

Trust in Early Recordings: documents, performances and works

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Introduction

Over the past few years, I have arrived at the conclusion that one should feel genuine sympathy for any researcher that is misfortunate enough to study early recordings.ⁱ This is not because their area of research is so bewilderingly broad.ⁱⁱ Nor is it because researchers of early recordings are required to read so many different kinds of text.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, it is because no matter how far their scholarship advances, and no matter how significant their findings appear to be, scholars of early recordings are constantly questioned about the legitimacy of the very thing that they study. I have experienced this first-hand, since involving myself in a research project focussed on the production and analysis of mechanical recordings^{iv}; even though the findings of this project were disseminated far and wide, involving both academic and public audiences, specialists and non-specialists, questions about the legitimacy of early recordings almost always dominated proceedings. The precise nature of the questions varied, of course, as did the terminology used.^v The overarching sentiment remained the same: to what extent can we really *trust* early recordings?

I do not wish to imply that questions of trust are unwelcome. Indeed, research, in the broadest sense, would cease to exist but for the robust questioning of evidence. There seems something quite unusual about the questioning of early recordings, however, that I have not observed in other research fields; they provoke such a degree of mistrust that a substantial proportion of academic conjecture is almost always given over to a defence of their use. This is, perhaps, because of the medium in question. Sound, or rather recorded sound, is quite unlike literary sources of evidence, in-so-far as researchers are neither fighting fire with fire nor armed with an arsenal of pre-existing methods for their studies; we lack a clearly communicable set of terms to describe certain aspects of sound, never mind a set of agreed strategies to facilitate high-level analysis, criticism, and debate. Contemporary recordings do not seem to suffer the same fate^{vi}, however, and this makes me believe that it is not simply a matter of the medium; mistrust comes from elsewhere.

In this chapter, I consider the trustworthiness of early recordings.^{vii} I do not give specific examples of such recordings, for fear of implying, incorrectly, that the discussion is limited to certain types of early recordings; my aim is to survey the broad terrain in which recordings exist, rather than focusing on a selection of hand-picked examples. Instead, I survey three of the main ways in which such recordings may be described and understood; firstly, as a form of documentary evidence, secondly, as performances, and thirdly, as works of arts. I find the third option the most convincing, and conclude that early recordings are studio productions that come into being through multiple agents, in the form of recording musicians, technicians, engineers and producers who, combined, maximise the affordances of their technologies for the purpose of creating expressive works of art. Through an examination of such works, I believe that we do not only encounter historic performances, but have the opportunity to explore a broader artistic sensibility that reveals the individual and collective values of the time.

Early Recordings as Documents

One of the major reasons why the legitimacy of early recordings is called into question relates to the fact that we consider them, in many respects, to be documentary in nature. The notion that early recordings are documents implies that, when listening, we have a unique opportunity to hear musical performances that were delivered in the past, with the event (the performance)

clearly preceding its documentation (the recording). This view has been widely expressed, not merely about early recordings but about classical music recordings in generally. For example:

[...] recordings of classical music [...] are not attributed the status of classical works by classical audiences. Rather, they are simply documents of important live performances of compositions. Classical recordings are not usually intended to be works in their own right, though they document performances of classical works. The role of recordings in the classical tradition is evidently less important than the roles of composition and performance. They contribute for classical performances of classical compositions to be, rightly, disseminated, but they are not classical works.^{viii}

On the face of it, this argument is fairly compelling; we have a long-standing notion that musical works are the enduring, critical focus of attention within classical music, with performances serving to present those works to listeners. Recording, the documentary view would maintain, serves to provide access to once-upon-a-time performances so that they may be accessed by audiences of the future.

An initial response may be to note that the vast majority of musical recordings are not *of important live performances* as Luzio claims. Rather, most recordings are produced in studios in which the technologies for recording are housed, and their recording capacity maximised. The uncontrollable environment of live performance, where audiences need be able to see, hear, and, unfortunately, make noise, is far from ideal for the production of recordings, as evidenced by the fact that live recordings remain a relative rarity within the world of classical music. This is particularly true of early recordings; technologies we heavy and difficult to transport, and the possibility of an audience interfering with the already expensive task of producing a recording was likely to be too much of a risk. For some, such as Stan Godlovitch, this may imply that we should not use the word *performance*; listeners are one of the four essential parts of his idealised model of musical performance: “Performances are not reflective activities savoured by their agents in solitude. Performances reach out for listeners. They are other-directed, or, in the idiom, ‘given’. [...] performances are specifically and directly intended, designed, or meant for audiences.”^{ix} Others, such as Gina Pane, take a more liberal view; when producing studio recordings, performers direct their actions to a deferred audience, and they subsequently remain “given”, albeit to an audience of the future.^x

Irrespective of the audience, there are more compelling reasons to question the documentary nature of early recordings. For example, we know that early recordings, of all kinds, had short recording durations. This either meant that programmes were chosen on the basis of what could fit on a cylinder or disc, or that musical texts were cut so that they may be recorded in part rather than whole. This implies that the performances would have been prepared, in the broadest sense, as material for recording, immediately undermining the idea that recordings are *simply* documents of performances. Philip Auslander, in his wonderful paper on the documentation of visual arts, suggests that this level of preparation is far more significant than the question of whether or not audiences were present; documented performances are invariably: “[...] staged to be documented at least as much as to be seen by an audience [...]. In this respect, no documented piece is performed solely as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation, the final product through which it will be circulated and with which it will inevitably become identified.”^{xi} This, in my view, immediately dooms any hope of establishing early recordings as a form of

document; the thing that they purport to document is far from neutral event. It is *constructed* for the purpose of documentation.

