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### Musical Recordings

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## **Musical Recordings**

*Andrew Kania*

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### *1. Introduction*

Over the course of the twentieth century, there was a major shift in the way that audiences experienced music. The advent of broadcasting and recording technology brought a sea-change in the standard situation in which music was heard. Where, before, music was rarely heard in the absence of musicians producing it live, now one could listen in one's living room to a performance that was actually going on thousands of miles away, or, stranger still, one that was already finished, and one could listen to the latter kind over and over again. Musicians and theorists had quite a bit to say about this shift.<sup>1</sup> Generalizing somewhat, people tended to divide into two camps. On the one hand were those who were enthusiastically *for* recordings, arguing that they were a new tool for musicians of all sorts to both create new kinds of musical objects, and record and disseminate traditional performances. On the other hand were those who thought that recordings were a mixed blessing. While few condemned recordings outright, detractors expressed various kinds of concern about them, from the indirect effects they might have on live performance to their ambiguous status as somehow performance-like, yet also a quite different kind of thing.

This last concern is an ontological one, that is, one about the kind of thing recordings are, compared to performances. This concern has been the focus of many philosophical discussions of recordings, and it will be my focus here. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the nature of the medium through which we hear most of the music we listen to, evaluative judgments depend in various ways on ontological judgments (Walton 1970, 1988, Kania 2008: 69-73). Most obviously, assessing the extent to which recordings are a good or bad thing overall will be difficult if there is disagreement over what exactly a recording is. In this article, I begin by discussing some basic ontological claims about recordings: their variety, repeatability, and transparency. I then look at the evaluative issues raised by recordings of music in live-performance traditions, from the points of view of both their creation and reception.

## *2. Metaphysical issues*

A live performance of a musical work is a *singular* entity, in the sense that although two performances might be similar in all sorts of ways, they will remain two distinct events; two musical events cannot be a single performance. A musical work, on the other hand, is a *multiple* entity, in the sense that two distinct performances may be performances of *one and the same* work. To illustrate: you may attend two different performances of Brahms's violin concerto, but you can only ever hear one violin concerto by Brahms, because he only wrote one. Recordings appear to be multiple, not singular, entities, since, like musical works, they are repeatable. When you play a recording twice, you do not just get two sonic events that are similar in all sorts of ways, as in the case of the two live performances mentioned above; you get two instances of one and the same recording.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Contextualism: Different Kinds of Recordings

Though multiplicity is common to all recordings, in our musical practices we distinguish between various kinds of recordings. Aron Edidin (1999) identifies three major kinds of recordings: (i) “recordings of performances”, or documentary recordings of live performances, (ii) “recordings of compositions”, such as typical recordings of classical works, cut together in the studio from various takes, and (iii) “recording artifacts”, or recordings that do not purport to be records of some other object of primary interest, such as a performance or composition. Works of classical electronic music are uncontentious examples of this third kind of recording. Though all three of these kinds of recordings may employ similar technology in their production, the ways in which that technology is used, including the intentions of those involved in the production of the recording, and the concomitant ways in which the resulting recordings are treated by knowledgeable audiences, seem to make them different kinds of things, in ways that are aesthetically or artistically relevant. Thus, when these differences are ignored, as reflected in a tendency to talk about “recordings” *simpliciter*, confusion can result.

One might dispute the usefulness or the precise boundaries of the particular categories Edidin suggests, but this need not affect the general view that there are different kinds of recordings, and that these differences are rooted in the artistic practices surrounding them. This idea accords with a general approach to aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, known as *contextualism* – the view that artworks are properly appreciated with regard to their socio-historical contexts of creation<sup>3</sup> – and social constructivism – the view that works of art are partly constituted by the ways we treat

them.<sup>4</sup> Another way of putting the same point is to say that all recordings share the same “physical medium” – the stuff of recording technology – but not the same “artistic medium” – the way that stuff gets used to convey “musical content”.<sup>5</sup>

