

## From Technology to Philosophy: Reflections on Recording

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During its relatively short history, starting with its appearance in the cultural scene in 1878 in the form of the phonograph, sound recording technology impacted the social-cultural practices surrounding music and music making in ways that are, arguably, still beyond our full comprehension or appreciation. Since it is impossible for anyone alive today to remember or reconstruct accurately the everyday phenomenology of musical culture in the pre-recording era and compare it with a phenomenology of the age of recording, the idea that recordings changed the world of music forever remains grounded in theoretical-historical comparisons rather than in experience. What we do have first-hand experience of, however, are the rapid cultural changes that take place as evolving sound recording technologies open up novel ways of engaging with music as listeners, performers, composers, critics, producers, etc. Attempting to critically assess the full cultural applications and implications of each technological transformation remains – as always – a wild goose chase, since technologies do not inherently imply the full range of their possible creative uses and the attendant social changes. Technologies can take on unpredictable functions, and serve previously unimagined ends. This was already the case at the very beginning of the recording era: when Edison speculated - in his well-known article of 1878 titled “The Phonograph and its Future”<sup>1</sup> - about the potential uses of his new invention, he remarkably assigned what has become the most basic and culturally dominant function of recordings during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the representation of musical performances, a most unassuming and unpromising place within his list: after citing, as potential functions of the phonograph, the dictation of letters for business purposes, recording of the testimony of witnesses in court, recording of books read by an elocutionist, preservation of the voices and last words of the dying, the manufacturing of dolls

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<sup>1</sup> This article appeared in the *North American Review*, which has recently been digitized and made available via the Cornell University Library. See: <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi>. Chanan (1995: 2-5) includes a brief discussion of Edison’s article.

which may speak, sing, cry or laugh, etc. Edison cited towards the bottom of his list a rather uncommon musical occasion as a potential use of the earliest recording technology. He wrote: 'A song sung on the phonograph is reproduced with marvellous accuracy and power. Thus a friend may in the morning-call sing us a song which shall delight an evening company' (Edison, 1878: 533). Edison could predict neither the ubiquitous role sound recordings would assume in representing musical performances nor the revolutionary role it would play in expanding - to an unprecedented degree - the materials amenable to meaningful use in musical composition during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, recording technology had a profound impact on the material approaches to the creation of music (e.g. electroacoustic compositional practice), as well as on the conceptual limits of traditional notions associated with musical practices, giving rise to philosophical questions that would not have arisen in its absence: these notions include the very idea of music (e.g. 'does a definition of music require sounds produced by humans via musical instruments?'); the idea of performance (e.g. 'does a musical performance necessitate the presence of the performers in the same spatio-temporal context as the listeners?'); the instrument (e.g. can the mixing desk be regarded as a musical instrument?); liveness (e.g. can one speak of a musical performance that is not live?), etc. Hence, changing recording practices throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century - evolving from the wax phonograph cylinder through the tape and shellac disc to the digital MP3 - brought with them changes not only in our perceptual/experiential modes in relation to music, but also in our ways of thinking about/conceptualizing musical practices. In this sense, recording technologies, and the practices they afford, come with certain philosophical - ontological, epistemological and aesthetic - perspectives or assumptions, whether these remain implicit or are articulated explicitly: like theories, practices never take place in a philosophical void.

Prior to the recording era, the Western musical landscape already involved a complex relationship between its two main ontological constituents, namely musical works and performances. Lydia Goehr's widely known - and also contested - thesis (1992; 2002) that the regulative concept of the musical work is a historical-cultural contingency appearing at a particular point in time portrays the historical roots of a particular ontology that has dominated

musicological thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century – an ontology that regards works as the primary category and performances as derivative of them.<sup>2</sup> The introduction of recordings into this picture further complexified it, introducing another level of representation for music, posing questions such as: Should recordings be seen as representing works or performances, or both? How would the aesthetic expectations in the context of a musical performance change once the ephemeral event becomes repeatable and decontextualized from its original cultural and spatial-temporal context?

Edison's brief reference in his 1878 article to a private, domestic musical performance as it related to its recording articulated not only the original function of the new technology in the context of music – namely, documenting, storing, providing a *record* of and reproducing the fleeting event - but also the first *aesthetics* of sound recording that gave the centre stage to the idea of truthful representation or *fidelity*. As the earliest genre to be recorded, classical music indeed has been the original site for the emergence of a particular philosophical position regarding the function, nature and practice of sound recording. Although the limitations of the recording technology at its earliest stage introduced various constraints regarding the 'documentation' that could be made of a musical performance, such as the possibility of capturing the acoustic waves in the recording venue only crudely and partially, other restrictions, such as the necessity of making *unedited* takes lasting between 2 to 4 minutes, helped - rather paradoxically - to reinforce the primary function of sound recording as a truthful 'document' of what transpires in a live performance. This particular philosophy of recording, which can be labelled 'Recording as Document' is also related to the defining conditions of a very long tradition of live performing in the Western classical genre, which is shaped in essence by the cultural valorization of high level performance skills. To this day, this tradition has been resisting any substantial change in the way performers are expected to make music. Even as sound recording technology changed dramatically during the

