

Musical Tradition and Artistic Individuality: A Case Study

Tradition

The basic question I have been exploring in my research is: How can I, as a musician, relate to a tradition while retaining a strong sense of individuality? First, let us consider more generally, what *is* a tradition? And is there an intrinsic conflict between individual musical expression and participation in a musical tradition? T.S. Eliot addresses this issue in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in relation to poetry¹, but much of what he says in that context applies to artistry in general and is relevant to musical performance. In any case, his remarks have helped me navigate the perineal tension between an array of external influences upon a musical performance and my own internal artistic impulses.

According to Eliot, a tradition is much more than codified knowledge (or the type of thing found in a textbook). And because it’s not reducible to a set of formulas that can be memorized and applied as convention dictates, it really can’t be transmitted didactically from generation to generation – at least not without freezing it into something dogmatic or ideological. Of course, there are some basic aspects of violin technique that do function more along these lines, but in the context of individual artistry, tradition is much more complex. Eliot says that ‘tradition cannot be inherited, and [that] if you want it you must obtain it by great labor.’² Now, what does he mean by ‘great labor’?

Here Eliot talks about the cultivation of a ‘historical sense’, and it is this historical sense that ‘makes [an artist] traditional. And it is at the same time what makes [an artist] most acutely

¹ T. S. Eliot. ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Fifth Edition, Volume 2* (New York: Norton & Company, 1986) [M. H. Abrams, General Editor] [first published in the *Egoist*, 1919]

² *Ibid.*, p. 2207

conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.’³ He goes on to clarify that operating within a tradition ‘involves, in the first place, the historical sense... and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.’ As a result, the past and the present are combined without one melding into the other or one dominating the other. So a performing artist with a historical sense must be conscious of both the past and the present, and of the *distinct* contribution of each one. So, as I understand it, the ‘great labor’ consists of 1) understanding the past; 2) keeping one’s performance fresh in the present, and 3) balancing these two demands in one’s attention all the time.

What I’m getting at here is a *kind* of authenticity. Not the kind associated with ‘period performance’, so let me clarify that. As a performer, it often feels as though there is a conflict between the past and the present, or between scholarship (into the past) and the imagination (as an expression of artistry in the present), as Richard Taruskin describes it. In his paper, ‘On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections of Musicology and Performance’, he writes that ‘music has to be imaginatively recreated in order to be retrieved, and here is where conflicts are likely to arise between the performer’s imagination and the scholar’s conscience, even (or especially) when the two are housed in a single mind.’⁴ He wrote this over thirty years ago, but what he’s talking about I wrestle with in my own performance preparation today. In my own mind I prefer to think of it not as a conflict but as a tension (that is, the three elements of ‘great labor’ I noted a moment ago). According to Taruskin, musicians can cultivate authenticity in performance by *providing themselves with tradition*. He echoes Eliot on the importance of developing a historical sense and of *earning* one’s tradition rather than simply inheriting it. Taruskin describes this view of authenticity in the following passage:

The most authoritative and compelling reconstructionist performances of old music, as well as the most controversial, have always been those that have proceeded from a vividly imagined – that is frankly to say imaginary – but coherent performance style. They provide themselves with Tradition, in the Eliot sense, and bestow authenticity upon themselves. Where such performers do not know the composer’s intentions they are unafraid to have intentions of their own, and to treat them with a comparable respect.⁵

Here, he describes tradition and authenticity not as inflexible, objective monuments, but as elements of a more flexible, personal creativity.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2207

⁴ Richard Taruskin. ‘On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology and Performance,’ *The Journal of Musicology*, 1/3 (1982), p. 343

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 343

Taruskin's views of authenticity and tradition consciously pick up Eliot's idea of tradition that is fluid and reflexive. For Eliot, art and mind 'changes, and this change is a development which abandons nothing en route'.⁶ But, further than that, he suggests that 'the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past'.⁷

Eliot's remarks, along with his emphasis on 'the historical sense,' are key to my own approach as a performer. For my doctoral study, I used Bartók's first sonata as a case study, to see what it really means to develop this 'historical sense' and to see how the process of engaging with a tradition might change my playing and how I approach a particular piece. By focusing on Bartók, I was able to explore the tension articulated by Eliot and Taruskin in the context of the well-established tradition of Hungarian violin performance, especially as associated with the Liszt Academy and the school of Jenő Hubay.