If we agree on the different kinds of recordings there are, some traditional concerns disappear. For instance, if we agree with Theodore Gracyk (1996) that rock recordings are ontologically like classical electronic music, that is, that they are “recording artifacts” in Edidin’s terms, concerns about whether the musicians are “cheating” by splicing together different takes disappear. Conversely, if a certain recording is presented as a documentary recording, then splicing different takes together *will* count as cheating. However, the remaining kind of recording Edidin mentions – recordings of compositions – is more problematic. The traditions Edidin has in mind here are those, like Western classical music, centered around works for performance. In such traditions, works are conceived of as properly instanced in performances (Edidin 1999: 31, S. Davies 2001: 19-36).<sup>6</sup> This raises a *prima facie* concern about accessing a work by listening to a recording. For if recordings are not performances, and listening to a performance is the appropriate way to access a work, then listening to a recording is an inappropriate way to access a work. This is in stark contrast to our practice, however. Our behavior seems to imply, for instance, that listening to a recording is a fine way of getting to know a classical symphony. So we have a paradox to resolve.

For the rest of this article, then, I focus on “recordings of compositions” in the Western classical tradition – a well-known musical tradition with works for performance at its heart.<sup>7</sup> Some maintain that jazz is like classical music in this respect (e.g., Gould and Keaton 2000, Young and Matheson 2000). If they are right, then the arguments I

consider here should apply to jazz (and any other tradition of musical works for live performance). However, it has been suggested that while jazz is a tradition with performance at its heart, those performances are not of works, due to the centrality of improvisation to jazz performance (e.g., Brown 2000: 115, Kania forthcoming a). Even if that is true, some of the arguments considered here will apply to jazz, but not those that depend on performances' being of works.

One challenge to the appropriateness of listening to musical works by listening to recordings, then, originates in the contextualist claim that the right way to experience classical musical works is through performances. This is a contextualist claim because it depends for its justification on the conventions in place in the context of these works' composition and/or the intentions of their composers. Recordings are not performances, as can be seen in the fact that they are fundamentally different kinds of things: Recordings are repeatable entities, like musical works, while performances are singular, unrepeatable entities. Thus, recordings are not an appropriate way to experience classical musical works.

## 2.2 Repeatability

A recent novel defense of recordings rejects the basis of this challenge. Christy Mag Uidhir (2007) argues that the nature of performances and recordings has been grossly misunderstood. Performances are not, according to Mag Uidhir, singular events; rather, they are, like works, repeatable entities that admit of distinct instances. That is, when we ask if someone has heard a particular performance, we are primarily interested in whether the person has heard a certain series of sounds. But there might be many different

instances of that particular series, some produced live (by an extremely well-disciplined orchestra, say), some produced by the playing back of a recording (of that same orchestra, say).

Conversely, Mag Uidhir argues that recordings are not necessarily repeatable. He asks us to imagine an improved *Mission-Impossible*-style recording-and-playback device such that any recording made on it is destroyed on being played back for the first time. That such a device is possible, he argues, demonstrates that repeatability is not a necessary or essential feature of recordings, but rather a contingent feature that most actual recordings possess.

Neither of these arguments is sound. In any case, it seems that at best Mag Uidhir can hold on to only one. If the fact that we can imagine recordings that cannot be repeated shows that recordings are not necessarily repeatable, then the fact that we can imagine *performances* that cannot be repeated shows that performances are not necessarily repeatable. But we don't have to imagine such performances; we hear them all the time. So if Mag Uidhir's argument about recordings holds, he cannot maintain that performances are repeatable.<sup>8</sup>

However, Mag Uidhir's argument about recordings does not hold, for it rests on a confusion between actual repeatability and potential, or possible, or "in-principle" repeatability. A recording that can be played only once is still a recording. What does it mean to call something a recording? At least in part, it means that some sort of template exists from which various token soundings (in the case of audio recording) can be produced. What it means to call something a "template" in this sense is partly a matter of its being an enduring thing. This notion is to be contrasted with media of *transmission*,

where a signal is preserved, perhaps across several media, yet is never “fixed” in such a way that later tokens of the signal could be produced. Clearly, though, this “fixing” is the relevant feature of recordings that leads us to call them *repeatable*. If the signal is fixed in a medium, such as the plastic-encased metal disk of a CD, then that signal is repeatable in the relevant sense, even if it is such that when played back on any CD player it produces sound waves that destroy the CD itself.<sup>9</sup> (Note again that if Mag Uidhir drops the appeal to *in principle* repeatability, his argument for the repeatability of all performances will not go through.)

