



## **String Chamber Music of the Classical German School, 1840-1900: A Scholarly Investigation through Reconstructive Performance**

### **PERFORMANCE EVIDENCE 1 – ANNOTATED EDITIONS**

David Milsom, 2009 (revised May 2015)

Until relatively recently, editorial evidence in the form of playing parts with performance markings was little understood and certainly under-appreciated. Much scholarship has been devoted to the question of ‘urtext’ editions, unearthing manuscripts, autograph scores and first editions, and the ‘early music’ or ‘historically-informed performance’ (HIP) movement has done much to further this cause. It has for some time been relatively easy to obtain reliable, scholarly editions of much eighteenth-century music. Some – such as Bärenreiter’s edition of the Bach violin concerti – contain not only a clean, modern urtext (true to the ‘original’ excepting corrections and the conveniences of modern typesetting), but also a realised part with performance suggestions by noted Baroque violinist Andrew Manze.<sup>1</sup> This is welcome and addresses one of the major criticisms of the urtext obsession amongst many ‘responsible’ musicians in the last twenty or so years – that an urtext tells one relatively little, and, certainly, can be used as a springboard for a performance every bit as far away from (for example) Baroque performing practices as a heavily-edited score dating from the mid twentieth century. Manze’s markings give the uninitiated a glimpse into possible HIP ways of playing the music. One could question Manze’s authority in this respect (especially since Baroque HIP in the twentieth century has developed its own self-referential conventions, and since so much of Baroque practice can never be known with certainty) – but in all fairness, Manze and other scholar-performers like him claim no more in this context than the authority of informed insight, which is as far as I, too, am prepared to go in this research study.

Nineteenth-century music is rather less well represented. Urtext editions (such as the Henle Brahms violin sonatas or, more specifically, the Wiener Urtext copies of these works<sup>2</sup>) are often confusingly edited. In both of these cases there are markings that bear no obvious to nineteenth-century practice, making the ‘urtext’ tag very tenuous and more than a little misleading. Even where this isn’t the case, composers such as Mendelssohn, Schumann or Brahms did not often indicate very much in terms of practicalities. In other words, one is no further along in terms of understanding performing practices of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Bach Konzert in a-Moll für Violine, Streicher und Basso continuo BWV 1041 (Barenreiter, Kassel, 2004) plate number BA 5189a; this describes itself as ‘Urtext Edition and Performing Edition with fingerings, bowings and comments on performance by Andrew Manze.’

<sup>2</sup> See my ‘Project Editions’ document.

One of the greatest gifts to the performance practice historian in respect of the nineteenth century was an ever-increasing tendency to tabulate, quantify and seek to explain – outworked in the form of increasingly complex works of pedagogy and, of course, a growing tendency from the middle of the century to produce detailed, edited works with (in the context of string playing) bowings, fingerings and other practical information. When viewed with a good working knowledge of the context as prescribed by performing treatises – and combined with a careful hearing of early recordings, as I discuss elsewhere – this gives us a much more precise idea of likely (or even just ‘possible’ or ‘probable’) contemporary ways of playing.

Thus, in this project it was sensible to begin with Louis Spohr – an exceptional figure certainly, but one with close ties to the Leipzig tradition of performance and hence Joseph Joachim and his protégés, who represent the final phase of this so-called ‘classical’ German style of string playing. It is a matter of endless puzzlement why more players have not regarded closely the intelligence Spohr provides – a violin treatise, carefully and systematically ordered, with copious musical examples replete with indications of fingering, bowing and the placement of vibrati; editions of his own music which contain almost as much in the way of bowings and fingerings (at least in solo and chamber works) as those in his *Violinschule*. Perhaps this is because his music has been unfashionable for such a long time – certainly, if it was as celebrated as Beethoven’s works, it seems hardly possible that such detailed evidence would be ignored. Perhaps, also, because his markings seem strange to those without a good working knowledge of nineteenth-century practices. In fact, the welcome tendency to rehabilitate Spohr’s music (with increasing numbers of his works being recorded in recent times) has *not* been accompanied by a commensurate appraisal of his performing practices. This underlines a still-extant ‘fault-line’ in modern performance (between ‘mainstream’ and ‘historically-aware’ persuasions) and reminds us that not all performers feel it important to seek understanding of a composer’s expectations of performance style. It is nonetheless odd that more HIP musicians have not paid closer regard to Spohr. Perhaps it is the unfamiliar (and therefore controversial) nature of Spohr’s inferred performance style that dissuades many from playing in this way.

For this project, however, freed from the commercial interests that can (and do) influence professional HIP performers’ attitudes, Spohr’s editions have proved very useful indeed. Clive Brown (noted Spohr scholar and biographer) and I, having studied Spohr’s practices in some detail for a number of years, felt confident in rendering traits of his style in performance. These editions provide detailed intelligence concerning his ideals. Others come into this category too, such as Ferdinand David’s Mendelssohn editions, and Joachim’s carefully-edited and described works in volume 3 of his *Violinschule*.

Not all of the editions used here have such detailed information or provide such a clear editorial stance. Many of the larger works, such as the Mendelssohn Op. 49 piano trio, only contain markings in the violin part; the performer of today (as in the nineteenth century, one might assume) has to apply such markings intelligently to the other parts. This is also the case in the Mendelssohn quartet parts with crayon annotations by Ferdinand David.

