

Acoustic Recordings for Victor Records--Jascha Heifetz (1917-1924)

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Essay by John Anthony Maltese (guest post)*



Jascha Heifetz

It is difficult to overstate the impact that the 16-year-old Russian violinist Jascha Heifetz had on the musical world when he made his United States debut at Carnegie Hall on October 27, 1917. A noticeable wave of astonishment swept across the audience when Heifetz first set bow to string that afternoon. Most of those in attendance had never heard a violinist play with such technical perfection, such precise intonation, and such a refined grasp of tonal shading and control. In a first tier box, the violinist Mischa Elman leaned over to the pianist Leopold Godowsky and whispered, “It’s awfully hot in here, isn’t it?” Godowsky famously replied, “Not for pianists.”

It is unlikely that any single concert in Carnegie Hall ever produced a more rapturous set of reviews. Sigmund Spaeth in the “Evening Mail” wrote that he had always thought “that it ought to be possible to play the violin with every note clear and in tune, with a correct rhythm in fast as well as the slow passages, and with a pure, musical tone, neither scratchy nor shaky, neither lifeless nor maudlin.” Until that Saturday afternoon, however, Spaeth said that he had “never heard any one actually do it.” Max Smith wrote in the “New York American” that in all his experience as a critic he had “never heard any violinist approach as close to the loftiest standards of absolute perfection as did Jascha Heifetz yesterday.” V.R. Key concluded in the “New York World”: “For the moment it is sufficient to say that he is supreme; a master...whose equal this generation will probably never meet again.” Rather than cherry-picking comments from the many reviews, Heifetz’s management took the unprecedented step of simply reprinting them in their entirety in multiple page ads placed in the leading music magazines.

Among those in the audience for Heifetz’s debut was Calvin Child of the Victor Talking Machine Company. Victor had already signed Heifetz to join its esteemed roster of recording artists (which included such luminaries as violinist Fritz Kreisler, pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and tenor Enrico Caruso). Given the success of his debut, Victor rushed to press a special four-page supplement to its catalogue announcing that it had engaged Heifetz—“this brilliant genius of the violin”—under exclusive contract. Fifteen days after the debut, Heifetz and the pianist André Benoist travelled to Camden, New Jersey, to make the first in a series of recordings for

Victor, which Child produced. Like his Carnegie Hall debut, they had a profound impact on the musical world. The more than 50 compositions that Heifetz recorded for Victor from November 1917 until December 1924 have been making it “hot” for violinists ever since.

Those recordings did much to fuel Heifetz’s worldwide celebrity. He was among the first generation of musicians whose recordings preceded his arrival in most parts of the world. In England, Victor’s sister company, His Master’s Voice (HMV), unveiled his first eight recordings by hiring a room at the Piccadilly Hotel in London on October 28, 1919, and playing them for a group of leading critics. One of them, Henry Coates, called them “a revelation.” By the time Heifetz arrived in England six months later to give his first concerts there, HMV had already sold 70,000 copies of his records.

At his London debut on May 5, 1920, the soprano Nellie Melba sat in the front row of Queen’s Hall. She had heard Heifetz play in Chicago in November 1917 and had been so thunderstruck by his playing that she sent him a fan letter. Now, in London, she stood up after Heifetz played Wieniawski’s “Concerto in D Minor” and, in an extraordinary gesture, handed him a large laurel wreath—the quintessential symbol of triumph. Not long afterwards, the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote Heifetz a now legendary letter. “If you provoke a jealous God by playing with such superhuman perfection,” Shaw warned, “you will die young. I earnestly advise you to play something badly every night before going to bed, instead of saying your prayers. No mortal should presume to play so faultlessly.”^{f4}

Throughout the world, Heifetz’s recordings so astonished listeners that they showed up in droves at his concerts to see if he could really live up to them. He did. When he made his debut in New Zealand in August 1921, “The New Zealand Times” marveled at the degree of fame Heifetz had achieved in such a short period of time, “not so much by advertisement as through the medium of the gramophone.” Those recordings, the article continued, generated “wonder and excitement”—leading to some of the largest audiences ever to attend concerts by a visiting musician in New Zealand.

These acoustical recordings predated the development of electronic microphones. A large horn captured the sounds to be recorded. The vibrations of the horn were then etched into the grooves of discs that spun at a speed of roughly 78 revolutions per minute. The resulting “78s” were produced in two sizes: ten-inch discs that could hold about three minutes of music, and 12-inch discs that could hold about five. The process allowed for no editing. What the musician played, the listener heard. A mistake could be corrected only by re-recording the entire piece. Thus, the results were unflinchingly honest.

In 1917, Victor still issued single-sided discs, arguing that they sounded better than double-sided discs. Victor’s ten-inch classical discs on its premium Red Seal label sold for \$1.00 each, while its 12-inch Red Seal discs sold for \$1.50 (about \$18 and \$27 today, when adjusted for inflation). Limitations on recording length and the cost of the records to the consumer influenced the type of music recorded. So did the limitations of the acoustic process. Orchestras, for example, did not record well, with wind instruments (which could be better heard) typically substituting for strings. Thus, the typical 78 disc contained short encore selections and single (sometimes excerpted) movements from longer works such as concertos that were often played with piano

accompaniment. That type of short, accessible repertoire had at least one advantage: it appealed to a broad audience that did not necessarily know much about classical music.

Some attempts were made during the acoustic era to record larger works with orchestra, such as complete concertos, but the resulting sets were sonically deficient and expensive to buy. Heifetz, for example, chose to record only the last movement of the Mendelssohn “Concerto in E Minor” with piano accompaniment in 1920, which conveniently fit on one side of one 12-inch disc. To record even the relatively short Mendelssohn concerto in its entirety would have taken at least five sides, resulting in a cost to the consumer of \$7.50 (the equivalent of about \$134 today).

To understand the impact of Heifetz’s acoustic recordings, listen to the lush tone he produced in Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” the lilting grace of his rendition of Drigo’s “Valse Bluettes,” and the ease with which he tossed off Beethoven’s fiendishly difficult “Chorus of Dervishes” (in an arrangement by Heifetz’s teacher, Leopold Auer). Every note, every octave, is always perfectly in tune. Bazzini’s “La Ronde des Lutins (Dance of the Goblins)” contains four repeated notes (first four F-sharps, then four E naturals), each played on a different string of the violin in rapid-fire succession. The rapidly repeated shifts of the left hand that are required to play the same note on different strings are notoriously difficult to land in tune. Heifetz nails them.

Aside from five movements from concertos by Goldmark, Lalo, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and Wieniawski, the repertoire Heifetz recorded on these acoustic discs consists entirely of short pieces—the longest being his 1919 recording of Sarasate’s enduring showpiece “Zigeunerweisen.” Still, they represent Heifetz doing something for which he is famous: turning three or four-minute trifles into miniature masterpieces. Just listen to his performances of Moszkowski’s “Guitarre” from 1918 or Glazunov’s “Grand Adagio” from 1922.

Heifetz went on to record for another 48 years after 1924: from early electric 78s to stereo LPs. Many of his most memorable and well-known recordings come from those later years—including important collaborations with the likes of Sir Thomas Beecham, Emanuel Feuermann, William Kapell, Serge Koussevitzky, Gregor Piatigorsky, William Primrose, Fritz Reiner, Arthur Rubinstein, and Arturo Toscanini. Nonetheless, his early acoustic recordings capture something special: the playing of a young phenomenon not yet taken for granted in repertoire that won the hearts of audiences around the world.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.