

PLAYING AND FIGHTING AS AN ELECTRIC VIOLINIST

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ABSTRACT

The violin is an instrument used in various musical genres. Besides preserving, elaborating, and valuating the classical form of the instrument as well as the classical violin repertory, an electronic version of the instrument has entered the music business many decades ago. It allows the musician to produce sounds ranging from classical violin sounds to electric guitar or even electric bass sounds. Nora Kudrjawizki ('Angelstrings', 'One Violin Orchestra') is an electric violinist living in Berlin and using the instrument for as many different genres and occasions as possible: playing Nirvana songs or fighting with the violin bow as an improvised sword to 'Pirates of the Caribbean' music as part of her performance. Her work will be presented as a case study and will be set into a bigger framework with further electric violinist statements generated from the literature. I focus on the differences in the instrumentalist–instrument relation when playing electric or acoustic. My aim is to prove that the electric violin is mostly used to play public and impress others and that there are also musically interesting aspects and individual experiences that should be valued.

KEYWORDS

Electric violin, Music business, Performance studies, Expressive demands, Instrumentalist–instrument relation

INTRODUCTION

In the 16th century, a string instrument known as an early version of today's violin was first mentioned in France and Italy (Melkus, 1979: 41-42). Until now, the acoustic violin is a pivotal instrument in orchestras as well as smaller ensembles like quartets and a solo instrument.

The electric violin usually is not seen as an original instrument, and its construction differs a lot from the acoustic violin. Many electric violins don't have a resonating corpus, and one may argue that the instrument therefore doesn't even fit the organological definition of 'violin' (as part of the lute family of instruments) but becomes a zither (von Hornbostel and Sachs, 1914)².

Still, the electric violin culturally is perceived as a violin as it is played by the same people: violinists. As an acoustic violinist myself, having played with many different violinists, I never heard or read about an electric violinist who had not been trained in classical, lute-kind of violin techniques first. So, the electric violin is not an instrument chosen by teachers or parents to introduce young children to musical practice. Obviously, only people who are already instrumentalists decide to play the electric violin. And even for people already trained on the acoustic instrument, there are not many (institutionalized) opportunities to get in touch with the electric violin or to play in an ensemble (whereas there are various opportunities to join amateur orchestras or ensembles when playing the so-called acoustic violin). In general, the electric violin seems to be explored mostly by professional violinists interested in challenging musical

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² Classification of musical instruments according to von Hornbostel and Sachs: <https://www.musikwissenschaft.uni-wuerzburg.de/musikinstrumente/organologie/systematiken/hornbostelsachs/>, last visited: 16 May, 2021.

experiments, for example, Victoria Johnson's New Music experiments,³ and/or by people interested in a cross-genre-career in the show business such as the 1970s 'Mahavishnu Orchestra'⁴.

I am curious to know whether electric violinists such as Nora Kudrjawizki, a violinist from Berlin, regard both kinds of violins as the same instrument or not and if they describe their own relation to the electric instrument differently from their relation to the acoustic instrument learnt since childhood. Do they play the electric violin just to be heard in bigger halls or is there anybody playing the electric violin for himself or herself as an intimate pleasure that needs no listeners? I was looking for interesting statements and held one longer interview with Nora Kudrjawizki that I am going to present as a case study in this context.

I would like to start by quoting Trueman who described the experience of learning to play the electric violin in his PhD thesis as follows:

“The first thing a violinist notices when playing electric is that the primary sound source is no longer directly under the ear. This sense of *detachment* can be at once both empowering and distressing. Freed from the limits of the box that fits on our shoulder and projects squarely into our ear, we can turn the volume up and point the amplifier at our electric guitarist friend, deafening him with gruesome *ponticello*. On the other hand, there is a striking loss of intimacy, even with a small amplifier placed nearby. What was once a voice whispering in our ear becomes a remote presence, no longer seeming part of our body” (Trueman, 1999: 5–6).

Trueman described the advantage of impressing the other instrumentalist when playing electric. But he also noted a loss of intimacy which seems to confirm my thought that an electric violin is impressive to the outside, whereas it is more satisfying to play acoustic for the violinist himself or herself. He described the amplified music as ‘no longer seeming part of our body’, so less personal. But he also mentioned feeling ‘freed from the limits of the box that fits on our shoulder’. I would like to put a focus on the idea of overcoming these limits.

The acoustic violin works via vibration: the wooden violin bridge passes the string's vibration to the wooden corpus. This corpus is mostly hollow, but there are also a wooden bass bar and a wooden sound post inside the corpus stimulated by the vibration (Melkus, 1979: 8). Most electric violins – but not all – are wooden too, but as there is no hollow, resonating corpus the strings' vibration can't be transmitted to a common medium. So, each string is vibrating independently, which makes the instrument getting definitely a zither-like attitude.

