



# "A critic's view" in "Music librarianship in America, Part 4: Music librarians and performance"

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## A Critic's View

*David Hamilton*

When preparing this talk, I thought back to my earliest encounters with music in an institution of higher learning. The first was a harmony class at Princeton, in a curious location known as the “Peking Room,” at a very early hour of the morning. At the first session, Milton Babbitt—a member of today’s panel—dumbfounded me and a number of my contemporaries by demonstrating a derivation of the tonal harmonic system from minimal assumptions. The necessity (indeed, even the desirability) of this exercise had never before occurred to us, but its elegance and power in clarifying the system’s subtle asymmetries have never left my mind.

My second encounter took place a block or so farther to the west, in Clio Hall, a little neo-Greek temple that in 1952 housed the Princeton Music Department. There I discovered a circulating library of recordings, of a size and scope that—at least for the time—was staggering. It was a circulating library, for the simple reason that Princeton then had no private listening facilities. The opportunity it provided to engage with the enormous range of repertory then appearing on LP was as influential as anything in my Princeton education. Among the recordings that remain in my mind and ears from that time are the early discs of the Juilliard Quartet, of which Raphael Hillyer—another member of this panel—was then violist, and the first record of Schoenberg’s Suite, op. 29, conducted by this session’s chairman, Gunther Schuller. Through these encounters with recordings, my appetites for comparison, verbal description of music and performance, and evaluation first surfaced, so Princeton’s record library was in a real sense the starting point of my vocation as a music critic.

Record libraries such as that one (of which I eventually became, for a time, the librarian) served several functions: (1) furnishing aural examples for faculty use in lectures and classes; (2) providing listening material for student assignments; (3) supporting independent research by students and faculty, notably the music majors’ responsibility for learning the “canonical” repertory; and (4) providing service to the university community at large. Nor have these roles altered significantly over several decades, despite technological developments—the introduction of stereophonic sound, cassettes, compact discs, and video recordings—though student ownership of playback equipment, then relatively rare, has now become universal, and the continuing expansion of the recorded repertory has decisively undermined the “canon” of those earlier days.

Over the past five decades, our perspective on recordings has changed. In the 1940s, they primarily represented performances from the present and the recent past; earlier recordings were so much more primitive in sound that they had been

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relegated to the status of curios rather than substitutes for live performance. The advent of the LP didn't really change that—indeed, it produced newer recordings that were a much more suitable *ersatz*—and libraries continued to concentrate on collecting the latest product, discarding earlier ones as they wore out or could be replaced. Gradually, however, the memory bank that records represent has extended, now spanning virtually a century, and we can regard them in more complex ways.

This expanded perspective is reflected in the domain of discography, the audio equivalent of bibliography. Its early ventures were largely codifications of available and recent records—roughly equivalent to *Books in Print*. Historical (retrospective) discography grew by fits and starts, beginning with jazz and then with vocal music, the area of art music in which it first became clear that performance techniques and styles had changed radically over the period of audible history. Today, thanks to numerous researchers and to meticulous discographies devoted to label names and catalog and matrix numbers, many areas of recorded literature are at least canvassed, if not always fully indexed and documented. Among many examples, acoustic orchestral recordings, quickly forgotten after 1925, when the microphone brought astounding sonic improvements in registering large forces, were never adequately documented; a much-needed discography is now in progress (by Claude Arnold). Though many of such recordings are musically compromised by altered orchestrations, cuts, and time limitations, they nevertheless document important aspects of performance practice.

Parallel to the increasing quantity of recorded sound and the broadened bibliographic control, critical writing about recordings has changed its focus. For a long time, the prevalent—if unacknowledged—model was the “consumer report,” aiming to establish the “best” recording of a work among the relatively few available for sale: Felix Weingartner or Arturo Toscanini or Bruno Walter conducting Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, Rosa Ponselle or Elisabeth Rethberg or Zinka Milanov singing “Ritorna vincitor” from Verdi's *Aida*, and so forth. Only examples from the present and recent past were considered. That model has gradually broken down, in part because it became unworkable: with literally dozens of versions of standard works current in the shops and many dozens more in libraries and archives, the task of discrimination and ranking far exceeds the appetites, even the capacities of rational beings. Record critics still evaluate newly recorded works, characterize new performances, and recognize obvious superiority in cases of limited competition—but forgive us for not even trying to rank the forty available recordings of Brahms's *Haydn Variations* or César Franck's Symphony in D minor.

