

Book Review: "Bach's Solo Violin Works: A Performer's Guide" by Jaap Schröder

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Walls, Peter (2007) "Book Review: "Bach's Solo Violin Works: A Performer's Guide" by Jaap Schröder," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 6. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.200712.01.06
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Book review: Schröder, Jaap. *Bach's Solo Violin Works: A Performer's Guide*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-300-12466-8.

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Jaap Schröder is an eminent violinist whose contribution to period-instrument performance for the last four decades has been immense. He is also an articulate and well-informed teacher – so it is good to have his views on works that violinists of all persuasions regard as cornerstones of their musical and technical development. Readers of this *Performer's Guide* should have near at hand the *Neue Bach Ausgabe* edition, a facsimile of Bach's autograph, and Jaap Schröder's own recording of the solo sonatas and partitas (Naxos 8.557563-64). The book is in two parts: an opening section that deals with Baroque style and technique and a second, longer section in which individual chapters are devoted to each of the six sonatas and partitas. It is full of intelligent practical analysis and sensible advice made from the point of view of someone long used to playing on baroque violins and early bows. In his preface, Mr. Schröder writes, "I can only hope to share the insights I have gleaned from the use of a baroque instrument and its technique, supported by a fair amount of relevant historical information. However, the focus of this study is by no means musicological; artistic choices, checked by an alert stylistic conscience, have always been of primary importance to me" (viii).

That is a fair statement of the book's priorities. Mr. Schröder clearly does have "an alert stylistic conscience" informed by an awareness of issues that musicologists interested in historical performance practice have been exploring during the course of his career. He is well known for having worked at the interface between musicology and performance (in, for example, the Mozart-symphonies recording project of the late 1970s on which he, Neal Zaslaw, and Christopher Hogwood collaborated). What this book seems to reveal is that musicological debate has stimulated and helped shape his musical imagination while, at the same time, his understanding of the issues being discussed has remained somewhat limited.

Tuning principles provide a good example of this. Mr. Schröder encourages violinists to place the third in, say, a dominant chord low rather than exaggerating its leading-note function by pushing it up as advocated by string players of the Casals generation. But his explanation of the underlying theory is not strong. He writes that "Bach adopted a tempered tuning for the keyboard which narrowed all the fifths just enough to be still acceptable to the ear, yet allowed modulations into any key: the so-called well-tempered tuning" (24). Narrowing all the fifths is, of course, exactly what happens in equal temperament and, in any case, Mr. Schröder's statement

rides rough shod over a debate that is still flourishing about exactly what Bach implied by ‘wohltemperierte.’

There are other mismatches between sound musical insight and confused musicological rationale. In encouraging violinists to bring out implied contrapuntal relationships, Mr. Schröder invokes the *style brisé*, a term that he erroneously refers to the treatment of “short motivic units that are ‘broken’ between two or more voices, often in an imitative manner” (117).

Even on purely violinistic matters, the scholarly underpinning is often rather questionable. On the very first page, Mr. Schröder pays tribute to Sol Babitz for his pioneering work in the area and then goes on to praise David Boyden in terms that suggest that he still regards *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761* as an authoritative text.^[1] The more up-to-date and specifically violin entries in his select reading list are few, though he includes Robert Seletsky’s 2004 *Early Music* article^[2] on the old bow and Judy Tarling’s introductory (and, I think, rather limited) book for baroque violinists.^[3] Mr. Schröder’s development both as a performer and as an informed musician seem to have coincided. At the end of the book, Mr. Schröder acknowledges the way in which all performances inevitably reflect the historical context from which they arose. He writes, “My own recording of the six solos will without any doubt be recognized in later decades as typical for the period around 2000” (180). In fact, it would probably be fair to say that they are typical of a musician who came to terms with baroque playing in the decade following the publication of Boyden’s book.

The attitude to vibrato, for instance, is exactly in line with the thinking of the Boyden/Donington generation. On p. 28 we read, “Vibrato has had an expressive function at all times; its application in the ‘warming up’ of long notes was basic to early vocal training. . . Its discreet and sometimes hardly noticeable presence is perfectly compatible with the sound of open strings.” Compare Donington in *The Interpretation of Early Music*: “Totally vibratoless string tone sound dead in any music. It is just as much an illusion to think that early performers preferred it as to think that early singers preferred a ‘white’ tone. Sensitive vibrato not only can but should be a normal ingredient in performing early music.”^[4] Where this certainty about early vocal training comes from, I do not know – but what is absolutely clear is that seventeenth- and

¹ David Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761* (London: Oxford University, 1965, rev. edn. 1990).

