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Something old, something new, something borrowed, something true: questions of aesthetics and epistemology in using recordings

In an interview in 1981, where he discussed his practice in the recording studio and the role recordings play in his professional development, the conductor Lorin Maazel stated: "I can't imagine life without recorded sound" (in Badal, 1996: 16). This rhetorical assertion made more than a quarter of a century ago rings true today in a literal sense: for me, as for practically anyone alive, an everyday phenomenology of the pre-recording era is simply not available. As far as the student of performance research is concerned, recorded presentations and representations of music and musical performances have always been part of individually and collectively remembered daily life. However much we speculate about the days before recording, we cannot recreate the phenomenological background for the aural experiences our predecessors had; and we cannot claim to proceed from the same kinds of experiential bases as our great grandparents when it comes to exploring and theorizing about current musical practices. We live in a different aural (and visual) world, where recorded sound and music permeate almost all aspects of daily existence.

Over the last several decades, recording technology and the recorded artefacts it makes possible have been the prime movers in the gradual establishment of *performance studies* as "a musicological discipline in its own right" (Rink, 2004: 36). Studying musical performance from the live event involves formidable challenges, most obvious among them the difficulty of obtaining and stabilising data from the fleeting performance for research purposes. In the words of Eric Clarke "the perennial problem with the study of performance is its temporality and hence ephemerality, and if nothing else, concrete performance data [obtained from recorded performances] at least gives analysts and other parties the assurance that they are dealing with the same thing" (Clarke, 1995: 52). Without recordings, we simply would not have the theoretical knowledge we now have about various aspects of musical performance.

The ubiquity of recordings in the discipline of performance studies is no doubt matched by their widespread use in the processes of professional performance-making. There is ample anecdotal evidence that performers do listen to and use recordings professionally, as part of their embodied aesthetic–epistemological quest to create musical meaning in and apply an artistic signature to their performances. Although the ways performers use recordings have not been systematically and rigorously documented and investigated, existing evidence, which comes mostly from interviews with performers, reveals that using recordings is a continual process, and an integral part of practical knowledge-production for many of them. Accordingly, these uses extend from learning a new piece aurally to seeking creative solutions to interpretative problems. For instance, the pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy states that when learning an unfamiliar work he usually checks himself whether he knows it well by playing a recording to "see whether I really learned it or not - that I haven't omitted something" (in Badal, 1996: 110). And the conductor Charles Dutoit mentions resorting to recordings by certain artists he considers to be great when he has a specific interpretative problem to solve (Badal, 1996: 84-5).

Such professional practices that involve using recordings raise important epistemological and aesthetic questions: for instance, how much authority do performers typically ascribe to the score during the various stages of learning a new piece, and how much of this authority has been taken over by recordings during the course of the twentieth-century? What are the aesthetic implications of borrowing interpretative solutions from other performers and how

does this influence our conceptions of creativity and singularity in musical performance? And in this context, does the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom, 1973) become a problem for performers?

Attempting to answer these and similar questions as musicologists, we quickly realize that we do not yet have a firmly established theoretical foundation, a conceptual basis on which to tackle them: for instance, there is no unanimous opinion regarding the nature of the creative processes behind performance-making, and indeed no consensual agreement that musical performance is fundamentally creative at all! Much of the dominant discourse in performance studies still revolves around a work-centred philosophy of music, which sees performance as the faithful reproduction of the composer's text (Doğantan-Dack, 2008). Exploring and understanding the ways performers use recordings first of all require making explicit the various (hidden and unarticulated) assumptions behind such under-theorized issues as creativity, knowledge-production and musicianship; in my view, this kind of research can attain robust outcomes only through close collaboration between musicologists and professional performers.