Language

Part of my engagement with the Hungarian violin-playing tradition involved consulting with three prominent musicians who are each connected, in their own way, to this particular violinistic lineage. These were György Pauk, the well-known Hungarian violinist and teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, who studied in Budapest with Ede Zathureczky (who himself was Hubay's assistant and played with Bartók); Yair Kless, the well-known teacher in Tel Aviv, Graz Austria, and the RNCM in Manchester, who was a student of André Gertler (who collaborated with Bartók); and András Keller, one of the main exponents of the Hungarian musical tradition currently and a well-known violinist and chamber musician.

Despite their common lineage, these three performers have very different ideas about violin playing and about how to play Bartók. But something that really struck me was that they all talked about *speaking* through the violin and about the idea of *parlando*. So much of the expression, the pronunciation, and the articulation that they seemed to be searching for in the music and in the playing was evocative of the way we use spoken language to express

⁶ Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 2208

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2208

ourselves verbally. But, linking back to Eliot's concept of a tradition for a minute, the way they conveyed the idea of this language was not didactic. It wasn't a set of rules saying 'this is how you play Hungarian music'. It was much more fluid, and much more about subtle expressive nuance. It can be helpful to think about the similarities between performing music and using a language, and to think of a musical tradition as a quasi-linguistic tradition. But at the level that I'm interested in, it's crucial to differentiate between the basic building blocks of that language and the *tools of expressive nuance* that allow me to really pronounce and enunciate in a meaningful way.

Going back to the idea of *parlando* or speaking with the violin, let's think for a minute about what that means, practically speaking. We have a violin, a bow – very little has changed in the century since Bartók wrote the Sonata. How do we use these simple tools to transmit the music that Bartók imagined? I don't want to downplay the complexity of playing the violin. Every movement we make, no matter how subtle, has implications for the whole body, and each element of violin playing is fundamentally connected with every other part. For example, *vibrato*: when I change the speed or width of my *vibrato*, or the direction or angle of my finger on the string, my bow arm also changes. My bow speed, the amount of pressure on the string, the source of that pressure, my sounding point (or how close to the bridge I am playing) – even the sensitivity and subtle role of each finger on the bow stick – these are constantly changing and adjusting according to what I hear and also to what I *want* to hear. And of course there is my playing position: how I stand or sit, the angle that I hold my violin (both the vertical angle and the degree to which the violin points to my left), whether or not I use a shoulder rest (I do not, but I have experimented with all of the models on the market) – all these things have enormous impact on the playing as a whole.

But just because everything is interconnected in this way does not mean that it's not useful to look in depth at specific elements. I am going to use, as my example, one detail of bow technique that is crucial to developing the speaking quality of my playing – that is the beginnings of notes.

By 'the beginning of the note' I mean the first sound that the bow makes when it touches the string. What happens after that, over the length of the bow, is related to the beginning of the note, but it is helpful to separate the elements if we want to look at the detailed mechanisms

in play. The initial contact is both important in itself and can also have a huge impact on what comes after it.

I am going to use the first phrase of the Bartók first sonata to demonstrate the variety of both beginnings and endings of notes. First of all, I would like to show you three video clips of the opening, with György Pauk, András Keller, and Yair Kless. Then I will look at the possibilities and the nuances of the beginnings of notes, and the technical mechanisms associated with these nuances. You will have to indulge me just a bit here because there are no individual moments that illustrate precisely what I'm talking about (the beginnings of notes); rather, the different possibilities come out in my analysis of each entire consultation. By focusing on the first phrase, I hope to at least give you some indication of the broader issues and how they relate to the beginnings of notes. Watch what they do and watch how I have to make changes in response to what they suggest both verbally and gesturally.

Watch the three video clips now

The first note of the violin line seems straightforward. But the initial contact with the string really sets the mood for the whole phrase, and maybe even for the whole movement. My own natural inclination, as if seeing the music for the first time, is to play the first note with a definite sound, or what I would call a *hard* beginning. I catch the string with a considerable amount of weight on the bow before moving it, and when I do move it, the speed is quite fast. The weight on the bow is well distributed, but there is definitely a substantial amount of involvement from my index finger.