This fixing of a signal is also what makes a recording something distinct from what it records. That is, we might think of a recording as a *representation* of a performance or other sound event, just as we think of a painting or photograph as a representation of something visible (S. Davies 2001: 318-19, 2006: 183-92). Mag Uidhir rejects this idea, too, with another ingenious thought experiment. This time he asks us to imagine a device that fits into your ear and blocks, but helpfully records, all incoming sound and then plays it back into your ear through a small speaker, virtually instantaneously. Thus, wearing the device at a concert, you have an auditory experience exactly like that you would have had without the device. It would be quite natural to say that you heard the performance you attended in this case, but the immediate object of your hearing is a recording. Thus, Mag Uidhir concludes, a recording is a performance.

### 2.3 Transparency

This argument is too fast, though, because it ignores other possible explanations of the fact that when we hear a recording we might say we hear a performance. You might say,

pointing at the closed-circuit TV feed of your home security system, “There’s a burglar scaling my wall!”, but this does not show that you think the burglar is a closed-circuit TV feed, let alone that he *is* one. Rather, you take yourself to be somehow pointing at the burglar *through*, or *by means of* the feed. Similarly, a more plausible account of our intuition that the audio device Mag Uidhir describes allows us to hear performances we attend is that recordings are “transparent”. In other words, we hear performances *through* recordings, just as we see things through windows. This notion of transparency has been most clearly spelled out by Kendall Walton, with respect to photographs (1984). Walton argues that photographs are like windows on to the past. We literally, albeit indirectly, see the subject of a photograph through the photograph. That this seeing is indirect does not disqualify it as seeing, argues Walton, because we see things indirectly through other devices, such as telescopes, microscopes, and periscopes. The more troubling issue is whether the experience of “seeing” something in a photograph is literally an experience of seeing, or whether this is just a compelling metaphor. After all, we commonly talk of seeing something in a painting, or in our mind’s eye, but these are not literal claims.<sup>10</sup>

Walton argues that the difference between literal seeing and these metaphorical uses of the term is that the visual appearances presented to us in literal seeing are “counterfactually dependent on the scenes they portray...[and that the] counterfactual dependence...is independent of [for instance] the photographer’s beliefs” (Walton 1997: 68).<sup>11</sup> This same condition, Walton suggests, distinguishes all the experiences we would literally call “seeing” (through windows, spectacles, periscopes, and so on) from experiences we could only call “seeing” in a non-literal sense. The extension of this notion of visual transparency to the realm of sound seems unproblematic. Sound

recording technology, of the sort used in making recordings presented as recordings of performances, aims to mechanically reproduce the sounds in the environment where the recording was made. Thus, if we see through photographs, we hear through recordings.

Since Waltonian transparency is a useful concept in thinking about recordings, it is worth pointing out that there is some confusion about it in the literature. Both Andy Hamilton (2003) and Joshua Glasgow (2007) confuse *transparency* with *accuracy*. According to Hamilton, the “*transparency thesis*...claims that the medium is insignificant, and should not intrude itself” (350), and claims that Walton argues that in cases of transparency “the object is seen directly” (351). In auditory terms, Glasgow writes that the transparency thesis “holds, in a nutshell, that a recording can capture what it records accurately, without distortion” (163), and thus that “transparency can be realized in *degrees*” (164). All of these claims are false. Waltonian transparency is not a matter of degree. A stained old sepia photograph is just as transparent as a dirty stained-glass window. You see things through it, whether accurately, dimly, or in a distorted fashion.<sup>12</sup> Thus, transparency makes no claims about the “intrusion” of the medium; Walton is very clear that his thesis is not an illusionistic one (1984: 249-51). He is also very explicit that we do *not* see things *directly* through transparent media, but indirectly. He points out, though, that this does not affect transparency. We literally see things through periscopes, though we do not see those things directly.<sup>13</sup>

