

THE AVANT-GARDE SHERLOCK HOLMES

by JENS BYSKOV JENSEN

One thing that is very clear to anyone who reads the Canon is that Sherlock Holmes was a keen musician. He played the violin well and had a wide knowledge of composers as well as performers and violinmaking. But was that all? I agree that it sounds like a great deal already, but was Holmes captivated by his musical interest to the same extent he was by solving mysteries?

Let us consider what has often been thought of as the strange side of Holmes's musical habits. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson tells us the following about Holmes's way of violin playing:

That he could play pieces, and difficult pieces, I knew well, because at my request he has played me some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder*, and other favourites. When left to himself, however, he would seldom produce any music or attempt any recognized air. Leaning back in his arm-chair of an evening, he would close his eyes and scrape carelessly at the fiddle which was thrown across his knee. Sometimes the chords were sonorous and melancholy. Occasionally they were fantastic and cheerful. Clearly they reflected the thoughts which possessed him, but whether the music aided those thoughts, or whether the playing was simply the result of a whim or fancy, was more than I could determine.

What sort of violin playing is this? Is this perhaps the wrong question? Perhaps we should consider Holmes's actions here from a broader perspective. What on earth is the man doing?

Let us consider the facts: Holmes is sitting in an armchair with his violin across his knees. There are two reasons why this is not a good way of playing this instrument. First is the difficulty you will experience with the armrests when trying to move the bow across the strings. Second is in fact much the same—when you are used to moving the bow across the strings on a violin held horizontally, it will be very difficult suddenly to do the same on a vertical violin. And what is the point? If it was Holmes's intention to make music, why sit in a way that makes it almost impossible? Or maybe the question should be asked in another way: If Holmes was not making music, what then was he doing?

It was very clear to Watson that Holmes's task, sitting with the violin in this way leaning back in an armchair, was an important one—a task that was not to be disturbed. This was evident from the energy and concentration that Holmes

projected into the scratching, melancholic, and cheerful sounds that escaped the violin. All sorts of moods came from the instrument, including some very unpleasant scraping sounds, which did not sound at all like Mendelssohn or any other type of music. Could Holmes perchance be experimenting with the instrument? And if so, why would he do that—to what purpose?

We may have a look at the musical and artistic atmosphere at the time of *A Study in Scarlet*. The case occurs around 1881 or 1882; the chronologists disagree. In the 1880s the Austrian cultural critic and author Hermann Bahr introduced the concept “Modern” (*Die Moderne*) as a slogan for the new radical changes in art. One of the new developments was a growing artistic contact between the European countries, so for instance authors in the outskirts of Europe became generally known throughout central Europe. The feeling in the artistic mind was a restless one, which called for something new and drastic, and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche probably captured it best when he talked about “reevaluating all values.”¹

These ideas did not come suddenly. They were caused by a development throughout the century, and as early as around 1840 Auguste Comte, of France, had developed ideas that would be known as positivism. “The mentality of this school of thought was consciously mundane, rested on things that could be experienced, and sought to describe the investigated phenomena, whether it was natural or human conditions, as facts submitted to lawfulness.”² It would not be surprising if Holmes were interested in this line of thought. A man who sees chemistry as an important part of his life must to some extent be a positivist.

Another hint could be the passage in *A Study in Scarlet* where he says:

I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilled workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order.

Just the idea seems to me as taken directly from a positivistic handbook. Consider a fragment of Holmes’s own “The Book of Life,” from *A Study in Scarlet*: “From a drop of water . . . a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link

of it.” Anyhow, a true positivist would probably at some point become a victim of an exclamation like the one given to Holmes by Watson in *The Sign of the Four*: “You really are an automaton—a calculating machine.”

It was not only in the philosophical field of Comte that these ideas took root. In literature it was established as naturalism under authors such as Balzac, Maupassant, Flaubert, and Zola. In England the main exponents were Dickens and Darwin.

