

## Heifetz Up Close



This story concerns one of my great violin teachers, Sam Arron, and a realization he had about violin playing.

Sam Arron was a young music student just about the time that Jascha Heifetz burst upon the American concert stage. Sam and another music student friend of his, attended a Heifetz recital together, but wound up sitting in different places in the auditorium. Sam's friend got a seat in the very high balcony two blocks up into the sky, and Sam got one of the cheap seats right up on stage. They used to do this when the concert was sold out—they would actually put chairs right up on the stage, so they could make more money. This sounds fun, but actually up close is a pretty crummy place to sit; if you've ever been in a crowded movie theater and had to sit way up close next to the screen, straining your neck up, you know that that's not very comfortable—you would prefer to sit further back.

So they listened to the concert, his friend up in the balcony, Sam down in front, "As close to Heifetz as I am to you," he said.. Afterwards, walking down the street on windy Michigan Ave., they discuss the concert:

Sam: "Boy, that Heifetz is no good! He is terrible! He's scrapes, he's squawks, scrape, scratch, crack, crack, hack, hack, squawk, crunch. I never heard so much noise in my life! "

Friend (look of amazement): "What the heck are you talking about? I didn't hear anything like that! I heard only beautiful, clear, strong, perfect playing!"

My teacher puzzled over this contradiction for some time, and gradually came to this realization: that ugly crunch sound, the sound of the bow setting hard on the string with a sharp quick percussive attack,

- a.) is necessary to project the sound into the hall, and
- b.) doesn't carry very far.

Hence, a violin that sounds bad from up close, may also sound beautiful from a distance.

It is sort of like radio. For radio to work, it requires two types of waves: the information wave, and the carrier wave. The carrier wave contains no information, but without it the information wave could not make it to your radio; it is kind of like a piggyback situation, where the information wave rides along on the back of the carrier wave. So, even though the sound of the bow setting on the string can be a little obnoxious, it is necessary to carry the information sound out into the hall.

One of the first phonograph records I ever bought was the great 60s recording of Isaac Stern playing the Tchaikovsky and the Mendelssohn Concertos. This was at a time when the music marketplace was witnessing a great surge of new classical music recordings, and the recording industry was just beginning to perfect its technologies. One of the funky features of the Stern recording is that the microphone is obviously too close; you can hear every crunch and scratch quite clearly, which in portions of the Tchaikovsky concerto reach hurricane proportions. I have heard Stern live, from the balcony, and can swear to you that his sound, in the hall, is seamless, gorgeous, and crunchless.

Actually, any good musician sounds better from a distance than from up close. When a player is playing with relaxation and is able to get the most energy into the instrument, the sound waves don't even begin to peak until at least 20 ft. away—at 20 ft. they begin to spread. I played with a beautiful flutist for many years, and, as a conductor, was tricked many times by this phenomenon; I would be conducting away, trying madly to get the orchestra to play a softer accompaniment for the flute—I was sure they were

drowning her out—but, when I went out into the hall for a sound check, I always found that the flute was much more present than I thought. I gradually learned to trust this principle and to gauge the orchestral balance accordingly.

Music as a signifier of identity has this single duty: to reveal the personal reality of the subjects involved—the composer and the player(s) together in an articulate, composite picture of life. The operative word in the preceding sentence is "articulate." Without clear articulation, musical images become fuzzy and vague. No fuzzy presentations for me! I want my personality to shine out sharp and clear, so I can shout out to the universe. "Here am I!"