Auslander's claim, that recorded performances are raw material for documentation, produces another important question: to what extent do acts of recording interfere with, or transform, the performance that is being documented? With respect to early recordings, there are many ways in which one may *attempt* to provide an answer. One might suggest, for example, that performers of the time would have had no context for how culturally significant recordings would ultimately become, perhaps allowing them perform with relative ambivalence. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is easy to imagine how a new technology, such as a phonograph, might have been confrontational to performers who had never previously experienced such a device, perhaps being detrimental to their practice. The real answer, of course, is that we do not know. There are some testimonies, such as Rachmaninov's below, but even this seemingly honest account of recording tells us little of his performances: "I get very nervous when I am making records, and all whom I have asked say they get nervous too. When the test records are made, I know that I can hear them played back at me, and then everything is all right. But when the stage is set for the final recording and I realise that this will remain for good, I get nervous and my hands get tense."^{xii}

It is interesting that Rachmaninov mentions test recordings. Rachmaninov does not give the impression that he was able to make multiple recordings of the same piece. Rather, it would seem that tests involved a process of trying out the recording technologies to ensure that the result would be satisfactory. We cannot be sure, however, how many recording-takes other performers were able to produce before one was ultimately selected, nor what such a selection might have involved; perhaps selection prioritised the most documentary performance, accurately reflecting a performer's style. Selection might, however, have prioritised those recordings where a performer did something unusual, accidental, or unprecedented. Once again, we do not know. In any case, we may safely assume that the performance was most likely recorded from start to finish, since early recording technologies did not permit the assembly of recorded fragments. It is not out of the question, however, that recordings were paused, albeit temporarily, to allow performers to reset prior to, or after, particularly challenging passages.^{xiii}

Since we have transitioned into a discussion about technologies, it is important to note that performances are not the only thing undermining the documentary notion under discussion. The machinery of recording, and particularly that of early recordings, plays a significant role in shaping the ostensible document. For example, Inja Stanović and I recently conducted a series of experiments to determine the extent to which a host of different factors potentially influence the sonic outcome of mechanical recordings (wax cylinders with a phonograph), including the variations of: recording machines, recording diaphragms, cutters, horns, the number of revolutions per minute while recording, room temperatures and wax temperatures, room sizes, proximity of instruments to recording machines, volume (amplitude) of performance, directionality of recording horns, and various related experiences.^{xiv} Without wishing to over-simplify a complex and laborious set of experiments, every single parameter listed above had a marked and significant effect on the frequencies that were captured, the dynamic range, tone quality, and overall volume. In short, every variable in the recording chain radically determined the nature of the resulting record.

It is not simply a matter of whether or not the technology was able to adequately document a performance, however, there are also many ways in which decisions about how to

record were technologically contingent, as implied by Lee B. Brown's description of acoustic recordings: "Pianissimos were in danger of being lost completely unless physically brought forward, or up in volume - either by singing louder, or by moving closer to the horn. Conversely, a Heldentenor had to back away from the recording horn in order to prevent his fortissimos from turning the playback sound into a nerve-wracking blur."^{xv} More strikingly, as Brown goes on to note, is the fact that the wilful, creative transformation of recorded sound began surprisingly early: "When Stokowski discovered in 1929 that orchestral sound was subjected to electronic mixing, he was shocked, feeling that the engineer was replacing him as conductor."^{xvi} It is not clear, of course, whether the mixing was used in the service of documentary aims, or whether it was an attempt to enhance certain aspects of the recording sound. Once again, we simply do not know. The oft-cited talk of studio secrets,^{xvii} alongside the fact that we can never know whether decisions were made for documentary or transformative purposes, does little to support the notion of early recordings as documents.

For Auslander, the entire documentary premise rests on the ontological relationship between performance and document, with the event preceding and authorizing its documentation. Auslander goes to argue that: "If we are to insist on a criterion of authenticity when contemplating performance documentation, we must ask ourselves whether we believe authenticity to reside in the circumstances of the underlying performance, which may or may not be evident from the documentation."^{xviii} In the case of early recordings, we must accept that we know relatively little of those circumstances. For my part, this is sufficient grounds to conclude that early recordings should not be mistaken for a form of document. As Snyder points out: "A document is etymologically and in the law an item of proof or evidence in support of putative fact..."^{xix} I would not be comfortable to claim any degree of proof or fact by presenting early recordings as documentary evidence. If the documentary view holds, so will questions of trust.

