

5 The twentieth century

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At the turn of the century Joachim and Sarasate, two of the most prominent exponents of nineteenth-century violin playing, were still active. Highly regarded throughout their careers, the two figures represented opposite ideals: Joachim was the serious musician who probed the musical essence of a composition, and Sarasate the elegant violinist who played with a sleek but somewhat glib virtuosity. Renowned for the depth and spiritual quality of his interpretations, Joachim was venerated as the greatest interpreter of the German masterworks. He had first performed the Beethoven concerto as a thirteen-year-old under the baton of Mendelssohn and, as leader of the distinguished Joachim Quartet, did much to bring the Beethoven quartets to the public's attention. As a close friend of Brahms, Joachim not only championed many of the composer's works, but also inspired and advised Brahms, notably in the writing of his Violin Concerto. By contrast, Beethoven and Brahms were composers for whom Sarasate had little affinity. The violinist Albert Spalding recalled that 'he played Beethoven with the perfumed polish of a courtier who doesn't quite believe what he is saying to Majesty'.¹ As for the Brahms concerto, Sarasate unashamedly refused to perform the work, explaining, 'Why should I stand there while the oboe has the only proper melody in the whole piece?'² It would be unfair, however, to dismiss Sarasate's achievement on the basis of his musical tastes. He was a unique personality, and had sufficient musical qualities to inspire a wide variety of composers to write works for him.

Standing apart from Joachim and Sarasate was Ysaÿe (Fig. 33), and it was his influence which was to predominate in the twentieth century. A student of Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski, Ysaÿe had a direct link with the grand romantic tradition of violin playing. He was also friendly with the most distinguished composers of his age, many of whom dedicated their works to him. Ysaÿe was a gargantuan personality whose playing was characterised by enormous sweep and panache. In some ways he can be regarded as a synthesis of the two extremes represented by Joachim and Sarasate. Combining a virtuoso technique with a rich musical imagina-



Fig. 33 Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931)



Fig. 34 Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962)

tion, he had the ability to convey a range of musical expression through his unique tone. By creating a new ideal in violin sound, Ysaÿe initiated the modern style of string playing. In the words of the Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, who discerned this new quality upon hearing Ysaÿe, Kreisler and Elman for the first time in Berlin in 1905, this sound was characterised by 'sensuous beauty, coloristic [sic] finesse and dramatic contrasts'.³

Mischa Elman (1891–1967), the first of Leopold Auer's many brilliant students, was only fourteen years old and already a seasoned performer when Szigeti first heard him. He and Franz von Vecsey, two years Elman's junior, were the sensational child prodigies of the time, but it was Elman with his luscious sound who ultimately gained the public's favour. Elman played with great spontaneity and abandon, and his interpretations were characterised by his uniquely personal rubato. In later years this rhythmic freedom had a tendency towards exaggeration, and his reputation suffered as a result. Elman maintained a loyal following throughout his career, however, and continued performing up until his death.

Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962; Fig. 34) was thirty years old in 1905 and, although Elman's senior by sixteen years, had been no less remarkable as a child prodigy. Following his graduation from the Vienna and Paris Conservatoires at the ages of ten and twelve respectively, Kreisler made an extended tour of the United States in 1888. Upon his return to Vienna the following year, he laid aside the violin to pursue his academic studies. At twenty-one, after attending medical school for two years and serving briefly in the Austrian army, he resumed his career as a violinist. During this time two other figures – the highly communicative Bronislaw Huberman (1882–1947), who had performed the Brahms concerto at the age of twelve in the presence of the composer, and the technically polished Jan Kubelík (1880–1940), dubbed 'Paganini revidivus' by his adoring audiences – were regarded by the Viennese public as the premier violinists of the day. Kreisler's rise to prominence was steady, however, and by the end of the century's first decade he became the undisputed 'king of violinists'. Carl Flesch ascribed Kreisler's relatively late acceptance by the general public to his novel technique (a rhythmically incisive bow arm and a consistently vibrant left hand), but as early as 1901 Ysaÿe had predicted: 'I have arrived at the top . . . but Kreisler is on the ascendant, and in a short time he will be the greater artist'.⁴ Kreisler had a unique combination of intensity and relaxation in his playing; despite the focused energy and articulation of his technique, there was always a naturalness and ease in his interpretations. Kreisler's supremacy prevailed until the mid 1930s, and his pervasive influence is confirmed by Flesch, who wrote that Kreisler 'divined in advance and satisfied the specific type of emotional expression demanded by our age'.⁵



