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Self and Other in the Study of Historical Recordings

This paper follows on from one given at the SMA/CHARM study day on recordings last October, in which I looked at the possible outcomes of ethnographic studies of the recording process, relatively few of which, incidentally, have been undertaken. In that paper I was advocating an ethnographic approach to the contexts in which Western art recordings are made - what I described as recording events - and I articulated some of the insights which I thought these approaches might provide. Understanding more about the social dynamics of recording events will, I think, give us important information into the significance attached to performances of musical artworks by those who recreate them. I'm not going to recap any of that now, but it sets the tone for what follows inasmuch as I was endeavouring to look at issues related to Western art recordings through an ethnomusicological prism. And, like a terrier with his favourite bone, I intend to keep chewing away at this area over the next 30 minutes or so, albeit today from a rather different perspective.

I'm often struck by LP Hartley's now celebrated observation that '[t]he past is another country. They do things differently there', and the degree to which this might alert us to the possible parallels between the study of historical recordings and the study of music from other cultures. Let's not over emphasise this, there are some rather fundamental differences here, not least of which is that we are clearly (in general) more familiar with the repertory being performed in historical Western art recordings than an ethnomusicologist is likely to be in relation to a music culture other than their own; and there are plenty of other differences which are fairly obvious. But the parallels are worth pursuing. In each instance we are engaging with and seeking to understand musical performance cultures which are unfamiliar to us; without due caution we risk making inappropriate assertions about the nature of those music cultures and the bases on which we believe musical performances within them might be predicated.

This is, I hope, fairly self evident. But to underline the point consider these two quotes:

> The Flonzaley Quartet's performance is a highly refined example of a style in which subtle emphasis of detail, by lengthening, shortening, emphasising with portamento, hurrying and displacing, form a continuous and ever-changing characterisation of the music…[b]ut the hierarchies of emphasis are not at all what we are accustomed to in modern performance, and our ears hear their varied and subtle placing of detail as a slightly casual lack of control and clarity. (Philip 2004:121)

And the 2nd quote:

> The initial challenge, of course, is the development of an ability to hear. The tendency of Westerners to 'correct' unfamiliar intervals, usually without being aware of doing so, can itself be corrected only be repeated exposure to listening and by singing. (Hood 1960: 56)

The first quote was from Robert Philip, discussing our possible reactions to a recording by the Flonzaley quartet; the second was from a paper by Mantle Hood on bimusicality. But both are suggesting that in order to appreciate the significance of particular performance cultures, we need to discard, or at least modify, the kind of perceptual and conceptual approaches which feel most natural to us. Hood is of course concerned with the specific way in which the brain tends to correct pitch intervals, but in both cases we are dealing with the need to develop a new way of hearing these unfamiliar music cultures, laying aside our preconceptions.

And here we are engaging with music as aural tradition. This is again fairly self evident, both in those many non-Western contexts where music traditions are sustained without reference to any notation, but equally in those Western art contexts where it is the performance which is under scrutiny not the score on which it may be predicated. As John Rink puts it on the CHARM website: '[the score-based approach] has for obvious reasons focussed on those aspects of music which are captured by notation, whereas the interpretive practice of performers lies largely in those dimensions which notation does not capture.' And interpretive practice is informed, to a considerable degree, by both aural and oral tradition.

But all this rather begs the question: if studying historical recordings has something in common with studying unfamiliar music cultures, what does writing about historical recordings have in common with writing musical ethnographies?

Consider this quote:

> 'The researcher, released temporarily from the confines and obligations of academe, immerses him or herself at length in this unfamiliar performance style, seeking to construe meanings from these unfamiliar musical sounds. Utilising a range of technical apparatus he or she arms themselves with graphs and tables, and transcripts of one kind or another, before interpreting all of these and disseminating the results - usually in written form - to a small but interested audience.'

Actually, it's not a quote at all - I made it up. But ask yourselves to what you thought I was referring as I was reading it: the musical ethnographer or the musicologist and his or her 78s?