Early Recordings as Performances

An alternative view maintains that early recordings do not *document* performances. Rather, they *are* performances. Such a view has been most eloquently, if forcefully, put by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson in what is widely regarded as a core text within the early music discipline, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances*:

I don't [...] entirely accept the argument that studio recordings are not performances. Of course, in an obvious and literal sense they are not. They are (nowadays) compiled from bits of many (usually incomplete) performances. Earlier they were performances recorded whole but very imperfectly. But when we listen to a recording we listen not to its construction but to its effect. [...] If it didn't sound like a performance it wouldn't be issued on disc, and if it sounds like one then it is one. What matters is that it's experienced as a performance. Because it's the sound that offers the proof of the pudding. [...] Recordings do what performances do well enough that we hear them as performances. This should encourage us to take the details of a recorded performance as the material for studies that seek to explain how music works, even though they may not represent any reality that could exist in a live performance. Provided that they work for us, they work, and that tells us something important about what music is. It's what we perceive as music, not what, looking at the production processes, we might say it 'really' is.^{xx}

In this short statement we find an extremely powerful alternative to the documentary view. Rather than attempting to maintain an ontological relationship between a recorded document and an historic performance, Leech-Wilkinson advocates a phenomenological reading of recordings, in which we take the content of our immediate experience to be the judge of whether something is, or is not, performative. Essentially, if recordings sound like performances when we listen to them then we should attend to them as such.

Leech-Wilkinson's view is almost identical to that of Auslander; both prioritise phenomenological experiences above and beyond efforts to establish the validity any historic documentation. Auslander arrives at this conclusion after comparing and contrasting two works of visual art: Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, where Klein is shown jumping from a top-floor window into the street below, without the aid of a safety net, and Chris Burden's short film, *Shoot*, in which Burden is shot in the arm with a rifle. These two works are chosen because they both *appear* to document a performance. Yet appearances can be misleading: Burden was actually shot, whereas Klein's iconic image was spliced together from two photographs in order to remove the safety net that broke his fall. From a documentary perspective, therefore, these works appear distinct. If we attend to them from a phenomenological perspective, the distinction collapses:

[...] the crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance but the one between the document and its audience. Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological. Just as one can have the pleasure of hearing Sinatra sing duets with singers with whom he had no real interaction, so one can have the pleasure of seeing Klein leap into the void or that of contemplating the implications of Burden's allowing himself to be shot. These pleasures are available from the documentation and therefore do not depend on whether an audience witnessed the original event. The more radical possibility is that they may not even depend on whether the event actually happened. It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.^{xxi}

I have a great deal of sympathy with the arguments of both Leech-Wilkinson and Auslander. In both cases, we are encouraged to examine the content of our first-person experience, rather than focusing on the ways in which performances were historically constructed; since our experiences rarely concern the means of production, we are focus instead on performativity which is, arguably, the central aim of such artworks. Despite this positive endorsement, the idea of prioritising our phenomenological experiences does not sit particularly well when the focus of our attention is directed towards early recordings. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, as Auslander notes, the phenomenological notion under discussion rests of the idea that these kinds of performances are not to be viewed as "an indexical access point to a past event."^{xxii} One may reasonable question whether removing indexical access points to the past is acceptable when applied to *early* recordings. The answer presumably depends on what we hope to achieve when using such recordings. If what matters is purely experiential, then our enjoyment of these performances may not rest on the fact that they are historic, but that they

are expressive, unique performances that we have the pleasure of hearing. If what matters is scholarly, however, then the designation *early* is surely of vital importance; scholars of early recordings engage in historical research and cannot, therefore, overlook historic links to the past. I would agree with Jerold Levinson when, in his discussion of autographic and allographic readings of art, he states: “What we are directly interested in with a musical or literary work is its structure understood in the work’s proper historical setting.”^{xxiii}

This leads us to a second reason why the prioritising of phenomenological experiences does not sit well with early recordings: the phenomenological idea that recordings are performances may hold when we *hear* them, but it rarely holds when we *study* them. This observation directly relates to the follow statement by Leech-Wilkinson: “Recordings do what performances do well enough that we hear them as performances. This should encourage us to take the details of a recorded performance as the material for studies [...]”.^{xxiv} Leech-Wilkinson goes on to say: “It’s what we perceive as music, not what, looking at the production processes, we might say it ‘really’ is.”^{xxv} I would argue that *experiencing* something is not the same as *studying* the thing that gave rise to that experience; we may well experience a recording as if it were a performance, for example, but when we come to study that recording/performance we will probably try to understand how our experience was formed or structured, how our experience related to past experiences of similar recordings, and so on. I would readily agree that *production processes* may be irrelevant to our enjoyment of a recording, but they are most certainly not irrelevant or incidental when we study them. Two examples demonstrate this point. Firstly, Auslander may well have experienced Klien’s *Leap into the Void* as if it were a performance. His study of that experience, by contrast, would not exist if he were not able to tell the reader precisely how Klein’s leap was created (through splicing together two photographs – with only one involving a safety net). It was essential for Auslander to study, and subsequently communicate, Klein’s production processes in order to present his thesis. Secondly, Leech-Wilkinson provides a host of examples that focus specifically on production processes. In the chapter called *Understanding the Sources: Performance and Recordings*, for example, Leech-Wilkinson provides the following description of a recording session:

