

Austro-German Revivals: (Re)constructing Acoustic Recordings

David Milsom, violin. Inja Stanović, piano.

This album was recorded during the final year of Inja Stanović's Leverhulme-funded research project (Re)constructing Early Recordings: a guide for historically-informed performance. As the title suggests, this project focused upon the technologies used to produce early recordings and, more specifically, the ways in which those recordings reveal performance practices of the past. The project was highly practical: a series of performing musicians were invited to produce brand new recordings, albeit using early recording technologies, period instruments, and historically-informed performance practices. The aim was to reconstruct and study the circumstances in which historic recordings were originally produced, in order that we might better understand what they reliably preserve of past performing musicians that are, nowadays, a rich source of inspiration for musicians of the present.

Stanović's project was conducted between 2017 and 2021 at the University of Huddersfield. Initially, it focused on the reconstruction of piano recordings, with Stanović as the pianist. Towards the end of the project, Stanović collaborated with a range of other instrumentalists, including David Milsom; a well-known figure in the practical study of nineteenth-century violin performance, and senior lecturer at Huddersfield University. Prior research by both Stanović and Milsom provided an appropriate foundation for their collaboration; both have researched the ways in which historic performance practices are evidenced through early recordings, putting their findings into practice through their own performances.

This album is the result of the collaboration between Stanović and Milsom. It presents reconstructions of historic recordings by pianists Ilona Eibenschütz (1871-1967), Natalia Janotha (1856-1932), and Alfred Grünfeld (1852-1924), and violinists Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), Marie Soldat (1863-1955), and Arnold Rosé (1858-1946). All these musicians were, to some extent, linked to Johannes Brahms (1833-1897); a central figure in the Austro-German canon. Curiously, however, the various recordings that these musicians produced reveal their highly personalised interpretative choices and their distinctive approaches to both technique and musical expression. The aim in reconstructing these historic recordings was to reflect on the wider Austro-German performing traditions, and to explore the various ways in which the first recording musicians of Brahms' circles produced highly individualistic approaches to their instruments.

The process of reconstruction began with close listening to the historic recordings (digital transfers of 10- and 12-inch acoustic discs), followed by experimentation annotating suitable editions from which to play, and autoethnographic reflection via individual and rehearsal experiments to create a technical and stylistic approach which pays direct homage to their historical counterparts. Following this, suitable recording spaces were prepared, and the extensive recording machinery set up; principally, a recording lathe built and operated by Duncan Miller. Based on the traversing turntables used by both HMV and Columbia during the acoustic era, Miller's lathe allows the recording horn to remain stationary, without loading the drive mechanism or changing position during the recording. The turntable, which is belt-driven from a speed controlled electric motor, was recycled from a 1950s EMI portable disc cutting lathe, and the recorder uses knife-edge pivot bearings and a spring tensioned retaining cord, also used in both HMV/Victor and Columbia recorder boxes. The cutter is steel, with a 50mm glass diaphragm on a 0.5mm thick flat rubber rear gasket. The aluminium recording horn used to produce this album was fitted to a 20mm diameter brass inlet tube via rubber tube.

Given the intention to reconstruct historic recordings, Milsom used a violin by Fernando Solar González (1976) strung with thick unwound gut D, A, and E and a silver-wound G as appropriate to this period, and a bow marked Otto of c.1920. Stanović performed on a John Broadwood & Sons upright piano of c.1915-1920 (frame number 121751), owned by Milsom, and not dissimilar to those likely to have been used in recording studios during the early part of the twentieth century.

A series of tests were conducted in order to determine the most appropriate ways in which the instruments might be recorded and balanced. This process revealed many of the challenges that lay ahead: the limited recording durations of the discs, the restricted dynamic and frequency ranges, and the physical positioning of instruments in proximity to the recording machinery made the process complicated, nerve-wracking, and a close approximation of live performance. This was, perhaps, a replication of the circumstances in which historic musicians produced their recordings. For contemporary performers who are familiar with the endless possibilities afforded by contemporary digital studios, however, they are all the more confrontational.