Of course, one of the major differences between these two approaches is that ethnographers would normally expect to be able to interview and talk to the performers themselves (and others), in order to ascertain - as Malinowski famously put it - the 'native's point of view', and that was exactly what I was getting at in my October paper, and why ethnographic studies of recording events might prove so useful. As most here will

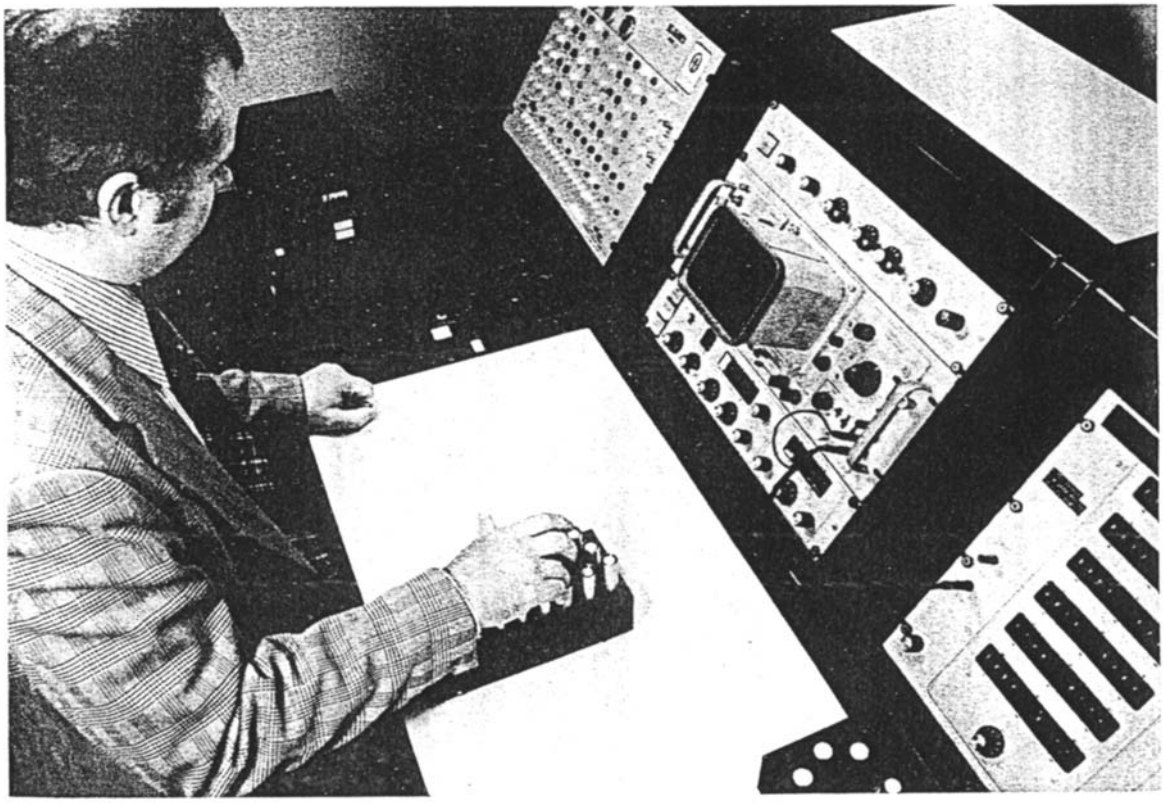
know, attempting to determine the insider's view became the dominant paradigm of ethnomusicology from the 1950s onwards. Here the musicologist and his 78s may be at a disadvantage, because the performers involved may be unreachable - perhaps because they're dead. Thus we are obliged to refer to whatever writings they may have left behind, or items which were written about them at the time: newspaper reviews, letters, biographies and autobiographies, etc, in order to gain contemporary insights into or views upon the musical performances themselves. All of these have obvious limitations. But both the musicologist and the musical ethnographer attempt to 'reconstruct' the context of the performance for their readers, notwithstanding that such reconstructions are not realities in themselves, but synthetic concoctions of reality which involve a considerable amount of editorial creativity on the part of the author; as Clifford Geertz puts it 'the responsibility for ethnography, or the credit, can be placed at no other door than that of the romancers who have dreamt it up' (1988:140).

So I'd like to leave that question hanging there for the moment, the first of our thinkpoints for later discussion: to what extent does writing about historical recordings actually resemble a kind of musical ethnography, and what are the implications of this?