Stanley Chapple, in a 1928 issue of Gramophone, provides a floor plan of [a recording] session. Two recording horns are used, with the violins (which recorded least well) nearest to them. Squashed around them are the woodwind players, who would have been reinforcing the string parts. Behind them, but higher, were most of the brass, the French horns facing backwards in order to direct the sound from their bells into the recording horn, the players following the conductor in a mirror. The conductor is pushed out of the way to the side where he can be seen but doesn’t obstruct the sound. Bassoons reinforce the cellos, and a tuba and contrabassoon replace double basses, which would not have recorded adequately.^{xxvi}

From this insightful description, we learn something significant about the production of a particular recording. If one were to study the accompanying recording with this description in mind, then it would be possible to make correlations with the resulting performance: Were the violins recorded effectively with the extra horn? Do we have a sense of whether the woodwind manages to reinforce the string parts? Do the French horns sound distant? Are the performers in time, given the placement of the conductor? And so on. These are questions may not have arisen but for a correlation between production processes and the resulting recording. Leech-

Wilkinson's scrutiny of production processes has therefore strengthened and advanced the field of early recording studies. The phenomenological idea that recordings *are* performances may therefore hold for an experiential turn, but it does not suffice when we study.

Thus far, we have simply observed that the *performance* view is less than helpful when we wish to study recordings relative to an historic context. There are good reasons why we might reject the performance view, however. To understand these, we shall introduce Andrew Kania's view on recordings so that we may borrow his terminology. In *Works, recordings, performances: classical, rock, jazz*, Kania makes the following claim about recordings of classical music:

[...] classical recordings [are] transparent in the sense made popular by Kendall Walton's discussions of photography: 'to look at a photograph is actually to see, indirectly but genuinely, whatever it is a photograph of' (1997: 60). The basic argument for this thesis is that photographs are 'counterfactually dependent on the scenes they portray...[and that the] counterfactual dependence...is independent of the photographer's beliefs' (Walton, 1997: 68). [...] What I suggest further is that there are no relevant differences between mechanical image-reproduction and mechanical sound reproduction, when it comes to considering their transparency. That is, recordings are as transparent as photographs; just as we see things in or through photographs, we hear things on or through recordings. The relevance of this point should be clear. Just as in looking at a photograph we see a single person, [...] so in listening to a recording we hear a single performance, even though we may listen to it several times. So, though the recording is a multiply instantiable enduring entity, our interest in it, what we hear through it, is a fleeting event – a performance. For that reason, classical recordings are better viewed as more like performances than like works.^{xxvii}

Kania acknowledges the major difference that holds between recordings and performances: the former are enduring, and can be listened to on multiple occasions, whereas the latter are fleeting, and can only be heard once. There are other differences, of course, and Kania mentions a host of them. His central thesis, however, is that despite these various differences we listen *through* the recording medium and, in doing so, encounter something that we *hear as* a performance. Although not using the same terminology as Auslander, the sentiment is the same: providing we believe that we are hearing a performance, then we might rightly assume that we are.

Kania goes on to consider a range of possible objections to his thesis. Chief among these is the fact that recordings, at least contemporary ones, rarely capture a single take:

The objection is that even if a classical recording is transparent, what you see through its window is not a single event – a performance – but a mish-mash of different bits of different performances tacked together with corrections pasted over certain spots, and so on. Thus, even if classical recordings are transparent, we do not, and ought not, approach them in this way. What we rightly appreciate in a classical recording is the finely honed sonic sculpture we hear on the surface, not the frantic chiselling that we know lies behind it.^{xxviii}

Although this point is not elaborated any further, Kania assumes that his reader will be familiar with the contemporary practices involved in the production of classical music recordings, in which multiple takes are spliced together, producing something that has the characteristics of a live performance. This is precisely what Glenn Gould has told us about in respect of his studio use; Gould said that his recordings were made possible through the splicing together of multiple takes, and that he would not (and perhaps could not) have arrived at the same result when performing live.^{xxix}

We have already noted that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to edit early recordings. In this sense, the notion of frantic chiselling does not apply, perhaps lending further credibility to the idea that they are, in fact, performances. There is, however, a more substantial issue; we do not necessarily experience early recordings as performances, even if we may wish to. This is, to use Walton's terminology, because they frequently lack the degree of transparency common to their contemporary counterparts. Digital recordings, with which we are now familiar, certainly create the illusion of transparency, but the same cannot be said of early recordings. This is because they are, on the whole, extremely noisy. Studies that Inja Stanovic and I conducted with a series of mechanical recording technologies highlighted multiple ways in which noise may be produced during the production of recordings, including: friction between the stylus and the recording medium, mechanical noise of motors in operation, phantom frequencies generated through the vibrational movement of the recording machine, surface noise when the recording is played back, instrumental noise generated through proximity of instruments and performers, material deterioration that occurs with age (particularly with mould on the medium, and the gradual warping of recorded grooves).