For me, playing – and most of all – tuning my acoustic violin sitting in the middle of a noisy orchestra, is hard to imagine without feeling the right vibration transmitted by the wooden corpus to my chin, to my jaw. When tuning, I often don't listen to my strings, but I feel if the vibration of two strings played at once is right or not.

This is not possible with an electric violin, but of course, it is not necessary too, as electric violinists don't sit in the middle of an orchestra where everybody is tuning the instrument at once.

When playing the electric violin, the instrumentalist hears the sound being reflected back to himself or herself depending on the amplifier or a whole technical system. Lähdeoja et al. employ the term ‘instrumental environment’ for the electric guitar noting:

“It is comprised of acoustic, electromechanical and digital parts, all of which are integrated into an instrumental environment. [...] The instrumental environment offers a high degree of configurability for the musician: tone woods, pick-ups, effects, amplifiers, loudspeakers, etc.

³ ‘Transformation’ by Alexander Refsum Jensenius and Victoria Johnson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTk7vZsj7Fc>, last visited: 14 April, 2021.

⁴ The Mahavishnu Orchestra: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-0bMRcBik4>, last visited: 14 April, 2021.

All these elements can be chosen separately and therefore allow for thorough customization of the instrument” (Lähdeoja et al., 2010: 41-42).

I would like to adopt this term for the electric violin. The instrumental environment may differ for the violinist from one concert to the other, whereas the acoustic violin always stays on the shoulder vibrating close to our skin and bones. So, even though instrumentalists changing from the classical to the electric violin do not have to learn a lot of new finger techniques, they still have to get used to completely new circumstances.

But the difficulties in playing this somehow different instrument don't hold up violinists who find something that makes it worth putting all this effort in.

I held an interview with Nora Kudrjawizki, an electric violinist from Berlin, who studied the classical violin at conservatories in Berlin and Dresden before she decided to go for a pop career and bought her first electric violin in order to be able to play in big halls. Asked about new possibilities and new limits when playing the electric violin, she said:

“You can play all songs on the electric violin, but you cannot play everything on a classical violin, because the circumstances change a lot. If you want to play pop in a big hall, you need an electric violin. [...] There are no songs that I would not be able to play on the electric violin” (Kudrjawizki & Seidlitz, 2021).

Answering so, Nora automatically put the focus on the public performing context, thus strengthening my initial thought that an electric violin is used most of all to impress others.

'ANGELSTRINGS' – A SHOW CONCEPT WITH ELECTRIC VIOLINS

Nora Kudrjawizki is a founding member and playing musician of 'Angelstrings' (figure 1), a show project with two female electric violinists⁵. The duo disguises as the black and white angel who represent the fight between good and evil. I would like to analyse their 'Pirates of the Caribbean' show where they imitate a fighting scene from the movie with their violin bows held as swords. In this show, the white angel starts by playing the calm, beautiful Beatles' song 'Yesterday'. She is interrupted by the black angel playing some bars of the powerful Bach 'Tocatta'. Then, the intro of the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' soundtrack is played in the background, whereupon the two women start a fight with their bows choreographed to the music before they finish the show playing on their electric violins in synchrony.⁶

Even though Nora Kudrjawizki and the second angel, Katie Barlas, are very skilled instrumentalists, this scene impresses more in terms of a show than in terms of a concert. The duo 'Angelstrings' is represented by 'Legrain Production', an event company founded by Nora Kudrjawizki and her husband. The couple has deliberately developed the 'Angelstrings' concept as something that is new to the show business and has organized the casting for the second angel: a female electric violinist able to dance while playing. Nora told me, as she is blond, they were specially looking for a brunette violinist – I would like to add that they were looking for a young, attractive violinist. Most of the decisions regarding 'Angelstrings' have been made out of pragmatic considerations. Nora Kudrjawizki and her husband were interested in creating a show concept that sells: You can book 'Angelstrings' for company events and so on. Nora told me that most of the company event attendees were male and were interested in looking at female artists.

⁵ The 'Angelstrings' show can be booked with more than two violinists as well. I focus on this performance with two female violinists.

⁶ 'Angelstrings' Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7GRxF3YMVE>, last visited: 28 February, 2021.

In this show concept, the electric violin – and most of all the violin bow – becomes part of the aesthetic concept. Hold as a sword, it even is a part of the fairy tale disguise.

