perfection among numerous critics and elite violinists. Over his career, Heifetz's extraordinary technique saw him acclaimed as being 'the greatest violin virtuoso since Paganini'. But what places Heifetz—in the eyes of many rival luminaries, international-level soloists, and high-calibre critics—on a pedestal above the rest? This essay offers a meta-analytical insight into Heifetz's musical profile based on unmediated critiques, newspaper articles, and biographical accounts. While undeniably a proficient violinist, his technical superiority becomes less obvious in the context of modern mass audio communication and heightened violinistic competition. It is Heifetz's career as a pioneer of audio recording—further characterised by his idiosyncratic stage demeanour and unusual technical prowess—that propelled his enduring legacy. The emergence and proliferation of recorded discs secured Heifetz's indelible mark on the classical music industry, and it is through similarly novel innovations that an adept violinist today may expand the avenues for virtuosic artistry.

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Deified as 'the greatest violin virtuoso since Paganini' in the *Los Angeles Times* on his death,<sup>2</sup> Jascha Heifetz (1901–82) stunned the world with his technical brilliance, extensive tonal palette, and immediately recognisable sound. This acclaim is undeniably the product of a prolific recording career and an indelible stage presence coupled with astounding technical finesse. Compared to his rival luminaries, who also demonstrated exceptional musicianship, Heifetz outshone them due to his unparalleled technical standards, as testified by numerous unedited recordings and recounts from eminent critics and musicians. His recordings are still synonymous with flawless performance and are frequently used as a violinistic reference, yet rising instrumental standards, heightened competition, and globalisation render Heifetz's title of the 'greatest violin virtuoso' more difficult to verify in a contemporary context. Regardless, Heifetz was undeniably a brilliant technician and recording artist who quintessentially transformed the standard of violin playing through his performances.

From the nineteenth century, the term 'virtuoso' has become associated with technical facility in musical performance and is commonly applied to those 'whose technical accomplishments were so pronounced as to dazzle the public'.<sup>3</sup> Heifetz's distinction rests on his interpretation of the romantic repertoire, which is characterised by the famous 'Heifetz slide'<sup>4</sup> and his distinctly rapid spitfire tempi. Growing up in an era that valued personal interpretative expression,<sup>5</sup> his playing often diverged from the conventions in which the work was conceived. Instead, Heifetz allowed his personality to pervade other composers' works, an idiosyncrasy which was particularly noticeable in his Bach renditions.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Lois Timnick, 'Jascha Heifetz, 86, Hailed as Greatest Violinist, Dies', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 1987, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-12-12-mn-6735-story.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Timnick. 'Jascha Heifetz'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Richard Taruskin and Pier Weiss, *Music in the Western World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 340.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Henry Roth, Violin Virtuosos from Paganini to the 21st Century (Los Angeles, California: California Classics Books, 1997), 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Heifetz Unrivaled on Violin', Boston Globe, 12 December 1987; Roth, Violin Virtuosos, 109.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Herbert Glass, 'Jascha Heifetz on Compact Disc', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1988, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-04-03-ca-944-story.html.

second half of the twentieth century saw a heightened rigour towards historically informed tradition with an ever-increasing emphasis on ostensibly following the composer's expectations. Thus, Heifetz's deviation from the composer's intentions has attracted criticism and would, by many proponents of informed performance practices, still elicit disapproval today, whereas it is his unique interpretation that gives him a distinguishable personal brand.