It is not simply noise that affects transparency. Many early recordings feature a prominent vibrato effect (sometimes referred to as a WOW effect) that is caused by the drive-belt on the recording machine. This will become more prominent if the same machine is used for playback. There are often cases in which early recordings audibly slow down (or speed up) during playback, thus effecting the pitch and duration of the recorded materials. Further to this, the dynamic range (between the loudest and the quietest sound) is often fairly small, and the frequency span is typically so narrow enough that the fundamental frequency of bass notes on the piano are not captured (we only hear harmonics above the fundamental). By contrast, harmonics of higher notes are not captured (we only hear the fundamental frequency). Bursts of sonic energy (such as the pressing of a piano key) are easily captured by early recording technologies, but natural decays (such as the fading out of the same piano note while the key remains depressed) do not follow the graduated decay that one might expect; notes disappear very rapidly once they drop below a certain threshold.

The above factors have a substantial impact on our ability to hear early recordings as transparent performances. This point was raised by Lee B Brown, albeit with a particular emphasis on how recording industries have aligned transparency with documentary, rather than performance:

The rhetoric of the industry has tended to suggest that its recordings were transparent in virtue of the mere fact that they were documentary. The putative conceptual connection can be broken easily, of course. A blurred photograph could hardly be regarded as transparent, even if it is essentially documentary in its function. However, the recording industry has not been quick to acknowledge the analogous fact about sound recordings. For this reason, a historical survey of the industry's rhetoric is rather amusing. Each of its technical breakthroughs,

from acoustic to electric, from shellac to vinyl, from monophonic to stereophonic, and from analogue to digital, was described in the same glowing terms as the one that came before.^{xxx}

Further to the above, I would argue that the lack of early recording transparency is compounded through our listening circumstances which, as Leech-Wilkinson notes, are equally problematic:

Patti was one of the most famous singers of the 19th century, and yet [...] what you think she sounded like depends on the speed at which you play her recordings. And about that, modern CD transfers have widely differing views. There is no scientific solution to this problem. All one can do is hear as many recordings of a performer as possible and gradually form an idea of the sound she makes, then test any one disc against that impression, adjusting the speed until she sounds 'right'. Of course one's impression may be based on so many mistaken speeds that one's quite wrong. All we can do is discuss the results among experienced listeners and hope to agree, more or less. Similar problems occur in more modern recordings because of differences among tape machines, cutting lathes and playback equipment. To make things worse, pitch was not necessarily fixed by the musicians at A=440Hz, and singers frequently had pieces transposed to suit their voices: neither fact was noted on the disc. Nothing but musical instinct can guide us here.^{xxxi}

Nowadays, there a further complication that I find equally problematic; the vast majority of early recordings as issued, and consumed, as MP3s. The digital format is extremely compressed, therefore further diminishing the quality of the musical materials that they represent, and frequently removes higher frequencies that *were* captured by early recording technologies. Although dealing with piano rolls, rather than early recordings, Inja Stanović's comparison of nine separate transfers of the same roll is extremely illuminating, demonstrating the extent to which digitisations vary.^{xxxii} A similar point is raised by Kendall Walton who, despite talking about photographs rather than music, notes that the machinery of production can often negate or complicate notions of transparency:

What about [photographs] which are devised largely in the darkroom-by combining negatives, retouching, burning out unwanted images, manipulating exposure and contrast, using filters, and so on [...]? Some have maintained that such photographic constructions are essentially similar to paintings. The darkroom artist exercises as much control over the finished product as painters do; his work seems no more mechanical or less human, although his tools and materials are different. The paradigms of transparent pictures would seem to be not the work of professional photographers but casual snapshots and home movies made by doting parents and wide-eyed tourists with assists from Kodak. Photographic constructions do differ importantly from snapshots [...]. Most photographic constructions are transparent in some of their parts or in certain respects. If a viewer doesn't know how a photograph was made, he won't know what he is seeing through it and what he isn't. But he will probably realize that he is seeing some of the things or events or states of affairs which the picture portrays, even if he does not know which ones, and this realization significantly colors his experience. His experience is not unlike that of seeing a white shape

and wondering whether one is seeing a ghost. It may seem to the viewer, moreover, that he is seeing everything that the photograph portrays even if he is not and even if he knows that he is not. Many photographic constructions appear to be transparent even in respects in which they are not [...].^{xxxiii}

The lack of transparency under discussion is far from irrelevant; try as we might, it is hard to listen to early recordings *as* performances without immediately being drawn towards the fact that they are, in reality, recordings. A similar realisation was certainly not lost on the phenomenology school, who produced the instructional notion of bracketing, popularised by Edmund Husserl. According to this notion, one is encouraged to suspend trust in the objectivity of the world in order that one might study the content of one's immediate, conscious experience. Even though this strategy underpinned the entire discipline of phenomenology, rightly obtaining a substantial place in the history of 20th century philosophy, experiences do not bend so easily to such instructions and consequently the notion of bracketing has been widely rejected. One only needs to look at the ways Pierre Schaeffer applied the same instructive notions within the field of *musique concrète* (through the notion of reduced listening, specifically) to see how implausible it is to impose experiential strategies on listeners; try as we might, we cannot condition the listening experiences of others simply by asking them to do so.^{xxxiv}