Nora described the violin she plays on in this show as a very regular electric violin but admitted she would not do the ‘fight scene’ with her regular wooden bow. Even though the two bows are not really touching each other (this is just an impression of the spectator sitting apart from the stage), the two women use special carbon bows which would not break if accidentally touching each other or falling down. So, the decision for the bow has not been made out of sound quality considerations but due to its designation to fit into a dancing show concept.

Nora Kudrjawizki also told me about other music shows she had developed in the past where she had played on a luminous electric violin. So, using the electric violin to make a show visually more interesting is something that worked out for her in different arrangements.



Figure 1: ‘Angelstrings’ (Katie Barlas and Nora Kudrjawizki) fighting with the violin bow, photographed by Bjoern Kommerell, open source.

It is notable that the instrument violin is visually impressive and that it fits a show that plays with the cliché of beauty and the fight of good against evil at this level. Behrens argued that synthetic violin pop music usually doesn’t refer to the long classical music tradition but to the ‘perfect world’ esprit associated with classical musicians, with violinists (Behrens, 1997: 29). When creating this show concept, Nora Kudrjawizki and her husband seem to have known exactly what people would love to book.

One may claim that Nora’s whole idea to change from an acoustic violin (after long years of studying the instrument and the classical repertory) to an electric violin to play pop music was just a pragmatic choice – a sort of fighting for survival in the music business with the violin bow in her hand. But doing some research about her further work on the electric violin, it became clear to me that Nora Kudrjawizki loves playing the electric violin for creative reasons as well, that she has also succeeded in musically overcoming some of the ‘limits of the box that fits on our shoulder.’

‘ONE VIOLIN ORCHESTRA’: ELABORATING THE MUSICAL POSSIBILITIES AS AN ELECTRIC VIOLINIST

Besides playing in different formations, Nora Kudrjawizki pursues a very interesting solo career as ‘One Violin Orchestra’. When performing as ‘One Violin Orchestra’, Nora fills the stage on her own with a special electric violin and a loop station: she plays pop song arrangements recording one audio track after the other with her loop station and later replays them all at once. To have the whole range of sounds, Nora plays on a five-string electric violin which has a lower string added to the usual four strings: it is a C-string as normally associated with a cello. She also works with an octaver, an electric effect unit as used by electric guitarists (Wicke & Ziegenrucker, 2007: 502), which permits the C-string to sound even one octave lower than usual. So, Nora is able to produce the sounds of a whole band all on her own. She also sings and adds rhythmic elements with beatboxing.⁷ Acting as ‘One Violin Orchestra’, Nora puts the focus much more on her instrumentalist abilities and her arranger capabilities than on the show effects. She also sells CDs and digital downloads of her sound recordings – songs that are beautiful to listen to without needing a visual aspect.

‘Angelstrings’ would not work without something to look at putting Nora Kudrjawizki and the second violinist in a position where their dancing, acting, modelling, and designing (Nora has designed the angel costumes herself) qualities are valued more than their instrumentalist ones. But the ‘One Violin Orchestra’ live shows and sound recordings are the product of a creative, inspired musician playing the electric violin. When recording in a small studio, the electric violin is as pivotal to the sound experience, to the expressive, aesthetic thought, as at live concerts played in big halls. The electric violin therefore is valued for its sound qualities.

It would not be possible to record the same songs with an acoustic violin.

Adding lower strings to a small acoustic violin corpus would not be easy as its hollow resonating body is constructed for a defined frequency range (Trueman, 1999: Chapter Two, 15). Lower tones are played on bigger instruments. In a ‘The Strad’ focus article the luthier Martin Brunkalla is quoted:

“[...] the body of the violin was never intended to respond to frequencies lower than those produced by the open G string. Typically, the C string on a converted four-string will take more effort to get moving, and sound flabby once it does respond” (Brunkalla in Todes, 2014).⁸

This luthier, among others, has worked on the five-string viola, an acoustic fusion instrument of the violin and the viola.

But Nora Kudrjawizki’s five-string electric violin (figures 2 and 3) is especially small and filigree. Often, five-string electric violins have a wider fingerboard than a usual four-stringed one (even if not shifting in corpus size). Nora decided to look for an individual construction being comfortable to play on with small hands: her violin has a regular-sized instrument corpus and a regular-sized fingerboard, so the five strings are very close to each other.

⁷ ‘One Violin Orchestra’ Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60BNCV9PTxQ>, last visited: 28 February, 2021.

⁸ Brunkalla, Martin, quoted by Todes, Ariane. 2014. *How to make a five-string viola*. Available at <https://www.thestrad.com/how-to-make-a-five-string-violin/2916.article>, last visited: 28 June, 2021.