Just as the printing press catapulted Martin Luther from local rebel to a European phenomenon, the proliferation of Heifetz recordings established his international celebrity status and ensured a lasting legacy. It was his successful 1917 Carnegie Hall debut, in the presence of the most renowned violinists of the time, that marked the epoch of Heifetz's recording career and attracted the attention of Calvin Child, who was involved in the Victor Talking Machine Company (VTMC). Within two weeks after his debut, he produced a highly successful series of recordings as a recruit of the VTMC which, by 1924, amounted to 50 recorded compositions. By the time Heifetz delivered concerts in England six months following his Carnegie Hall recital, His Master's Voice had already sold 70,000 copies of his records.<sup>8</sup> These early recordings were unedited and required a final, single take performance. Any mistakes could only be corrected by rerecording the entire piece, thereby providing a true, unaltered representation of his performed renditions and impeccable technique. The proliferation and accessibility of Heifetz's solos prior to delivering live concerts across the globe further propelled his worldwide prominence. Through the medium of the gramophone, his music impacted and interested individuals from remote countries with minimal prior exposure to Western music. <sup>9</sup> Those who heard his recordings eagerly attended his concerts and were impressed, as illustrated by one concertgoer's assertion that 'He is quite as good as his records'. 10 Heifetz self-reportedly catered his repertoire towards the audience's preference for virtuosic showpieces, including the Tchaikovsky Concerto or Bruch's G Minor Concerto. 11 He also incorporated miniatures, a choice which some critics asserted as 'play(ing) down to an imagined poverty of taste and knowledge'. 12 One such piece, Herbert's Valse, was denigrated as a 'trifle' and deemed 'quite simply ludicrous' in the Boston Herald, 13 yet it was this miniature that was likely performed as an encore, <sup>14</sup> suggesting the audience's approval of his program choice. In another instance, he was accused of choosing repertoire too serious for his audience through the inclusion of works such as newly commissioned violin concerti. 15 However, among the sea of glowing reviews, the occasional critical remark about Heifetz's program can be deemed subjective and does not reflect how Heifetz performed. Furthermore, his ability to infer his audience's tastes and preferences was an important factor in his popularity. Increased publicity opened opportunities for more performances and a myriad of reviews followed, several of which praised him for being the 'greatest' and a substantial number of which emphasised his technical finesse and entrenched the connection between Heifetz and violinistic perfection into the public consciousness. His entire recording career spanned an impressive 61 years. 16 The publicity and substantial critical attention his recordings and live performances attracted elevated Heifetz's international presence. Their durability and timeless nature facilitated a new benchmark for violinistic instrumental standards, to which many of today's violinists aspire.

Recordings of his contemporaries, including Fritz Kreisler and Mischa Elman, testify that they also possessed a formidable violinistic command; however, unmediated accounts confirm that Heifetz's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> John Butt, Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

Michael Dervan, 'Too Perfect for this World', Irish Times, 24 February 1995; John Anthony Maltese, 'Acoustic Recordings for Victor Records—Jascha Heifetz (1917–1924)', National Registry, 2008, www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/JaschaHeifetzAcousticRecordings.pdf, 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> 'Last Recital by Jascha Heifetz: Great Reception', *The Times of India*, 30 January 1932.

<sup>10</sup> Dario Sarlo, 'Investigating Performer Uniqueness: The Case of Jascha Heifetz' (PhD diss., University of London, 2011), 238.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Frederick Herman Martens, Violin Mastery: Talks with Master Violinists and Teachers, Comprising Interviews with Ysaye, Kreisler, Elman, Auer, Thibaud, Heifetz, Hartmann, Maud Powell and Others (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1919), 89.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Richard Aldrich, 'Music: The New York Symphony Orchestra. Jascha Heifetz's Recital', New York Times, 17 November 1919.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Sarlo, 'Investigating Performer Uniqueness', 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Sarlo, 'Investigating Performer Uniqueness', 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Sarlo, 'Investigating Performer Uniqueness', 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Tim Page, 'A Genius Who Demanded Respect: Jascha Heifetz', Newsday, 12 December 1987.

technique remained superior. Kreisler's performances were tainted with technical flaws. He was not known to warm up before his concerts, thus in the first few minutes his playing could be riddled with mistakes. Nonetheless, he compensated for such inaccuracies through an opulent tone, tremendous charisma, and a deft and convincing recovery. 17 Kreisler himself believed that the importance of sincerity and personality outweighed that of technical perfection. This tempered attitude was perceived by violinist Karl Flesch, who stated that 'Kreisler had a divine carelessness for all matters technical'. 18 Furthermore, Kreisler's intonation became consistently unreliable in his later years, partially due to impaired hearing. Similarly, Elman's technique lacked the reliable flawlessness of Heifetz's. 19 While there is no conclusive evidence to demonstrate that Heifetz never had an off night, critical first-hand reviews indicate that Heifetz consistently displayed extraordinary technical confidence. There was one rare example in which Heifetz experienced a memory lapse performing the third movement to Sibelius's Violin Concerto. After reattempting the movement Heifetz completed the concerto successfully. This seemingly minor incident generated a myriad of shocked reviews, among them the New York Times article titled 'Why Did Heifetz Fluff?'<sup>20</sup> However, it is the blatant bewilderment and breadth of articles on this single incident that illustrates Heifetz's otherwise habitual accuracy. Moreover, Flesch provides further insight into the source of Heifetz's greatness, beyond his instrumental mastery. He notes that the most reputable performers played with the 'inner participation of their personalities'. <sup>21</sup> Heifetz's impassive stage manner and personality, which so intriguingly pervaded his performances, juxtaposed the markedly charismatic personas of his contemporaries. This 'enlivening touch of vulgarity' 22 provoked a myriad of conjectures and assertions, generating helpful publicity. Consequently, violinists such as Kreisler, Milstein, or Elman, who had a similarly solid careers, never acquired the enduring popularity and fame of Heifetz.