Taking a slight detour for a moment, it's interesting to consider the two different disciplinary trajectories, of ethnomusicology and musicology, the latter broadly construed. The discipline of ethnomusicology, or comparative musicology as it was known before World War 2, was entirely founded upon the study of recordings, the transcriptions of them, and the analysis thereof. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive how comparative musicology might even have been established, were it not for the invention of the phonograph, as the work of people like Hornbostel and Stumpf makes clear. Transcription of recordings dominated the discipline until the mid 20th century. Bruno Nettl writes that:

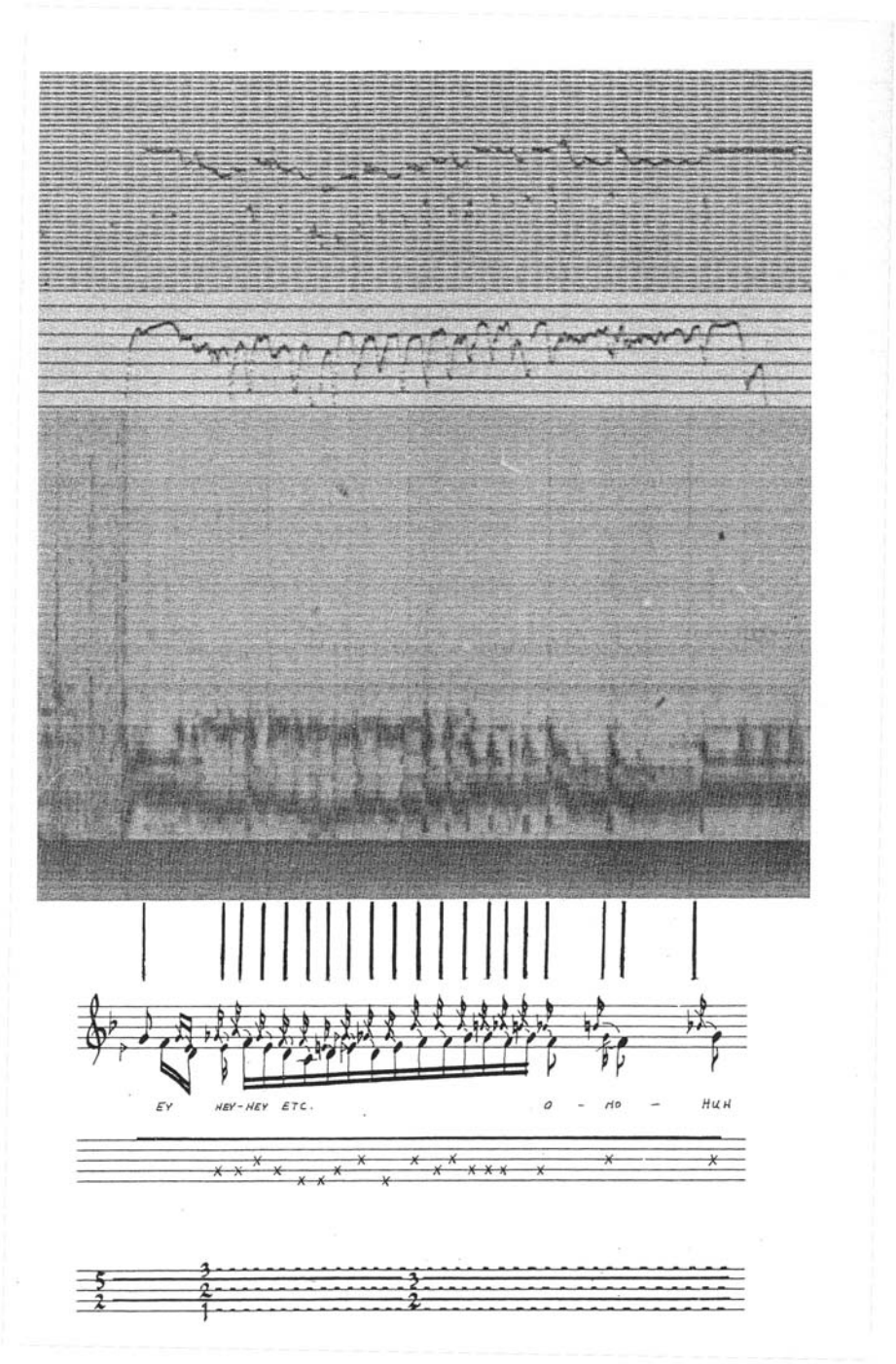
> Until well into the 1950s the ability to transcribe was viewed as the basic and perhaps even diagnostic skill of the ethnomusicologist, and many still regard this ability as essential […] Like the student of unwritten languages at that time whose major activity was the collection of phonetic transcription of texts, and like the scholar of Renaissance music who transcribed earlier into modern notation as the daily bread, the ethnomusicologist for long was in the first instance a transcriber of music. The first task of the field was thought by some to be the transcription of all available recordings. (Nettl 1983:67)

