

Do It with Dash!

Dive in to a Jascha Heifetz transcription

BY SHERRY KLOSS

THE JASCHA HEIFETZ TRANSCRIPTIONS for violin and piano are miniature masterpieces awaiting interpretive discovery. These duo-partnerships, more than 100 in all, are brilliantly conceived to capture the essence of the originals in a manner that is true and fresh. To ensure a scintillating realization of each work, the player must recognize the thematic material as it is handed back and forth between the instruments, appreciate the harmonic humor, and understand the stylistic intent. You also should explore the vocabulary of tonal colors, maintain the rhythmic direction, and immerse yourself in the unique mystique that each piece represents.

An excellent example for those interested in understanding Heifetz's approach to transcription is "Mediterranean" by Sir Arnold Bax (1883–1953). Bax wrote the work in 1920, originally as a solo piano piece, and he later orchestrated it. Heifetz made his own violin-and-piano transcription of the work in 1933, dedicating it to Firenze—this may have been a reference to the city of Florence, Italy, but it's also possible that it was a tribute to his first wife, silent-film actress Florence Vidor. The excerpts discussed here appear on pages 40–44.

READ IT AND REAP

First, be aware of all the concise, detailed instructions found within each measure. Look closely: Often fragments of the theme are hidden within the textural writing. After careful study of the road map of notes, dynamics, phrasing, and articulations (short, long, portamento), look at the piece as a whole, as one large idea. From this perspective, you will have a guide upon which to base your creative interpretation.

Heifetz' transcription of "Mediterranean" presents a multitude of images amid a luxurious, colorful landscape, a musical Garden of Eden. It is a dance in three: one-two-three, one-two-three. Listen to the piano introduction, which takes on the role of a guitar. At the first sounds of the legato violin entrance, the right hand of the piano mimics a guitar accompaniment (see measures 5–9, page 40).

Simply set, this seductive introduction beckons us to enter another world. How should these opening three notes be approached? Consider quality of tone, timbre, tempo, and, more. The first note is your "Hello," the second note says, "Let me tell you," and the third note begins your own personal story. I like to employ the use of three different colors by varying my bow speeds, applying various amounts of vibrato (less, more, and most), and by subtly dragging my first finger at just the "right" speed from E to E \sharp creating a vocal warmth. The F \sharp is the beginning of the journey. To prepare to express the phrase, I suggest that you save the bow by

master class

using a slow bow speed until you've accomplished the sound you desire. At this point, draw the rest of the bow at a faster speed. Beautifully set on the D string, the timbre contrasts with the lushness of the G-string sound in measure 10 (below).

Notice the following notes in the piano: in measure 4, E E \sharp F \sharp ; in measures 6–7, F \sharp G \sharp C \sharp ; in measures 8–9, G \sharp B C \sharp (below). The three introductory notes of the violin are present in the piano, but slightly altered. It's most important to point out this relationship in the dialogue with the violin. Heifetz would say, "Make a dent."

Each time this theme appears in the violin, it is presented differently. There is a change of octave, a change of color (accomplished by choices of fingerings and the string that best suits the material), a change in rhythm (triplet filigree embellishing the melody), or enriched harmony (major slithers down harmonically to minor, only to conclude in major). For exam-

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ple, later in the piece, parts of the theme in one voice are handed over to the other: Look at the piano's E E \sharp F \sharp to the violin's F \sharp A F \sharp in measure 81 (page 42).

SHOW THE DIFFERENCE

In measure 15 (below), the violin takes on the role of the guitar in triple note pizzicato, a la Guitare, as we strum multiple strings at once using the index finger instead of the bow

with the up and down bow-arm gesture. This sound alternates with percussive, accented bowed strokes at the frog and legato glissandi to the high octave harmonic.

These special effects have already created varieties of timbres that build excitement for the reentry of the original legato line, now one octave higher. Notice how the statement is different this time: Dotted rhythms (exaggerate them), ornamentation, and chromatic double stops (stretch the rubato sixths in "basking" Mediterranean fashion) are juxtaposed against

the guitarlike triplet figures of short staccato-legato (see measures 22–33, opposite page).

As the violin moves along in a sustained chromatic line, the piano enjoys something fresh: articulation of a short duple rhythm in measures 31 and 33, contrasted with waltzlike legato in measures 32 and 34.

We find ourselves in yet another tonality reminiscent of the Orient, with the violin playing double-stop intervals of fourths and fifths in measures 38–40. The "guitar" timbre is all-present as the piano plays repetitive rhythmic figures with agogic swing (where is the beat?), creating a sense of suspension while the violin modulates through tonalities *a la capriccioso*. Notice how many times the piano repeats the rhythmic grouping of three notes in the left hand—15 times—then up a half step for another pattern of three.

In the second excerpt (page 42), after a key change back to three sharps, there is continued use of legato versus the short pluck of the guitar, an unadorned phrase, followed by an embellished ten-note flourish in measure 70, repeated E's in measure 71 (Heifetz would say, "Add a few more . . ."), familiar, but fragmented figures, and then, back to *a tempo* and the

theme. Look at how fancily the opening violin notes are dressed in measure 79 (page 42): placed high on the E string, with double-stops and triplet flourishes. Meanwhile the piano teases us playfully with snippets of earlier material: E E \sharp F \sharp in measure 79, and E \sharp F \sharp G in measures 82–83.

The drama is mounting: The piano announces the grand finale with a short, upbeat, dotted-rhythmic treatment of the theme (exaggerate the dots), octave leaps, and triplet material (already introduced by the violin). In octaves, but in different ranges, the

instruments play the opening material again, for the last time. The piano passes its fragment of the theme to the violin in measures 91–92 and offers a lush support as the violin sings the original basic line in full expansion in measures 97–98. Together they strut grandly with the pride of a toreador adorned in his fighting best.

A free-form relaxation of the pace lingers until the phrase concludes with both instruments strumming in Flamenco style. There is yet another opportunity to enjoy the journey as the legato violin and piano frolic through

the chromatic tonalities and dotted rhythms. The "interesting" harmonies of both voices in dialogue, a typical Heifetzian flourish (see the upbeat to measure 145 above) and just one more time, the "guitar" strum of three-note chords wind down our Mediterranean adventure. A full-sounding four-note pizzicato and embellished piano flourish recall the energetic stomp of the Flamenco dancer and the clicking of castanets. Our charming travelogue has come to an end, but the aura lives on.

I can hear Jascha Heifetz's words, "Now, do it with dash!" □