Any discussion regarding the relationship between performers and recordings also needs to acknowledge the fact that the term "recording" actually means different things - ontologically and by implication epistemologically - in different musical idioms. In the classical idiom, for example, recordings are traditionally taken to represent performances of musical works. The great majority of musicians, listeners and critics regard them in this way. Among the basic objections raised against this view is the idea that because the studio-editing that technology allows usually generates acoustical objects which are "less a trace than a representation of a performance that never actually existed" (Cook, 2001: ¶ 20), recordings cannot be regarded as being performances. However, there are conventions, developed over the course of the twentieth century, that define the limits of acceptable practice in the production of a classical recording, and these conventions are rooted in the tradition of live performance (Kania, 2008). In the words of the music philosopher Andrew Kania, "what these conventions try to do is precisely to find a practice that honors both the tradition's ancient valorization of live performance skill and the desire of performers and audiences (not of recent vintage itself!) to hear the best performance possible. Essentially, one should not release a recording under one's own performing name if one would not be capable of producing such a phenomenal performance live under ideal circumstances" (Kania, 2008). Furthermore, many performers state that their recordings represent well their view of the work at the time of the recording, and in that sense are documents of their musicianship (Badal, 1996). Hence, there are substantial philosophical grounds for thinking of classical recordings, as they are typically made, as giving access to performances. The important implication is that when using recordings performers approach them as representative of performances by fellow musicians, even if they generally acknowledge their differences from live music-making. In the tradition of rock music, on the other hand, recordings are typically seen as sonic sculptures created in the studio; they are "the works of art" within this idiom and do not represent a kind of performance as in the classical idiom. The way a musician uses a rock track will, therefore, be shaped significantly by this distinct ontological status of rock recordings.

Such fundamental differences between idioms are also evident in relation to the issue of borrowing (and the implied question of creativity) that I raised earlier: in jazz, for instance, where compositional and performance skills are joined in the improvisatory act, it is a common and acceptable practice to borrow ideas and quote from other musicians. Indeed, John Murphy has written of the "joy of influence" that characterizes this practice (Murphy, 1990), which is often seen as a way of honouring a musician (Benson, 2008). In the classical idiom, on the other hand, there is no such tradition, and the value attached to singularity would oblige performers to make any idea they may borrow from a recorded performance strictly their own by effectively stamping it with their own performance signature. Even if

similarities can be documented in the performance styles of teachers and their late pupils (Cook, 2007), for instance, the tradition does not place any particular value on making creative influences explicit in practice. While one may be proud to have worked with a particular teacher, the best performers often desire to differ than to imitate, even during their pre-professional years.

Given the complexity of the issues involved in the professional use of recordings, where, then, is the most appropriate starting point for our research? Since any musical use of recordings is based on listening to them in the first place, I would begin the enquiry by exploring how classical performers hear and listen to classical recordings. In this connection, I wish to repeat a hypothesis I have articulated in some of my earlier work (Doğantan, 2002; 2008), namely the idea that there are significant differences between the ways (non-performing) listeners and performers relate to music. Whenever I make this suggestion to musicologist colleagues, the reply I receive almost invariably points out the obvious - and uninformative - fact that, after all, performers are listeners too. However, research in psychoacoustics and music psychology is beginning to provide evidence for my position that there is indeed a species of hearing and listening to music that we can call “performerly” (Galembo et al., 1998; Repp and Knoblich, 2004). In this connection, I wish to propose the term “expert performerly listening”, and discuss how it differs from what Nicholas Cook calls “musicological listening” (Cook, 1992: 152 ff).

There is, I would argue, a spectrum of expert performerly listening that spans the psychological space from less to more expertise. In this space, increasing expertise brings distinctive cognitive and affective experiences, which are based on the recognition of similarities in the physical and psychological aspects of music making between the listening performer and the one listened to: the cognitive-affective experiences of a pianist, for example, are different when she listens to a cellist, to another pianist playing an unfamiliar piece, and to yet another pianist playing a well-known music. The last category of listening involves the greatest degree of expertise. The aesthetic-critical judgments made by a pianist listening to the recorded performance of another pianist would be motivated by a shared epistemological plane that is characterised by procedural action representations, originating in the expert production of musical sound sequences on the piano (Jäncke, 2006; Palmer, 2006; Schlaug, 2006). These action representations, which are continuously activated during listening, form the conditions of possibility for the acquisition of new knowledge about the art of piano playing while listening to recorded performances. For a performer listening, “a knowledge of what *might have been* in the performance of [a] sound is able tacitly to inform the moment of hearing it” (Cumming, 2000: 55). Unless one has first-person experience of music making on the piano, the mere observation of the actions and sounds of a pianist would not lead to this kind of comparative cognition of her musicianship. While one can still describe the musical movements, gestures and sounds observed accurately in terms of timing and dynamics in the absence of such first-person knowledge, one would have difficulty in attributing *pianistic* meaning to them. To use a term from ecological theory (Clarke, 2005; Gibson, 1986), a recorded performance *affords* expert learning and comparative enacting of the music for a performer.