Figures 2 and 3: The five-string violin. Photos by courtesy of Nora Kudrjawizki.

Playing as ‘One Violin Orchestra’, Nora Kudrjawizki performs arrangements of famous pop songs, such as Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’, Sting’s ‘Shape of My Heart’, or Camila Cabello’s ‘Havana’. There is not only a big variety in the song and genre choices (within the pop range) but also in the creative decisions on organizing these arrangements or sound collages. Sometimes, Nora sings the main melody, so that the electric violin is an accompanying instrument (see, e.g., ‘Shape of My Heart’ and ‘Havana’), in other songs, the main melody is transferred to the electric violin (see ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’). Asked about her decision-making for different arrangements, Nora Kudrjawizki said that she liked to perform songs as you have never heard them before. So, in a Nirvana cover, putting the main focus on the very melodic instrument violin was more interesting to her than singing the lyrics.

VIOLINISTS ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL RELATION TO THE ELECTRIC AND TO THE ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENT

Even though the electric violin permits Nora to develop musical arrangements that are unimaginable on an acoustic violin, she has a very emotional and personal relation to her classical violin. Asked about her favourite violin when just playing for herself, she responded:

“I would always choose the classical one, because the sound of the classical violin is warm and different ... livelier than the one of the electric violin” (Kudrjawizki & Seidlitz, 2021).

I would like to argue that when playing to oneself, visually attracting elements are less needed than when playing to impress others. One would like to focus on the music itself or on the chemistry between the own body and the instrument. Probably Nora’s choice also means that – when playing to herself – she is more interested in playing regular violin repertory than in achieving uniqueness. This would be no surprise as she has studied the classical violin for many years.

But who says that playing for oneself is the most important situation in a professional violinist’s life? So, finally, I asked Nora Kudrjawizki about her favourite violin out of all her violins, in general. Nora said:

“My acoustic violin is my soul. It’s the one everything started with. And everything that needed to come out of me came out through it. And the electric violin was simply a progression of this. And my favourite violins are the classical one and the five-stringed one.

The five-stringed one simply adds the possibility for me to discover a spectrum that normally is not part of a violin: the low string sounding a bit like a cello” (ibidem).

So, playing electric is not just a pragmatic choice for her but motivated by expressive wishes as well.

Of course, Nora possesses a lot of different electric violins for different show concepts. And not all of them seem to have been built and bought due to their sound quality. Some of them were bought because they guarantee a visual show element (they are luminous and so on) or because they make it a bit easier to dance with. In the interview, Nora Kudrjawizki (2021) told me that some electric violins were simply too heavy for some dancing parts of her shows. Choosing a certain violin due to its weight is very pragmatic and shows again that in some parts of the ‘Angelstrings’ shows her dancing or acting qualities are put more into focus than her violinist ones. But the five-string electric violin, I would like to point out, is an instrument adding musical possibilities to be discovered: It does not feel like a new instrument to Nora but like a ‘progression’ of her instrument learnt since childhood making it possible to realize new expressive ideas as a skilled instrumentalist. She thereby overcomes the ‘limits of the box that fits on our shoulder.’

In the spirit that electric instruments are needed to fulfil some expressive demands of musicians, I would like to quote Patteson who published a study about the first electric instruments for New Music in 2015. Patteson states for musician-inventors in Germany in the 1920s that they

“staked their careers on the claim that electric instruments could be reconciled with the expressive demands of performing musicians. [...] Whereas mechanical instruments represented the complete externalization of music from the human being, electric instruments were conceived as technological extensions of the human body” (Patteson, 2015: 66–67).

Nora described her acoustic violin as her soul – the acoustic violin made her into a violinist, so this is a big part of identity and of personal musical taste evolution. But as Patteson notices, an electric instrument can be seen as an extension of the human body and – I would like to add – as the extension of a creative spirit as well.

Electric instruments are needed to play in certain circumstances, to play with a loud band in a big hall. But this is not the only benefit of electricity. When comparing the classical guitar to the electric guitar, it is obvious that these two instruments often fit into different style categories (even though it would be more or less possible to play the same compositions on it) and that, because they attract a different group of people such as composers, musicians, and the public, different guitarists deal with different expressive demands. These expressive demands motivated them to create more and more genres, to develop more and more effect units, and so on.

Of course, this spirit affects other electric instrumentalists, such as electric violinists, as well. And even though Nora Kudrjawizki possibly may have aspired to a classical violin career in the first place, since playing electric she found out a lot about the expressive possibilities when playing electric. Kucherenko and Sediuk noted for the aesthetic experience of the musician:

“The nature of the performance experience directly depends on the instrument through which a musician develops a system of muscular and auditory sensations, reveals and expands the spectrum of emotional reactions, and acquires an individual type of thinking” (Kucherenko & Sediuk, 2020: 22).