In that respect, record critics are doubtless less helpful to music librarians than they once were. At the same time, our current concerns may suggest new directions for record libraries as well as for manufacturers. To that end, let us consider some of the things recordings can do for us. Most conspicuously, they can document the extraordinary changes in performance style during the present century. We need only think of Baroque performance practice, in which the progress of seven decades can be seen to have steadily shifted its destination. A dramatic illustration is offered by the opening of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 5 in a selection of recordings—to be considered not as sources of pleasure nor criticized for their failure to match contemporary ideals, but as sources of information about past ideals and practices. The following performances are arranged not by recording date but by conductors' birth date:

- Alfred Cortot (b. 1877, conductor & piano); Jacques Thibaud (violin), Roger Cortet (flute), Chamber Orchestra of the École Normale, Paris (HMV DB-1783; recorded late 1920s); M.M. ♩ = 100 (approximate tempo of opening measures);
- Leopold Stokowski (b. 1882, conductor); Anshel Brusilow (violin), William Kincaid (flute), Fernando Valenti (harpsichord), Philadelphia Orchestra (Columbia MS-6313; recorded 1960); M.M. ♩ = 86;
- Otto Klemperer (b. 1885, conductor); Henri Merckel (violin), Roger Cortet (flute), Marguerite Roesgen-Champion (harpsichord), Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra (Polydor 566.218/20; recorded 1946); M.M. ♩ = 92;
- Edwin Fischer (b. 1886, conductor & piano); Manoug Parikian (violin), Gareth Morris (flute), Philharmonia Orchestra (HMV ALP-1084; recorded 1954); M.M. ♩ = 86;
- Wilhelm Furtwängler (b. 1886, conductor & piano); Willi Boskovsky (violin), Josef Niedermayer (flute), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Recital Records RR-515; recorded at concert, Salzburg, August 31, 1950); M.M. ♩ = 72;
- Adolf Busch (b. 1891, conductor & violin); Marcel Moyse (flute), Rudolf Serkin (piano), Busch Chamber Players (British Columbia LX-445/6; recorded 1935); M.M. ♩ = 82;
- Karl Münchinger (b. 1915, conductor); Reinhold Barchet (violin), André Pépin (flute), Germaine Vaucher-Clere (harpsichord), Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra (London LLP-222; recorded 1951); M.M. ♩ = 88;<sup>1</sup>
- Nikolaus Harnoncourt (b. 1929, conductor); Alice Harnoncourt (violin), Leopold Stastny (flute), Georg Fischer (harpsichord), Concentus Musicus (Telefunken SAWT-9460-A; recorded 1964); M.M. ♩ = 84;
- Reinhard Goebel (b. 1952, conductor & violin); Wilbert Hazelzet (flute), Andreas Staier (harpsichord), Musica Antiqua Köln (Deutsche Grammophon 423-116-2; recorded 1987); M.M. ♩ = 104.

Even a brief excerpt tells much: the tempo, its articulation at the cadence of the initial ritornello, the overall sonorous gestalt, and the treatment of the texture in the initial concertino passage. The earliest performances may be said to continue representing performance practices of the nineteenth century—especially (despite its late date and the presence of a harpsichord) the Stokowski recording, which sounds even slower than it is, thanks to the large sonority and the massive cadential ritard. For its day, the Cortot performance is remarkably fleet, though here too tempo is employed to inflect the cadence. Furtwängler's tempo is slowest of all, resulting in the effect of 2/4 rather than 4/4 measures and making the piece subjectively twice as long. However, the conductor's free reading of the cadenza in this performance is an enthralling document of an essentially Brahmsian understanding of Bach style. Already in the 1920s, a leaner, tauter approach was making its way (one might draw a compositional parallel in the progression from Max Reger to Paul Hindemith); Klemperer was one of its noted protagonists, though he recorded Bach only after World War II. (His Philharmonia recordings represent a still later stage in his own stylistic development.) Edwin Fischer and Adolf Busch epitomize intermediate stages, featuring the counterpoint lovingly "orchestrated" to underline motivic matters and, especially in Busch's performance, a chamber-music rather than a "conducted" ensemble. The early-1950s recording by Karl Münchinger and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra epitomizes the postwar "sewing-machine Baroque" style. With Harnoncourt's first recording, performance on

<sup>1</sup> This recording was omitted from the tape used to illustrate the presentation.