Notwithstanding the shift to a participation/observation methodology from the fifties onwards, recordings and, subsequently, ethical issues relating to mediated sound, have remained visible components of ethnomusicology. In particular it's worth considering the role of the melograph in the 1970s. This was an early piece of electronic equipment used to analyse sound sources. The machine itself looked like this:



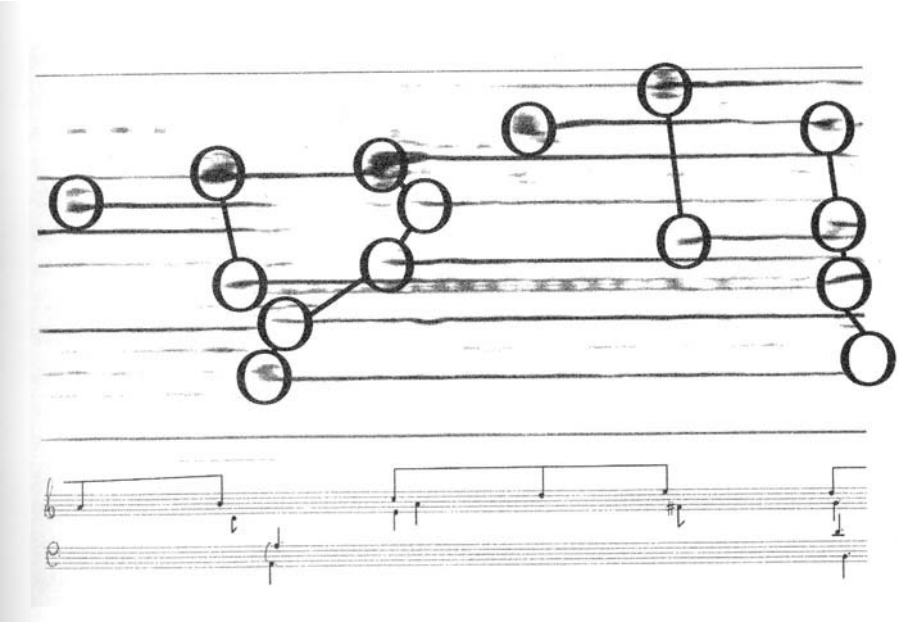
(taken from *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, vol 2, No. 1, p.3)

and the kinds of results it produced looked like this:



(taken from Margaret Caton 'The Vocal Ornament in *Takiyah* in Persian Music', *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, vol 2, no.1, 42-53)

By now, you're wondering where I'm going with all of this, and what does it have to do with my title. Well frankly, not much. But compare the spectrum analysis of the melograph, with, as an example, Dan Leech Wilkinson's spectral analysis of a performance by Myra Hess:



(taken from Daniel Leech Wilkinson 'Using recordings to study musical performance' in *Aural History: Essays on Recorded Sound* p.9)

My point here is that there are resonances between approaches taken by ethnomusicologists, and some of the approaches taken more recently by Western art musicologists. We may have some thinking to do about what those resonances are, and what we might learn from them. I am not, of course, claiming that they are somehow 'the same', but clearly there are ways in which they are similar: such as the use of frequency spectrum analysis to gather information on performance practice. It is also notable that, in the examples I've shown, in order to convey the information meaningfully, both have found it necessary to refer back to some kind of staff notation, notwithstanding the obvious limitations John Rink has pointed out, and also notwithstanding that it is precisely these limitations which require recourse to forms of graphic representation in the first place. Again there are issues here relating to prescriptive and descriptive notation which cut across both disciplines.

It's also interesting to note, when thinking about trajectories of disciplines, that these kinds of approaches to recorded performances have become much less common in ethnomusicology now, just at the time when they are becoming more common within musicology. But it is because I see a certain amount of complementarity in these different areas that I wonder whether we might begin to think of this analysis of recorded sound as something approaching a sub-discipline in its own right; what I think of as 'phonomusicology'. However, all of that, I think, must wait for another paper.

By now I've substantially digressed from my title, so I want to return to the writing of ethnographic and musicological texts, and consider the parallels between our engagements with ethnographic others, and with

recorded others. In particular I want to draw on ideas by the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup relating to the ethnographic present. This is a literary conceit in which an ethnography is written in the present tense, notwithstanding that the experiences which provide the foundation for that ethnography occurred in the past. This mode of writing has been much critiqued within anthropological literature and I want to consider some of the consequences of this debate in relation to our study of recordings.

