Cecilia Wee
(University of Sussex)

CHARM symposium 1: Comparative perspectives in the study of recordings

14-16 April 2005, Royal Holloway, University of London

CHARM's first symposium on the study of recordings brought together a group of 40- odd interested scholars working with audio (and in some cases, video) recordings. The diverse range of topics explored coupled with ample discussion time in both formal and more informal, caffeine-fuelled contexts meant a broad attendance including music archivists, scholars working within ethnomusicology, popular music and performance studies, and historical musicology.

Nicholas Cook, CHARM's director, opened the symposium with a lively introduction, mapping out the aims of the CHARM project and some of the issues arising from studying recorded music. Playing an excerpt of a recording by the last castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, Cook asked participants to question the notion of 'reality' as represented by early recordings. Whilst we may posit that this historical recording gives us an as-accurate-as-possible representation of what Moreschi's singing sounded like, such a perspective depends on the transparency of the recording medium, which (as writers such as Timothy Day inform us) is often questionable. Indeed, the supposition that recordings can be a sufficient means of conveying past performance practice is tautological if we are unable to situate the claims embodied in recordings within a broader epistemological framework.

Interrogating the conventionally accepted perception of recordings as representations of performance practice was a recurrent theme throughout the conference. Cook proposed that recordings could be more usefully considered as signifying rather than representing music and musical contexts: the interventions and technical manipulations of producer, engineer and editing suite highlight the 'unnatural' experience of recording, particularly in the early years when studio temperatures were dictated by the idiosyncratic demands of wax cylinders. Although the establishment of CHARM indicates that the significant work of scholars dealing with recorded musics is being recognised, Cook was quick to note that the dominant modes of musicology have not yet thoroughly scrutinised the relationships between performance contexts and music recording. Music's history has been heavily dependent on technological developments, yet musicology's language for understanding the involvement of technology is implicitly derogatory. The CHARM Director likened the textual emphasis of Western Art Musicology's core activities to those of philology. In such a context, music is conceived as a text whose meaning is to be expounded through employment of various analytical tools. The Hanslickian view of music's existence as independent of its performance is countered by methodologies in popular music studies and ethnomusicology where performing is fundamental to the subject of study.

Stephen Cottrell's largely speculative paper 'Self and other in the study of historical recordings' assembled perspectives from ethnomusicology, historical musicology and hermeneutics to explore the notion of performances as embedded in recorded music. Beginning with LP Hartley's comment that '[t]he past is another country', Cottrell suggested that interpretative challenges in study of music from the past can be compared to issues that regularly confront the ethnomusicologist. Moreover, he emphasised that lessons can be learnt from the ethnographer's engagement with performers, proposing that a re-tuning of ears is necessary to appreciate the ethnographic or historical recorded Others. Broad in scope, Cottrell's paper raised salient issues that would return during the course of the symposium. His discussion of the Performance Practice PhD programme at Goldsmiths College, indicative of current trends in performing arts research towards synthesis of the practical and theoretical (such as the Bristol University based PARIP project - Performance As Research In Practice) provided much food for thought. Examining the prose of the PhD requirements, Cottrell was particularly concerned with how performers would be expected to 'illustrate' the products of their written research in actual performance. Whilst the performing arts academic community is yet to resolve this issue, the paper stressed the continued value of engaging with the work of writers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Clifford Geertz. In response to Cottrell's call to hermeneutics, Eric Clarke suggested that we question our motives when working with recordings, acknowledging the subtle yet distinct ideological differences between the reconstruction of historical performance and contemporary attempts to understand music's history.

