15 The violin in jazz

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It is often assumed that the violin has had only a small role in jazz and related musics, although in fact its achievement has been quite large and varied. The roots of this diversity lie in the wide range of musics that contributed to jazz and allied forms. Jazz began in the USA, whence countless immigrants travelled from Europe, plus many involuntary immigrants from Africa. They all took with them their music, which the new world changed, and it may be that the most significant aspect of jazz in particular is the extent to which it has reflected the mixture of cultures and races that characterises the country in which it emerged.

The violin's place in all this goes back a long way. In *Music in New Orleans: the Formative Years 1791–1841* (Baton Rouge, 1967) Henry Kmen writes that 'as early as 1799 fifes and fiddles were used' by the city's slaves. One line of descent from those times may be glimpsed in *Yodelling Blues* by the Buck Mt[1] Band (OKeh 45428, 1929),[2] where Van Edwards's fiddle reminds us of both country music and blues. So does the Johnson Boys' *Violin Blues* (OKeh 8708, 1928), except that Lonnie Johnson's violin, with its double-stopped imitations of train noises, anticipates the railway onomatopoeics of boogie pianists and more especially of the Quintette du Hot Club de France's *Mystery Pacific* (HMV B8606, 1937), and hence is closer to jazz.

All musics which flowed into jazz fiddling can be grouped under the usual 'vernacular' and 'cultivated' headings, and essentially there is a dialogue between the two. Most of the violinists mentioned here underwent some training in classical traditions, in certain later cases up to a high level, and this is nearly always a positive factor. European techniques of expression and execution both are modified by other requirements and contribute to the latter's realisation. Thus in the quick *I've Got a Woman on Sourwood Mountain* by Earl Johnson's Clodhoppers (OKeh 45171, 1927) the leader's background in classical violin playing aids release of the music's wildness rather than weakening its stylistic integrity. This is something that can be observed repeatedly.

There was much regional variation in the country fiddle styles that

were fed into jazz violin playing. Indeed, some individual traditions had considerable variety in themselves, an instance being the violin music of the Acadians, or Cajuns. They were originally French Canadians who settled in south-western Louisiana, where they remained speakers of French or of a *patois* derived from it. Guitars, banjos, *bal musette* accordions are present, but the fiddle remains the leading instrument, bringing with it suggestions of Irish reels and American hoe-downs, the latter done with a sort of European accent. There also are echoes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French dance tunes, cowboy songs, blues, Tin Pan Alley ditties. A good example is Wallace Reed's *Rabbit Stomp* (Arhoolie 5015), whose band includes a second violin, played by Isaac Soileau.

This was recorded c. 1956–9, which serves notice that the musics which contributed to jazz did not stop when it started, but continued alongside it, raising the question of cross-influences. Another latter-day musician, J. P. Fraley, an East Kentuckian active in the 1960s and '70s, achieved a compromise between the wildness of Georgian fiddle playing like Earl Johnson's and the gentler Cajun sounds. A piece such as his *Wild Rose of the Mountain* (Rounder 0037, c.1974) is lyrical yet with irregular rhythms which seem to echo French Baroque *notes inégales* and microtonal pitch deviations suggestive of blues.

Such is the diversity of this vein of music that one can do little more here than cite further contrasting examples. The output of Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers – e.g. *Back Up and Push* (Bluebird B5562, 1934) often has the wildness of Georgian string bands, while that of the North Carolina Ramblers, as in *Milwaukee Blues* (Columbia 15688D, 1930), is more controlled, purposefully shaped, although both drew their repertory from the usual wide variety of sources. Latterly such groups sustained their reputations with records and radio work rather than from just functioning in their own communities. This was even more so with subsequent developments like bluegrass, the Tex-Mex music of the Rio Grande Valley, and western swing, in which last the influence of jazz is particularly clear – e.g. *Cotton-Eyed Joe* by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (Columbia 37212, 1946). Inevitably the influence also travelled in the opposite direction, and Stuff Smith, an unequivocal, if overrated, jazz violinist, paralleled the country fiddler's short bowstrokes and brief phrases (*Onyx Club Spree*, Decca 1279, 1937).