This hard beginning sets up the phrase to be declamatory and heroic. Pauk seems to share this view, and although he does not go into much detail here, his gestures are definitive. He does many fast upwards gestures that seem to propel the music in a very determined way. When he himself plays, it is to show me just how much accent and force he really wants on those repeated notes later on.

In the Kless and Keller clips, I play the first note with a softer beginning. For me, the phrase has a different atmosphere, and it is partly because of how I play that first note. I am *leaning in* to the sound more, rather than starting with a definite beginning. Kless shows this well

with his exaggerated leaning movement. The weight of the bow arm comes down *at the same time* as I start moving the bow, rather than before I move. The weight comes from the whole arm, and is less reliant on pressure from the index finger. This changes the intensity of the sound and makes it less hard-edged. The beginning of the note influences what comes after it: the big intervals in the phrase do not become increasingly heroic, but rather become more pleading and emotionally charged. This is the *mourning* that Keller mentions. Playing the first note with a softer beginning sets a different tone for the piece, and makes my bowing slightly different for the whole of the phrase – less angular, more *legato* or smooth, and with rounder edges.

The differences between the hard edge and the softer edge are visually illustrated by the body movements each of these musicians. Pauk's movements are as I said – sharp, declamatory, and pronounced – and he is encouraging a more heroic sound. Both Kless and Keller have much more fluid body movements and (though it is not in this specific video clip) Kless talks at length about 'looking for the rounds'. This seems to apply to Keller as well, especially if you noticed his organic hand motions. Kless and Keller are significantly different in other respects though. Kless is much more organized and methodical in his technical approach and he bases his suggestions on a clearly conceived idea of what he wants me to produce, whereas Keller is much more instinctive and seems to be drawing inspiration from the piece (and from each note even) as we work.

Summing up:

Returning to the general theme/problem of relating tradition and individual artistry, it is worth noting that a 'tradition' is not a monolithic entity, with set rules and boundaries. In fact, we might use these illustrations to extend and clarify Eliot's point that a tradition is not reducible to codified knowledge. This may be true enough is poetry, which is what Eliot was concerned with – but poetry, as a creative art, has at least some codified forms (such as the sonnet, haiku, and limerick, which have well established rhythm and rhyming patterns). However, it is even less plausible for a performative art. The transient interpretive and expressive moments of a performance rule out 'rules'.

What then *is* a tradition? Rather than conceiving of it as a set of rules or a body of knowledge, i.e., as something theoretical, we may be better served to think of it in terms of a historical community. This community is bound not by adherence to a set of technical principles, but by the conversations and interactive exchanges of the people who participate in that community. The disagreements, interpretive divergences and debates are its threads and sinews, so to speak. An essential part of the ‘great labour’ that Eliot dwells on is learning to negotiate in this community. Artistic authenticity is not, therefore, something at odds with a tradition or something that can be stifled or suffocated by ‘tradition’ but rather something that feeds on a vital (i.e., living, fluid and evolving) community.

The three violinists I have looked at today would all describe themselves as being part of the same Hungarian tradition. And what became clear when working with them is that even though they consider themselves part of the same tradition, they differ in many fundamental ways. But despite these differences, each violinist imagines and conveys a concept of the piece that feels completely authentic.

Moreover, we tend to think of the transmission of a tradition in terms of lineage (I myself have used this word as a shorthand earlier). But really, the metaphor of a line is too simplistic. What keeps a tradition alive and vital is its multidimensionality, in which its elements are transmitted by various routes simultaneously.

A second metaphor that I drew on earlier elucidates tradition in terms of language. But in this case, I am not going to correct myself but rather elaborate on it one last time. Wittgenstein makes an insightful remark about language, comparing it to an ancient city:

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.⁸

The city Wittgenstein imagines here has a distant past that persists and remains central to its current life, and it has a more recent past that is connected to its oldest streets. The more recent additions to the city are more accessible to our current understanding, and they provide clues for making sense of older patterns. Similarly, in a musical tradition the recent past is

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1958) p. 8e No. 19

evident in its current practitioners, and these practitioners are linked to those who came before them.