

Home Sweet 'Home'

When Jascha Heifetz met Americana
songwriter Stephen Foster

BY SHERRY KLOSS

STEPHEN COLLINS FOSTER, BELOVED SONGWRITER of the 19th century, was born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. He devoted his short and troubled life to the composition of more than 200 "folk" songs inspired by the American culture of his time. His world reflected the aftermath of the War of 1812 and the impending outbreak of the Civil War. In the 20th century, native Pittsburghers proudly sang his treasured ballads from an early age in grade-school music classes.

The songs are true melodies, and they charmingly characterize the sentiments of nostalgia, joy, melancholy, and humor.

Jascha Heifetz, born in 1901 in Vilnius, Lithuania (Russia), escaped the Bolshevik Revolution with his family and made his home in America. He never hesitated to share with his students the importance of the privileges accorded to American citizens. If the Presidential election happened to fall on a class day, he enjoyed dipping into his jacket pocket to reveal his "stub" (receipt of his vote). His students quickly learned that if they were eligible to vote, then they had better do the same and cast their vote!

Understanding the great sense of personal responsibility that Heifetz felt as a citizen of a free country, it is appropriate that he would champion works of American composers including George Gershwin and Stephen Foster, whose music he transcribed for violin.

FROM THE TOP

Jascha Heifetz' transcription of Foster's "Old Folks at Home" (excerpted on pages 22–23) was completed in Beverly Hills, California, in 1939. This beloved song could not have been set in a more exquisite way. Under a tempo marking of *Moderato*, the piano introduction contains fragments of the melody to come, with rolled left-hand harmony in a harplike strum.

The violin enters with the theme intended to be played entirely on the G string with a "swing" to the rhythm: eighth note to dotted quarter, dotted quarter to eighth note. In the next statement, the theme is played one octave higher on the A string. This time the rhythm is totally unadorned

and consists of quarter-, half-, and eighth-note values. Heifetz fills out the harmony by adding double-stops consisting of fifths, sixths, and passing thirds. The secondary part to the theme appears at measure 21 in a simplified line with the indication *forte espressivo*, making the most of the D-string timbre. This continues with the addition of double-stops in fourths, which add a tension to the now very chromatic piano harmony. At measure 25, another statement of the antecedent segment of the theme is placed on the G string in straightforward rhythm, until a fermata in the melody provides us with true enjoyment of the moment.

A lushly written piano interlude (omitted from our excerpt) contains the same melodic content of the opening violin statement, however this treatment now reveals Heifetz's particular genius of reinventing familiar material in new ways: The simplistic piano chords of the opening accompaniment now are fully harmonized with American parlor-style piano bass rhythm, chromaticism, and modulations into tonalities Stephen Foster would never have dreamed of.

When the violin enters again at measure 37, the rhythmic swing returns, amid double-stops of all varieties. The chorus of the song is intensified by the use of insistent glissandi fourths up and down as the piano plays a Bachlike eighth-note counterpoint that contains hidden references to segments of the melody. This builds to a fortissimo *molto espressivo* in measure 49, where the violin plays the melody in high octaves with the rhythmic swing. The piano is harmonized with wild and effective chromatic chords magnified by fifth and octave left-hand grace notes that emphasize the theme at its peak.

Beginning with the pickup to measure 53, the violin plays the theme one last time on the D and G strings, with a mezzo piano *espressivo e dolce* indication. The low F in the left-hand piano serves as a dominant pedal point, while the right hand provides chromatic and harmonic richness. In the *Meno mosso* the lovely nostalgia of this Stephen Foster melody is "sung" on the G string in all of its glory, bringing together the straightforward and "twisted" rhythms. The piano strikes anthemic chords, pauses for a fermata, and then Heifetz' twinkling smile appears in the final measures using the note progressions B♭ A G F E♭ D.

The concluding *molto ritard tempo* indication gives us the opportunity to cherish some "stolen moments" with the unforgettable melody to Foster's "Old Folks at Home," also known as "Swanee River," which was to become the official state song of Florida in 1851. □



AMERICANA: Stephen Foster had a rare gift for melody.