

CHARM RMA Annual Conference: Musicology and Recordings ***Royal Holloway, 13-15 September 2007***

A peaceful, pre-term Royal Holloway was the setting for the 2007 Royal Musical Association Annual Conference, put on by the AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM). Undeterred by the prospect of being at the centre of a foot-and-mouth surveillance zone, a large number of musicians and scholars descended on the Egham campus for the three-day residential event organised by Nicholas Cook and Carol Chan. The title 'musicology and recordings' was broadly interpreted, and the conference served as a valuable interdisciplinary forum for the exchange of ideas between people working in a wide variety of musical areas, including musicologists, ethnomusicologists, performers, producers and sound engineers.

Robert Philip's opening keynote paper praised this current plurality of approaches to studying music through recordings, noting the huge development in the area since he wrote his pioneering PhD thesis more than 30 years ago. However, he stressed that scholars should keep in mind that the standpoint from which we view things might influence what we see. He also highlighted the importance of 'not limiting the field of enquiry to that which is easily measurable', and urged musicologists to spend more time talking with musicians in order to 'find a common language'.

The influence of developments in computer software for the analysis of recordings cannot be overestimated, and this was reflected in the analytical papers that used empirical data to furnish new insights into performance style. Richard Turner's study of 100 recordings of Brahms' First Symphony applied statistical analysis techniques to timing data to chart stylistic patterns between conductors. Alan Dodson and Miriam Quick investigated the relationship between performance timing and musical structure in piano works by Bach and Webern respectively, while László Stachó analysed timing microstructure in recorded piano performances by Bartók and Dohnányi. Elsewhere, David Beckford introduced us to the music analysis software waveDNA, and Peter Elsdon took a novel approach to the frequency spectrum to help him pin down the 'sound' of the Icelandic band Sigur Rós.

Many speakers used recordings to talk about historical performance style and to trace patterns of influence between musicians. In a fascinating paper that culminated in a practical demonstration, Abigail Dolan investigated vibrato in early flute recordings to talk about the evolution of the distinctive tone colour of the French School. Historical violin performance is currently a thriving research area, with Eitan Ornoy, Dorottya Fabian, Edward Cross, Ruth Rodrigues, Alison Rabinovici and David Milsom all contributing papers on this topic. David Milsom later expanded upon his paper with an evening violin lecture-recital, in which he compellingly brought the style of Joachim to life in performances of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Spohr and Brahms, accompanied by Jonathan Gooing on the piano.

The 2007 Peter LeHuray lecture, introduced by RMA president John Deathridge, was given by the distinguished American ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger. Seeger took us on a journey through recording formats from wax cylinders to YouTube. From an ethnomusicologist's perspective, he discussed the varying abilities of different recording formats to capture 'the musical experience' – an issue also raised by Stephen Cottrell, among others – and urged us to ask the important question: what are we missing about the original performance by focusing on the recording? The

complicated relationship between ethnomusicologists and their field recordings was also explored in the papers by Shzr Ee Tan, Jonathan Stock, Janet Topp Fargion and John Baily, often raising questions about the ethical and legal issues inherent in the academic use and commercial appropriation of non-Western musics, while the three papers on black recorded music in the European market were uncomfortably counterpointed by Angela Hammond's disturbing paper on music of the American white supremacist movement.

Although the potential for recordings to decontextualise and objectify musical practice was widely recognised, many papers successfully overcame this tendency by reconnecting recordings to the social, cultural and economic circumstances of their production and reception. Simon Baines linked changes in twentieth-century brass playing style to developments in instrument design as well as changes in fashion, taste and recording conditions, while in a highly entertaining talk, Timothy Day showed how the ideals of communality and 'manliness' were so central to the notion of 'Englishness' that profoundly influenced the twentieth-century English cathedral choir sound. Nick Morgan, David Patmore and Lewis Foreman all tackled the business side of record production and distribution, past and present, and Hannah Vlcek and Gwendolyn Tietze drew attention to the ability of recordings to familiarise listeners with new music.

A number of papers focused on the recording process itself. Terence Curran's and Ananay Aguilar's papers took us both inside the recording studio and inside the minds of the performers, while Andrew Gwilliam and Pip Williams described the ingredients that make a studio mix into a 'culinary experience'. Allan Moore and Ruth Dockray's paper detailed how the placement of sounds within the stereo image creates a virtual performance space, and Nicola Dibben showed us how microphone placement and mixing techniques are used on Björk's albums to create a sense of intimacy. Nigel Simeone engagingly described the making of cast recordings of musicals, illustrating how the producer can translate the staged performance into an aurally effective recording.

Several speakers raised important questions about the status of recordings and/as 'texts'. Amanda Bayley's report on video recordings of the Kreutzer Quartet's rehearsals of a piece by Michael Finnissy illuminated the idea of composition as an ongoing creative process shared between composer and performers, rather than one that stops at the score. Roger Parker discussed how a 1930 recording of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* might in turn serve as a primary source for a critical edition, and Christopher Dingle showed us how Messiaen's 'romantic' recorded performances of his own works might lead us to reappraise them. Erlend Hovland compared Furtwängler's performance of the *Eroica* with Schenker's analysis, and Peter Johnson suggested that a 1933 recording of Beethoven's Op. 135 by the Busch Quartet might have been responsible for a considerable number of critical readings of the slow movement. José Bowen's engaging comparison of dozens of performances of the jazz standard 'Body and Soul' charted the shifting concept of the musical work through recordings, and the intriguing possibility that recordings might function as oral (or 'aural') tradition was also raised in Robert Walser's study of melodic variation in sea shanties and Victoria Vaughan's study of performers' use of recordings as learning tools. Specifically, Vaughan showed how the famous 'everlasting' penultimate semiquaver at the end of Puccini's *Nessun Dorma* is a product of early recorded performances, not notation.

In a unique paper, David Trippett explored the ability of recordings to circumvent the one-way passage of time, while the capacity of recordings themselves to become raw material in a compositional process – creating, in Cormac Newark's words, 'music in dialogue with its means of reproduction' – was considered in numerous interesting ways by Mark Katz, Steve Savage, Simon Zagorski-Thomas and Aleksander Kolkowski. From scratching to sampling to performance art, the vast creative potential of recorded music is only just beginning to be realised.

The rich variety of issues raised during the conference was testament to CHARM's achievement in bringing research into performance and recordings into the musicological mainstream. Looking to the future, the calls of Seeger and Philip for further reflection on live performance and more interaction between musicologists and performers may well be answered by CHARM's successor, the AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice (CMPCP), to be launched in 2009.

[Further details and abstracts at:

<http://www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/content/events/2007conference.html>]

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