The trope of viewing musical recordings as hermeneutic encounters introduced by Cottrell's paper also appeared in Robert Philip's presentation, 'Why are we listening, and what do we hear?' Although its title and ambitious abstract might suggest an exploration of the diverse uses of recordings from a listener's standpoint, it would seem that Philip's interests lay mainly in unearthing developments in twentieth century performance practice through musical recordings. Giving a brief historical overview, Philip asserted that the 1960s saw the breakdown of consensus in performance techniques, a situation which paved the way for today's performance culture of 'official pluralism'. Examining instances of portamenti in the Capet Quartet's late 1920s recording of Mozart's Dissonance Quartet and the effect of Strauss' tempi changes in his recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the paper simultaneously questioned historical musicology's urge to deduce frameworks for historical performance from early recordings and brought attention to the almost frenetic penchant for detail engendered by such recordings. It seemed that by linking a discussion of performance practice to judgments of taste Philip aimed to advance another thesis – namely, that the performer's use of specific performance techniques could be perceived as manifestations of aesthetic decisions. Several members of the audience picked up on Philip's focus on individual performers as shaping performance practice. As a complement to suggestions of the performer's expressive role as 'artist', both Jenny Doctor and Renate Braeuninger suggested that scholars working with recorded performances constantly need to put them into their larger cultural, historical and economic

contexts, emphasising that the politics of recordings as commodities undoubtedly had (and continues to have) an effect on performers. Without overtly examining the musicologist's need for self-reflection when using recordings, the paper approached recordings as traces of actual performances: the emphasis was on recordings as epistemological tools for the exploration of historical performance techniques and styles.

John Cowley's '*Iron Duke in the Land*: case studies in the use of discography as a source for the history of vernacular music' drew together several strands of research from over a 20 year period, initiated by an interest in the musical cultures that black migrants from the Caribbean brought to the UK during the twentieth century. This extremely detailed paper presented a 'thick' description of Trinidadian music as captured by UK-based record companies and ethnographic researchers: Cowley suggested that the dual aim of the commercial recordings of popular dances and songs in Trinidad was to develop generic distinctions (both nationally and internationally) and establish a buying market within the existing national musical culture. Indeed, it seemed that makers of commercial recordings placed more emphasis on product visibility – such as large adverts in the local *Horn of Spain Gazette* - than the ethical responsibility to produce 'in context' representations of Trinidadian musics. The spectre of colonialist cultural politics loomed over Cowley's discographic work: he noted that the music locally known as 'calypso' was, in the commercial context, frequently described as 'Creole' music. The record company's influence was similarly tangible in the discrepancy between titles given in record company files, newspaper advert descriptions and the names given on the records themselves. Such rewriting of cultural history by commercial interests undoubtedly affected consciousness of Caribbean music on a global level and locally, presumably through clubs, dance events and radio. Janet Topp Fargion noted that in contrast to the radio, where critical debate about music may be voiced, the ethnomusicologist working with recordings needs to consider to what extent a commercial disc is representative of local culture. Cowley acknowledged the social and political complexities of his discographic work but, in his concern to present the rich fruits of his research, critical appraisal was somewhat overlooked.

Day 2 of the symposium began with Alf Björnberg's exploration of the transparency of recordings in light of the conspicuous employment of technology. His paper, 'Probing the reception history of recording media: problems and possibilities', arose from a research project on the use of music technology in Sweden, and assessed factors salient to the reception of recorded music between the 1940s and 1970s. Whereas other speakers focussed on the impact of studio technologies on performance practices, this paper considered how such technological developments were aesthetically perceived by audiences. Björnberg considered the status of specific technological developments and their products, using information gathered from sources including record reviews in Swedish 'trade' magazines. He proposed that multi-track recordings in the late 1940s and early 1950s were admired within the music industry primarily as technological achievements. For 'serious' music critics, the musical merits of recordings like Charles Redland's 'I'm looking over a four-leaf clover'

(1949) - an example of a six layer multi-track recording where all tracks were recorded by Redland - were effectively muted. Music that consciously explored the sonic potentials offered by pioneering recording technologies, such as Thomas Funck's records for children (1954), contradicted the transparency of conventional musicianship and was seen as a threat to the musician's skill. The subject matter of these recordings probably also contributed to their being seen as ideologically fantastical and aesthetically inferior to jazz or Western Art Music: it was as if music that foregrounded recording technologies was subject to judgment as non-authentic; its impossible rendering within the live context consigned it to the category of content-less, parodic and, by implication, immature play. As with Cowley's paper in the previous day's session, Björnberg's research highlighted the interpretative influence held by those who own the means of musical production (and their media counterparts). However, in light of the renewed significance of aesthetic theories of play by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Anton Ehrenzweig, perhaps the inferences of triviality in Swedish record reviews may now be viewed more constructively.