So, these ideas started to emerge up through the nineteenth century, but how about the musical scene? In England the musical development had been less than nil ever since the glorious days of Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) and up past the mid-nineteenth century. The musical life of the day had never decreased, though. Music was played everywhere and regular concerts were arranged. But the development of music itself as an art form was not present. This was probably due to the lack of thorough musical education. In this field Germany was ahead at this time, and the change did not come until just before the turn of the century, when men such as Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) and Sir Hubert Parry (1848–1918) made the foundation for progression. The Royal College of Music in London was established in 1883 and is now one of England’s leading academies of music. Sir Hubert Parry was director here between 1894 and 1918.³

Both Stanford and Parry were thus pioneers of what has been known as the nineteenth-century “renaissance” of English music—not only because of their efforts in the field of education but also as composers. The elements of this “renaissance” in the music itself were characterized by the influence of national folk music and English music from its days of glory in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Another pioneer, who joined the “renaissance” a bit later than Stanford and Parry, was Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934). He also contributed greatly to putting England back on the musical map—also outside the United Kingdom.

It was not until Sir Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) entered the stage that England received a new, truly English sound and way of making music. Vaughan Williams was also very influenced by national folk music, but where, for example, Stanford’s “Irish Rhapsodies” only use folk music and folk song as a spice, all these influences were to become integrated into the music of Vaughan Williams and be an essential part of his personal expression:

In 1904 Vaughan Williams established contact with the Folk-Song Society, which had been founded a few years earlier, and in the following years he made a comprehensive collection of English folk music—at the same time as Bartók and Kodály in the opposite part of Europe.⁴

Yes, an essential part of the new development was a large exchange of ideas and contact throughout the countries of Europe. And the composer who has ever since then been linked with collection of folk music and allowing this to influence and merge with his own composition was the Hungarian pianist and professor of music Belá Bartók (1881–1945). Bartók and his friend and fellow composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) collected folk songs and folk music throughout Hungary, the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa. They wrote down both music and lyrics and recorded everything on wax cylinders.

The main theme of the musical and cultural change at this time was a search for something new. For centuries music and art had been developed from what then seemed to be a set of everlasting rules. In music these rules were tonality. But now composers began to realize that everything had been tried before—nothing new could be made, unless the rules were changed. And thus the search began. Some of the composers found their new inspiration in folk music; some went other ways. But it was common to all of them that the idea of a musical major/minor tonality had to be tampered with. Some composers—like the New Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) and the Impressionists (Debussy, Satie, Ravel)—even omitted it.

Have we lost our connection with Sherlock Holmes? Not quite. Stanford and Parry were influenced by the German musical education system. Vaughan Williams was educated at the new Royal College of Music in London. After finishing his education there, he went to Germany to study with the composer Max Bruch (1838–1920) in Berlin during the 1890s.⁵ It seems that London was very influenced by German music at this time—as was Holmes. At the time of “The Red-Headed League” Holmes uttered: “I observe that there is a good deal of German music on the programme, which is rather more to my taste than Italian or French.”

As we learned earlier, the musical and cultural change was in full swing during the last decades of the nineteenth century—especially in England—so Holmes was right in the middle of it. Let us then return to Baker Street: Holmes is sitting in an armchair by the fireplace leaning back into the comfortable seat with his eyes closed. His violin is thrown across his knees, and a sonorous sound full of the deepest melancholy escapes the instrument. The Stradivarius moans for a couple of minutes, then everything changes, and the most cheerful, sparkling sounds fill the room. What is this?

Several Sherlockians have given thought to this question. The first was Guy Warrack in *Sherlock Holmes and Music*:

It is very doubtful whether Holmes ever played any of the great classics for unaccompanied violin. If we can judge by purely negative evidence, as

Holmes himself did in ‘the curious incident of the dog in the night-time’, the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a closed book to him. Still, one feels instinctively that Holmes was more likely to be a Bach-lover than Watson with his monodic leanings, and it is just possible that when Holmes produced chords that were sometimes ‘sonorous and melancholy’, sometimes ‘fantastic and cheerful’, he was practising the Chaconne. On the other hand, most violinists find it difficult enough to make a convincing show of Bach’s solo-violin works even holding their instruments in a more orthodox way than thrown across their knees.⁶