The technical brilliance and adamantine intensity of Heifetz's live concerts was curiously contrasted by an austere platform demeanour. He thereby imparted the aura of an invisible performer whose personality did not intrude on the music. The convention of applying bodily gestures and facial expression to convey emotion and meaning was entirely replaced by a statuesque immobility and stoicism onstage. This idiosyncrasy was entrenched in Heifetz's ethos and teaching method: he emphasised to his students 'not to express your emotions through external means, but convey them through your music, and let the audience emote'. 23 The absence of physical contortions led detractors to perceive emotional disengagement and thus criticise him for his glacial manner and lack of profundity. Composer-critic Virgil Thomson pejoratively remarked upon Heifetz's 'machine tooled finish and empty elegance'. 24 A deemed lack of engagement due to few and restrained discernible gestures by critics such as Thompson was perhaps inevitable. The visual aspect of performance plays a substantial role in projecting the emotional engagement of the musician to the audience, as concluded Jane Davidson's study of performance gestures and expressivity. 25 In this study, she found that in a comparison of a violin performance played in three manners—deadpan, projected, and exaggerated visual aspects ranked the highest in expressivity while sound and related aspects ranked lowest. However, it would be hyperbolic to presume complete motionlessness in Heifetz's performances and thereby deem him emotionally unresponsive to the music. A video of a concert featuring Saint-Saëns' 'Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso' reveals that Heifetz does demonstrate subtle reactions through a slight swaying of his torso; <sup>26</sup> however, he does so significantly less than other performers such as Ray

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Roth, Violin Virtuosos, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Boris Schwarz, Great Masters of the Violin, (London: St Edmundsbury Press, 1984), 305.

<sup>19</sup> Schwarz, Great Masters of the Violin, 427.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> 'Why Did Heifetz Fluff?', New York Times, 11 January 1954.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Terry Teachout, 'Fiddlers Three', Commentary, April 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Teachout, 'Fiddlers Three'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ayke Agus, *Heifetz as I Knew Him* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2001), 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Teachout, 'Fiddlers Three'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Jane Davidson, 'Visual Perception of Performance Manner in the Movements of Solo Musicians', *Psychology of Music* 21, no. 2 (1993): 109

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Nelson Zapata, 'Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso—Jascha Heifetz,' YouTube, 9:52, 13 October 2017, youtu.be/AmiazjeaLVA.

Chen <sup>27</sup> or Itzhak Perlman <sup>28</sup> performing the same work. Heifetz manifests an individuality of interpretation and inherent musicianship, particularly in more lyrical passages that are enriched by carefully constructed phrasing, flexible use of vibrato, and his idiosyncratically frequent and liberal use of *portamenti*, such that the music transcends the notes that Saint-Saëns imparted to the score.

Reviews demonstrate that many critics revered him as the epitome of perfection and eminent violinists openly expressed their fervent, unwavering admiration: Max Smith in the *New York American* wrote that he had 'never heard any violinist approach as close to the loftiest standards of absolute perfection as did Jascha Heifetz'.<sup>29</sup> Critic Henry Roth praised Heifetz for possessing innately superior muscle reflexes.<sup>30</sup> Itzhak Perlman regards him as the King of Violinists for his distinctive, pellucid tone. Pinchas Zukerman declared him the King of Virtuosos. David Oistrakh asserted 'There are violinists and then there is Heifetz'.<sup>31</sup> Karl Flesch lauded Heifetz to be 'the high priest of our profession'.<sup>32</sup>

In 1982, Heifetz was rightly compared with Paganini, but how would this assertion fare in the current era? Violin performance today is pitted against an unprecedented availability of professional recordings. These provide a wide variety of interpretations to take into consideration, but also serve as a standard musicians strive to meet to succeed in the international market. Especially in famous and familiar compositions that are frequently performed by virtuosi, such pieces are now met with high and narrow expectations, emphasising the importance of understanding and mastering the composer's and audience's demands. It is noteworthy that the globalisation of performance has resulted in an increased homogeneity of sound recordings, as they serve to establish historically informed conventions for repertoire and periods. Conversely, pre-1940s performers experienced a much smaller range of influences, which paradoxically generated a greater diversity of interpretations, since virtuosi had to resort to their own imagination to develop their own musical philosophy and unique playing style. Heifetz's debut in Carnegie Hall occurred when recorded music was only in its infancy, therefore each performance was a unique experience for both the musicians and the audience. Mistakes and roughness were soon forgotten. 33 These circumstances, combined with his unique and extraordinary talent, allowed Heifetz to ride the first wave of mass audio communication. It provided a platform to market his technical talent and become a high-profile public figure. Schoenbaum illustrates the point: 'It naturally helped that the profession enjoyed a visibility and cachet hardly imaginable today, only a generation or two later.'34