Articulated as an engagement with Michel Foucault's theory of 'practical' knowledge, Peter Johnson's paper, 'The legacy of art-music recordings: performance as embodied knowledge', provided another perspective from which to evaluate the now-familiar theme of using recordings to uncover, interrogate and critique the practices and experiences of performance. This theoretical paper attempted to map out the philosophical relationships between the closeted immortality of the recording and the performer's vulnerability in 'live' performance, anchored through the prism of Lydia Goehr's account of the work-concept. Johnson's concern for the notion of performance is perhaps a consequence of his reflection on his position within a conservatoire: although much of his previous research has centred on the performer's aesthetic decision-making, he does not consider himself a performer. His appropriation of Foucault's theory of 'practical' knowledge affirms performance as a force challenging the 'hegemonic' (in other words textual and specifically literate), institutional forms of knowledge usually dominant in conventional musicology. Performances that 'fail' – those unable to draw the audience into the rhetoric of a musical 'work' – are, Johnson implies, the consequence of ineffective engagement with 'practical' knowledge. However, as with the concern over how one can 'exemplify' knowledge of a musical tradition through performance (as raised by Cottrell's paper), a question emerges as to whether the concept of 'practical' knowledge can be transferred from an abstract context to one of research assessment. Furthermore, as Richard Middleton noted, embracing the idea of 'practical' knowledge is not unproblematic: like its corollary position, it is also ideological and contingent. Johnson's paper and his comments throughout the symposium demonstrated an undeniable desire to fuse interpretations of performance with aesthetic theory. This concern for ways to enlighten the experiences of performers and spectators, ranging from Gilles Deleuze's deterritorialisation to Judith Butler's description of the Self's formation and Jean-François Lyotard, was admirable; at the same time, the paper's broad exploratory tenor suggested fascinating routes for further

investigation rather than offering a fully-formed analysis of how performance can be embodied in musical recordings.

Allan Moore's 'The sound of popular music: where are we?' similarly addressed a wide range of issues. If the performer was the centre of gravity in Johnson's paper, Moore's focussed on the experience of listening, considering studio practices as fundamental to the sonic and ontological framework of popular music. Taking recording as the normative mode of performance in popular music, Moore argued that the record presents listeners with a 'virtual' performance. Whilst only the most naïve listener can today believe that recordings of Western Art Music have no need of interventions by producers, engineers and edits, Moore hints that a high degree of popular music's distinctiveness depends on the creative employment of these studio processes, which become essential elements of the record's mode of virtual performance. For many popular musicians, simulating the sheen of naturalistic performance is significant, yet here the accent is on simulation as a means to destabilise the foundations on which the 'real' is posited. Moore utilised his 'soundbox' model of listeners inhabiting a 3-D acoustic space (also discussed by Richard Middleton and Philip Tagg), examining the manipulation of the soundbox in seven popular songs ranging from 'Vienna' by Ultravox to Peter Gabriel's 'Rhythm of the Heart' and the Beatles' 'A day in the life'. The sonic presentation of the drum kit emerged as a particularly noteworthy instance of studio play on the soundbox space, especially in the songs by Ultravox and Peter Gabriel: the presence of drum machines undermines the capacities of the individual human drummer and also influences the subsequent layout of acoustic drums by 'real' drummers. Moore was in addition keen to scrutinise linguistic distinctions in popular music studies and, indeed, the (in)adequacy of language within the musicological project. Discussing Martin Grech's 'Dali', Moore stated that due to its irrefutable involvement with studio processes it should be thought of as a 'track', rather than a 'song': without the complex montage techniques that define its timbral world, the track would be effectively unrecognisable. By implication, the 'song' is defined by Moore as that which can sustain the challenge of a cover version, by virtue of its relative autonomy from the recording process. Indeed, Moore's definition of song came close to reinforcing the notion of musical work *qua* score when he said of 'Dali', 'I can't think of how to write that down'.

