

A FEW THOUGHTS ON RECORDING AND PERFORMANCE

We often refer to recordings as 'performances', but of course live performance, recording of a live performance, performance in the studio, a studio performance captured on record, edited studio recording – these things all stand in subtle and complex relation to each other, and as technologies have changed these relationships have also changed dramatically.

While recording may have been extraordinarily nerve-wracking to some musicians in bygone eras, the 'take two-ness' (as Glenn Gould put it) of the modern recording studio may, in stark contrast, remove some of the 'blood sport' elements of live performance. Some performers might thrive under studio conditions – tantalising, for instance, is the prospect of the microphone eavesdropping, as it were, on private music-making – others might feel debilitated, or their perspective skewed, by the lack of a gallery to play to.

It is often simplistically said that the editing of recordings has set standards of accuracy for live performance which has had a detrimental effect on spontaneity or creativity – an astonishing inversion of values. If actually true, there could not be a more damning indictment of the zeitgeist: virtuosity (the ability to take flight, the ability to turn the workings of the physical mechanism to expressive effect) is by no means synonymous with mere accuracy; and surely a lack of interesting things to say is a far more serious failure of professional musicianship than 'slips'. Can it really be that musicians and the critical community at large would allow their priorities to be dictated thus by a technological advance without realising it?

If it is really so that imperfections mar the experience of repeated listening, why do we celebrate, and return again and again to the recordings of, say, Cortot and Schabel, whose wrong notes and rushed passages become in so many instances touching emblems of sacrifices made in the aesthetic and expressive striving? Would we really want to be without these vulnerabilities, toughen these artists up, as it were? The recent Joyce Hatto scam, where the recordings of several pianists were

passed off as those of one musician, and vaunted, points to a disquieting standardisation of expectations. Are Cortot and Schnabel and their ilk too easily relegated to the "of course we can't play like that now" category, a different set of standards applying to latter-day musicians? Or can it be that the real malaise has been actual loss of recognition, a general forgetting, of expressive vocabularies and mores themselves? And why would we forget? Is the embrace of 'digital' values merely a symptom of a far-reaching sea change in sensibility since the early days of recording – the result of a kind of aesthetic Darwinism where some of the most beautiful modes and means of expression have become extinct?

If modern-day musicians are sacrificing complexity of expressive means for greater 'security' (– it is easier to satisfy a handful of demands well than juggling a myriad of impulses) this lack of complexity must surely be transparent both in their live performances and in their recordings. It seems inescapable that at this core level performers will reflect the same values in the studio that they exemplify live: wrong notes may be corrected, but a genuinely uncanny alchemy of phrasing and timing and voicing and colouring and emphasis and gesture – virtuosity with a real dimension of beauty – is infinitely harder to 'fake' in the editing suite.

It is nevertheless true that the adrenalin of live performance, or simply the awareness of the presence of an audience, may galvanise aspects of musicianship that are harder to energise without. And no doubt the editing process can disturb or undermine the longer-term rhythmic undertow and calibration of a single exciting through-take. On the other hand it is possible to exercise considerably more control over the conditions under which one plays in the studio than in concert – potentially enabling, but also potentially sanitising. The question of the phenomenological differences between performance and recording and recorded performance in their different manifestations becomes pressing: does one for instance think of a recording simply as an 'idealised' performance (effectively the equivalent of the ideal recorded live performance) or, equally simply, merely as a 'thing in itself'? If one tends to the latter view one is bound to ask which aspects of the performer's aesthetic are transferred to this new thing from his practice

workshop or from his live performance, and by what process this is done.

Of paramount importance is the performer's attitude to spontaneity: is his aesthetic premised on a ideal tracing of a musical argument already fabricated in all particulars?; or does he allow himself freedoms within a very defined framework, the knowledge of the possibility of another take encouraging him to 'try something else'; or is he apparently freely drawing on resources of memory, musical language and expressive device in the manner of an improviser? It would be a mistake to suppose that the studio cannot accommodate all these. Inevitably, the more overtly diverse the material available from the sessions, the more interesting the choosing of takes (mapping) – and the more integral this choosing itself becomes to the creative results. Thus the recording and editing processes can be sensitively attuned to the performer. Again it is hard to imagine that such aesthetic ideals would not reflect themselves both in the intentions expressed in live performance and in recording. The emphasis might slightly shift but to the discerning listener performance and recording (in whatever form) will inevitably reflect closely related values. How and what the listener discerns in turn will reflect their own values.

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