There has been much discussion of Walton’s claims about photographic transparency. Most objections boil down to an alternative distinction between literal seeing and other kinds of visual experience. The current contenders include the (alternative) criteria that literal seeing requires (1) the continuous transmission of light

from the object seen to the eye (Gaut 2003: 637), or (2) the ability to spatially locate oneself with respect to the object seen on the basis of the visual experience alone (Carroll 1996: 61-2, Currie 1995: 65-9), or (3) *continuous* counterfactual dependence between the visual appearance under consideration and the object (S. Davies 2006: 186-8).<sup>14</sup> All three of these criteria, and objections to them, can be translated into sonic and aural terms: (1) If the continuous transmission of sound waves is required for literal hearing, then you do not literally hear your mother when you talk to her on the phone. (2) If the criterion of hearing is the ability to spatially locate yourself with respect to the object heard on the basis of your auditory experience alone, then you do not literally hear a person whispering in an echoey cathedral, unless you can point to where they are. (3) If *continuous* counterfactual dependence is required, then it makes a difference whether the audio link you use to participate in a meeting employs a medium of recording or transmission, in the senses discussed above. If it records the sounds before transmitting them, then it is not transparent, according to this criterion; if it does not, then it is transparent.

It seems to me that the objection to proposal (2) is decisive. It is not clear that one ever locates oneself spatially with respect to an object solely on the basis of one's visual or auditory experience. But even if one does, the line between such cases and other cases where one cannot do so does not seem to mark any natural boundary between literally seeing or hearing something and seeing or hearing a mere representation of that thing. Proposal (1) is more promising, and yet I do not think there is enough consensus in our intuitions to decide for or against this criterion. As a principle, continuous transmission of light or sound seems like a good candidate for the criterion we seek, but when it comes to

cases, it seems arbitrary to place a sharp line between observing what's going on in the next room through a periscope and through a closed-circuit video link. Similarly, if I literally hear my mother through a "tin-can telephone", it seems reasonable to say that I also hear her over an ordinary telephone line, or a web-based phone link.<sup>15</sup> Proposal (3) is in roughly the same boat: The presence or absence of continuous counterfactual dependence of a visual or auditory appearance on its object seems a significant feature, yet it is difficult to argue for it as the criterion distinguishing literal perceptual contact from mere representation without begging the question.

It may be that there is simply no clear line between literal perceptual contact with an object and contact only with a representation. If so, however, it does not follow that these distinctions are without interest. For one thing, they may allow us to place various modes of contact on a continuum between uncontentious literal perceptual contact and uncontentious lack thereof. At least we can say that ordinary recordings bear the same sort of relation to the sounds they record as photographs do to their subjects. And even most of Walton's critics admit that this is a relation significant for its lack of intentional mediation (Warburton 2003).<sup>16</sup> Thus, in what follows, I will assume for the sake of simplicity that sound recordings are transparent. If you are not convinced of this, I do not think the arguments based on this thesis will lose much of their force if the transparency claim is replaced with a more nuanced account of the precise relation between a sound recording and the sonic events it records. For instance, casting our minds back to Mag Uidhir's "hearing aid", this relation can be used to explain away the intuition we might have that the recording we hear while wearing the device at a performance is itself a performance.

### *3. Evaluative issues*

Even if we grant that sound recordings are transparent, we might still resist the idea that in hearing an ordinary classical recording we hear a performance of a work, since most classical recordings are not “documentary” recordings of a single performance. Rather, most classical recordings are spliced together out of the best parts of several different “takes” of sections of a single piece. For the most part there never occurs in the studio a complete performance of the piece being recorded, and even if whole movements get played, it is rare for one entire take of a movement to make it to the final cut. Even recordings sold as “live” recordings have usually been “patched” with extra takes made under studio conditions at a later time. This raises the evaluative issue of whether recordings are a way of “cheating” by enabling musicians to present something as a unified performance that was never so performed.<sup>17</sup>

Turning from the context of creation to the context of reception, there has been discussion of the aesthetic effects of the medium of recording. There is a wide range of differences between the experience of attending a live performance and that of listening to a recording, and most of them have been a source of concern. These differences include (i) knowledge of the repeatability of recording, (ii) differences between the sounds of live performances and recordings, (iii) the lack of the visual element of live performances in recordings, (iv) the impossibility of interaction between audience and performer in the recording situation, and (v) the lack of the social and “ritual” elements of live performances when listening to recordings.

