

# Changing Aesthetics and Cello Performance 1920–1960

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A number of scholars see the 1920s as a turning point in relation to instrumental playing styles. The rejection of overly romantic modes of performance coincided with the ascendancy of a playing style that sought to represent the letter of the notation over its interpretation. Performers of the era were, as noted by Bruce Haynes, characterised by their "formal clarity, emotional detachment, order and precision" whilst at the same time rejecting the romantic style's "excessive rubato, its bluster, its self-indulgent posturing and its sentimentality."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Richard Taruskin characterises this emerging modernist performance style as "text centred, hence literalistic" and "impersonal, hence unfriendly to spontaneity."<sup>2</sup> Robert Philip's examination of early recordings identifies how these values were manifested in performance as a move "towards greater power, firmness, literalness, clarity and control and evenness of expression, and away from informality, looseness and unpredictability."<sup>3</sup>

While such observations encompass the general instrumental practices of the time, sources of the period which specifically concern the cello, including treatises, memoirs, and of course sound carriers, register a similar aesthetic shift and most describe the modernisation of cello technique. Nevertheless, an examination of the views of cellists during this time reveals varied and often conflicting approaches. This article examines the attitudes towards performance practice of influential cellists of the period, thereby contributing to an understanding not only of the music and emotional climate of the time, but also of the inherited influences of such aesthetic changes today.

Hugo Becker (1863–1941) and Julius Klengel (1859–1933) were both at the forefront of German cello pedagogy in the early twentieth century and embody two opposing schools of thought. Of the two cellists, Becker was, as noted by David Johnstone, more aware of the aesthetic changes occurring during his lifetime, hence it was he who moved more decisively towards modernising cello technique.<sup>4</sup>

Becker's 1929 treatise *Mechanik und Ästhetik des Violoncellospiels*, written in collaboration with physiologist Dago Rynar, outlines practices that are consistent with

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Musical Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance (1900-1950)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 229.

<sup>4</sup> David Johnstone, "Hugo Becker—The German Transition to the Modern Age," Johnstone—music.com, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.johnstone-music.com/articulos/music/6013/vlc12-article-hugo-becker-the-german-transition-to-the-modern-cello-age/>.

Philip's observation of the trend towards more controlled expression. In particular, Becker recommends the regulation of certain expressive devices to avoid overly sentimental playing, which he believed had (regrettably) come to be expected of cellists.<sup>5</sup> He establishes three main rules for the execution of portamento. First, every portamento should be accompanied by a diminuendo, particularly for large intervals and slow left hand slides. Second, consecutive portamenti are prohibited; and third, vibrato should accompany a descending portamento "wherever great passion, sorrow, deep emotion or the expiration of vital force is to be illustrated."<sup>6</sup> Becker also describes the absence of vibrato as having a powerful emotional effect, implying that it is otherwise to be used continuously<sup>7</sup>—another characteristic identified by Philip as prevalent by the 1920s.<sup>8</sup>

Becker's section on rubato is one of the most substantial in the treatise and it is, indeed, the first detailed discussion of the device in the cello literature, perhaps reflecting an attempt to regulate its use (which had arguably been pushed to extremes by the height of his own career). He emphasises the importance of rhythm as the foundation of music and advocates the manipulation of tempo and pulse in accordance with the character of the phrase. Accelerandi should occur at the climax of the phrase to evoke the character of "storming, driving or of a situation of fleeing,"<sup>9</sup> whereas ritardandi may occur at points of rest, signifying "reflection, reserve, hesitation, deliberation," or in preparation for the climax to illustrate struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Such practices also align with what Haynes describes as the modern style, which, he writes, was established by the end of World War II.<sup>11</sup> However, far from advocating the "emotional detachment" which Haynes also attributes to this style, Becker's treatise conveys a desire to elevate a physiological understanding of cello technique to one of equal standing, rather than being superior to, the subjective realm of artistic expression.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the more authoritarian approach of Becker, students of Klengel recall his emphasis on fostering a sense of individuality amongst his pupils.<sup>13</sup> Klengel's ideas regarding technique may be deduced mainly from his substantial output of studies and technical exercises which emphasise left-hand agility but which have little to offer on

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo Becker and Dago Rynar, *Mechanics and Aesthetics of Violoncello Playing* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1929), 250.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> Philip, *Early Recordings*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Becker and Rynar, *Mechanics and Aesthetics of Violoncello Playing*, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Annette Morreau, *Emmanuel Feuermann* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 14.