Classical music is no longer a rarefied entity but has become commoditised through mass production. Recordings are no longer presented in full but as individual tracks that are accessible on platforms such as Tidal, Spotify, and YouTube through subscriptions or even free of charge. Access to audiences is now subject to social media campaigns, artificial intelligence recommendation algorithms, and professional promotion and advertising. The world of mass digital communication has rendered traditional word-of-mouth less effective and changed the calculus of what determines greatness. In today's climate, saturated with prerecorded classical repertoire and a concurrent ubiquity of mobile phones, it is worth noting the dilution of the classical music experience, where it is often listened to as background sound. Prior to the recording era, classical concerts were comparatively rare events. Even during the early recording period, listeners would dedicate their full attention to the radio or vinyl, elevating the value of the live concert-going experience. With a declining prominence of live classical performances, and an audience which has become used to perfectly edited renditions and higher technical standards than ever before, Heifetz would still be considered an adept musician based on his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, 'Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso Op. 28, Saint-Saëns—Ray Chen & Malta Philharmonic Orchestra', YouTube, 10:01, 24 November 2020, youtu.be/8UTq1eZrDkI.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Abner Silva, 'Itzhak Perlman—Introduction & Rondo Capriccioso', *YouTube*, 10:21, 4 October 2013, youtu.be/BnsPnyiLdrw.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Sarlo, 'Investigating Performer Uniqueness', 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Roth, Violin Virtuosos, 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Roth, Violin Virtuosos, 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> David Schoenbaum, 'Heifetz at 100: Both Thrilling and Chilling', New York Times, 23 December 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Robert, Performing Music in the Age of Recording (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Schoenbaum, 'Heifetz at 100'.

intrinsic ability and be placed in the ranks of Perlman, Hahn, or Ehnes. But his talent would be crowded out by a larger number of highly accomplished violinists who have equal access to mass media.

One must also question what virtuosity really entails in the modern age. André Rieu is a primary example of commercial success in the contemporary classical music industry, but in contrast to Heifetz, his performances demonstrate a hefty emphasis on flamboyance and exuberant showmanship rather than virtuosic technical aptitude. Though the combined talent and effort of producers, directors, and sound engineers as well as the musicians themselves, his concerts manifest the élan and flair associated with virtuosity. Cinematographic techniques further enhance these qualities through video editing, camera angles, colour, and lighting. With his 2014 international tour outselling Metallica, Ed Sheeran, and Beyoncé, Rieu's website reveals the sizeable importance of marketing and advertising. In addition to tickets and DVDs it offers complete tour packages and sells André Rieu-themed merchandise and souvenirs. Furthermore, his concerts are regularly promoted on his highly popular social media platforms—including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—across which he has amassed a massive following. The popularity of his concerts—which feature an unusual blend of classical, pop, and folk genres—reflects an apparent change in audience entertainment preferences, revealing that it would be more difficult to attract concertgoers with Heifetz's understated body language. His success today would depend more heavily on marketing than it would on his sheer technical talent.

Heifetz was an outstanding virtuoso whose tonal palette was of superlative dimensionality and variety so that any informed listener could easily discern his unique sound. Fundamentally, the claim of his unparalleled technical superiority was true during Heifetz's career: his violinistic ability was unmatched at the time and thus he came to represent the paragon of twentieth-century violin playing. His technical prowess, which was novel and remarkable in the early twentieth century, has today become requisite to any international soloist career. The concomitant proliferation of uneditable audio recordings during Heifetz's early career precipitated his status as a pioneering recording artist and enhanced his impact on audiences. Therefore, the emergence of a novel performance medium was a pivotal factor in his enduring success. This event highlights the reality that entertainment relies on novelty. An adept violinist today, to stand out among the rest, would accordingly seek such opportunities and ride the first wave of a novel innovation such as virtual reality performances or, like Rieu, tailor classical music to the change in popular musical tastes. It is phenomena like these that allow the expansion of musical horizons. They provide opportunities for a musician to establish a new dimension of virtuosic greatness, just as Heifetz created his enduring legacy with his extraordinary skill, unique performance persona, and the concurrent commercialisation of sound recordings.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Alfred Hickling, 'André Rieu: 'I Spent £34m on Fountains, Ice Rinks and Gold Carriages'', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2015, www.theguardian.com/music/2015/dec/20/andre-rieu-violin-superstar-king-of-waltz-interview.

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