### 3.1 Ideal and Actual Recordings

Some recent defenses of recordings attempt to dispatch these concerns almost at one blow, by restricting the discussion to “perfect” or “ideal” or “in principle possible” recordings, or certain aspects of these. For instance, Christy Mag Uidhir explicitly states that his thesis is “that there is no *necessary* aesthetic difference between a live performance and a recording of that performance – a recording of a live performance can *in principle* be aesthetically equivalent to the live performance recorded” (2007: 298, original emphases), and restricts his discussion to “*undoctored* recordings of live performances...” (299, original emphasis). Joshua Glasgow defends the even more restricted thesis “that reproductions can transparently [by which he means “accurately”] capture the *sonic* properties of the original performance.... [The thesis] makes no claim about the aesthetic value or non-sonic properties” (2007: 164, original emphasis).

While such discussions can have some philosophical interest, and serve to counter the more extravagant claims made by some critics of recordings, they tend to leave the most engaging issues untouched. For what motivates most people to enter this debate is our common experiences of actual live performances and recordings. While it may be worth noting (even if it is not surprising) that we can imagine technology that would deliver a perfect sonic reproduction of a given performance, that fact will not do much to set one’s heart at ease if one is concerned about the fact, for instance, that one may never hear a performance of one’s favorite piece of music, even though one has several recordings of it.

### 3.2 The Context of Creation

Let us return, then, to one of the central concerns with ordinary classical recordings, namely, the differences between such a recording and a performance of the work it purports to be of. Stephen Davies argues that typical works in the classical repertoire, which constitute the overwhelming majority, are *works for live performance*. That is, it is part of the very nature of such works (for contextualist reasons) that proper instances of them must be live performances. Davies contrasts such works with *works for playback*, such as classical electronic works, and a new category he argues for: *works for studio performance* (S. Davies 2001: 6-36). Works of this last kind are not properly instanced in *live* performances, yet, unlike works for playback, they can receive various performances, from different performers, that have different aesthetic and artistic properties. Davies argues that rock songs fall into this last category. He endorses Gracyk's arguments that studio production is central to rock music, but argues that since performance skills are an equally central part of the rock tradition, rock works are not like those of classical electronic music. Rather they fall in between works for live performance and works for playback. They are instanced in performances, but these performances are necessarily mediated by studio technology (S. Davies 2001: 25-36).

Consider two consequence of Davies's view: First, if classical works are, of their very nature, for live performance, then no recording can be a proper instance of a classical work. Second, if rock songs are, of their nature, for studio performance, then no live performance can be a proper instance of a rock song (S. Davies 2001: 36). The first claim seems plausible, and Davies accounts for our acceptance of classical recordings, despite their failing to properly instance the works they are of, in terms of their being simulations, or representations, of live performances (317-19). The second claim,

however, is so unintuitive that it appears to be reason enough to revise the theory if possible. Once we have revised the theory, however, I believe it gives us reason to question the first claim.

The revision I suggest is that rock songs are not *for studio performance*, but, at most, for performance *simpliciter*, and maybe not *for* anything in particular at all (Kania 2006). If rock songs are for performance *simpliciter*, then they can be properly instanced in either kind of performance – live or studio – which seems to match our intuitions without any loss in explanatory power. Once we consider this possibility, though, the suggestion presents itself that classical works, too, may be *for performance simpliciter*, rather than for live performance in particular. If this were the case, then classical works, too, could be instanced equally well in live and studio performances.

In fact, I think this picture is a little simplistic, because relevantly different things go on in the studio in the course of making classical and rock recordings. In a nutshell, anything goes in the rock studio, but not in the classical studio. This is because, on the one hand, as Gracyk powerfully argues, rock music was born and raised in the studio, during a period when the studio itself was coming into its own (Gracyk 1996: 1-36). Classical music, on the other hand, came to the studio with a centuries-old tradition of live performance under its belt, and thus approached the resources of the studio differently (Kania forthcoming a).<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, you might say, what you hear on a classical recording is not actually a performance, call it what you will. At best it is a collection of partial performances cobbled together in order to give the impression that a certain performance took place, which never actually did. I think this attitude misunderstands both the nature of performance and what goes on in the classical studio;

in what follows I will try to defend the view that when you listen to a typical classical recording, you hear a genuine performance.