Perhaps it is plausible that some hints to Holmes’s taste in music may be given by negative evidence, as Warrack suggests, simply because not one single piece from the conventional violin repertoire is mentioned in the Canon. But then, it does seem quite strange, following an idea like that, to suggest a piece like the *Chaconne* (originally: *Ciaccona*, red.) from Johann Sebastian Bach’s (1685–1750) *Partita 2, in d-Minor*, BWV 1004, for solo violin. This piece is part of the three Partitas and three Sonatas written by Bach for solo violin, and all six pieces are frequently on the standard violin repertoire. However, none of Bach’s music for solo violin is easy, and in order to play it in a way that will not scare off any listeners, skills that are close to professionalism must be had. The movement mentioned by Warrack, the *Ciaccona* from *Partita 2*, is in fact one of the most difficult of these movements. With its 256 bars of complex chords, fierce arpeggios, and fast-running scales it is by far the longest movement of the entire three Partitas and three Sonatas.⁷

Five different recordings give the following number of playing minutes for the *Ciaccona*—with violinists Sergei Azizjan [14:35], Henryk Szeryng [14:22], Monica Huggett [14:10], Gidon Kremer [12:47], and Sigiswald Kuijken [12:00].⁸ In comparison, the second-longest movement of the three Partitas and three Sonatas is the Fuga of the *Sonata 3 in C-Major*, BWV 1005, which plays from 8–11 minutes in the above recordings. The Fuga contains 354 bars and is thus longer in print than the *Ciaccona*, but it is a lot lighter and not by far as complex. One question remains: Why would Warrack choose one of the most difficult movements in the violin literature as a probable piece played in an awkward position by Holmes? Especially after suggesting a search through negative evidence for Holmes’s musical taste, since Bach is not mentioned anywhere in the Canon, either? Why indeed. The reasoning seems blurred.

A very interesting article on this subject was published in *The New York Times* on 7 March 1965 and later reprinted in the JOURNAL. The article was by Harold C. Schonberg, who claimed:

Dr. Watson never said that Holmes threw a violin across his knees. The word Dr. Watson used was “fiddle.” It so happens that the fiddle family is a large and very old one. In Renaissance times there were all kinds of gamba instruments, many of which were played in the lap or across the knees. Of course, Holmes played the violin, and played it as all violinists do. But the man who knew all about Lasso would also have a variety of old instruments in his flat at 221B Baker Street. The chances are that Holmes was playing a *vielle*. The *vielle* is described by Karl Geiringer in his history of musical instruments (Oxford University Press, 1945) as a 5-peg instrument that was a precursor of the violin. Another name for the *vielle*, says Dr. Geiringer, was “fiedel,” which of course means “fiddle.” Let’s, for goodness sake, give Dr. Watson credit for being accurate. He said “fiddle,” and he meant “fiddle”; and he was dead right.⁹

This does sound plausible. Even though a *vielle* would be hard to find—maybe even harder than finding a Stradivarius—it is possible that Holmes had one. If this were the case, I wonder whether Watson would not have described the situation in the armchair differently. If Holmes were playing a *vielle*, Watson would probably just have made a lighthearted comment on Holmes messing around with antique instruments, would he not?

Rolfe Boswell put forward the idea that Holmes’s violin was in fact a viola: “Sherlock’s Stradivarius, certainly, was a viola; and it may very well have been an unusually large viola, since he is shown to have been experimenting with an alternative position for playing it.”¹⁰ Some may even argue that this also explains the unpleasant sounds, but I am not completely convinced. From Watson’s narrative it seems to me as if Holmes’s unusual music making took place sitting down. Why? Perhaps because it was essential to him to have his eyes closed in order to listen more intensely, and if he sat in an armchair, he did not have to use any energy or thought on standing up with closed eyes. Intense listening was certainly required if he was going to invent something new—new chords, new sounds, new music. The unusual way of playing ensured him that he would not fall back on old, traditional habits.