Hastrup argues that it is through the creation of the ethnographic present that the anthropologist confronts the object of study and, literally, makes sense of that confrontation. She observes that 'although fieldwork took place some time in an autobiographical past, the confrontation continues. The past is not past in anthropology, it is ethnographic present' (Hastrup 1992:125). Thus, although the fieldwork itself may have a particular chronology, the ethnographic results of that fieldwork may surface many years later, with the anthropologist continuing to reflect on the nature of his or her experience, thus making sense of it *through* the writing of the ethnography.

For Hastrup, the ethnographic present exists in the space *between* self and other, notwithstanding that the others become textually fixed and, therefore, hierarchically differentiated in ethnographic discourse in a way which they are not in fieldwork dialogue. She notes that:

> At the level of dialogue, the individual interlocutors are equals. 'You' and 'I' are engaged in a joint creation. But we are both subjects engaged in a process of objectifying our reciprocal identities. There are selves and others, but no absolute and exclusive categories of *ego* and *alter*. Difference is continually transcended. However, at the level of discourse the 'others' are textually fixed; the absent people are recognised as embodying an alternative culture (:129).

Furthermore, she argues that the ethnographic present is not a present tense at all, but a 'world-out-of-time' (:128), an artificially constructed chronology which has only an ambiguous connection with 'real' time, and which is presented in an ethnographic text which is itself allegorical (:128).

Elsewhere I've argued that one can take Hastrup's ideas a stage further, and view the ethnographic present as existing in a space not only between the anthropologist and his or her subject(s), but within a triangle formed by adding the reader for whom the ethnography is intended. This is not to say that all readers infer the same from a given text. Interpretation is not the sole prerogative of the anthropologist and they cannot be sure that their texts will be received uniformly; in fact, one can usually be sure of quite the opposite, as the comparison of any two reviews of the same book will frequently reveal. So, extending Hastrup's analysis, I would argue that the ethnographic present, while existing for the anthropologist in the act of writing the ethnography, is also created in the mind of the reader for whom that ethnography is intended; in short, it exists between

those who must write, those who must know, and those who must suffer to be written of.

Now some of this maps onto the study of historical recordings and some of it doesn't. As I've already noted, there isn't generally any dialogue between the researcher and the performers, so there is no transformation from dialogue to discourse, in that sense. However, the 'absent people' *can* be seen as embodying an alternative culture, as I've already suggested.

But it might be argued that there are further parallels here between ethnographic texts and our written studies of recordings. Neither can be said to represent 'the truth', only particular versions of it, and thus both constitute interpretations of these other, unfamiliar performance cultures; both are fixed representations of what are in fact flexible and fluctuating traditions, and both run the risk of emphasising or giving particular substance to individual instantiations which would, in the context of the traditions within which they normally reside, be taken as rather more transitory events - the performances themselves. And both forms of writing in turn become re-interpreted in the eyes and ears of the reader/listener, and thus both are subject to changing meanings over time.

Writing about historical recordings, then, like writing about other music cultures, could in some ways be seen as a mediation between self and other, a place in which we seek to make sense of the other *through* the writing of our texts, as Hastrup puts it. But where I think this engagement between self and other becomes particularly interesting is when it is expressed not through written work, but through musical performance itself. That is, when the outcomes of research into historical recordings are expressed not in writing but as musical performances; where a given performance is seen to be 'historically informed', not by reference to conventional primary sources such as manuscripts and treatises, but in relation to an historical performance tradition represented by a body of recordings; and I'd like to spend a moment pursuing this idea.

Like Hastrup's ethnographic present, musical performance is itself a 'world out of time'. As Alfred Schutz has observed, such performance is characterised by the 'pluridimensionality of time'. In his words: 'Making music together is an event in outer time, presupposing also a face-to-face relationship, that is, a community of space, and it is this dimension which unifies the fluxes of inner time and warrants their synchronization into a vivid present (Schutz 1951:118)'. John Blacking, who was influenced by Schutz more than he acknowledged, similarly frequently stated that 'music can create a world of virtual time in which things are no longer subject to time and space' (Blacking 1977:6). Just as Hastrup has argued that the ethnographic present is a 'world out of time', and which I have further suggested is constructed in a triangle between the subject, the author, and the reader, so musical performances can be seen as a

'worlds out of time', at least some of which might be seen as existing between the performer, a history of related recorded performances, and the audience for whom that performance is intended.

Now I know that this may appear as a rather abstract or philosophical perspective, but it does in fact lead me on to some very concrete issues. One of the motivations for my contribution to this symposium, and indeed the point from which I began to consider this issue of self and other in relation to studying recordings, relates to my work at Goldsmiths. Since most of us here are involved in higher education in some way, I think it's worth considering some of the pedagogic issues relating to performers studying recordings, and I have a particular issue I wish to address, and which is related to what I have been saying.