The first thing to think about is the nature of performance. For a start, the term is ambiguous between the *activity* performers engage in – blowing air through complicated constructions of wood and metal, drawing taut horsehair over tauter metal, and so on – and the *product* and point of engaging in that activity – the sounds that emerge from the instrument and are heard by the audience (Levinson 1990b: 387-9). I call the former the “active performance” and the latter the “phenomenal performance”. These are not two different kinds of performance, but rather two elements or aspects of a single performance, and the phenomenal performance is the *telos* of the activity:

the thing primarily judged seems to be product rather than process, achieved result rather than activity of achieving it. This is not, however, to imply that one can judge the product in this case – a performance – in *ignorance* of or in *isolation* from the process that issues in it. (Levinson 1990b: 387-9)

We can now reformulate the worry about classical recordings as a worry about the separation of phenomenal performance (the performance we *hear* on the recording) from the active performance of the musicians. When we listen to a live performance, the single, unified phenomenal performance we hear is the result of a single, unified active performance on the part of the musicians. But when we hear a single, unified phenomenal performance on a classical recording, even if recordings are transparent, we do *not* hear a single unified active performance, since the recording is constructed out of many partial active performances, and their respective phenomenal performances.

One way to defend recordings against this charge of a kind of inauthenticity is to argue that the phenomenal performance we hear on a typical classical recording is indeed connected in the right way to the active performance of musicians. The mistake is in assuming that one particular kind of connection between active and phenomenal performance is the only authentic kind. The best way to make this argument is to point to the conventions for the production of classical recordings that have emerged and developed along with recording technology. In essence, these conventions maintain that one should not release a recording under one's own performing name if one would not be capable of producing such a (phenomenal) performance live under ideal circumstances. (Compare Godlovitch (1998: 26-7), S. Davies (2001: 192-4), and Edidin (1999: 33-6).) Apart from knowledge of how the classical recording world operates, evidence for the existence of these conventions can be found in the occasional scandals that arise when it becomes public knowledge that the conventions have been violated.

We might interpret what is going on here as follows. With the advent of recording technology, we discovered a new way to produce performances of musical works. That is, the conventions that have developed for classical recordings preserve the twin goals of live performance, namely, (i) producing the best possible phenomenal performance, while (ii) adhering to certain valued ways of producing those sounds. Thus, we can think of live performance as one species of the genus "performance", with studio performance being another. If we then think of traditional classical works, unobjectionably, as simply *for performance*, there are two ways to authentically instance them – in live performance, or by producing a recording in a certain way. If this makes sense, then we really can say that typical classical recordings capture performances. One interesting difference between

documentary recordings of live performances and studio recordings is that the performance we hear through the latter has no status as a unified performance independent of the constructed recording. This explains our tendency to think of studio recordings as themselves particular performances when we know full well both that recordings are distinct from performances, and that studio recordings are constructed out of multiple takes. In sum, when we listen to a typical studio recording of a classical piece, we literally hear a performance – musical sounds produced in the right sort of way – through the medium of recording.

### 3.3 The Context of Reception

Having considered concerns about the production of classical recordings, I now turn to concerns about their reception. To be brief, an examination of the literature dispels most of these concerns. It cannot be denied that there are appreciable differences between the auditory experience of actual recordings and live performances, let alone the absence of the visual element from most recordings. However, no one denies that the experience of a recording, at least from the last half-century or so, is sufficient for acquaintance with the work, and the performers' interpretation and performance of it. Though some fine details of timbre, for instance, may be lost, recordings enable us to hear some other features, through judicious microphone placement, that we might miss at a live performance.<sup>19</sup> The auditory experience a recording provides is not equivalent to that of a live performance, but this need not concern us if typical classical recordings can be considered a kind of performance. The visual aspect of performances has been discussed since some argue that in order to fully understand a typical work, we must understand how the sounds are

produced (Levinson 1990a: 398-402). However, if we are already acquainted with how a violin is played, we need not *see* every performance of Brahms's violin concerto; we can *hear* how difficult it is to play (Gracyk 1997: 146-7).<sup>20</sup>