the subject of interpretation, as if to suggest that this should be left to the discretion of the player.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the styles of his students vary widely. Emanuel Feuermann (1902-1942), one of Klengel's most prominent pupils, places far greater emphasis on technical accuracy than his mentor. Annette Morreau observes a distinct departure by Feuermann from "lugubrious slides and slow vibrato" of the "old style" in his 1927 recording of Chopin's E flat Nocturne.<sup>15</sup> In this recording, Feuermann demonstrates cleaner articulation, a finely focused sound, more accurate intonation and the selective use of portamento.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Feuermann had expressed concern for the condition of German music pedagogy in the 1930s, in particular, the tendency to revere music as an art form at the expense of technique. Instead, like Becker, he advocates the importance of great technique as a vehicle for great artistry.<sup>17</sup> Feuermann's views also conflict with the romantic privileging of personal expression. He writes:

Is not the composition the property of the composer, which is handed to us, the players, only for the purpose of realization, an alien property that we must look after with the greatest conscientiousness and love and input of all our mental and material powers? . . . Every intentional emphasis of one's own personality is a crime against the composition in which only one personality must intentionally be expressed: that of the composer.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Feuermann, Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-1976) studied both with Klengel and briefly with Becker but was far more influenced by Klengel's emphasis on individuality and the importance of personal feeling in performance. Piatigorsky writes:

What an absurdity to say, "Here is a performer who excludes himself" or to insist, "A performer plays Beethoven well only if he himself disappears." If he disappears, he is a corpse. No-one disappears. The performer is a human being. His judgements may be right or wrong but through them he is always there.<sup>19</sup>

Piatigorsky's advice regarding the use of expressive devices similarly encouraged the individuality of the performer, especially with regard to vibrato, which he considered to be the means through which this individuality could best be conveyed. Thus, he advises

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<sup>14</sup> This is most evident in the three volumes of Klengel's *Daily Studies* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1939).

<sup>15</sup> This work for solo piano was arranged for cello by Friederich Grützmacher.

<sup>16</sup> Morreau, *Emmanuel Feuermann*, 298.

<sup>17</sup> Without this approach, Feuermann warns that "the student will be constantly reminded of the seriousness, the majesty, the nobility of the artistic profession, while technique or mechanism will be rejected with contempt." *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Terry King, *Gregor Piatigorsky: The Life and Career of a Virtuoso Cellist* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010), 252.

performers to use the device according to personal taste but with sensitivity to the context in which it is used:

. . . [O]ne cannot vibrate successfully without having a definite musical idea behind the vibrato . . . . He who has only one vibrato for all types of expression is certainly grossly underdeveloped.<sup>20</sup>

He offers similar advice regarding portamento, writing that the device may again be used according to personal taste, but that "the musical phrase must guide the decision."<sup>21</sup> However, as one of Piatigorsky's students recalls, his interpretations were not purely subjective but were always informed by careful study of the score:

He [Piatigorsky] was a very gifted and instinctive player, and always played from his heart, but he was also very interested in finding original editions and manuscripts. He strove to play in an "authentic" manner, way before it was fashionable.<sup>22</sup>

Becker and Klengel's contemporaries in England were William Whitehouse (1859-1935) and Herbert Walenn (1870-1953), both of whom appear to favour the romantic approach.<sup>23</sup> Margaret Campbell summarises Walenn's approach as involving "minimal technical instruction and concentration more on musical matters."<sup>24</sup> In his 1930 memoir, Whitehouse rarely expresses his views on playing style; however he repeatedly praises the late-romantic style of the violinist Joseph Joachim, especially for his interpretations of Bach, but criticises the restriction of rubato in contemporary performances:

(Bach) must have been an out and out revolutionary virtuoso! and not a dry-as-dust person as some would have us believe. Hence the argument in favour of a warm elastic impulsive playing of his works, subject of course to a due sense of proportion- in place of the machine-like regularity that some players adopt!<sup>25</sup>

This contrasts with Becker's views, discussed above, which specifically condemn elasticity and impulsiveness in Bach, suggesting that Whitehouse's style was exactly that which Becker opposed.

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<sup>20</sup> King, *Gregor Piatigorsky*, 259.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>23</sup> Walenn founded the London Cello School which, as well as being a training facility for aspiring professionals and soloists, accepted young beginner cellists and amateurs as his students. Whitehouse taught at three major institutions: the Royal Academy of Music, Royal College of Music, and King's College, Cambridge.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Campbell, "Masters of the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion Guide to the Cello*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 76.

<sup>25</sup> William E. Whitehouse, *Recollections of a Violoncellist* (London: Strad Office, 1930), 96.

In North America, Felix Salmond (1888-1952) was an influential teacher at the Julliard School and the Curtis Institute. Whitehouse names Salmond as one of his favourite pupils, suggesting that they shared similar views on interpretation. Indeed, Bernard Greenhouse (1916-2003) who studied with Salmond for four years, describes Salmond as "a product of the old school" and "a fine artist but his technique was very limited."<sup>26</sup> This suggests that Salmond subscribed to a more romantic approach rather than the modern preoccupation with technique that was shared by Becker and Feuermann.