In this sense, the differences one hears between various performances during expert performerly listening are not all of one kind, forming a contrast with the experiences of the musicological listener. In accordance with the new “performance studies paradigm” in musicology (Cook, 2001: ¶ 16), all live and recorded performances represent “ontologically equivalent instantiations, all existing on the same ‘horizontal’ plane” (ibid.). Performances, in this view, acquire meaning through their relationships with each other, and comparative performance analysis aims to explore the relationships between performances rather than the relationship between performances and an immutable notated text. This approach is, of course, a welcome attempt to counter the work- and score-based ideology of the dominant musicological discourse. However, in such comparative performance analyses, the

presumed ontological equivalence between different performances very often spreads into the aesthetic realm, such that the heard and measured differences are all presented as of one aesthetic kind. The different interpretative solutions ascribed to different performances are discussed without reference to an aesthetic hierarchy.

The reasons for such a stance might be more complex than I can identify here, but it seems to me that the post-modern obsession with pluralities of meaning, and the denial of the transcendence of norms influence performance analysis as currently practised. We are almost always left in the dark as to whether the analyst aesthetically prefers one performance to another, and why; how a particular recording affects him or her and whether she or he would like to revisit it for aesthetic reasons. As Scott Burnham has observed in the context of music analysis in general, so in performance analysis the interaction with a musical performance appears to have “shifted from personal truth to reasoned argument” (Burnham 1999: 195). Once, an ethnomusicologist colleague said that “there is no bad music”. My response was that there is, of course, truly awful music and musical performances, the recognition of which does not imply any negative attitudes towards the culture that produces it. I, for one, would have no problem in reclaiming some of the transcendence of aesthetic norms that post-modern thought denies us. Indeed, expert performance listening always happens through a discriminating aesthetic lens, and always involves value judgments. In performance pedagogy and criticism, such judgments are part of standard practice. Musicological performance analysis based on empirical data may or may not provide corroborative support for the aesthetic evaluations I wish to make in relation to the musical examples I will now play, but the important point is that any professional pianist would readily explain why she or he finds the recorded performance of a certain pianist exciting, but that of another one pianistically and musically poor.¹

John Rink has argued that in empirical performance studies there has been “a bias towards the study of tempo and dynamics, mainly because these lend themselves to more rigorous modelling than intractable parameters like colour and bodily gesture” (Rink 2004: 38). While musicological listening focuses on those parameters that can be studied empirically, the expert listener’s focus extends to other pianistic parameters of intelligibility and expression, including tone colour, touch, articulation, and dynamic sense of phrasing and form, which are not recoverable easily – if at all – from the recorded performance by means of the technological tools currently available. Nevertheless, in a study titled “A microcosm of musical expression: Contributions of expressive timing and dynamics to the aesthetic impression of the initial measures of Chopin’s Etude in E major” (1999), Bruno Repp found that the overall aesthetic quality of performances as assessed by judges selected specially for his research had little to do with timing and dynamics. Repp speculated that other variables - for instance, touch - might play a greater role than timing and dynamics in making aesthetic evaluations.

