

Abstract of DLA dissertation

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Creativity and Interpretation of the Performer  
in Violin Playing at the End of 18th and the  
Beginning of 19th Centuries

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## **I. Background of Research**

My interest in the changing of instrumental performance practice was first aroused by my encounters with historically informed performance. Later, during my studies in the United Kingdom I was acquainted both in theory and practice with the wealth of possibilities in musical performance and the diverse prevailing concepts on interpretation of different eras, which influence also contributed to the writing of my essay.

Although musicology in Western countries has already made considerable efforts to explore the performance practice of past ages, this topic – with particular regard to violin playing – is addressed only by relatively few studies in Hungarian. As in other countries, the task of mapping this field in Hungary will probably be incumbent primarily on violinists. In the course of my research I sought information in instrumental treatises and written records concerning performers' attitude and perspectives on interpretation; furthermore I wished to investigate the idiosyncratic readings and creative additions of performers whose role was in transition between that of the co-author

and of the „transparent performer“. Displaying these findings my aim is to provide a general overview which may serve as base for future, more specific studies.

Several significant, comprehensive works have been published on violin performance practice, as for example *A History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761* by David D. Boyden (Oxford University Press, 1965), *Violin Technique and Performance Practice in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) by Robin Stowell, and, most recently, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Playing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), a book by David Milsom. These ambitious works examine aspects of instrumental technique and of musical performance alike. On performance practice in general, Clive Brown's substantial publication, *Classical and Romantic Performance Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford University Press, 1999) gives a detailed discussion of the most relevant issues.

## **II. Sources**

While the above mentioned works served as secondary sources to my study, my primary sources included the most paramount violin schools and other decisive treatises published in the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, with special emphasis on *Violinschule* by Louis Spohr (Vienna: Haslinger, 1832), and Pierre Baillot's *L'art du violon* (Paris: Dépôt Central de la Musique, 1835). Boris Schwarz's volume, *Great Masters of the Violin* (London: Robert Hale, 1984) provided useful material on prominent violin virtuosos of different centuries.

## **III. Method**

The chapters of the dissertation discuss matters in disparate ways. The first part considers the relation between musical work and musical performance, the liberty of the performer as well as questions of authenticity by juxtaposing opinions of various composers, performers

and present-day musicologists. The second part sketches the work of the founders of the 19th-century French and German schools of violin playing, then tackles the transformation of music life at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and the emerging new challenges it entailed for performers. In the successive chapters I endeavour to present Pierre Baillot's and Louis Spohr's thoughts on virtuosity and interpretation as well as evidence of their attitude as reflected in their violin schools and performing activities. Ornamentation, rubato playing, and cadenza – as some of the concrete manifestations of the performer's creativity – become the focus of scrutiny in the concluding part that draws both on instrumental treatises of the period and on contemporaneous accounts.

#### **IV. Results**

My essay attempts to call attention to the fact that the violin performance practice of the 18th and 19th centuries is a field still in need of investigation.

Although the violin schools of Spohr and Baillot are not only important relics of their era, but also proved to be significant documents in the history of violin playing, they are unfortunately not yet available in Hungarian translation. While my survey on account of its multiple subjects must dispense with in-depth analysis, its purpose is to provide information in Hungarian on the two artists' thoughts on interpretation along with those of their predecessors and contemporaries and to offer an insight into the results of the 20th and 21st century research on violin performance practice.

To highlight factors behind an actual performance such as the performer's personal relation to the musical work and his/her own role may seem unusual, nevertheless – since they have an essential impact on the artist's interpretation – they clearly deserve inspection.

In my opinion obtaining information not only about the history of music, but also about the development of music performance would be necessary for all instrumental artists. The discoveries I found exciting will hopefully enrich other performers and will also give inspiration for further research in this area.



## **V. Documentation of activity related to the subject of the dissertation**

As a practising violinist I intend to capitalise on the information gained through my investigation that has substantially altered my understanding of performance practice. I have already acquired some experience in the field of improvisation and cadenza-composition which I plan to broaden in the future.