So, Nora Kudrjawizki experienced new expressive demands, looked for a changed construction of her instrument, and tried out for arrangements that are innovative.

For me, as a passionate acoustic violinist, it was not surprising that Nora stated always choosing the classical violin when playing for herself. But of course, this is a personal choice and other electric violinists may answer differently. Trueman, for example, noted about playing the electric violin for himself:

“For me, playing through headphones induces a sort of private (after all, nobody else can hear what I am hearing), meditative state where I can create my own virtual world” (Trueman, 1999: 21–22).

On the one hand, it must be aesthetically less fulfilling to hear yourself via headphones. You can't feel how your musical action fills the room you are in. The instrumentalist's ears are not directly stimulated by what the same person's fingers do and what reality reflects instantly (e.g., a resonating room you are standing in). On the other hand, playing with headphones may free instrumentalists like Trueman from other – again – pragmatic choices as the time of the day, the room, and the atmosphere for playing. Being an acoustic violinist, I can't freely choose when and where to play. I decide for it due to rest protection regulation. I always close the windows.... So, possibly the new options when playing with headphones help people like Trueman to feel independent, making it a very personal moment.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Of course, being creative and innovative in terms of instrument making is not a privilege to electric violinists. For creative experiments on modelling the hollow, wooden corpus of an acoustic violin for expressive reasons, see, for example, Massimo de Bonfils and Mauro Fabretti, teachers of the Lutherie Course at the Conservatory of Santa Cecilia in Rome (De Bonfils & Fabretti, 2019) or the already mentioned ‘The Strad’ article about the violin-violin-fusion-instrument, the five-string viola (Todes, 2014).

But in the popular music business, it seems to be a bit more common to look for a modified construction than in the classical milieu. The ‘The Strad’ article mentions jazz, world, and folk players as instrumentalists looking for new constructions. I would like to add that in the pop business, visually attractive individual constructions of the electric violin are appreciated. This can be explained as electric violinists act less as part of a long tradition and more as pop stars looking for something that makes them unique.

Trueman furthermore discusses the individual sound experience for the instrumentalist himself or herself while playing a concert in a big hall. He compares the acoustic violin and the electric violin:

“[...] detachment [as it is possible when playing electric] can minimize the differences in sound that the player and listener perceive. ‘Classical’ violinists are trained to ‘project’ their sound, which can result in the violin sounding harsh and unpleasant under the ear, but strong and full in the back of a large hall. With an electric violin, we have the option of ‘projecting’ by simply placing a speaker in the back of the hall, or in some other configuration between listener and player” (Trueman, 1999: 6).

So, there even may be situations where the electric instrument enables the music to be enjoyed more by the instrumentalist himself or herself in a precise moment than it would be possible with an acoustic instrument. In a certain sense, this can be seen as a moment where somebody plays for himself or herself (in the spirit of enjoying oneself), too. So it would be too easy to say that an acoustic violin generally allows a better individual playing whereas the electric instrument creates bigger show effects. There are effects created on an acoustic violin for the public sitting apart as well. And there are very intimate possibilities to play electric.

In addition, I would like to mention that there are experiments, on how to improvise a solo, to have a musical dialogue with oneself, thanks to electrics. ‘Transformation’ by Alexander Refsum Jensenius and Victoria Johnson is such an ‘improvisation piece’: the electric violinist Victoria Johnson moves within an interactive 2D space that reacts by randomly playing back fragments of a pre-recorded violin sound collection. She plays simultaneously on her electric violin, thus responding to herself (Jensenius & Johnson, 2012: 36). This shows that there are a lot of expressive

ideas on how to change the instrumental environment and the personal experience of the instrumentalist and the public thanks to electrics.

I'm sure that new musical and technical experiments may follow all over the world leading to new individual perceptions of the violinist–violin relation. One driving experience is the force of being competitive on the local music market, which is opening up to another kind of global exchange.

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APPENDIX: VIDEO MATERIAL WITHOUT AUTHORS

- ‘Angelstrings’ Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7GRxF3YMVE>, last visited: 28 February, 2021:



- ‘One Violin Orchestra’ Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60BNCV9PTxQ>, last visited: 28 February, 2021:



- The Mahavishnu Orchestra: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-0bMRcBik4>, last visited: 14 April, 2021:



- ‘Transformation’ by Alexander Refsum Jensenius and Victoria Johnson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTk7vZsj7Fc>, last visited: 14 April 2021.