Each of the various recordings heard on this album were captured in a single take; wax discs do not allow for any revisions, such as temporary pauses or edits, and this produced a substantial pressure on the performers to perform at a high level, on demand. This pressure was exacerbated by the small number of blank discs that were available to produce the recordings, occasionally resulting in a one-take opportunity to record a given piece. Blending the waxes required to produce a blank disc takes about 2 hours of melting and stirring, to ensure that the wax is homogenous and the material reaches about 150 degrees centigrade. It has to be handled with care when casting into pans to make the 40 mm thick blanks that were used. No more than 3 blanks can be made in one session, as they need about 3 kg of wax each. Once made, the residual bubbles have to be removed with a gas flame from a blow torch, a process termed flaming off in the old literature, and the wax composition has to cool fast enough to avoid separation of the components, yet slow enough to avoid cracking the 12 inch (30cm) blanks for the final 10 inch (25cm) records.

The rough casting has to be trimmed flat on the top and bottom and to specific diameter on the edge; a process that takes up to an hour. Final shaving to a recording blank finish takes around 20 minutes using a polished sapphire blade. It was not immediately possible for the performers to listen back to their recordings; it takes up to several weeks to produce the finished discs, and only then could the recordings be heard. Given all of this, it is hoped that the listener will understand, and expect, the highly idiosyncratic (for want of a better term) nature of these recordings; perhaps, as with their historical counterparts, there are aspects that would have been revised, rethought, and redressed, had recording circumstances allowed.

The recordings on this album are transfers of the finished acoustic records. To produce these transfers, each record was played back using an original HMV (model 108) Gramophone, and recorded using a stereo pair of AKG 414s mounted on a stereo bar directly in front of the horn. Despite their relatively recent production, a number of unwanted artefacts may be heard. These include both surface and stylus noise, alongside the occasional burst of audio distortion. In other circumstances, these artefacts might have been removed during post-production. In an effort to ensure transparency, however, there was no subsequent editing or manipulation of the transfers.

The resulting album required a combination of both scholarship and artistic imagination. The basis of scholarship into early recording technologies, performing practices, and the analysis of recordings, provided both Stanović and Milsom with a knowledge of appropriate stylistic and technical practices. The aim, however, was not a dry, scientific exercise to copy old recordings. Rather, there was an attempt to place oneself, psychologically, within the historical activity one is performing in order to act the role. This is something both Stanović and Milsom did here. Faced with an ‘acoustic recording studio’ (in actual fact, simply finding the space, equipment, expertise to make new acoustic recordings), they found themselves in need not only of a practical ‘make it work’ way of thinking (improvising positioning and style of playing, in order to make a ‘successful’ acoustic recording), but also, psychologically, a sense of treading in the footsteps of the mythologised historical figures whose playing they sought to reflect. This act of the imagination conjoined with their attempts to practice traits of performance directly transmitted by the original acoustic recordings they sought to emulate, along with their scholarly knowledge of principles underlying such specific actions and contained within their published outputs otherwise. In truth though, this was not a matter of emulating originals but in creating new artistic outputs in their own rights. A distinction between that which is ‘correct’ and that which is ‘fine’ or ‘beautiful’ resonates widely throughout the nineteenth century: the latter involves not only departures from the literal musical text (un-notated practices), but also and perhaps more deeply denotes a sense of artistic independence, albeit carefully circumscribed and schooled within the aesthetic paradigms taught and appreciated in this tradition. In Joachim & Moser’s *Violinschule*, for example, the authors offer the following:

The aim of all truly good teaching has ever been to lead the pupil towards artistic independence, or, as L. Ehlert says, “to point out to the pupil the path to his ‘I’” (den Schülern den Weg zu ihrem “Ich” zu Weisen). [Joseph Joachim & Andreas Moser, Violinschule, (English trans. Alfred Moffat, Berlin, N. Simrock, 1902-5), Volume III, p.34]

The complexity, subtlety, and cultural purposes of this album, then, are not easily reduced to the prosaic demands of a dry scholarship but rather aim to offer to take the listener on a historical journey. Whilst both performers undertook reflection upon, and analysis of, their resulting performances, the aim – perhaps in common with the historical figures who acted as the source tools and inspiration – was to offer attractive and artistically effective performances under these conditions, attesting to their musicianship, while acting as a testament to the performing traditions evoked in these recordings.

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