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<sup>2</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Goehr's neat dualistic account of 19<sup>th</sup>-century musical ontology is challenged by the existence, in the discourses of the period, of another category that is not identical either with the work or its performances: the category of 'the music'. See, Doğantan-Dack (2012a).

course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to allow the manipulation of recorded materials, it is still culturally unacceptable for a performing classical musician to avail him/herself of any technological means in the studio to produce a performance that s/he could not achieve live on the concert platform, which would count as cheating. In this genre, 'one should not release a recording under one's performing name if one would not be capable of producing such a phenomenal performance live under ideal circumstances' (Kania 2008: 9). Consequently, the deeply rooted live performance tradition in classical music continues to demand – even as the affordances of the technology evolve - an aesthetics of recording that respects the representation of (the Aristotelian) *unity of place and time* as in a live performance, and of *the impression of unmediation* in the final product; the aim is to enable listeners to experience the recording as providing access to a 'real' performance that was given at a particular space and time, as well as to the artistry and musicianship of the performer(s) and their interpretations, even if in reality hundreds of takes and/or edits go into the shaping of the final, commercial product. In this connection, Gibbs and Dack have argued that by reinforcing the impression of spatio-temporal unity in a classical recording, 'the opportunity is presented for the identification and indeed the celebration of an *event*. That event is, of course, the performance and it is this – be it real or illusory – that is presented for critical appraisal' (Gibbs and Dack 2008: 175).

It is, therefore, ironic that while the prevalent (popular or 'folk') philosophy of recording in the classical genre identifies, and creates the expectation for, the recorded musical event as a representation of a live event, in reality listeners have come after decades of exposure to recordings to expect the live performance to simulate the recorded one. The ontological and epistemological hierarchy has in fact been turned upside down such that the recorded performance is the primary, and 'real' category for many listeners. Cummings quotes one reviewer, who got to 'know' the violinist Midori through her recordings and was shocked upon encountering her in a live performance at the Barbican concert hall in London: 'On this evidence the Midori who sells all those CDs is a creation of the microphone and the Sony engineers. Heard 'live' (10 March), she has a small, rather wiry tone with an E-string sonority that is close to a whistle' (Cumming 2000: 21).

As far as the performing musician is concerned, however, there is evidence to suggest that an analogous transformation in *their* musical ontology and epistemology may not have taken place: I have argued elsewhere that for musicians in the classical genre, performing for audiences in live contexts is part of a 'highly specialized, rigorous training, and throughout one's career it remains as the gold standard in evaluating one's expertise and musicianship. The classical performer depends on live performance to establish and define his or her artistic identity as a musician' (Doğantan-Dack 2012b: 36). As Robert Philip wrote: 'Concerts in front of an audience are still what counts, and are the events most [classical] musicians measure their lives by... Musicians who regard recordings as preferable to concerts are in a tiny minority' (Philip 2004: 60).<sup>3</sup>

One of the important issues that is introduced by the aesthetics of *Recording as Document* concerns the concept of *fidelity*: while it can be defined in technical terms as the simulation of live performance psychoacoustics, concerning 'the extent to which technical equipment is capable of accurately capturing, storing and reproducing sounds' (Rumsey 2008: 213), defining the essentials of an *experience* of fidelity in listening to a sound recording is much more complex and far from easy. For instance, in early advertisements for gramophones and phonographs 'people were quoted swearing that it was impossible to tell the difference between the crackly, distorted reproduction of a singer and the original performance' (Rumsey 2008: 218). Factors such as recognition of the familiar, the appeal to emotions, etc. play important roles in the listener's experience of sonic fidelity. What is interesting to note is that while high technical fidelity is now possible, few listeners 'seem to care very much about it' (Rumsey 2008: 219). Once again, there appears to be an asymmetry between the *production* and the *reception* sides of the music reproduction chain regarding the value attached to technical high fidelity. As Rumsey notes: 'While the trained sound engineer may care deeply about the last decibel range and the minutiae of stereophonic imaging, the average consumer is often totally unaware

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<sup>3</sup> A celebrated example of a musician who took the idea of the live performance as the gold standard to its extreme is the Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache (1912-1996): he consistently refused to release his recorded performances commercially during his lifetime as he believed that recording rendered the music 'flat and mediocre' (Celibidache 2001: 71).