Fig. 35 Jascha Heifetz (1901–87) aged seventeen

Among the other violinists who gained prominence during the period before the First World War were Carl Flesch, George Enescu and Jacques Thibaud. Despite their different backgrounds, all three studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Martin Marsick. The Hungarian-born Flesch (1873–1944) made his mark as one of the century's leading pedagogues, while the Romanian-born Enescu (1881–1955),⁶ a violinist of great imagination and fantasy, was also a superb pianist, conductor and composer. Jacques Thibaud (1880–1953), the leading French violinist of the century, was particularly admired by Ysaÿe and Kreisler. His playing was characterised by an enchanting mixture of sensuality and tenderness, and his sonata performances with the pianist Alfred Cortot (as well as trios together with Pablo Casals) were especially distinguished. One of the most eloquent violinists of the century, Thibaud died tragically in a plane crash en route to a performance in Indo-China.

By the First World War the most prominent violinists began to rival the great singers in popularity. A violin recital by a major artist was regarded as a special event, and these concerts often took place in large venues which could accommodate huge audiences (e.g. the Royal Albert Hall in London and the Hippodrome in New York). In an age preceding radio and television it was only natural that live concerts should inspire this interest. One of the most celebrated violin recitals of this century was the American debut of the sixteen-year-old Jascha Heifetz (1901–87) in New York's Carnegie Hall on 27 October 1917. Heifetz (Fig. 35) was a remarkable prodigy; at the age of eleven he had performed the Tchaikovsky concerto with Artur Nikisch and the Berlin Philharmonic. He tossed off the most difficult passages with a nonchalant ease, and his name became synonymous with violinistic perfection. His sheer mastery of the instrument brought a new level of technical awareness which consequently altered the course of violin playing in this century. In addition to the razor-sharp finish of his technique, there was a smouldering passion beneath the sheen and polish of his playing. Soon after Heifetz's formidable American debut, a critic remarked 'Kreisler is king, Heifetz the prophet, and all the rest, violinists!' If the playing of Kreisler was like the cosy warmth of a log fire, that of Heifetz was like the luminous white heat of a laser. Despite their differences the two violinists, who incidentally shared the same birthday, represented the two ideals of violin playing in the twentieth century. Yehudi Menuhin's recollection that his 'greatest desire as a child was to play the violin as well as Heifetz, and to communicate as Kreisler did'⁷ echoed the wish of many generations of budding violinists.

Although Kreisler and Heifetz were the dominant figures, the period between the two world wars has been dubbed the 'golden age of violin playing' owing to the many distinctive violin personalities who were active at the time. There was a proliferation of individual talents from virtually every country, and interest in the violin was pervasive. Adolf



Fig. 36 Joseph Szigeti (1892–1973)

Busch (1891–1952) and Georg Kulenkampff (1898–1948) were the principal violinists of Germany, and, in addition to Huberman, Eastern Europe had produced Pawel Kochánski (1887–1934), Erica Morini (b.1904) and Váša Příhoda (1900–60). Auer's many outstanding pupils included Efrem Zimbalist, Toscha Seidel, Mischa Piastro, Kathleen Parlow and Eddy Brown, and Carl Flesch had taught such superb talents as Max Rostal, Szymon Goldberg, Henri Temianka, Ida Haendel, Josef Wolfstal and Ricardo Odnoposoff. Two students of Ysaÿe, Alfred Dubois and Mathieu Crickboom, carried on the Franco-Belgian tradition, and Manuel Quiroga and Juan Manén were two remarkable virtuosos from Spain. The leading violinists of England, Italy and America were Albert Sammons, Arrigo Serato and Albert Spalding.

