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## **Book Review: *Heifetz as I Knew Him*, by Ayke Agus**

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Materials in this book are based on the author's experiences with Heifetz during the last 15 years of his life. Ayke Agus was a talented violinist and pianist who started as a violin student in his master class, and ended up factotum, hostess at his house, and accompanist.

It is not difficult to make the error of thinking that, with respect to a person of genius in some specific field (say, violin performance), the person also has genius level, precognitive abilities in all the other areas of human endeavor; philosophy, politics, social justice issues, etc. That, in other words, a person of genius would exhibit genius across the board, so to speak. This is not the case with Heifetz—and probably not the case with anyone.

Despite his fame and international standing as a concert and recording artist, and the adulation shown to him by many admirers, Heifetz nevertheless exhibited many of the prejudices and shortcomings of his age and era: sexism, superstition, a controlling and difficult nature. Some of the shortcomings may be attributed to the cultural milieu in which he developed, some to his individual upbringing; his youth was entirely sacrificed to this art and supporting his family. Whatever the reasons, though his performances may have been perfect, many of his attitudes were not.

He liked to enlighten me on the subject of the male-female relationship and explained countless times that human life essentially is based on a continuous tension, which he viewed as a kind of game, between man and woman. As for his role in this tension, he was a confirmed male chauvinist, deeply convinced of male superiority; his opinions on the subject were full of bigoted clichés and antiquated principles about women's role in married life and society. (p. 139)

But all of that is rather understandable and can be forgiven, in light of his contributions to music. The *mémoire* has much to teach about violin performance, interpretation and string pedagogy. In no particular order of importance, some of the issues in the master class include:

1. Insistence on professional dress, even during lessons (no sneakers or bangs that cover the face—dresses and suits)
2. Insistence on keeping violin and bow spotless—and his rosin was even across the top, not the groove in the middle
3. Insistence that students dispense with the shoulder rest and string the inner two strings of the violin with gut strings
4. It was required that students play all major and minor scales and arpeggios, in all keys, and 3rds, 6ths, 10ths, and parallel and fingered octaves
5. Heifetz did not really teach technical material, aside from the insistence on mastering all the scales (see above), but he did know what études to recommend to remedy any student's technical deficiencies, and he practiced the études regularly, himself
6. Thought students over 25 incapable of acquiring new technical facility
7. Had no respect for degrees, diplomas, certificates, etc; thought that if a player were good enough, they would come to be recognized
8. Same attitude towards contests
9. Would not work with "prodigies"
10. To test and develop students' musicianship, he would change fingerings, bowings, positions, dynamics, in odd ways designed to throw them off
11. There was no arrogance in the way he taught, even when he demonstrated a passage; rather, "His demonstrations were those of a craftsman revealing all the secrets of his trade to his apprentice." (p. 57)
12. Students expected to also play viola and piano (excellent advice)

A lot is omitted, due to the brevity of this review—such as the practice by Heifetz of insisting students use the whole bow, and if they didn't, humorously offering them this tiny 12" bow he kept on hand. His actual work with her as an accompanist (e.g., making the piano sound like various orchestral instruments), and a great deal more, besides, cannot fit into a brief review. But it's well worth reading, especially for performing players and teachers.

Here's another quote, and I think an important one, found at the end of the first chapter. It is natural that much of his behavior was shaped by the circumstances of his world fame, and isolation as a child:

Heifetz had built an impenetrable barrier around himself as protection for his innermost uncertainties about his worth as a human being. Because of that, he was the target of personal and impersonal criticism, often deeply rooted in jealousy. His personality was so complex that it obscured understanding of his motives, his actions and reactions, and even his art. (p. 18)

"deeply rooted in jealousy" is interesting. I don't think she means that Heifetz was jealous of anyone, but the opposite: people were jealous of him—and behaved badly because of it; this would be the impetus to much of his behavior: not wanting people to pry, not accepting appointments without prior notice, not wanting to gossip or be quoted.