We know that Holmes had an interest in musicology. During “The Bruce-Partington Plans” he lost himself in the study of Orlando di Lasso’s motets. Was this perhaps also part of the “renaissance”—the search for something ancient or native to inspire the growth of new, modern music? Was Holmes perhaps going through the same stages of search for this new image of art music as was Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna? We have a hint in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that Holmes’s taste in art was rather radical or even avant-garde, at least compared to Watson’s:

For two hours the strange business in which we had been involved appeared to be forgotten, and he [Holmes] was entirely absorbed in the pictures of the modern Belgian masters. He would talk of nothing but art, of which he had the crudest ideas, from our leaving the gallery until we found ourselves at the Northumberland Hotel.

Perhaps Holmes's "crude ideas" applied to art in general, not just painting but also music.

Was Holmes trying to invent new, modern music sitting in the armchair scraping on his violin? I am inclined to think yes. One of the major inventors in modern classical music was, as mentioned before, Bartók.¹¹ (Frank Whitaker interviewed Bartók in his home in Budapest. The resulting article, "The Most Original Mind in Modern Music," appeared in *Radio Times* (February 1932, p. 504). One day Whitaker chanced to see Bartók at work, and he wrote:

I remember calling on him one hot afternoon at his flat in Budapest and finding him with a sidedrum on his knee and a rapt look on his face. In one hand he had a drum-stick; with the other he was fiddling with the snares, or catgut strings, that are stretched across a sidedrum to make it rattle. A pair of cymbals lay at his feet. I wish I remembered exactly what he was doing with them all, but I don't. However, the point is that he had discovered a new effect, and for the next five minutes or so, having motioned me to a chair, he alternately thwacked the drum with a startling vigour and listened to the echoes wide-eyed and still, like a thrush that hears a footstep on the lawn.¹²

Bartók was well known for his piercing, wide-eyed look. Apparently, this was also on his face when he was concentrating in his work. Holmes is well known for leaning back into his armchair and closing his eyes—both when he was listening to the details of a client's case, and when he perhaps was investigating modern music. Apart from that I think the above incident in Bartók's apartment in Budapest sounds very similar to what Holmes was doing leaning back in his armchair with closed eyes scraping across his violin. Sherlock Holmes "was an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit." Suddenly these words of Watson's from the time of "The Red-Headed League" gain a new meaning in their own right.

NOTES

1. *Gads Musikhistorie* (Gad's Music History, ed.), Copenhagen: GEC Gad, 1990, p. 421.

2. *Gads Musikhistorie*, p. 424.
3. *Gads Musikleksikon* (Gad's Music Encyclopaedia, ed.), Copenhagen: GEC Gad, 1976, p. 388.
4. *Gads Musikhistorie*, p. 441.
5. *Gads Musikleksikon*, p. 477.
6. Guy Warrack, *Sherlock Holmes and Music*, London: Faber & Faber, 1947, pp. 27–28.
7. J. S. Bach, *Sechs Sonaten und Partiten für Violine solo*, BWV 1001–6, Urtext, Munich: G. Henle Verlag, pp. 35–41.
8. Sergei Azizjan: J. S. Bach, *Partitas for Solo Violin*, Classico, Classical 161; Henryk Szeryng: J. S. Bach, *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, Deutsche Grammophon, 453 004–2; Monica Huggett: J. S. Bach, *Partita 2–Sonate – Partita 3*, [Cd 2]; Gidon Kremer: J. S. Bach, *The Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, Philips, 416 651–2; Sigiswald Kuijken: J. S. Bach, *Drei Sonaten und drei Partiten für Violine Solo*, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, 05472 775727 2.
9. Harold C. Schonberg, “Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 1965), pp. 83–85.
10. Rolfe Boswell, “Quick, Watson, the Fiddle!” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* [O.S.], Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct. 1948), pp. 435–440.
11. Bartók is buried in Ferncliff Cemetery, Hartsdale, N.Y.—the same cemetery as Basil Rathbone. Judi Culbertson and Tom Randall, *Permanent New Yorkers: An Illustrated Guide to Cemeteries of New York*, Chelsea, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1987, pp. 337, 339–342. Special thanks to Marina Stajic for telling me about this connection.
12. Malcolm Gillies, *Bartók Remembered*, London: Faber & Faber, 1990, p. 75.