Curiously, this brings up a paradox which sits at the heart of the discussion about whether recordings *are* performances; because we know that contemporary recordings have been produced in a studio designed to maximise their transparency, we are readily drawn towards a phenomenological reading of our experiences, and are therefore willing to hear them as performances. By contrast, because early recordings lack the same degree of transparency, we readily question the nature of our experience, and wonder to what extent they represent the reality of what was once performed. In short, we are drawn back to the documentary view. With this in mind, I would be more inclined to uphold the very first sentence of Leech-Wilkinson statement about recordings *as* performances: "Of course, in an obvious and literal sense they are not."

Early Recordings as Works of Art

Thus far, we have considered, and rejected, the idea that early recordings *document* performances. Furthermore, we have considered, and rejected, the idea that early recordings *are* performances. An alternative idea is that we play down the performativity of early recordings altogether, and instead attend to them as works of art that were produced, sometimes in a studio, through the creative acts of engineers, technicians, producers, and performing musicians, using the technologies and facilities of the time. In a sense, this idea takes us back to where we started, with a discussion about ontology. Yet in this case, we are not concerned with the ontological relationship between past and present, performance and document. Rather, we are concerned with ontology in the metaphysical sense; "the study of the kinds of things there are in the world".^{xxxv}

The term *work* is, of course, loaded with cultural and social assumptions; I am reminded of Phillip Tagg's essay, "The Work: An Evaluative Charge", where he claimed that the term *work* seems far too pretentious and problematic to apply to popular music.^{xxxvi} Along similar lines, Strohm's essay in the same book claims that the work *concept* has been "on the run" for quite some considerable time, and in need or rethinking for future generations.^{xxxvii} Even so, we do still speak of art *works*, and I shall argue below that early recordings (and recordings in

general) fit into our broader conception of how such works exist. To that end, we shall use Andrew Kania's definition of works; Kania says that they are "of a kind that is a primary focus of critical attention in a given art form or tradition, and [...] a persisting object" (Kania). Let us consider the two parts of this definition in turn.^{xxxviii}

The first part of Kania's definition requires that works of art must be the primary focus of critical attention within a given art form. Here, we immediately run into problems, not least since we have already encountered the view that recordings are *not* the primary focus of critical attention within classical music: "The role of recordings in the classical tradition is evidently less important than the roles of composition and performance. They contribute for classical performances of classical compositions to be, rightly, disseminated, but they are not classical works".^{xxxix} There is no doubt that Luzio is correct. Recordings are *not* the primary focus of critical attention within the classical tradition; since the middle of the eighteenth century, the composed musical work has been primary, with performances a secondary means of making those works audible and accessible. I would counter, however, that recordings *are* the primary focus of critical attention within the tradition of recorded music.

One may object to the idea that recorded music is an autonomous tradition or art form, but there is mounting support for a notion. For example, Theodor Gracky's work on the ontology of rock music offers a work concept for studio-created albums.^{xl} Gracky argues that works of rock music are created in the studio, using the technologies and facilities of recording and playback, and that works subsequently exist in a recorded form. Live performances, in this context, serve to recreate the recorded work, just as live performances in instrumental music serve to recreate composed works. Those who take part in the recording process are numerous – musicians, technicians, sound engineers, producers – and cannot be disentangled from the creation of the works themselves. Along similar lines, Lee B. Brown has proposed the notion of *phonography* to cover music that is made, at least in part, using electronic technologies:

Examples of works of phonography lie along a spectrum of types, according to their degree of "artiness." At one end we have cases such as Vladimir Ussachevsky's experiments with magnetic tape, such as "Underwater Waltz," a piece generated by recording the lowest A on the piano at multiple tape speeds. And we can cite minimalist works by Steve Reich, created entirely out of tape-manipulated snippets of human speech. In the same place, of course, we find the huge category of electronic music. At the other end of the spectrum, we find novelties for the pop market, like the pastiches put out almost a half century ago by RCA Victor, under the name, "The Singing Dogs," with tunes like "Camptown Races" stitched together out of isolated dog barks. More familiar, of course, are the vocals by the imaginary group, The Chipmunks, whose infantile timbre was achieved by accelerating the recording tape.^{xli}

In a similar way to Gracky, Brown focuses upon the ways in which recording technologies allow one to produce works that could not otherwise exist. Unlike Gracky's work on rock, however, works of phonography cannot be performed; they are only phono-accessible.