Goldsmiths has a number of students undertaking a PhD in Performance Practice. The final examination on this programme involves a reduced doctoral dissertation of 50,000 words, together with a full evening recital. The relationship between these two assessed elements is expressed in the programme's rubric as follows:

> The thesis will be supplemented by additional evidence in the form of practical performance that exemplifies and illustrates the ideas contained in the written part of the thesis [...] Applicants may offer for consideration any thesis topic that falls within the broad scope of performance practice. This might include such areas as contemporary music studies, ethnomusicology or aspects of historical awareness […] The recital must in each case be accompanied by programme notes and an extended essay that explores the relationship of recital and thesis.

There are a number of students on this programme who are analysing bodies of recorded performances as part of their research. And while I personally have no problem with the final performance itself as being a form of research, nor of course in the idea that studying a body of recordings is worthy of doctoral studies, I do wonder in what way the performance may be said to 'exemplify and illustrate' the written thesis. That is, how does studying other people's performances, and particularly performances from historical music cultures, influence or impact upon one's own performance; and, equally importantly, how might this be articulated or demonstrated?

In the ethnomusicological context, of course, this particular relationship between theory and practice is articulated rather differently. Learning to perform as a research tool has been an important part of that discipline since at least the 1960s. Engaging as a performer with another music culture, and then demonstrating that engagement through both writing about it and performing examples of it is, if not exactly straightforward, certainly a more clearly defined research pathway. But demonstrating familiarity with this other music culture is not quite so straightforward in the Western art tradition. We are not asking pianists simply to mimic Myra Hess (I assume) even though we are happy for them to study her

performances. Similarly we are not asking violinists to immerse themselves in recordings by Heifitz, say, and then play like him. But what exactly is the relationship, from the performer's perspective, between this historical body of evidence, the aural tradition, and contemporary performance practice, and how does a performer begin to conceive and express this?

And this is particularly interesting given that our own music culture prizes individuality of interpretation above all else. Performers are trained, developed, obliged to determine their own, highly personal approaches to musical artworks. It is the personal, individual nature of what we describe as 'interpretation' which so often draws comments from critics and others, and which, of course is also central to several of the CHARM research projects. Anthony Kemp's (1996) work on the personality of Western musicians demonstrates how the deliberate cultivation of a conscious musical self becomes a significant component of the personality of professional musicians, as well as being accompanied by the cultivation of a notable streak of independence. But how is this strong sense of musical self conception, the individual interpretive agenda, if you like, modified or impacted upon by engagement with the historical recorded tradition? How does the performing self engage with this historical other, what happens in between, and how do we know?

So it is this area between self and other which I think is particularly interesting in the case of musical performances informed by historical awareness of the performance tradition of which they themselves form a part. How might performers articulate this? Well, that's rather for them to tell us, but I think there might be some further parallels here with certain types of reflexive ethnography and the role played by individual experience. Tim Rice's work with Bulgarian gaida players, Jeff Todd Titon's work on Southern Baptist singers, John Baily and Afghanistan, even John Blacking and the Venda, have all to some extent reflected on their own practical experience, how it was informed by practical engagement with the tradition, and what it taught them about the musical culture under scrutiny. This kind of reflexivity must be carefully handled, in case it becomes simple and uncritical autobiography. But it may provide some possible models for performers seeking to articulate what it is they have found in the recorded traditions they have studied, and how this has informed their own performances.

I'd like to finish with a thought from Hans-Georg Gadamer. There will be others here who are more familiar with his work than I am myself, but I note with interest his views on what he describes as 'historically effected consciousness', and his observation that subsequent understanding of a given text is superior to the original production *precisely because* it is enhanced by historical distance. He writes:

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a

> text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience […] for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. (Gadamer 1979:296)

Gadamer of course is interested in hermeneutics and is primarily concerned with literary texts. I don't want to start making the analogy between recordings as 'texts' in that sense, because I think that may be unhelpful. But clearly the musical scores themselves can be seen as texts and thus the recordings made of them over the last century constitute a significant part of the 'objective course of history' which informs the historical situation of the interpreter. Gadamer's essential point that 'meaning' is somehow construed at the confluence of historical tradition and contemporary reality is I think a useful starting point for trying to think about how performers engage with historical recordings, and how this engagement is manifested in their own performances - if and when it is manifested.

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