Next come two concerns about the lack of interactivity available to audiences of recordings as opposed to live performances. Concerns are raised about the inability of the musicians on a recording to respond to their audience, and about the inability of audiences of recordings to interact with one another, in the social and "ritual" ways common at live performances. In these cases, it is clear that recordings do not have the features that live performances do. However, it is difficult to argue that these features are relevant to the aesthetic experience of a typical classical performance. It is no easy matter to determine the frequency and extent of musician–audience interaction at live performances. To the extent that it does occur, though, it seems to affect the performance being experienced, rather than being an object of musical interest itself. This is even clearer with the social and ritual aspects of performance. By "ritual", Stan Godlovitch means the formal setting of a live performance, including the social norms enforcing minimal disruption of the performance (1998: 39-41). If our concern is with attending to the work, we can similarly minimize disruptions to our auditory experience of a recording – locking the door, taking the phone off the hook, and so on. These measures might fail, of course, but the live performance norms might fail, too, for instance, if everyone in the audience has a hacking cough. The social aspect of a live performance simply seems irrelevant from a musical point of view.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, a range of concerns are raised by the fact that recordings, unlike performances, are repeatable. One concern is that repeated listening to a recording will

jade us to its aesthetic qualities (e.g., Roger Sessions and Howard Niblock, quoted in Glasgow 2007: 168). Joshua Glasgow rightly points out that this is a contentious claim (2007: 168-9). We seem capable of appreciating other artistic objects on repeated experience to them, so why not musical recordings? Even if repeated exposure to the same recordings did jade us, it seems that the advantages accruing to the repeatability of recordings would outweigh this possible disadvantage. The repeatability of recordings, and the portability that follows upon it, allow us to listen to the performances of people we could never hear live, for any number of reasons. It allows us to compare two performances side by side that we could not hear that way live. It allows us to hear music that is not performed where we live. It allows us to hear a much larger number of works than we could hear live, and so on.

It might be argued that the repeatability of recordings has larger scale effects than the ones I have discussed above. It is surely the repeatability of recordings that drives performers to “perfect” their recordings, that is, to fix the small errors that would pass in a moment in a live performance, yet become anticipated landmarks in a repeatable recording. As a result, it is argued, live audiences’ tolerance for small errors has decreased, leading to less risk-taking by musicians in live performance. It is undeniable that performance styles and interpretations have become less varied over the course of this century.<sup>22</sup> (Ironically, for the technology’s detractors, some of the best evidence for this is recordings.) The factors plausibly involved in this shift are so complex that it is difficult to lay responsibility for it solely, or perhaps even primarily, at the feet of recording technology. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that recordings have played a significant role. It is possible, though I think implausible, to dispute the assumption that

this loss of diversity in interpretations is a bad thing. But even if this were the case, there are other putative negative effects of the goal of perfectibility, for instance, the somewhat widespread view that there is a single best interpretation of a work. This is perhaps reflected in the averaging out of interpretations, and the tendency of many listeners to buy just one recording of any given work.

Though, as I have said, these kinds of shifts in musical practice are difficult to precisely assign causes to, if we believe they are changes for the worse, we might yet consider possible remedies. This would be a relatively rare case in contemporary analytic aesthetics where we could offer some suggestions to practicing artists and audiences. The basic advice would be to acknowledge the close relation between live performances and recordings, while at the same time maintaining an awareness of their differences. On the part of musicians, this would involve adopting a different attitude in live performance than in the recording studio: taking more chances live, and experimenting with new approaches, while acknowledging that only certain kinds of approaches and interpretations will bear the multiple listenings that recordings allow. This is no small recommendation, since there is a close connection between what musicians do live and what they do in the studio. Nonetheless, I am suggesting that there should be more acknowledgement of the differences between the two venues.<sup>23</sup> The related recommendations for audiences would be to embrace just this kind of experimentation and diversity in live performances, and to think of one's record collection as a collection of *performances*, rather than works.<sup>24</sup>

#### *4. Conclusions*

There are certain necessary conditions on being a musical recording: recordings are repeatable, unlike performances, and involve an enduring medium in which a musical signal is stored. But there are also different kinds of recordings, as evidenced in our musical practices. The most troubling are recordings that purport to be, contain, or afford access to, performances of works from a live-performance tradition that are not simply documentary recordings of live performances. I have tried to show that we can sensibly talk of hearing a performance of a work when we listen to a typical classical recording, and that such recordings do not pose a serious threat to our musical practices as performers or audiences.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thoughtful introductions to the history of musical recording include Chanan 1995 and Eisenberg 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Recordings are also multiple in the sense that you can have two *copies* of the same recording (e.g., two CDs off the same production line), but this kind of multiplicity does not raise any additional issues for our purposes. Another copy of the same CD just means another way to produce multiple instances of the same series of sounds.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the debate over contextualism, see Graham 2006 and D. Davies 2006.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the *term* “social constructivism” is not so common in aesthetics, but the *view* is quite widely held. See, for example, Danto 1981, S. Davies 2001, and Levinson 1990c. (For a good general introduction to social constructivism, see Haslanger 2007.)