However, for Greenhouse and many other cellists of the period it was Pablo Casals (1876-1973) who made the most lasting impression as both a teacher and performer.<sup>27</sup> The American cellist Leonard Rose (1918-1984), another student of Salmond, describes Casals's ideas regarding style and technique as definitive innovations for cello playing:

The cello was rather late in developing as a solo instrument. . . . We had to wait for Pablo Casals to come along to really master and improve the contemporary techniques, fingerings and of course style—he was a great artist and musician.<sup>28</sup>

Casals appears to have been the most successful in synthesising both the old and new styles,<sup>29</sup> and this perhaps accounts for his popularity. Whilst Casals did not write a method book, his ideas regarding technique and interpretation are explored by David Blum,<sup>30</sup> Juliette Alvin,<sup>31</sup> and David Cherniavsky<sup>32</sup>. Alvin proposes that Casals's technical innovations evolved to advance the expressive capabilities of the instrument, thus bridging the divide between the emotional and the intellectual, the romantic and the modern:

The whole of Casals's technique is based on music. Its scientific beauty arises from the fact that he has discovered the exact meeting point of the musical needs of the artist, the physical possibilities of the hand, and the inherent nature of the instrument. His technique is not only result of musical genius served by

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<sup>26</sup>Tim Janof, "Conversation with Bernard Greenhouse," Internet Cello Society (1998), accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.cello.org/Newsletter/Articles/greenhouse.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "A Lesson with Leonard Rose: 1978," YouTube video, 1:47, posted January 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZCZwvcvSjM>.

<sup>29</sup> Philip, *Early Recordings*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> David Blum, *Casals and the Art of Interpretation* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977).

<sup>31</sup> Juliette Alvin, "The Logic of Casals's Technique," *The Musical Times* 71, no. 1054 (1930): 1078-1079, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/stable/914302>.

<sup>32</sup> David Cherniavsky, "Casals's Teaching of the Cello," *The Musical Times* 93, no. 1315 (1952): 398-400, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/stable/934445>.

magnificent intellect, but also the fruit of ceaseless industry, indomitable will and patience.<sup>33</sup>

Casals also insisted that interpretation must go beyond the score, expressing frustration towards the purely objective approach emerging at the time:

How curious this fetish of objectivity is! And is it not responsible for so many bad performances? There are so many excellent instrumentalists who are completely obsessed by the printed note, whereas it has a very limited power to express what the music actually means.<sup>34</sup>

Students of Casals were also less divided in their approaches than those of Klengel, and tend to echo Casals's views. One of the most detailed explorations of technique and interpretation of the period is provided by Casals's student and assistant at the École de Normale in Paris, Diran Alexanian (1881–1954). Casals provides the preface to Alexanian's treatise, *Traité théorique et pratique du violoncelle*, suggesting that its ideas were in accordance with his own. Casals praises the volume for its unprecedented modernising of cello technique and for debunking many of the "superannuated prejudices" of previous treatises. He is particularly enthusiastic about its aim to equip the reader with a technique which informs and enhances musical expression:

[N]owhere in it is there to be found a precept of which the application, sustained by artistic taste, would not contribute to the formation of a technique . . . capable of adapting itself to the subtle diversity of expression of the same instrumental formula, according to its various "musical situations."<sup>35</sup>

Alexanian attempts to regulate the use of certain expressive devices but is more explicit than Becker in his description of technical implications for their execution. His account of portamento was, to that time, the most detailed and also the first to explain how to avoid sliding in ways other than simply shifting quickly.<sup>36</sup> He recommends exercises to master the avoidance of ascending and descending portamento when shifting on two strings, and with a change of bow. Portamento between large intervals should be used only if the interval is ascending and even then, "very parsimoniously, and only in case a musical necessity demands it."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Alvin, "The Logic of Casals's Technique," 1078.

<sup>34</sup> J. Ma Corredor, *Conversations with Casals*, trans. Andre Mangeot (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1956), 183.

<sup>35</sup> Pablo Casals, "Preface" in Diran Alexanian, *Traité Théoretique et Pratique du Violoncelle*, (Paris: A. Z. Mathot, 1922), 4.

<sup>36</sup> George William Kennaway, "Cello Techniques and Performance Practices in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2009), 146, [http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2718/1/uk\\_bl\\_ethos\\_509818.pdf](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2718/1/uk_bl_ethos_509818.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Alexanian, *Traité Théoretique*, 57.