The first example I will play is a recorded performance of Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 41 No. 4 in C sharp minor. The performance, which I find exciting, was recorded live. The pianist displays a wonderful variety of tone colours from phrase to phrase, from one section to another. Through the most natural-sounding rhythmic shaping of the phrases and melodic units, a thrilling Mazurka emerges. Most significantly, however, the *internal shaping* of each phrase, which is naturally directed in its flow, and the deep and unwavering touch of the pianist, create a wonderfully pianistic performance:

¹ From the musicological point of view, such aesthetic judgements are ultimately responsible for the analyst’s choice of performances that are to be investigated, and for the kind of knowledge s/he hopes to discover through this kind of research. Is it not the case that if the analyst studies a poor performance by a novice, s/he will make the assumption that what s/he discovers does not reveal expert knowledge? Here, aesthetic judgements are already at play.

Music Example 1
Chopin Mazurka Op. 41/4 in C sharp minor
Pianist: Nelson Freire (recorded in 1984)

Now, another recorded interpretation (this time, a studio recording) of the same Mazurka: from my perspective, it is too rhythmically lifeless to be a Mazurka performance, too calculated and unnatural. Listen, for example, to the phrase starting in bar 17, the shaping of which does not create any internal consistency or flow or to the ornamental tones in bars 25-28, which are delivered with a too-laboured, heavy hand.

Music Example 2
Chopin Mazurka Op. 41/1 in C sharp minor
Pianist: Vladimir Ashkenazy²

My next example concerns a historical recording; the way performers use such recordings is once again determined by the differing traditions in different idioms. In jazz, for instance, the legacy of historical recordings has played a major role in establishing the status of jazz as a canonical art form, and historical performances “are used as the benchmark for standards and quality of performances. Canonised recordings are promoted as having inherent value; they are considered to be ‘great’ since they have supposedly stood the test of time” (Whyton, 2008). There is no similar systematic (and institutionalized) veneration of historical recordings in the classical genre: first, there is the issue of technological limitations and imperfections that form the acoustic setting for early recordings, which is often considered to hinder the accurate representation of the musicianship of the recorded performer. I would suggest that the modern performer’s attitude towards historical recordings in the classical idiom is more along the lines of an affective appreciation than of idolization, regarding them as culturally precious artefacts that have been passed down to us as part of our heritage of musicianship. Even if modern pianism is very different from its counterparts as represented in early recordings, these can often provide insights about intensity of performance, commitment to the music, the ability to communicate. The next example I will play is a performance of Chopin’s Mazurka Op.63 No. 3 in C sharp minor, recorded in 1923. I would like to draw attention to the marvellous rhythmic relaxation with which the pianist delivers the c#-b#-d# figure in the second bar, and the astonishing colouring of the counterpoint in the inner voices in the coda (bars 65-76).

Music Example 3
Chopin’s Mazurka Op.63 No.3
Pianist: Sergei Rachmaninoff (recorded 1923)

A recent recording of the same Mazurka demonstrates well the necessity for introducing aesthetic judgments into performance studies: it is too laboured, involves a weak piano sonority, and there is no sustaining force behind individual phrases to give them a musical, rhythmic shape.³ Would it be sufficient to provide empirical data and argue for the existence of a certain interpretative concept behind this performance, and leave it there, without pointing out that actually, it is pianistically not very good?⁴ I believe tackling this

² I have not been able to verify the exact date of recording for this performance. It is sometime between 1976-1985.

³ When I used these comparative examples in my performance studies class, some students liked this recording; but when I asked them to explain why, they only pointed out the modern-sounding reverberant acoustics of the recording rather than any musical qualities of the performance.

⁴ I use the term "pianistic" as a subcategory of "musical": in other words, if a performance is pianistically poor, it is also musically poor in my view. Although it is logically possible to keep the two terms separate and argue that a performance can be musically good but pianistically poor or vice versa, many, if not all, critics, for

issue is of utmost importance for the CMPCP-project that will soon follow the research carried out in CHARM, since exploring music performance as creative practice requires a rigorous discussion of what is to be understood by *creativity* in the first place: since creativity is epistemologically related to singularity, is every singular performance creative? How would such a claim be different from the trivial fact that because human behaviour is inevitably variable, each performance is necessarily different from all others, and singularity in this sense is not what performers strive for, but a result of what they necessarily do? Or, is something else meant by the singularity of a performance?