that stereophonic imaging is important ... In the absence of anything to compare it with, mediocre sound quality (in absolute terms) may be regarded by the general population as good. For the average listener, once above a certain threshold, perhaps sound quality only needs to be 'good enough' (Rumsey 2008: 221). Hence, evidence based on the reception of sound recordings indicates that total fidelity to the original acoustical environment does not have to be an aesthetic aim. Furthermore, given that such fidelity is still not technically possible in our advanced stage of sound recording technology, whenever a musical performance becomes mediatized by being recorded there is bound to be an element of illusion, an element of 'production'. In this sense, even if one sets out to practice an aesthetics of *Recording as Document*, recordings always transform the reality they aim to document (see Eisenberg 1988).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of more advanced sound recording technologies that would allow sound capture through microphones, multi-track recording, editing, etc. prepared the material conditions for the emergence of a substantially different recording philosophy: *Recording as Creation or Artwork*. In the classical genre, this philosophy has not been adopted to any significant degree by any performing artist except Glenn Gould, whose unusual career continues to be a source of fascination for classical music lovers: halfway through his career, Gould would abandon the concert platform to retreat exclusively to the recording studio and experiment with the creative potentials offered by recording technology in order to 'produce' performances that would not be possible on stage, turning the established aesthetics – and arguably the ethics – of recording practices in the classical genre upside down. To be sure, Gould would not make use of technological opportunities to rectify his performance mistakes (it appears that the various takes he made in any recording session were invariably note-perfect; see Scott et al., 1983); his concern was with the creation of interpretations that might turn out to be 'better' than those that are possible within the temporal constraints of live performance: the studio would enable him to overcome the 'inexorable linearity of time' (Gould and Davis 1983: 57).

In another genre, that of popular music, however, the aesthetics of *Recording as Artwork* would quickly become the norm during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In

this genre, recordings do not standardly aim to document, or faithfully reproduce, a performance that took place at a given spatio-temporal location. Instead, the performances that listeners hear on the recordings are ‘constructed’ in the studio. It is perfectly acceptable to regularly transform the recorded sound, and there is no requirement to create the impression of a realistic, unified original spatio-temporal location for the performance: the construction of virtual acoustic spaces that could not exist in reality is quite common. The record producer and musician George Martin described this radically new recording philosophy by noting that ‘the recording of a concert performance at the Albert Hall may be the same as a recording of a live stage play but making a record in a studio is much more like making a film’ (Martin 1979: 77). According to this philosophy of recording, anything is permissible in the studio as long as the result sounds ‘good’, and a certain sound manipulation that would be regarded as ‘cheating’ in the classical genre, for example, becomes ‘creative’ practice. However, there is no substantial research literature comparing how notions of ‘good’ are to be identified on the *production* and *reception* sides of sound recordings in the popular genre. For example, do listeners prefer the ‘tricks’ done in the studio that make pop music sound ‘good’ to the live performance, where bands are rarely able to do such tricks all live? Why do some listeners prefer amateur ‘audience’ recordings made live that ‘muddy the music yet capture the ‘feel’ of being there, as when one fan praises one of these ‘audience’ recordings [of the Grateful Dead] for letting them ‘experience the experience’” (Gracyk 2008: 68)? And could it be that some listeners have come to enjoy certain kinds of sounds artificially created in the studio simply for their own sake – akin to enjoying art for art’s sake! Without extensive research on the various listening practices of audiences, we remain far from understanding the critical implications of the aesthetics of *Recording as Artwork*.

The AHRC-funded Research Network on Performance in the Studio, which was set up to study musical performance as it takes place in the recording studio, has generated fascinating data from the recording of a pop song in a session that took place in the studios of the London College of Music in December 2012. Studying this data provides the opportunity to re-evaluate the nature and

boundaries of the various recording philosophies that emerged throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, how rigid are the boundaries of different aesthetics of recording that are standardly associated with different genres of music (such as the association of the aesthetics of *Recording as Document* with classical music, and that of *Recording as Artwork* with pop music)? When recording in the studio, is there a dominant aesthetics of recording that is shared by the majority of the team members, or perhaps imposed by the producer? And is it necessary or desirable for the team members in the studio to subscribe to one and the same recording aesthetics in order to ensure the 'success' of the final recorded artefact?