While Alexanian is more emphatic than Casals about the continuous use of vibrato which he recognises as a departure from the "old school," he advocates Casals's use of a varied vibrato.<sup>38</sup> He also offers more regulated instructions for its use than Piatigorsky: "spaced and supple" for a *piano* dynamic, and "rapid and nervous" when playing *forte*, with a reduction in width of the vibrato as the register ascends.<sup>39</sup> Alexanian permits its absence in only three situations: (1) fast passages where it is not possible to vibrate on every note; (2) situations requiring a "dull sonority;" and (3) when providing a harmonic voice that would interfere with the melodic line if coloured.

The influence of Casals was also profoundly felt by many twentieth-century virtuoso performers, including Gaspar Cassadó (1897-1966), Maurice Eisenberg (1900-1972), Antonio Janigro (1918-1989), Edmund Kurtz (1908-2004), and Paul Tortelier (1914-1990). Cassadó describes the "indelible impression" made by Casals's playing during his early studies with him. Cassadó particularly valued Casals's ability to "improvise" in performance and to spontaneously change elements of his interpretation, a quality associated with the romantic aesthetic:

Many essential points of the interpretation can't be fixed once and for ever, though a player must imagine them in his mind. But in the process of a performer's interpretation there appears a new factor: inspiration, enthusiasm borne of a moment. It is possible to assert that a great performer is an improviser at the same time. He never performs the same composition twice in the same way."<sup>40</sup>

Literature concerning the interpretation and technical approach of Janigro and Kurtz is limited; there is, however, a record of Eisenberg's ideas in his 1957 treatise *Cello Playing of Today* which reiterates the importance placed by Casals on interpretation informed by good technique and considered phrasing. The volume is even endorsed by Casals himself:

This book should be invaluable to advanced, talented students, who will find within its pages much that will help them to comprehend the reasons for actions which, although, perhaps, accomplished by them instinctively, require conscious understanding if they are to be applied to the utmost advantage. . . . I like especially the way in which the technique is considered in relationship to interpretation, the recurring emphasis laid on such points as phrasing and

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<sup>38</sup> Alexanian maintains that the "old" perception of the vibrato as a symptom of "the lack of control of the pureness of sound" was "based upon an inexactitude." Instead, he writes: "The vibrato is an expressive undulation; principally on the violoncello, this undulation allows of the singing of a phrase, with the charm and intensity of a warm and well-coloured voice." *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>40</sup> Gaspar Cassadó, cited in Lev Ginzburg, *History of the Violoncello* (New Jersey: Paganiniana Publications, 1983), 164.

vocalization, and the use of the illustrations to clarify details without unnecessary verbal explanation.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of Casals's influence on Tortelier is indicated in Blum's volume *Paul Tortelier: A Self-Portrait*, which devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of Tortelier's relationship with Casals. In this chapter, Tortelier confirms his support for many of Casals's ideas including his condemnation of militant objectivity in performance:

Over the last decades there has been a tendency towards "authenticity," towards "respect." Sometimes a critic throws a brick at you for doing something that's not marked in the score or that's not orthodox. . . . We mustn't be too afraid of making the music ours. We should know that we are participants; otherwise there will always be a barrier between the composer and ourselves.<sup>42</sup>

Casals was one of the most innovative and influential cellists of the early twentieth century. His longevity and active international performing and recording career allowed him to transmit his ideas across several generations of cellists until his death in 1973. This had far-reaching implications for the way in which the aesthetic shift described by Taruskin and Haynes affected cellists of the period. Their accounts of 'impersonal' interpretations, 'emotional detachment,' and aversion to spontaneity conflict with the ideas expressed above. Like Casals himself, those cellists who studied with him appear to support elements of the romantic approach to interpretation whilst also observing the need for technical proficiency.

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The preceding analysis has shown that the move away from the nineteenth-century romantic style and aesthetic was never a clear departure; rather it resulted in a multiplicity of attitudes towards the various aspects of musical interpretation. Consistent with general instrumental practices of the time, some cellists advocated the more restricted use of expressive devices such as rubato, portamento, and continuous vibrato. Significantly, several treatises placed greater emphasis on technique, and represent significant advances in the formalisation and codification of cello technique, advances that were highly influential through the course of the twentieth century. However, the romantic style, though in decline, continued in the teachings of cellists such as Salmond, Walenn, and Whitehouse, who privileged emotional expression and individuality. Indeed, the most widely disseminated and influential views, particularly those of Casals and his pupils, successfully integrated aspects of both the modern and romantic styles. For many

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<sup>41</sup> Maurice Eisenberg, *Cello Playing of Today* (London: The Strad, 1957), xvii.

<sup>42</sup> David Blum, *Paul Tortelier: A Self-Portrait* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 153.

cellists, the art of music-making therefore lay not in confinement to the score, or in technical perfection that risked "emotional detachment," but in investigation, a high level of technical skill, and the sensitive and considered (albeit more restrained) use of expressive devices.