Play Music Example 4

Chopin Mazurka Op. 63 No.3 in C sharp minor

Pianist: Piotr Anderszewski (recorded in 2003)

In many discussions about using recordings, their repeatability has been described as antithetical to the ephemerality of musical performance; the argument is that since live performance is ontologically prior, repeating a performance in every detail is contrary to the essence of music-making. Moreover, the idiosyncrasies of a recorded performance become aesthetically undesirable once one knows the performance inside-out. I personally do not find this argument convincing; there are many recordings to which I keep returning precisely because of the idiosyncratic performances they represent. One can never totally “consume” a fascinating recorded performance: every time I listen to such a recording, I find that innumerable new meanings emerge from it, at the same time generating ever new creative impulses for my own practice. The next example I wish to play is just such a recording: if one seeks a paradigm of “beauty” in the realm of pianistic touch and dynamic shaping, one can find it in the performance of this pianist:

Play Music Example 5

J.S.Bach Keyboard Concerto No.5 in F minor, second movement (Largo)

Pianist: Glenn Gould (recorded in 1958)

Before I end my presentation, I would like to briefly mention one other way in which performers, or to be precise performer-researchers, have recently started using recordings. I am currently leading a research project titled "Alchemy in the Spotlight: Qualitative Transformations in Chamber Music Performance", funded by the AHRC. There is a preliminary web site for the project, which can be visited at www.mdx.ac.uk/alchemy. The main area of investigation can be identified as performance epistemology and the specific aims of the project are to explore the cognitive and affective factors that shape live performances from the perspective of professional performers in the context of a piano trio (the Marmara Trio: piano - Mine Doğantan-Dack, violin - Philippa Mo, cello - Pal Banda); to compare and contrast these with what happens in rehearsals; and to understand and theorize about the way performers continue to learn on stage, which indeed can be conceived as their work place. This kind of research would simply not be possible without recording technology: the research methodology involves recording all rehearsals, workshops and public concerts, and carefully listening to them as the very first step of analysis. There is a profound difference between listening to recorded performances by fellow musicians and listening to one's own recordings: the kind of critical distance that exists in the latter case is categorically different, since the action representations that are activated while listening are identical to those that are behind the production of the musical sounds on record. One readily recognizes one's own touch and affective-expressive patterns of music-making. However, unlike in the case of recordings by other musicians, one immediately notes how a certain shape can be improved, or how the tempo might be changed, and what

example, would be reluctant to describe a pianist as a "wonderful pianist but a poor musician", or "a wonderful musician but an inadequate pianist". This view also accords well with the reluctance of many pianists to distinguish technique and expression in practice.

kind of local adjustments can be made to create a more effective global shape, etc. Colin Davis has noted, in this respect: "When I listen to tapes of live performance I've given, I learn what I'm doing wrong" (in Badal, 1996: 28). Furthermore, one's own recording is part of an autobiographical narrative, which by definition is not available when listening to recordings by others: listening to it always retains this strongly subjective trace.

I shall end by playing a short excerpt from the first concert we gave as part of this research project: it represents for me an ultimate professional experience in that for various reasons, we did not have a chance to rehearse the piece, which we did not perform before, until the morning of the performance. I will leave a discussion of what we have musically learned from this performance for another occasion, when I have more data with which to compare it. As CHARM proceeds into CMPCP, the increasing number of performers who theorise about what they do, and how they do it, with the kind of rigour they insist upon when making music, is slowly increasing, and the grounds for the sustained interaction of musicologists with performers, which would start the tradition of a shared conceptual plane, are already being prepared. Recordings will continue to play an essential role in this endeavour: to adapt Lorin Maazel's words, without recorded sound and recorded music, we simply could not imagine the future of performance studies.

Music Example 6

Beethoven Piano Trio Op.1 No. 1 in E flat major, first movement, exposition
Performers: The Marmara Piano Trio (recorded May 2008)

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