Label of 78-rpm recording by Alfred Cortot of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 5, 2d movement (1931), and compact disc containing Reinhard Goebel's performance of the concerto and two other works (1987), both reproduced actual size.



period instruments achieved consistent technical mastery, as well as an aesthetic outlook freshly conceived. Reinhold Goebel's *Musica Antiqua Köln* provides a sample of recent approaches—seemingly half again as fast as Harnoncourt, with much improvised ornamentation. Aside from a general speeding up of tempo (less pronounced, perhaps, than one might have expected) and slenderizing of texture, this series of examples nourishes the view that the postwar fascination with timbre as a constructive compositional element has been reflected in performance style as well.

Recordings can also remind us that not all change is progress. Recently I compiled an anthology of recordings from Verdi's *La Traviata*, performed by Metropolitan Opera singers from 1906 to the present (Metropolitan Opera Guild MET-505). These document a distinct hardening of the rhythmic arteries over the years, as well as a loss in dynamic variety and shading. In the older recordings, some of that light and shade was communicated by expressive devices that in recent years have been stigmatized as mannerisms, affectations, or liberties with the composer's wishes. The most famous example from *La Traviata* has long been Fernando de Lucia's early recording of Alfredo's "De' miei bollenti spiriti" (G&T 052129), with its long drawn-out diminuendos, sudden dynamic contrasts, metrical distensions, fermatas, unwritten ornaments, and the like. Since de Lucia did not sing this at the Met, his recording was out of scope for my anthology, but I found a similar, if less elaborate version by a less well-known tenor of a few years later, Fernando Carpi.

That Carpi recording also illustrates the historical value of recordings by forgotten performers. If we had only de Lucia's "De' miei bollenti spiriti" to illustrate that performance style, it might easily be dismissed as the whimsy of a spectacular eccentric. But the recordings of his run-of-the-mill contemporaries validate his centrality; they all share in that style. (And they and the Violettas and Germonts of the period make most modern *Traviata* performances sound driven, strenuous, and of limited expressivity.)

Historical recordings also enable us to deduce the unwritten axioms and practices of earlier performing styles. A splendid example is Will Crutchfield's systematic study of ornaments and cadenzas in Verdi recordings made by singers trained during the composer's lifetime, all the more valuable because it yields general guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions for imitation.<sup>2</sup>

The power of recordings to demonstrate forgotten or neglected alternative approaches to works and styles should be valuable in the teaching of performance—not as models for imitation, but as stimuli for imaginative rethinking of generic modern approaches to standard works. In a musical world where too many performers seem to view their role as a passive one, analogous to a stylus tracking a record groove, the study of historical performance might serve to stimulate individuality—as, for not unrelated reasons, has the use of historical instruments. In either case, the challenge is to avoid plodding, lifeless performances based on rote or rules.

Historically, the performance of new music has provided stimuli to performance practice. People who play new music have to "invent" its sound—they cannot just

<sup>2</sup> Will Crutchfield, "Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence," *19th-Century Music*, 7 (1983), 3–54.

run through what they remember from recordings; there are no such crutches. And when these people turn to older music, the best of them continue to exercise the skills honed in learning and performing new music. That is why performances of standard repertory by such artists as Bethany Beardslee, Ursula Oppens, the late Jan DeGaetani, Paul Jacobs, and Robert Miller—not to mention my colleagues on this panel, Raphael Hillyer and Gunther Schuller—have so often been vital, imaginative, and healthy.

Thus, to its potentially destructive effects on our musical life, the phonograph also offers a counterbalance, through its ability to preserve and revive a wondrous variety of stylistic and interpretive possibilities. If I have a single message for music librarians, it is to encourage them to build collections of recordings that will make possible many encounters of this stimulating kind among performers and listeners of several generations.