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to these concepts of medium, see D. Davies 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Exactly where to draw the boundaries of such traditions is a matter of some dispute. See, for example, Goehr 2007.

<sup>7</sup> I use “classical” throughout in the broader sense, as opposed to rock and jazz, rather than in the narrower sense, as opposed to baroque and Romantic.

<sup>8</sup> For all I have said, you might think Mag Uidhir should (or does) defend the idea that *some* performances *happen to be* repeatable. But it is not clear how we should distinguish between singular and repeatable performances, and, anyway, Mag Uidhir argues quite generally that performances are types, and thus repeatable in principle.

<sup>9</sup> For amusing and mind-bending riffs on the topic of player-breaking records, see Hofstadter (1979: 75-81 *et passim*).

<sup>10</sup> Mag Uidhir notes the possibility of appealing to transparency to close the apparent gap between performances and recordings (2007: 308, n. 17), but seems to want to avoid resting his case on a contentious claim. Unfortunately, his own argument is much more contentious.

<sup>11</sup> Walton does not imply that intentions play no role in photography, just that there is one particular role they do not play, which distinguishes them from ‘handmade’ images. Also, it is worth noting that Walton does not think transparency precludes representation, unlike, say, Roger Scruton (2006).

<sup>12</sup> To count as transparent, a medium must reach some threshold of resemblance between the appearance of the object and the appearance of the medium. Though this threshold is difficult to pin down, it is nonetheless either reached or not, and thus does not lead to transparency’s being a matter of degree.

<sup>13</sup> “Transparency”, in the Waltonian sense, is a term of art, and others may use the word differently as they see fit. Yet both Hamilton and Glasgow are very explicit about the fact that they aim to employ Walton’s term and concept, and thus extra care is required in unpacking their arguments. (Lee Brown (2005) is one theorist who is very clear that he uses the term “transparency” to mean “sonic accuracy”, rather than using it in Walton’s sense.)

<sup>14</sup> When Noël Carroll (1996) talks of photographs and films as “detached displays”, he sometimes seems to have something like this third criterion in mind, though he principally appeals to the criterion I list second.

<sup>15</sup> For a consideration of many issues about the identity, individuation, and transmission of sounds glossed over here, see O’Callaghan 2007.

<sup>16</sup> One exception to this generalization is Stephen Davies (2006: 186-8), but it must be noted that Davies argues that the lack of intentional mediation in photography is not significant in the course of arguing that intentional representations, like paintings, can be just as transparent as photographs.

<sup>17</sup> I do not consider electronic note correction, or related kinds of manipulation of recordings, in what follows, though one can imagine various ways in which the arguments considered below could be brought to bear on them.

<sup>18</sup> Again, there is some dispute over exactly how many centuries old the classical tradition of works for performance is.

<sup>19</sup> Musical recordings are sometimes compared to photographic reproductions of paintings in art-history books. To my mind, they are more closely analogous to DVD editions of films (which we are less inclined to dismiss as “mere” reproductions). The experience of a recording is as undeniably different from that of a live performance as watching something on a television is from seeing it on the big screen. Nonetheless, nothing on the artistic order of brushwork, for instance, is lacking from films seen on a small screen. Likewise for typical classical recordings.

<sup>20</sup> Opera and ballet are in a different category with respect to this question, since they are not purely musical arts: A proper instance of an opera or ballet is staged. Thus, an adequate recording of such as work must be an audio-visual one (S. Davies 2001: 320).

<sup>21</sup> Even so, Gracyk has pointed out that there are alternative social venues for recording audiences, such as online discussion groups (1997: 147-8).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Philip 1992.

<sup>23</sup> This should not be taken as an incitement to alter the recording conventions that link the phenomenal performance recorded and the active performance of the recording musicians, discussed above.

<sup>24</sup> For a more descriptive than prescriptive consideration of these issues, see Hamilton 2003.

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