Simon Tresize's 'Musical archaeology: learning to learn from early recordings, the pitfalls and the pleasures' inspected the performance practices embedded in early recordings (*as* performances) from the perspective of the contemporary, expert listener. Comparing vocal tone, articulation and tempi of recordings in concert and studio contexts by Wagnerian singers like Lotte Lehmann, Birgit Nilsson and Lillian Nordica; Trezise focussed on how the physical demands of acoustic recording affected performer behaviour: in this way he demonstrated that the processes of acoustic recording affected the sonic results and that an understanding of these processes is necessary for their aesthetic assessment. His interest in early recordings underpins a desire to understand how the physical demands of acoustic recording affected performer behaviour and the recorded product. Bearing in mind our

understanding of the early recording session as a physically strained and (as Timothy Day says in *A Century of Recorded Music*) probably sweaty experience, Lillian Nordica's studio performance of the Battlecry from *Die Walküre* Act II, for instance, is extraordinary in its ability to evoke dramatic tension. Although Trezise suggests that Nordica's position nearer to the recording horn in the studio 'performance' produces a sense of unease in her voice, on record this seems to add to the fluency of the musical passage in question. The paper's suggestion that the circumstances of acoustic recording could be reconstructed today sparked off an animated debate: among the issues deliberated was the possibility of recreating historical recording processes, with or without access to the relevant equipment, and the need to acknowledge the status of an early recording as an object and not just the trace of a performance.

Session five of the symposium was held jointly with the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. It opened with another challenge to the stability, significance and relevance of knowledge possessed by the expert spectator or listener with Susan Melrose's perhaps ironically titled paper 'Out of words'. The exquisite rhetoric of this dense text was clearly motivated by an attempt to put the performer's specialist knowledge at the centre of studying performance. The paper focussed on the value of the performer's disciplinary expertise, proposing that what is currently considered 'performance studies' is in many instances a disguised form of expert 'spectator studies'. As with Johnson's location in a music conservatoire, Melrose's ideological position is clearly coloured by her past experience as a theorist trained in French semiotics working within the context of an actor training institution (she is now Professor in Performance Arts at Middlesex University). The paper drew on a rich pool of writings including Sandra Rosenthal (speculative pragmatism), Paul de Man's concept of 'hypotyposis', and an illuminating exposition of Brian Massumi's notion of the event as 'streaming'. Melrose also played a diverse range of examples of contemporary performance. However, presented with an ideal opportunity to illustrate what an expert practitioner's interpretation would look/sound like, Melrose thwarted expectations by denying the audience a thorough analysis of the DVD performances by physical theatre company DV8, Theâtre de Complicité and Jack Brel that she showed. She further brought to light the differences of focus between musicology and performance studies when she suggested that musicians played a smaller role than theatre-trained or visual artists in the interdisciplinary performance work of the 1950s and 60s: a position that conflicts with Cage's centrality to East Coast performance, or the eminently musical focus of Fluxus at the hands of Dick Higgins and George Brecht. Melrose's assumption that delegates would be familiar with Jean-Jacques Nattiez' 'Is the Search for Universals Incompatible with the Study of Cultural Specificity?' was equally indicative of the different themes of debate current within the disciplines of performance studies and musicology. Despite her somewhat challenging address, the values espoused in Melrose's paper were not fundamentally at variance with the concerns about performance's peripheral position in the study of performing arts, concerns which were also voiced by various speakers and non-presenting delegates.