One of the most distinguished figures to emerge during this period was Joseph Szigeti (1892–1973). A student of Jenő Hubay, Szigeti (Fig. 36)



Fig. 37 Yehudi Menuhin (b.1916) aged eleven

made a number of recordings as a young prodigy in the first decade of this century. Unlike Hubay's other prodigy, Vecsey, whose career had faded after his early success, Szigeti's reputation grew gradually. He lived for several years in London and Geneva (where he taught at the Conservatoire), and by the late 1920s he was recognised as a violinist of paramount importance. Equipped with a virtuoso technique, Szigeti combined a natural musicianship with a penetrating intellect. His purity of intonation was especially notable, and the depth of his interpretations remains unequalled.

The 'golden age' of violinists coincided with the development of the recording process, and, fortunately for posterity, most of the well-known performers of the period have been aurally documented. The phonograph was widely disseminated after the First World War, and brought music to a much wider audience than ever before. The popularity of short pieces in violin recitals was related to the 78 rpm record; the three- to four-minute duration of these miniatures fitted perfectly within the time limits of a single side. Not only did these violin pieces adapt to the length of a recording, but the violinists themselves developed a concentration of expression which could show off their special qualities within the time given.

In the late 1920s the American-born Yehudi Menuhin (b.1916) began

his career as one of the most remarkable violin prodigies of all time. In addition to his technical prowess on the instrument, Menuhin (Fig. 37) displayed a poetry of musical expression which was unimaginable in a child. A student of Persinger, Busch and, most of all, Enescu, Menuhin made his debut in Berlin on 12 April 1929 performing concertos by Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. At this memorable concert Albert Einstein exclaimed 'Now I know there is a God in heaven!'¹⁸ Three other outstanding American prodigies, Ruggiero Ricci, Oscar Shumsky and Guila Bustabo, also made their first appearances during these years, but it was Menuhin who made the strongest impression.

Several years later another remarkably individual young talent, Ginette Neveu (1919–49), emerged. The elemental force of Neveu's playing was wholly original, and she was destined for a major career before her tragic death in a plane crash. Neveu had sprung to fame upon winning first prize at the 1935 Wieniawski Violin Competition (David Oistrakh and Henri Temianka were the second and third prize-winners). This event, created to honour the centenary of the great Polish violinist's birth, signalled the beginning of a new musical institution: the major international violin competition. Although competitions had existed for many years, this was the first one staged as an open event on an international scale. Following the Second World War international music competitions have flourished, and today there are violin competitions named after composers (Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, Busoni), performers (Paganini, Thibaud, Kreisler, Flesch, Enescu) and cities (Geneva, Munich, Montreal and Beijing). Two years after the first Wieniawski Competition, the Ysaÿe (now Queen Elisabeth of Belgium) Competition was established. This event, won by David Oistrakh, was a Soviet triumph, as five of the top six prizes were awarded to Russians. The determination and rigorous training of violinists in the Soviet Union (taught primarily by Stoliarsky in Odessa and Yampolsky in Moscow) had now proved to be a new force in violin playing.

In the decade preceding the Second World War a number of violinists began to turn their attention to the repertoire of the twentieth century. Louis Krasner had commissioned and performed the Berg concerto in the mid 1930s, and in 1940 he premiered Schoenberg's Concerto. Samuel Dushkin worked closely with Stravinsky, and commissioned the composer's Violin Concerto as well as several other chamber works. Prokofiev's two violin concertos were championed by Szigeti and Heifetz respectively, and the composer received much support from David Oistrakh in the composition of his two violin sonatas. The Hungarian violinists Zoltán Székely and Szigeti featured many compositions by their compatriot Bartók in their respective repertoires.