For the country fiddler as for the jazz violinist playing for dancing, the instrument was an impetus to physical movement, though it was the latter who more deliberately explored its further expressive and technical potentials just as his colleagues were developing those of brass, reeds and percussion. It was this that led to most of what is most valuable and original in the music considered here, but the violin had meanwhile also entered jazz by another route. For all its syncopation, ragtime was a formally composed music, intended to be played exactly as written, and

as such was an attempt at participation in the 'cultivated' tradition. Most ragtime pieces were published in orchestral form, a violin part always being included, sometimes two. Modern performances of some of these orchestrations can be heard from, for example, the New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra (Arhoolie 1058, 1971). Usually in such ensembles during the ragtime years the violinist was also the leader, and the phenomenon of the violinist bandleader lasted into the jazz period.

Typical were Charlie Elgar, who began with string groups in New Orleans, and Carroll Dickerson, whose band was fronted by Louis Armstrong in Chicago and New York. Few of these men were themselves jazz musicians, but they often exerted a significant influence. Eduardo Andreozzi, for example, was a Brazilian violinist whose band played jazz from 1919 onwards and who was one of the pioneers of this music in South America. Oivind Bergh had a similar role in Norway, Pippo Barzizza in Italy, Bernard Ette in Germany.

Also descending from the presence of violins in ragtime orchestrations is their employment in larger jazz ensembles. Here the pioneer was Paul Whiteman, who used quite varied groupings, for instance four violins and two cellos in *St Louis Blues* (Victor 20092, 1926), five violins and two violas on *Louisiana* (Victor 21438, 1928). Whiteman's arrangers, notably Bill Challis and Ferdé Grofé, showed considerable resource in fitting strings into wind-dominated jazz textures. Jelly Roll Morton added two violins to his *Someday, Sweetheart* (Victor 20405, 1926) in an amusing satire of this tendency, but it is a pity Whiteman's initiatives were not properly followed up except by a few musicians directly associated with him, such as Frankie Trumbauer (e.g. *Manhattan Rag*, OKeh 41330, 1929).

Some of the larger swing bands of the 1930s and 40s employed strings, but nearly always ineffectively because of unskilful writing. For example in *Leave Us Leap*, scored by Ed Finckel for Gene Krupa's band (Columbia 36802, 1945), the nine string instruments can be heard only during the piano solo. The exception was Artie Shaw, who built his band round a string quartet and his own clarinet. There are excellent pieces which use just these instruments plus a rhythm section (piano, guitar, double bass, percussion), such as *Streamline* (Brunswick 7852, 1936). Even when a complement of brass and reeds was added Joe Lippman managed to score so that the strings still had a prominent role in the music, a good instance being *Cream Puff* (Brunswick 7806, 1936).

Ahead of the non-jazz-playing violinist leaders musically speaking were those rank-and-file members of bands who doubled on the violin and could improvise jazz with it that approached the standard of those soloing on instruments more conventionally associated with this music. An example is Edgar Sampson, who later became a well-known arranger, and who can be heard on Fletcher Henderson's *House of David Blues* (Melotone M12216, 1931). A similar case is Darnell Howard, a clarinettist

Fig. 45 Joe Venuti (c.1930)

and saxophonist who nevertheless plays capable violin jazz on such items as Earl Hines's *Cavernism* (Decca 183, 1934). That Juice Wilson could do more is suggested by solos like the one buried amid the minstrel antics of Nobel Sissle's *Miranda* (HMV B5709, 1929), but this individual-sounding violinist spent too much time in Mediterranean countries to be recorded as he probably deserved. After working with important bands led by Andy Kirk and Alphonso Trent, Claude Williams also spent many years in obscurity, chiefly playing the guitar. But he made a convincing return to the violin later, performing, indeed, with much greater freedom and authority than before, as in *Yardbird Suite* (Sackville 3005, 1972).

