

85th Birthday Greeting

As Irene Adler was always *the* woman to Sherlock Holmes, so Jascha Heifetz has always been *the* violinist to me. Of course there have been some long term romances (i.e. Stéphane Grappelli), and a few bagatelles (Ysaÿe's recording of *Lointain Passé*, Huberman's Beethoven, Eddie South), but these in no way substitute for, and in many ways serve to enhance, the underlying and overwhelming influence Heifetz's playing has had upon me.

I have met him only twice in my life under circumstances he could not possibly remember. The first of these was a concert he did at the Brooklyn Academy of Music around 1950, the programme of which included the Bloch Sonata and the Grieg C minor Sonata. I sat with my parents in the front row of the seats placed on stage to accommodate the overflow. I never took my eyes off him. As compositions, I hated both the Bloch and the Grieg (I was as prim a little aesthete as any seven-year-old child could be. I have since grown to adore both works!). Afterwards I went backstage for an autograph. The security was fairly tight. People were only allowed in one at a time. There was a hulk of a bodyguard. There was an absolutely gorgeous woman (Heifetz's wife) and there was this not-as-gigantic-as-imagined man who looked at a very tongue-tied child whom he might have recognized from the front row, and gently asked "would you like my autograph?". The child somehow managed to wag its head, mutter thank you, and was ushered out.

The second incident occurred at Juilliard during a sonata class I was having with Edouard Dethier. It might have been 1958 or 1959. I was playing the Saint-Saëns D minor (a work I fell in love with immediately upon hearing Heifetz's recording). The door opened and HE appeared. He listened for a while, stopped us very shyly and gently (by putting his hand on one of my arms), exchanged some words with Dethier, said goodbye, and left.

My only other contact with him was, as a Heifetz fellow at the Berkshire Music Centre in 1965, when I wrote him a thank you letter. For years I have wanted to write, saying what he has meant to me, as influence, as model, but I have always thought it would seem presumptuous, and an intrusion.

A great deal of my violinistic "roots" come directly from his recordings. I feel this may appear strange given how disparate our repertoires are. One evening I was driving and tuned into the middle of a broadcast of a violin and cello duo. It was clearly a 20th-century work, probably middle-European, pre-World War 2 language. That I did not know it was a little surprising, but what absolutely drove me crazy was the violin playing. Who played like this – diamond-etched bow strokes, equal attention paid to decay as well as attack, acerbic, glinting, asymmetric? I did! I played that way, but despite more than 60 first recordings to my credit, I was certain that I had not simply forgotten that I recorded it. But here was a work, from my own back yard, and someone was playing it as I would! Who *could* it be?

The recording in question was Ernst Toch's Duo, and the performers were Heifetz and Piatagorsky. If anything demonstrated the applicability of Heifetz's style to 20th-century music, that experience did. Heifetz's playing is as much a part of this century as Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier.

So, happy eighty-fifth birthday, dear Mr. Heifetz, and thank you very, very much, not only for your playing and accomplishments, but for opening a window that allowed the future to enter our violinistic lives.

Paul Zukofsky

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