Although there had been a number of successful women violinists such as Maud Powell, Isolde Menges, Marie Hall, Celia Hansen, Renée Chemet and Jelly d'Arányi in the early part of the century, the years

during and following the Second World War witnessed a notable rise in the number of female soloists. Of these, Gioconda de Vito, Ida Haendel, Camilla Wicks, Johanna Martzy and Guila Bustabo were among the most successful. Two extremely gifted violinists of the war years were Josef Hassid and Ossy Renardy. With their tragic early deaths (at the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-three respectively) the violin world was deprived of two of its most promising talents.

Following the Second World War, Zino Francescatti (1902–91) and Nathan Milstein (b.1903), both in their prime, rose to the international prominence they had long deserved. A direct descendant of Paganini, Francescatti was taught exclusively by his father, who studied with Paganini's only pupil, Camillo Sivori. Francescatti's iridescent tone and grand virtuoso style combined to form one of the most brilliant violin sounds of this century. Milstein took lessons with Stoliarsky and, for a short time, with Auer, but from the age of thirteen onwards he was virtually self-taught. He executed his immaculate technique with pristine clarity, and always performed with suave elegance.

In the third quarter of the century, a new wave of Soviet-trained violinists made successful international careers. David Oistrakh (1908–74) was Russia's leading violinist, but he did not give many concerts abroad until the 1950s (his American debut did not take place until 1955). Oistrakh's powerful technique and warm burnished tone endeared him to audiences throughout the world, and he was a gifted conductor as well as an inspiring teacher. The other younger Soviet violinists who emerged during this period were Leonid Kogan, Igor Bezrodny and Oistrakh's talented son, Igor. Among the violinists from Europe to establish important solo careers were Arthur Grumiaux, Christian Ferras, Josef Suk and Franco Gulli. Two other highly individual personalities of this time were Tossy Spivakovsky and Ivry Gitlis. Perhaps the most outstanding European violinist to emerge in the 1950s was Henryk Szeryng (1918–88). A student of Flesch in Berlin until the age of thirteen Szeryng lived in Paris before settling in Mexico during the Second World War. For years his primary activity was teaching, and it was only after his compatriot the Polish pianist Artur Rubinstein encouraged him that he decided to return to the concert stage. Szeryng's playing was characterised by a creamy smoothness and an infallible technical control.

Although all the leading violinists had traditionally been trained in Europe, the United States emerged as one of the great centres of violin playing in the twentieth century. The wave of immigrants from Europe and Russia had a deep effect on American culture, and by the middle of the century a number of important solo violinists had been produced in the United States. Isaac Stern (b.1921), the leading American violinist of the second half of the century, was born in the Ukraine, and, after the family moved to San Francisco, was taught by Naum Blinder, another

Russian émigré who had studied with Adolph Brodsky. An authoritative figure, Stern is a violinist of tremendous energy and force. He is a persuasive communicator, and, in addition to his violinistic gifts, is an influential personality who has been a champion of many philanthropic causes. Another American violinist who rose to prominence in the 1950s was Ruggiero Ricci (b.1918). Although his career had waned after his successful years as a child prodigy, his return to the concert platform following the Second World War was met with great enthusiasm. Despite his reputation as a Paganini specialist, Ricci has a vast and varied repertoire.

Two renowned centres of violin teaching in the United States have been the Juilliard School (formerly the Institute of Musical Art) in New York and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, founded in 1905 and 1924 respectively. Franz Kneisel established the international reputation of the Institute of Musical Art by producing such excellent violinists as Sascha Jacobsen, Louis Kaufman, Jacques Gordon, William Kroll and Joseph Fuchs, and both Auer and Zimbalist, who taught at the Curtis Institute, numbered Oscar Shumsky, Benno Rabinoff, Aaron Rosand, Eudice Shapiro, Joseph Silverstein and Shmuel Ashkenasi among their successes.⁹

In the years following the Second World War Demetrius Dounis emerged as another influential teacher. A physiologist who played the mandolin, he concentrated on the physical aspects of violin playing. By the middle of the century the most important violin pedagogue in the United States was Ivan Galamian (1903–81). Born in Iran, Galamian studied with Konstantin Mostras in Moscow and the renowned quartet leader Lucien Capet in Paris before settling in New York in 1937. He was on the faculty of both the Curtis Institute and Juilliard School, and had his strongest influence in the three decades after the Second World War. His immense roster of superb violin students included Paul Mekanowitsky, David Nadien, Jaime Laredo, Berl Senofsky, Arnold Steinhardt, Erick Friedman, Michael Rabin, Paul Zukofsky, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, Kyung Wha Chung and Dong Suk Kang.