Beyond such players stand the jazz musicians who specialised in the violin, foremost among these, in the earlier phases of this music, being Joe Venuti (Fig. 45). His virtuosity enabled him to emphasise just those aspects of the instrument's character which best accorded with the jazz of his time, and he removed all doubts concerning the violin's capacity as a solo voice in such music. Before the instrument could be amplified Venuti, like other violinists in jazz, had the problem of making himself heard. This was partly solved by the uncommon incisiveness of his playing but also by an unusually acute ensemble sense. In Red Nichols's *Bugle Call Rag* (Brunswick 3490, 1927), for example, Venuti can easily be followed because he threads such an individual, and essentially violinistic, path through the collective improvisation. And the quality of his solo playing was such that on Jean Goldkette's *Clementine* (Victor 20994, 1927) he could take his turn between two cornet improvisations by the great Bix Beiderbecke without letting down the music's overall tension.

The partnership of violin and guitar used to such effect by country fiddlers was also pursued by Venuti in company with Eddie Lang, the first outstanding guitarist of jazz. Their zestful *Wild Cat* (OKeh 40762, 1927) typifies the results. This basic relationship was extended into other, often adventurous, instrumentations producing the earliest examples of jazz chamber music. An instance is Venuti's Blue Four, which combined violin and guitar with bass saxophone and piano. In fact it is not possible to refer here to all aspects of his singular achievement. Venuti was still producing jazz of high quality into the 1970s and was sufficiently adaptable to work with prominent modernists such as the tenor saxophonist Zoot Sims (e.g. *Small Hotel*, Chiaroscuro 128, 1974).

Naturally Venuti had disciples, such as Matty Malneck in the USA, Stan Andrews in England, Cesare Galli in Italy, Otto Lington and Svend Asmussen in Denmark, although the last of these later pursued a more independent path. Others were doing the same, often with the violin–guitar partnership as the basis of fresh ventures. The Quintette du Hot Club de France was formed to provide a context for the work of the Belgian gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, the first major figure in jazz

who was not American. It teamed him with two further guitars, double bass, and violin played by Stéphane Grappelli, and produced a whole range of sounds and textures that were new to jazz. On records such as *Minor Swing* (Swing 23, 1937) the invention, emotional power and originality of Reinhardt's improving makes his the dominant voice, but Grappelli's elegant playing provides an apt foil.

It is said that the violinist Reinhardt would have preferred in the Quintette was Michel Warlop, whose brilliant duets with the guitarist, such as *Christmas Swing* (Swing 15, 1937), make this theory seem plausible. Warlop ranged from exquisite tone-painting in *Taj Mahal* (Swing 28, 1937) to *Harlem Hurricane's* fire and fantasy (Columbia DF20040, 1936). There are Gallic echoes of American string bands in his String Septet with its violins, guitars, sometimes harp – e.g. *Retour* (Swing 100, 1941) – and he undertook early 'third stream' ventures such as his *Swing Concerto* (Jazz Time 251272–2, 1942). Since his premature death in 1947 Warlop has been almost forgotten, yet he is the major European jazz violinist, at least up until the arrival of Jean-Luc Ponty.

Another who did his best work in Paris was the American Eddie South, who studied in Chicago and Budapest, where he was influenced by gypsy violinists. His earlier and later recordings are uneven, but South's 1937 performances with Reinhardt, such as *Sweet Georgia Brown* (Swing 8), are among the finest violin jazz of any period, exactly matching the instrument's resources to the needs of jazz. A special case of the violin–guitar relationship, also dating from 1937, is that of Emilio and Ernie Caceres, who added violin and clarinet doubling baritone saxophone to Johnny Gomez's guitar. Theirs is music of exceptional colour and animation, as in *Who's Sorry Now?* (Victor 25719), and it is noteworthy that Emilio Caceres, another forgotten man, was able to produce jazz of similar quality thirty-two years later (Audiophile AP101, 1969).

Attempts at amplifying the violin began with Augustus Stroh early in the century. Stuff Smith was a pioneer in the jazz use of an amplified instrument in the 1930s and he has been followed by the great majority of later players. Most employ a microphone, a transducer, or an electric violin – one that has a built-in transducer. Other electronic devices have also been adopted to improve and vary the instrument's sound: these include equalisers, wa-wa pedal, echo, time-delay and reverberation units.