There are numerous videos of the Heifetz master class on YouTube. According to the author (p. 50) the Heifetz master class videos were filmed in 1962, ten years prior to her entry to the class, and don't reflect the best of his teaching, nor how he was teaching 10 years later. She wrote that the videos were made to showcase his best and most prepared students, but his best teaching was evident in his work with the new students.

It is not globally established that Heifetz was the greatest violinist ever; Oistrakh holds that position in Japan, by all reports. It is also not established that he was a great teacher. He didn't deal with technical matters, at all, but left that to the teaching assistants. Mostly he just stirred matters up by observing the already-trained player, and pushing them with alternative rhythms, tempi, dynamics, articulations, and doing things like not turning pages as expected. He wouldn't even take older students, younger students, students who expressed themselves as intellectuals (which he despised), or any student who refused to go along with his stipulations as to clothing and demeanor. He thought the way a student looked was as important (to their career, perhaps) as the way they played. The one very young prodigy that might have been accepted into the master class was refused admission because Heifetz's name was spelled wrong on the application.

When Heifetz decided that Ms. Agus would become his accompanist and later, work for him in his home, the decision was preceded by nearly a semester of uncertainty, where she was accompanying the class and studying piano, but had no secure position. He told her that she didn't need to study violin with him, and was already capable of getting some violin job with her current skill level on violin. He wanted her to work for him, and be shaped by him as an artist, and her finances were such (she had to buy a good piano for her home, in order to work there with his students, preparing them for his class), that she really didn't have much choice in the matter. Had she not made the choice to accept the accompanying position, Heifetz indicated she would not be studying violin with him. By her report, she was hurt by this, but she mentions frequently that the cultural attitudes of her Chinese-Indonesian background influenced her compliant behavior.

Heifetz read Russian novels, *National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, books on art and the biographies of artists (musicians, composers, actors, etc.). His view was that musicians should study all the arts, not just music (p. 177). He was fastidious about decorating, gardening, organizing his music, entertaining. But social justice issues, especially with respect to women, did not seem to concern him. Sexism, like

racism, has existed in the human community since prehistory, but notable minds have criticized these kinds of prejudices, and it diminishes someone's stature when they are compliant with the norm.

The author never mentions that she was paid for her work in his home: cooking, keeping him company in the evenings, driving him back and forth between his home in Beverly Hills and his beachfront property in Malibu. She even crawled on his roof and fixed tiles. He did not like to come home alone to an empty house, and would call her, even at 11:00 at night, so that she could be there if the housekeepers were off, to fix him a drink and perhaps play cards. It almost appears that he thought of her as a species of servant, and took advantage of her because of her status as a female. She also notes that when he died, his family informed her that her duties were over.

The question becomes, why would anyone feel obliged to do a moment's work for anyone, without getting paid? Because he played the violin brilliantly, had an international reputation and was wealthy because of it? Because he was in a prominent position at the university? Those are not good enough reasons to abase oneself like that, and allow someone to use you in whatever capacities you have to offer.

This is a dense and well written book. In the Acknowledgments she credits the father of her son (so referred, rather than "my husband"), with "help in verbalizing" her story and "editing the manuscript." Editing does not mean writing, of course; but if she didn't write it herself, I would be surprised.

Heifetz was difficult, he was sexist, and—like so many people with extremely high intelligence—he routinely manipulated people for his own ends. So our hero is not perfect, but human. All the more reason to set aside the personality (as one so often has to do with artists) and focus on the art.

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## Further Reading

### Books:

- Herbert R. Axelrod: [Heifetz](#)
- Galina Kopytova: [Jascha Heifetz: Early Years in Russia](#)
- Sherry Kloss: [Jascha Heifetz Through My Eyes](#)
- Andrew Previn: [No Minor Chords: My Days in Hollywood](#)

### DVD:

- Jascha Heifetz, Peter Rosen (Director), [Jascha Heifetz: God's Fiddler](#)