Other editions, such as those by Schnirlin and Auer, are only tangentially relevant to this study and require a certain degree of circumspection. As explained elsewhere in the project, such editions are perhaps the best indications that we have of Joachim's performance ideals in the absence of an actual Joachim edition. They are, as in Schnirlin's 1926 Brahms sonatas, 'second-generation' editions of the Joachim school, produced at a time of very significant stylistic change. In the case of Schirlin, they are devoid (as I write today) of any substantiating information about the editor and his motivation, or indeed performance style, other than the fact that his markings seem closely congruent to those of his teacher, Joachim.

In the case of other works, such as the Schumann and Gade trios, even this information is missing, and we have had to use our received understanding of performance style of this period to make our own performance decisions based upon precedent and informed guesswork. To summarise, the editions in this project fall into the following categories:

**A. Detailed performance markings and unambiguous editorial relevance to the period studied**

- Spohr Op. 13, 67/1 and 45/2 works
- Mendelssohn violin concerto, Op. 64 (ed. F. David)
- Mendelssohn violin concerto, Op. 64 (ed. J. Joachim)
- Beethoven violin sonatas, Opp. 12/2 and 24 (ed. F. David)
- Beethoven violin sonatas, Opp. 12/2 and 24 (ed. J. Joachim)
- Mozart violin concerto in A, K.219 (ed. J. Joachim)
- Beethoven Romance in F, Op. 50 (ed. J. Joachim)
- Joachim Romances in B-flat and C (ed. J. Joachim)

**B. Some performance markings with unambiguous editorial relevance to the period studied**

- Mendelssohn Op. 12, 13 and 44/3 quartets (with crayon annotations of the 1<sup>st</sup> violin part by F. David)
- Mendelssohn Op. 49 piano trio (ed. F. Hermann)
- Mendelssohn Op. 49 piano trio (ed. J. Joachim)

**C. Performance markings with related but still questionable editorial relevance to the period studied**

- Brahms-Joachim Hungarian Dances (ed. O. Schnirlin)
- Brahms violin sonatas, Opp. 78, 100 and 108 (ed. O. Schnirlin)
- Brahms violin sonatas, Opp. 78, 100 and 108 (ed. L. Auer)

**D. Editions with little or no performance marking/s requiring new reconstructions of likely performing practices**

- Gade piano trio, Op. 42
- Schumann piano trio, Op. 63
- Brahms quartet, Op. 51/2
- Brahms 'FAE' scherzo, Op. Posth.

Apart from the specific instances cited above, these annotated editions create the usual, generic difficulties with this form of evidence. It is not entirely clear for whom they are intended or what they are telling us. Are the markings a 'blueprint' for performance, departure from which would be considered sacrilegious, or simply a few suggestions to aid performance? Spohr, from what we know of his character and the many references in his autobiography to 'inappropriate' performance of his music, might be considered to fall into the former category. Joachim, on the other hand, whose famously ambivalent attitude to the task of editing is hinted at in the article on his style and practice included here, might fit more properly the characteristics of the latter. But all of this is far from sure and, even if it is, the practical implications are uncertain. However much Spohr might have been desirous that his performance style be followed faithfully, he nonetheless espoused (as did almost all nineteenth-century musicians) an aesthetic that not only allowed but *celebrated* performance individuality and the spontaneous performance characteristics of tempo rubato, agogic accentuation and so forth. Joachim, meanwhile, was a trenchant critic of performance styles with which he did not agree, and vigorously defended the established style of playing he epitomised against newer influences, as can be seen in his *Violinschule*. Besides, his editions are far from similar to each other in style – there are very few markings indeed in the Mendelssohn Op. 49 trio, but many more in the sixteen works included in the *Violinschule*.

These difficulties, limitations and challenges have defined my own practical attitudes to the editions from which we performed. In general, we attempted to carry out faithfully markings where the editorial evidence seemed closely related to the project's geography and timescale, but we did not balk at making a few individual decisions of our own. Whilst the empirical musicologist might find this abhorrent (after all, our adaptations are, and can only be those of twenty-first century musicians with a twenty-first century perspective), it is, I believe, entirely consistent with the inherent spirit of nineteenth-century performance. Generally, where editorial evidence was less strong and/or incomplete, we were more ready to adapt markings in accordance with the intelligence we had gathered and embodied in the entire scope of the project and of course to supplement incomplete markings with further ones of our own. I have included, where available, copies of the editions used in the project performances, preserving our pencilled annotations and notes for performance as an insight into our approach. These should be viewed whilst listening to our performances and have been included in each individual work file as relevant.

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Performance from annotated editions in this project has helped to ground the style of playing in a strong base of evidence. Nonetheless, the difficulties inherent in such an activity should not be under-estimated. To use such editions in a way that has any hope of representing nineteenth-century performing practices requires a very considerable amount of contextual scholarship as well as years of practical experimentation. This undoubtedly is the reason why even the best-intentioned of modern HIP performances of nineteenth-century works sound quite unlike early recordings, and why the task of 'reconstructive performance' is such a large and difficult one, in any musical epoch. It is also the reason why this study can be little more than an archaeological one and, as such, will no doubt be superseded in due course. The 'CHASE' AHRC Research Grant project at Leeds and Cardiff Universities (2008-12),<sup>3</sup> which, for the first time, attempts a systematic collation and analysis of nineteenth-century string chamber music editions, is a part of this process and should enable future performers to have access to an increasing body of knowledge on which to act in the furtherance of this course of study.

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<sup>3</sup> 'CHASE': '19th- and Early 20th-Century Annotated Editions of String Music: Bibliographical Problems, Editorial Content and Implications for Performance Practice' (AHRC Research Grant project, Universities of Leeds and Cardiff, 2008-12). Project website: [www.chase.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.chase.leeds.ac.uk)