Based on my preliminary analysis of some of this data, I wish to put forward here some hypotheses, each of which will be re-evaluated through further detailed analyses and contextualization of all of the data that the Research Network on Performance in the Studio makes available. First, I posit that different aesthetics of recording are abstract idealizations: it is not possible to speak of a 'pure' aesthetics of recording as documentation, or a 'pure' aesthetics of recording as artwork as representing any studio recording practice in real life. What emerges from real-life studio practices is more complex than what could be captured by either of these philosophies alone, and often the criteria of one aesthetic approach sits side by side with those of the other. For example, during the interview the drummer, Chris Taylor, expresses preference for the aesthetics of *Recording as Document*. He explicitly notes his dissatisfaction with the fact that technology actually 'creates' the final artefact that is commercially released. He prefers the earlier way of recording in the studio where what was recorded would be 'the finished article. [People were not] expecting technology to finish the article', and comments: 'I don't know why technology has to get involved in what we do, recording-wise'. In his view, recording should simply be a 'capturing' process rather than 'something you create music from.' The technologically mediated representation of the performance given in the studio is not, in his view, representative of the *artistic identity* of a musician or group of musicians as revealed in their authentic *sound*: in this sense, Taylor promotes an aesthetics that finds the primary value in live performance and in the skills that it involves. He notes: 'I think the best music is

done when you're just interacting [with the other musicians] without too much technology' ... 'Personally, I do prefer for us all to be in one room and for us to get our own sound together, which goes against the technical guys because they want to put a mic on everything and shield everything off', ... 'It's not about the technical side; it's all about sound and getting the vibe together.' At one point during the interview, he in fact articulates an essential aesthetic principle that continues to drive recording practices in the classical genre, by arguing that what the Beatles did in the studio creatively would not really belong to them – or identify them as those artists – if they could not reproduce it live on stage: 'the Beatles' is what listeners hear on stage. Similarly to the reviewer who was shocked by the mismatch between the artistic identity of the violinist Midori as revealed through her sound on record and her sound on the concert platform, the drummer in this project also subscribes to the age-old cultural tradition of valorizing and prioritizing live performance skills. What is important for research purposes is that the interview as it unfolds reveals that the drummer sees no contradiction in *also* subscribing, to a certain extent, to the aesthetics of recording as artwork: for example, the overdubbing is not, in his view, a case of technology interfering with the 'capturing' – the accurate representation – of his music-making. It is merely a process of 'adding something to something that has already been created'; it is just 'perfecting' the music.

The interview with the double bass player, Jonny Bridgwood, roughly inverts the position articulated by the drummer, Chris Taylor, in that he does not strongly promote the aesthetics of recording as document, and 'is happy' to let the rest of the production team 'create' the final sound of the recording; for him, the 'performance' is a layered building up of the recorded song through technological means. However, he does still believe that the final sound of the recording, over which he does not exercise any control, represents his artistic identity as a musician. He notes: 'It's really the end of the line, people are going to listen to it and they are going to say like who is playing the bass on that, you want to be good'; what matters is 'just the end product if you are listening to it on radio or whatever.' He also believes that in the studio, one still gives a performance even if the environment is very different compared to a live context. What emerges from these two interviews – with the drummer and the

double bass player in this project – is that musicians have *philosophies of performing* as well as *philosophies of recording*: the two do not necessarily overlap in their aesthetic essentials. Further research is needed to document the history of the relationship in different musical genres between the philosophies of recording and of performing as they shaped the practices of generations of musicians; and to understand if performing philosophies have been changing in ways similar to recording philosophies.

The second hypothesis that I wish to put forward is that for the musicians performing in the studio, the primary focus is on expressive communication – or the communication of a certain expressive quality/moment. This is articulated in terms of ‘getting the vibe’, ‘getting in the zone’, ‘capturing the magic’: there is no research literature on how the listeners’ perception of the expressiveness of technologically mediated performances differ or is similar to the expressiveness they experience in live performances. This project, however, provides evidence that from the perspective of performing musicians, live and mediated performances meet at a common denominator that is highly valued by them, namely the experience – on stage or on the studio – of making music expressively, which is variously described in terms of ‘magic’, ‘flow’, etc. In this regard, the fundamental value and nature of *performing*, as distinct from recording, appears to have changed little as the nature of the recording process, and the values associated with it, continue to change since 1878. The multiple philosophies of recording that musicians may bring to the recording studio in the pop genre are still filtered through this performance philosophy.

The third hypotheses I wish to articulate is closely related to the second one I outlined above: even though practices have changed dramatically on the production side of recordings since its first appearance in culture, there does not appear to have been many changes on the receiving side that parallel either in magnitude or content these dramatic technological advances. Certain qualities that listeners expected from live events during the pre-recording era are still highly valued in terms of the qualities contemporary listeners expect from a *musical experience* – whether originating in a recording or a live event: most important among these qualities is the potential of a performance to generate an

affective response. How technologically mediated sound achieves this end is a question for further research.

The AHRC-funded Research Network on Performance in the Studio provides researchers with an invaluable opportunity to re-think the meaning of such traditional notions as 'performing', 'instrument', 'musicianship', 'expression', 'listening' in the digital age of recording: doing so will also mean scrutinizing in further detail different philosophies of recording.

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