Each significant jazz violinist since World War II has used this equipment to individual ends, gradually extending the resources. However, the major figure in this large group, the latter-day equivalent to Joe Venuti in the size and diversity of his achievement, is Jean-Luc Ponty. Like Warlop, he originally intended to be a classical violinist and won a Paris Conservatoire *premier prix* at seventeen. Devoting himself entirely to jazz from 1964, Ponty has performed with many distinguished

musicians and groups, such as the second Mahavishnu Orchestra, led bands of his own, toured widely. Adept at an impressive range of distinct jazz styles and able to make a personal statement in each, he is an embodiment of the 'post-modernist' situation in which jazz finds itself in the closing years of the twentieth century. Illustrations of so large and richly varied an output can only be selected arbitrarily, but a start could be made with his *Upon the Wings of Music* (Atlantic 18138, 1975). From 1969 Ponty employed a violectra, an electric instrument sounding an octave below the violin, in 1977 replacing this with a five-string electric violin reaching down to c, and more recently playing both instruments plus an acoustic violin, using a synthesiser with this last to produce electronic effects.

The Polish violinist Michal Urbaniak has followed a similar course, employing additionally a six-string instrument going down to F. He is another one to work as both a classical and a jazz violinist, the latter in a wide variety of settings. Of particular interest is Urbaniak's *New York Batsa* (Columbia KC33184, 1974), which features the melodic phraseology and irregular metres of Polish folksong.

Amplification and the related electronic devices noted above have led to more jazz musicians taking to the violin than hitherto, and only brief comment is possible on a few of them. Leroy Jenkins, a pioneer of free jazz on the instrument, has claimed Heifetz and Eddie South as main influences, and of especial interest are his duos with the cellist Abdul Wadud (*Straight Ahead*, Red 147, 1979). A pupil of Jenkins, Billy Bang has followed his free jazz initiatives and says, 'Much of the time I'm playing quarter tones or eighth tones. I'm between C and C sharp a *lot*.'[3] The String Trio of New York, with Bang, James Emery (guitar) and John Lindberg (double bass), demonstrates the continuing affinity between the violin and guitar (*Rebirth of a Feeling*, Black Saint BSR0068, 1983). Bang has also produced works fusing improvisation and composition, such as *Outline No. 12* (Celluloid CEL5004, 1982) which employs three violins, three clarinets, soprano saxophone, vibraharp, double bass, percussion.

Another striking combination is Didier Lockwood's Swing Strings System, which uses violins, cellos and other instruments, as in *Paysages* (Uniteledis 131078, 1978). Lockwood is a further important violinist who has performed in many contexts and brings a virile temperament something like that of Michel Warlop to contemporary jazz. He should in particular be heard in duet with the great pianist Martial Solal in *Solar* (Stefanotis P963, 1981). Phil Wachsmann drew on a considerable variety of sources, including Webern, before turning to free improvisation and the use of electronics. He also has brought forward mixed media pieces such as *Colour Energy Reaction* for orchestra and film, but his playing is best represented by his unaccompanied *Writing on Water* (Bead 23, 1984). Several of these men have issued LPs of solo improvisation, for

instance Jenkins's *Solo Concert* (India Navigation 1028, 1977), Bang's *Distinction Without a Difference* (hat Hut 1R04, 1979) and Zbigniew Seifert's *Solo Violin* (MRC 06645088, 1976). Among other contemporaries who deserve mention are Michael White, who is more influenced by avant-garde saxophonists like Ornette Coleman than by violinists, Jerry Goodman, who was in the first Mahavishnu Orchestra, Nigel Kennedy, better known as a classical player, Krzesimir Debski and Ric Sanders.

In parallel with this thorough exploitation of the violin as a vehicle for solo improvisation it has also been put to more effective use in large ensembles than formerly. Examples include André Hodeir's jazz cantata *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (Philips PHS900–255, 1966), where it is played by Jean-Luc Ponty, Martial Solal's Suite for big band (Gaumont 753804, 1981), where a cello is also employed. A string quartet is heard to fine effect in Gunther Schuller's *Abstraction* (Atlantic 1365, 1960) as are larger bodies of strings in his Concertino, Hodeir's *Around the Blues*, Werner Heider's Divertimento (all Atlantic 1359, 1960), John Lewis's *Encounter in Cagnes* (WEA 254833, 1987) and Wynton Marsalis's *Hot House Flowers* (Columbia FC39530, 1984).