In contrast to Susan Melrose's insistence on the practitioner as the fount of performance expertise, Philip Auslander seemed entirely comfortable in approaching the issue of recordings as such an 'expert spectator'. He used his presentation as a 'think-piece' to survey some of the differences between strictly audio and audio-visual recordings, which included considering the issue of 'listening', an obvious yet virtually overlooked issue within the context of the symposium. Auslander's principal thesis was that audio recordings are experienced as referencing the present whereas audio-visual recordings are experienced as referencing the past. The position Auslander adopted in 'Sound and vision: record of the past or performance in the present?' is informed by his essay 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto' (2004) and the research for his forthcoming book on Glam Rock. The paper was structured as two 'Moments', the first of which claimed that the experience of listening to a recording is, perhaps contrary to perspectives taken by writers in performance studies like Patrice Pavis, embodied. Developing a theme from his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* and following on from Moore's discussion of recordings as the normative form of popular music, Auslander suggested that recordings be thought of as 'another' mode of performance. The paper's second 'Moment' linked Roland Barthes' idea of the photographic polysemy to Jonathan Sterne's reading of the isolated collectivity of listening to the gramophone: Auslander attempted to overcome the intuitive paradox of listening as an individuated activity (even if done collectively) through an appeal to audile technique. The plethora of visual clues offered by video recordings, he said, cannot but envelop the spectator into the collective experience of spectatorship, and therefore suggests a video recording's location within a historical context.

Michelle Kisliuk's presentation offered a breath of fresh air to the otherwise conventional conference paper format. 'Singing and re-singing: Positioning a "field recording" between Central Africa and Virginia' gave an account of her experiences with musicians in the Central African Republic and her direction of performances of BaAka song at the University of Virginia. Within the United Kingdom, the last 10 years in particular have witnessed an increased awareness and respect for music from the CAP, which has been featured on programmes like Radio 3's ground-breaking *Late Junction* and publications such as *the Wire*. By use of a simple (yet effective) mix of narration, archive audio recordings, audio-visual footage and live music-making, Kisliuk informed and illuminated the complex politics of musical performance and recording within a non-Western context, troping on issues previously explored in the symposium from more theoretical standpoints. After briefly explaining the musical structures and social contexts of BaAka song, the symposium participants were invited to learn the BaAka song *Mawa na Mwe*. This participatory strategy was a clear instance of a scholar illustrating (and passing on) their 'practical knowledge', an issue much discussed throughout the three days. Indeed, the process of teaching the song brought to light Kisliuk's own relationship to the oral tradition of BaAka music events. Listening back to the recordings made during her extended fieldwork, she noted that the 'version' of *Mawa na Mwe* she teaches to her University ensemble slightly modifies what she has on tape. Despite the continued pursuit for

the definition and attainment of 'authenticity' within certain strands of musicology and performance practice, this variation seems to converge with the fluid musical and social structure of BaAka events. Both Kisliuk's paper and her enlightened contributions throughout the symposium displayed a sensitive understanding of the questions currently concerning scholars working with recordings in ethnomusicology, comparative musicology, performance studies and contemporary artistic practice.

The last day of the first CHARM symposium on musical recordings began with Janet Topp Fargion's 'Recordings in context: the place of ethnomusicology archives in the 21st century'. The paper, exploring the work of the National Sound Archive's World and Traditional Music section, called for scholars to reflect upon the necessity and methodological rationale for making field recordings. Whilst archiving and conserving recordings remains a central part of the NSA's work, Topp Fargion also informed the audience of the NSA's critical objective to interrogate the philosophies underlying ethnomusicological fieldwork. To this end, the NSA produced an on-line research statement asking scholars to discuss to what extent field recordings 'put performance at the heart of ethnomusicology', to adapt one of CHARM's stated objectives. The concerns raised by issuing such a statement clearly have fundamental repercussions for ethnomusicology, where scholars are more likely to ask one another 'what equipment are you bringing?' rather than, 'will you be recording what you hear?' Topp Fargion suggested that the shift in ethnomusicological practice from empiricist approaches to ones informed by cultural studies and anthropology in recent years - aiming at putting 'music in context' - implies a changed significance for field recordings. Moreover, she iterated the need to examine the relative value of field recordings, above and beyond one's own research. Drawing on the history of ethnomusicological research, particularly Hugh Tracey's call for the 'musically sensitive anthropologist', the paper echoed Kisliuk's appeal for sensitivity towards the task of fieldwork recording. Topp Fargion also emphasised that in order for fieldwork recordings to operate within a successful, culturally rich research realm, they must be located in frameworks that are well-archived, catalogued and sufficiently accessible to researchers wanting to explore the material.