I imagine that both Gracky and Brown would dismiss the idea that recordings, as I have presented them, are works of art; the recorded works that they both identify cannot have an autonomous existence beyond what is constructed using the recording medium, whereas the classical work and performance heard *through* a record both exist prior to its recording. I would counter, however, that such a view clings to the notion of recordings as documents, and

massively underestimates the revisionist degree of composition and creativity that recording involves. In fact, I would go further, and suggest that Gracky's vision of rock music is an ideal case in point; although it may be that some rock musicians enter the studio with absolutely no vision for what they will record, it is far more likely that the vast majority have worked out the essential structures and plans for their songs in advance. Accordingly, we could argue that the work actually exists as an ontologically thin structure^{xlii} prior to recording; this thin structure is fleshed out substantially through the creative acts of a host of musicians and recording specialists, and emerges as a fully-fledged studio production that Gracky will happily call a work^{xliii}. It seems to me that classical recordings are very similar. The works recorded may have a prior existence, but those works are equally thin in their constitution, and it is not so much through the documented performance that they are realised, as through a fully-fledged production that involves a whole host of recording and production agents. This is perhaps similar to the category of works that Stephen Davies describes as *works for studio performance*. According to Davies, these are:

[...] special kinds of performances that involve the electronic manipulation and sculpting of sound to achieve effects that, typically, cannot be achieved live. Multi-tracking, collaging, filtering, mixing, and other interventions are central to the presentation of such works. The result, which is issued on disk, is what I call a virtual performance. It is virtual in two respects. No continuous performance event of the kind that seems to be represented on the disk need take place and the "performance" occupies an aural space unlike any present normally in the real world.^{xliv}

The second part of Kania's definition requires that works of art are *enduring*. Here, it is important to note that Kania thinks of classical works of music as enduring entities, in the sense that they exist independently of any given performance. By contrast, performances of those works are fleeting, in the sense that they start and stop, and cannot be repeated. This requirement, relative to recorded music, needs no lengthy justification; clearly, recordings exist when they are not being played. Thus, just as we make a distinction between the musical work and its performance, so we might between the recorded work and its playback.

Readers will note that I am no longer making a case exclusively for early recordings, but for recordings in general. This is because I believe that recordings of all ages are a part of the same art form; there is no essential difference between them. Technologies of the past were certainly less advanced than today, but I have no doubt that recording engineers of the past not only mastered but maximised the potential of those technologies in an effort to produce the most expressive recordings possible. They made decisions about how to record that radically determined the nature of what we can hear today. To think otherwise, is to overlook the co-creational input of a wider group of people invariably involved in the production of recordings and to regress, as I see it, to either documentary or performative notions of recordings.

Conclusion

This chapter considered why early recordings tend to invite so many questions of trust. It suggested that questions spring from a misunderstanding of what recordings actually *are* and the ways in which we attend to them. More specifically, it questioned the view that early recordings are a form of documentary evidence or a type of performance, before arguing that they are, in fact, works of art. I believe that there are two substantial benefits to this view.

Firstly, I believe that the art work view will not raise nearly as many questions of trust as the alternatives. This is because works of art, unlike documents, are understood to be a form of creative expression, rather than a statement of fact. It no longer matters whether a recording accurately or authentically documents a performer's playing. Rather, what matters is that those recordings are accurate and authentic expressions of the recording practices and machinery of their age. In this way, I am actively encouraging the idea that recordings are a form creative artifice and, as such, their authenticity is no longer pinned to what Dutton refers to the nominal: "defined simply as the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named."^{xlv} Further to this, the art work view maintains that early recordings are the product of many different actors, including performing musicians, technicians, engineers, and producers. Together, they work to maximise the technologies of their time in order to produce expressive recordings that are not merely aligned with the performing musician, but are the result of shared agency and creativity. Secondly, as a direct consequence of firstly, one can more successfully evaluate the historic meaning of early recordings, if one attends to them as art works, by arriving at a concept of authenticity that has more to do with an object's character as a true expression of the broader historical values and beliefs of their time. Dutton refers to this as *expressive* authenticity: "Works of art, besides often being formally attractive to us, are manifestations of both individual and collective values, in virtually every conceivable relative weighting and combination. Clifford Geertz remarks that "to study an art-form is to explore a sensibility," and that "such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation" whose foundations "are as wide as social existence and as deep" (Geertz 1983)." If these two benefits are unconvincing, then I hope that these final words from Glenn Gould shall be more persuasive: recording, Gould says, "represents something special [...] it isn't a replica of a concert experience [...] it isn't a memento of some hallowed public occasion [...] it is, inherently, an art form with its own laws and its own liberties, its quite unique problems and its quite extraordinary possibilities."^{xlvi}

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ⁱ Although most of my comments in this chapter relate specifically to early *musical* recordings, some (such as this) may apply more broadly.

ⁱⁱ Researchers involved in early musical recordings must, at the very least, know a great deal about musical works *and* performances *and* recordings technologies.

ⁱⁱⁱ These frequently include testimonies, *and* musical scores, *and* recordings, *and* analysis data, *and* an ever-expanding sea of academic writings, among many more.

^{iv} I have been involved in Inja Stanović's project *(Re)constructing Early Recordings: a guide for historically-informed performance*, as a recording engineer, producing digital recordings of live performances and digital transfers of mechanical recordings.

^v Over the past few years, I have encountered the terms *accuracy*, *legitimacy*, *validity*, *trustworthiness*, *veracity*, *efficacy*, and *authenticity* in relation to early recordings.

