

"Early Recordings and Musical Style: Chaning Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950." By Robert Philip

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Robert Philip. *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. x, 274p. ISBN 0-521-23528-6.

As a child, I was fascinated by the sounds of Caruso, Galli-Curci and Maud Powell that emanated magically from the horn of the family hand-crank Victrola phonograph. Later, as an undergraduate, I spent many hours in my college's music-listening room enjoying an excellent collection of 78s that no one else seemed interested in. Perhaps what appealed to me in these recorded performances of an earlier generation was a certain spontaneity and freshness, as compared to a style of singing or playing that was even then, in the 1950s, becoming increasingly narrow and depersonalized. What Robert Philip has found in such performances is a gold mine of performance-practice source material that he uses not only as a demonstration of how radically performance style has changed in the twentieth century, but also as a case study in the nature of our understanding and interpretation of performance-practice documentation in general.

Philip's book is, indeed, nothing short of revolutionary. Imagine the excitement if actual recordings of 18th-century musical performances suddenly turned up. Scarcely less dramatic are the discoveries Philip has made in an until very recently almost completely neglected body of audible, primary source material, the earliest of which is now almost a century old. For the purpose of this book, he has limited his study to instrumental performance, although there is also some useful material on singing, as it is related to instrumental style; sensibly, he "concentrates on the features of performance that have undergone the greatest change during the century—or to put it another way, the habits which make the performances on early recordings sound most old-fashioned to a modern listener" (p. 2). These particular habits are: tempo flexibility (especially the effect of a hurrying *accelerando*), including *rubato*; and the use of *vibrato* and *portamento*. Philip takes these up in turn in the first three parts of his book, performance by performance, in sometimes almost excruciating detail, but a detailed, event-by-event analysis is indispensable for his argument; the casual reader can omit the repetitive minutiae and still see the main outlines of the author's picture, thanks to his skillful presentation of the material.

The treatment of each performance aspect begins with "the documentary evidence of the period: what did musicians recommend or claim, and how did their views change over the period?" Specific recordings are then discussed, "to show what musicians really did in practice." One of the author's most significant conclusions is that "musicians do not necessarily do what they say," nor do they always heed the advice of method-books or other contemporary guidance; in fact, "in many cases it would be impossible to deduce everyday features of performance without the recordings. The importance of this for students of earlier periods is obvious" (quotations from p. 2).

Rhythm and tempo in the earlier recordings (up to the 1930s) are dramatically different from what we are used to today: fast tempos are in general a good deal faster; tempo-flexibility includes not only slowing down but also speeding up; dotted rhythms are interpreted very loosely and are frequently exaggerated; groups of fast notes are often rendered in a way that would seem to us unacceptably sloppy ("slapdash" is a favorite description of Philip's); and various kinds of rubato are liberally applied (Philip has invented some ingeniously effective notational devices to illustrate rubato effects).

Perhaps most fascinating, and remotest from our own ideals of musical style, is the portamento, which Philip investigates first as used in solo and chamber-music performance, then in orchestral playing. Examples of the former include performances by Sarasate, Ysaÿe, Joachim, and the Busch and Lener quartets; of special interest are the author's comparisons of songs by Dvořák and Schubert as sung by Teyte, McCormack, Gigli and others, and as played by violinists and cellists at about the same time.

Portamento of a kind and frequency that would be considered tasteless today was common in orchestral string playing, but it varied from country to country and conductor to conductor—Mengelberg and Stokowski encouraged heavy portamento, while the practice of Toscanini, for example, was much closer to today's. Many earlier recordings show not a coordinated, sectional portamento, but, surprisingly, individual players sliding at different points in a melodic line, at times giving the effect of an almost continuous portamento. The breadth of Philip's research throws considerable light on this phenomenon: he shows how scant rehearsal time and the "deputy" system of substitute players, especially prevalent in British orchestras of the '20s and '30s, affected the style of playing through uncoordinated, haphazard bowings and fingerings.

Spot-checks of several of the recordings cited by Philip gave me confidence in his interpretation of the audible evidence, but in fact there is little room

for disagreement with his findings in the case of tempo-change and portamento, although subtleties of vibrato and portamento techniques could possibly be debated. In any case, however, Philip's conclusions do not rest on subtle readings of the performances he analyzes—the sounding evidence fairly bowls the listener over. A 13-page discography lists all the recorded performances Philip takes up in the text. Many of these recordings are very rare; most are 78s. Though some LPs and CDs are included, the listing is clearly not meant to be a guide to re-releases; fortunately for those of us who are curious to hear what Philip is writing about, many performances on his list are available on CD. I should perhaps mention at this point two minor problems I had with the author's treatment of his printed sources: first, he relies wholly, and, as a rule, uncritically, on English translations (some of which show their age) of foreign-language material; and second, there is no separate list of the rather large number of sources he cites, which may necessitate frustrating searches through pages of endnotes to find the complete citation for a particular item.

The final two chapters present Philip's conclusions: first, the implications of early recordings for our interpretation of performance in the 19th century; the earliest recorded artists were either themselves of that century, or studied with someone who was. (The great violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, perhaps the most dramatic example of this continuity, worked with Mendelssohn and Brahms, and made several remarkably vigorous and clear recordings just after the turn of the century.)

And finally, Philip offers a few trenchant observations on possible implications of his study for the future of performance style. He hears a trend, over the fifty years his book covers, "towards greater power, firmness, clarity, control, literalness, and evenness of expression, and away from informality, looseness, and unpredictability" (p. 229). Reasons for increasing (some might say deadening) literalness in 20th-century performances include demands on the performer that are peculiar to much new music, and the influence of the phono-recording itself, which, ironically, has had a leveling influence on style, tending to repress spontaneity and individuality.

Philip's study certainly gives support to Richard Taruskin's brusquely argued view that the only real "authenticity" in our present-day early music performance practice is that it is authentically late 20th-century.¹ Early musicians admit those older techniques that fit our own ethos, and, in particular,

¹For example, his "The Pastness of the Present" in *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 193f.

those that promote clarity, "cleanness," and control. Modern string players "control" vibrato by using it constantly, but in doing so, they have given up the possibility of its spontaneous, expressive use; some, at least, of their early-music counterparts control it by refusing—against the evidence—to use it at all. Portamento also affords a useful example: although its tradition continues atavistically in operatic singing, it is shunned by both modern and "period" instrumentalists as a violation of standards of cleanness and taste, even though the "authentic" rendition of 18th- and 19th-century music absolutely requires it. As Will Crutchfield aptly observed, "We may wind up having to record the Mozart symphonies on original instruments all over again, *with portamento*."² I, for one, am not betting against it.

Philip's argument—without taking anything away from the important contributions of the early music movement—is that not only could we not reproduce the musical performance styles of the past even if we wanted to (and we really don't), we are also powerless, as his analysis of the recordings so unsettlingly shows, to interpret performance-practice documents adequately to restore anything like "authentic" performances; therefore, "the only authenticity available to us consists in creating performances which work *now*, not performances which supposedly worked for the composer" (p. 240). This is a book that no one with an interest in musical performance style can afford to overlook.

Douglas Leedy

²Will Crutchfield, "Some Thoughts on Reconstructing Singing Styles of the Past," *Journal of the Conductors' Guild* 10/ 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1989): 120.