Richard Middleton's 'Last night a DJ saved my life: Aspects of the social phenomenology of the record' provided another insight into Middleton's recurring preoccupations with popular music, psychoanalysis and critical theory. Beginning with a playful reading of Mariah Carey's rendition of the song, featuring Busta Rhymes, DJ Clue and Fabolous, Middleton illustrates how gender oppositions set up by the vocal characters in 'Last night a DJ saved my life' (Fabolous' authoritative, self-assured rap in contrast with Carey's 'little girl lost' vocals) reflect some of the broader gender constructions within music as recorded cultural product. The 'life-saving' assertion of the lyrics with its emphatic delivery is perhaps somewhat ironic when attributed to a DJ spinning 'dead' or fossilised music, mediated through technology such as Pro Tools. Looking at the work of writers including Barbara Eng, Adorno, Hegel and Kaja Silverman, Middleton further mused over the gendered and raced connotations of the vinyl disc, and its relation to musical performance as a vehicle for identity

construction. The exploration of Hegel's master/slave dialectic as metaphor for the record's reified state was perhaps contentious given the ensuing discussion of George Clinton's 'Dr Funkenstein'. Contextualising Dr. Funkenstein's self-made biography within debates on black consciousness, diasporas and slavery, Middleton seemed to argue that Clinton's dependency on studio techniques in this instance results in embodiment being determined by the recording machine, which is fuelled by feedback loops. This line of reasoning sparked off much debate, with notable contributions from Eric Clarke and Philip Auslander, both of whom questioned Middleton's implied portrayal of Clinton as the slave/victim. Performing and authoring power is reclaimed through Clinton's precise control of sound production, his attempt to signify through disguise ('hope you got your sunglasses on!') and his self-proclaimed discourse on scientifically formulating funk in his sound laboratory. Middleton's paper and its responses revealed the complexity of issues underpinning Clinton's work, particularly the ways in which his work is only possible through the technologies of the late Twentieth Century studio and recorded medium.

The first CHARM symposium closed with an animated open forum, where participants had the opportunity to broach issues they felt required more attention as well as reflecting on the themes explored over the three days. Nicholas Cook opened the discussion by posing the question 'what do we need to know to understand recordings?' One of the immediate responses to this came from Stephen Cottrell, who highlighted that even the concept of 'understanding' in relation to recorded music must be re-examined from a phenomenological perspective. This prompted Robert Philip to comment that research about recorded music should guard against an emphasis on the materiality of recordings and should ideally incorporate looking at the musical performers in those recordings. Although the majority of the symposium concentrated on audio recordings, the issue of audiovisual recordings arose, partly due to observations from several participants who have worked with this form, coupled with its increasing use for ethnomusicological fieldwork. Comparisons may be made between the two media; however, it is necessary to avoid a reductive approach towards recording media. On this point, Philip Auslander noted that as with musical recordings, there are numerous 'types' of audiovisual recording that function in differing ways. The issue of reception was engaged with from several viewpoints. Firstly, Nick Morgan remarked that despite the plethora of recordings made by classical musicians there are few 'Glenn Goulds' interested in the philosophical interrogation of the medium and its relationship to performance. This led to a discussion of the accessibility to materials on recorded music (Timothy Day), the need for raw reception data and an inquiry into the relationship between concert hall and recording discourse (Jenny Doctor) especially with regards to the dissemination of new music recordings. The question of listening strategies was also brought up by several participants including Catherine Parsonage and Eric Clarke. In an era where diverse listening opportunities exist, the need to evaluate aural approaches are paramount to our musical and cultural understanding of recorded music. The symposium's three days of enthusiastic debate and welcome interdisciplinary exchange came to a gentle conclusion with a discussion of CHARM's future aims and objectives.