^{vi} This observation, like much of the discussion thus far, is anecdotal; during seventeen years as a lecturer in music technology, I have never once encountered a student or colleague questioning the validity of a contemporary recording, either as a source of evidence, or as a research output.

^{vii} I take for granted that the reader of this book will have a robust sense of what is implied by the terms *early* and *contemporary*, since both appear throughout, and I ask that the reader forgives the anecdotal premise upon which this chapter is based; although there are certain publications in which the trustworthiness of early recordings has been called into question, this chapter is not intended as a riposte to any particular author.

^{viii} Hugo Luzio, "The Ontology of Rock Music: recordings, performances, and the synthetic view", *Philosophy and Society* 30, no.1 (2019): 75.

^{ix} Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: a philosophical study* (Routledge, 1998), 28

^x Gina Pane, quoted in Kathy O'Dell, "Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s", *Performance Research* 2, no. 1 (1997):76-77.

^{xi} Philip Auslander, "The performativity of performance documentation", *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 3.

^{xii} Sergei Rachmaninov, quoted in Robert Philip, *Early recordings and musical style Changing tastes in instrumental performance, 1900-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231.

^{xiii} Inja Stanović and I tried this during a recording session with wax cylinders. The result was fairly convincing, but for a brief burst of noise where the splice between takes was produced.

^{xiv} Inja Stanović and Adam Stanović, "A Chip off the Old Block? Introducing the practice of historically-informed recording", *Sounds of Science* 26 (2021): 1-16.

^{xv} Lee B. Brown, "Phonography, Rock Records, and the Ontology of Recorded Music", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 4 (2000): 362.

^{xvi} *Ibid*, 361

^{xvii} Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performance* (London: CHARM, 2009), chapter 3., paragraph 16.

^{xviii} Auslander, 8.

^{xix} Joel Snyder, "Documentary without Ontology", in, *Studies in Visual Communication*, Vol 11, issue 1, (University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 78.

^{xx} Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, chapter 3., paragraph 107.

^{xxi} Auslander, "The performativity of performance documentation" 9.

^{xxii} *Ibid*, 9.

^{xxiii} Jerold Levinson, "Autographic and Allographic Art Revisited", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 38, no. 4 (1980): 378.

^{xxiv} Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music*, chapter 3., paragraph 107.

^{xxv} *Ibid*, chapter 3., paragraph 107.

^{xxvi} *Ibid*, chapter 3., paragraph 16.

^{xxvii} Andrew Kania, "Works, recordings, performances: classical, rock, jazz", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3 (2008): 8.

^{xxviii} *Ibid*, 9.

^{xxix} Glenn Gould, "The Prospects of Recording", *High Fidelity* 16, no. 4 (1966): 46-63.

^{xxx} Brown, "Phonography", 362

^{xxxi} Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music*, chapter 3., paragraph 23

^{xxxii} Inja Stanović, "Back to the future: The digitisation of reproducing piano rolls as a rendering of the past", *Swedish Journal of Music Research/Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning* 99 (2017): 83-103.

^{xxxiii} Kendall L. Walton, "Transparent pictures: On the nature of photographic realism", *Critical inquiry* 11, no. 2 (1984): 267.

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- ^{xxxiv} Pierre Schaeffer. *A la recherche d'une musique concrète* (Paris : Média Diffusion, 2016).
- ^{xxxv} Stephen Davies. *Ontology of art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 155
- ^{xxxvi} Philip Tagg, "The work: an evaluative charge", in *The musical work: Reality or invention*, edited by Michael Talbot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 153-67.
- ^{xxxvii} Reinhard Strohm. "Looking back at ourselves: The problem with the musical work-concept", in *The musical work: Reality or invention*, edited by Michael Talbot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 128-52.
- ^{xxxviii} Kania, "Works, recordings", 2.
- ^{xxxix} Luzio, "The Ontology of Rock Music", 75
- ^{xl} Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Duke University Press, 1996).
- ^{xli} Brown, "Phonography", 363
- ^{xlii} The notion of works as either *thick* or *thin* comes from Stephen Davies. *Musical works and performances: A philosophical exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). In this text, Davies argues that works underdetermine the details of their performances. If a large number of details that are predetermined, and must appear during performance, then the work is *thick*. By contrast, if few details are predetermined by the work, leaving the performer with many freedoms during performance, then the work is *thin*.
- ^{xliii} If not, then: "Gracyk's ontological account has the strange consequence that the groups who play rock music, without ever being recorded – either because no recording deals were offered or because they cannot afford the recording expenses – do not create rock works." Luzio, "The Ontology of Rock Music", 14.
- ^{xliv} Stephen Davies, *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 37.
- ^{xl} Denis Dutton, "Authenticity in art", in *The Oxford handbook of aesthetics*, edited by Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 263.
- ^{xlvi} Glenn Gould, transcript of an interview given to CBS Records and dated 26 July, 1982, accessed at: <https://www.glenn Gould.ca/the-solitude-of-the-studio/> on 10/01/2022