By the late twentieth century the general technical standards of the average player had reached a uniformly high level internationally. A certain codification of violin technique, however, set a standard in sound production which lacked variety. The concentration on left-hand technique led to an increase in digital facility, but also an overemphasis on vibrato at the expense of shadings in the bow. Recital programming also underwent a major change. In 1928 Flesch had recommended the inclusion of at least one piece of chamber music (i.e. a sonata) in a recital;¹⁰ half a century later most violin concerts with piano consisted exclusively of duo-sonata works. In the 1950s concertos with piano accompaniment were no longer featured, and the number of short violin pieces included in recital programmes had severely diminished. One

factor in the declining popularity of these miniatures was the displacement of the 78 rpm disc by the LP ('long playing') record. Another consequence of the LP era was that recordings were no longer mastered directly from a performance, but put on tape which had the potential to be edited finely. By the 1970s the 'perfectionism' and 'sonic fidelity' of recordings had irrevocably affected violin playing. The aesthetic transformation of violin playing before and after the Second World War can be likened to the replacement of flickering gas lamps by even electric light; the individual and sometimes wayward approach had now been replaced by one of consistent but occasionally charmless accuracy.

As we begin the final decade of the century several violinists have already established themselves as major figures. Two of the most prominent are the American-trained Israelis Itzhak Perlman (b.1945) and Pinchas Zukerman (b.1948). The honey-toned Perlman communicates an infectious joy in his playing, and Zukerman displays a rare poetic sensitivity beneath his cavalier manner. Two other younger Israelis, Shlomo Mintz and Gil Shaham, display great potential. A number of young Soviets such as Vladimir Spivakov and Viktoria Mullova have also had success, but the most individual personality is Gidon Kremer (b.1947), whose pointed, clinical style has strong expressive capabilities.

While many of the major violinists in this century have been of Jewish origin, the past fifteen years have witnessed a flood of superb Oriental talents. Kyung Wha Chung is perhaps the most well known, but Cho-Liang Lin, Dong Suk Kang, Mayumi Fujikawa and Midori have exceptional qualities. Europe has also produced its share of fine violinists such as Salvatore Accardo of Italy, Pierre Amoyal and Augustin Dumay of France, and two young Germans, Anne-Sophie Mutter and Frank Peter Zimmermann. A number of promising American violinists have been trained by Dorothy DeLay and Josef Gingold in recent years, and there are reports of a new generation of Soviet violin stars nurtured in Siberia.

As the emphasis in twentieth-century violin playing has shifted from the expression of one's individual personality to accuracy and fidelity to the score, there has been an interest in the past few years in the 'authentic' performance of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century music. Characterised by a non-legato, strongly articulated style, the 'authenticity' movement can be seen to be a reaction against the smooth but occasionally bland approach prevalent in much of today's string playing. Some of its performers, however, emphasise surface gesture at the expense of emotional depth, and it remains to be seen whether this 'authentic' approach will produce any truly great artists.

The increase in competitions and growth of the recording industry have also had a strong influence on violin playing in recent years. Although they have occasioned a high general standard, there has been a

de-personalisation of musical expression. Competitions have also had the effect of narrowing the concert repertoire through their insistence on the same 'set pieces'. The carefully constructed interpretations of edited recordings have replaced the spontaneity of live events, and it is ironic that the invention which documented so many varied personalities in the 'golden age' of violin playing has now created a normalised ideal which strives for the illusory concept of the 'definitive' performance. Finally, as distinctions between different solo players have become more subtle, the visual dimension of the concert has increased in importance. Not only is this related to the pervasiveness of the visual media (especially television), but it has been encouraged by managements intent on building the public image of their artists.