² Robert Seletsky, “New Light on the Old Bow,” *Early Music*, Vol. 32, no. 2 (May 2004): 286-301.

³ Judy Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners* (St. Albans: Corda Music Publications, 2004).

⁴ Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963, rev. edn. 1992), 235.

eighteenth-century sources offer a far wider range of options (from rejecting the device outright to recommending it warmly in certain contexts) than seems to be envisaged here.

There is a similar lack of awareness about the breadth of options in such a basic question as how to hold the violin. Mr. Schröder asserts that “well into the baroque era” the violin was often “held against the upper body at an angle that caused the bow to move more vertically than horizontally” (11). This, he says, is “visible in many paintings and art works of the time” (11). Perhaps, but actually the range of positions shown in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art and described in performance treatises is very wide indeed. The famous engraving of Veracini that appeared as the frontispiece to his *Sonate accademiche* (1744)^[5] shows an instrument that is completely horizontal, and Geminiani, in the first-known violin treatise ever directly addressed to serious players, insists that “The Violin must be rested just below the Collar-bone, turning the right-hand Side of the Violin *a little* downwards, so that there maybe no Necessity of raising the Bow very high, when the fourth String is to be struck [my italics].”^[6]

Sometimes there is no appeal to eighteenth-century precedent, as when Mr. Schröder states that “Dotted rhythms, as in the Allemanda of the B minor Partita or the first variation of the D minor Ciaccona, are either hooked or played with separate strokes” (17). There is quite a lot of baroque-era advice on hooking notes in an up-bow, but only as a way of ensuring that the next stressed note in a (bowed-out) dotted group can occur on a down-bow. Pairs of notes hooked in a down-bow are never, so far as I am aware, advocated in an eighteenth-century source. Mr. Schröder relies quite heavily on his own practical experience/experimentation sometimes reinforced by some fairly fallible Baroque authorities, as when he recommends that “Given the shortness of the stick, fast passages are best played in the upper half, as recommended by Bartolomeo Bismantova in his *Compendio musicale* of 1677” (15).^[7] Bismantova is known as a cornettist and the *Compendio* is most notable for its basic advice on wind instruments. Tartini might have seemed a more relevant mentor for playing Bach, though in the Rules for Bowing he urged violinists never to play near the point (or the heel, for that matter).^[8] Later he advised Signora Lombardini to make herself “a perfect mistress in every situation and part of the bow.”^[9]

⁵ Francesco Maria Veracini, *Sonate accademiche* (London and Florence: Author, 1744), frontispiece.

⁶ Francesco Geminiani, *The Art of Playing the Violin* (London: Author, 1751), 1.

⁷ Bartolomeo Bismantova, *Compendio musicale* (MS, Ferrara, 1677).

⁸ Giuseppe Tartini, *Traité des agréments de la musique* (Paris: Pierre Denis, 1770).

⁹ Tartini, *A Letter from the Late Signor Tartini to Signora Maddalena Lombardini (now Signora Sirmen.) Published as an Important Lesson to Performers on the Violin*, trans. Charles Burney (London: R. Bremner, 1771), 5.

But it would be churlish to deny the usefulness of this book. In his epilogue, Mr. Schröder makes it clear that he wrote it with his modern violin students at the Yale School of Music in mind. For such students there is an abundance of sound musical advice. Take, for example, his comments on how to treat the anacrusis that occurs at the beginning of any allemande: “it must be executed very lightly, like the tiny swirl of a pen before the first down-stroke. As a movement of the bow, it must be realised with a mere wrist inflexion preceding the down-bow, not with a true up-bow movement” (118). Here, as so often in the book, we hear a good teacher providing practical and imaginative advice that is conditioned by well-informed musical judgement.

Peter Walls is the author of History, Imagination, and the Performance of Music (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, NY, 2003), and of numerous articles on historical performance practice and the violin, particularly in Early Music and The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, second edition (2001).