

The Artistic Integrity of the Record

OTTO MAYER-SERRA

Why shouldn't the ultimate aim of musical performers—solo or group, vocal or instrumental—be to achieve their own kind of fame through recorded performances rather than through concert hall appearances? Can't records be an end in themselves?

THE STEADILY GROWING ACHIEVEMENTS in the field of recording and reproduction techniques have created a new reality of musical performance which has not yet been grasped or fully understood in its artistic and sociological significance. The high-fidelity record should not be judged by the current criteria derived from the performance of music in the concert hall, but we should break away from preconceived ideas of concert performance standards when we move in the field of audio. It is time to take a new critical attitude which will allow us to analyze the record from within its own sphere.

The comparison of the 78 record with the performance in the concert hall was unavoidable, as the old technique offered us a mere suggestion of how music really could and should sound. The LP record, in many respects superior to the living performance, makes such a comparison preposterous. After having listened to thousands of records in the last years, it no longer occurs to us to compare the recorded sound of an orchestra with its "real" sound in the concert hall. The current advertisements of audio equipment "which bring you the realism of the concert performance in your own home," strike us as being beside the point. When recently a famous conductor declared to us in an interview that the record is for him "a kind of photography, which needs, as does all photographic art, excellent illumination," we realized more than ever the need for a clarification of concepts. How many people today owe their musical education exclusively to recorded music—people who have never attended a concert performance or an opera!

The idea that the record is a mere black and white photograph of a splendid and colorful reality comes from the long existence of the 78 record, and because of the serious shortcomings of recording techniques, "canned music" was thought to be inferior to the fresh product. There is no reason to approach the LP record of today in that frame of mind.

The comparison between recorded music and the photographic reproduction of a painting is not adequate, because, a piece of music, if it is not brought to sonorous reality from its score, has no reality at all. Music only "lives" when it is played or sung, and its performance today has the same reality if its impact upon the public

is made via the concert hall or via the microphone which transcribes the music onto a record. In both cases, music has to be rescued from the dead notes of its score through the action of a similar physical process whose basic laws are the same although the media of realization are different. Neither of these two ways of making music live is perfect, but both give us specific compensations for their respective shortcomings.

Live Concert Limitations

The handicaps of the living performance are many and are very well known: there may be mistakes in interpretation, pianos may get out of tune during a recital, performers may be at less than their best because of mood or health, the hall may suffer from acoustical imperfections or from "dead" spots, the public may be noisy or afflicted with colds and coughs. . . . To those things add the inconvenience of being obliged on a certain day at a certain hour to leave your comfortable home and perhaps slog through the rain to a cold (or stuffy) concert hall. Perhaps you had a very busy and tiring day and might really prefer to rest on a couch at home and read a detective story. Furthermore, you may have to listen to a symphony which bores you or one performed by an incompetent (in your opinion) conductor to be able to hear your favorite violinist or some modern work which may come at the end of the program.

But, on the other hand, the compensations are many. You get a sound quality of a different order from that received from recorded music, and you also get the

full impact of the personal appearance of the artist. There is the always fascinating "show" of a big orchestra in full action, and the general assistance of visual perception which helps us understand how the artist achieves his technical virtuosity . . . dazzling octaves, the fairy-like notes of a bouncing bow, or the force and grace of a conductor's baton. The personal glamor, showmanship, and stage presence of many artists add an important element to their performance. In opera, of course, this is a substantial part of the whole, when added to the components of scenery, costumes, and lighting. And let's not forget the social compensation of concert and opera-going—the eagerness of the ladies to show off a beautiful gown and jewels (a very important element in maintaining the interest of our concert life and opera season), the pleasure of meeting friends during intermission and talking over with them the latest gossip and the splendor of the tenor's high C, and the atmosphere of an auditorium full of people dedicated to an evening of artistic excitement. Furthermore, there is a feeling of belonging to a privileged group, whether you sit with the furred and jeweled ladies in a box, or with the intellectually arrogant students in the gallery.

All this is denied to the record listener. But he can claim an impressive number of compensations of his own. He can choose the right time to hear the right music and he can listen to it in the intimate surroundings of his home. Instead of being submitted to the effects of mass psychology, he can listen to the music and to it alone (perhaps with a score in his hands), he can enjoy it in all its artistic purity without being in any way distracted by extramusical elements. The most famous artists and orchestras play for him alone, giving him a feeling of special privilege, for he can be utterly close to the music and its greatest performers. The piano is always in tune, even if he listens to Gieseking or Backhaus for hours. No wrong notes, no mistakes, no false entrances; this is music in its supreme perfection.

The Real Differences

The most important difference between the live performance and the record is obviously the quality of the sound. The lecture-concerts of Gilbert A. Briggs revealed that

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Born Barcelona, 1904, from German-Spanish family. Studied musicology at Berlin, Colonia, and Greifswald, receiving his Ph.D. in 1929. Became, successively, assistant to Dr. Hermann Scherchen at the State Radio, Berlin, music critic and teacher in Barcelona, researcher on Mexican and Latin American music in Mexico, author of several books, including the first Dictionary of Latin American Music. He became a music critic, and was, for several years, publicity manager of Carlos Chávez, manager of the Xalapa Symphony Orchestra. In 1952, he founded the first record magazine in Spanish, *33 1/3*, which carries a regular 24-page supplement dedicated to high fidelity.

recording and reproduction techniques have reached such a high standard that—in spite of their qualitative differences—the similarity between live sound and recorded sound is so close that many experienced listeners could not, by the testimony of their ears alone, distinguish between recorded music and living music. This means that we have come to the point where recorded music has reached the development of its own integrity as a full-fledged means of making music come alive in its own right. It is no longer a substitute; it is an entity.

Each score written by a composer requires its realization by a performer. The composer always needs an intermediary between the products of his imagination and the public in order to make himself heard; this is also the case of the group of composers of the *musique concrète* who write directly for electronic instruments.

In earlier ages of our musical history, the composer himself was always the performer of his music. With the general "division of labor" of the 19th century, the composers and performers split into two different groups of "specialists." The composer dedicated himself to creating his scores and relied on trained instrumental performers or singers to present them. He used an intermediary who became the means of transmitting to us the music he wrote. But the record uses two intermediaries—the performer, and the electronic process of reproduction.

It has been said that the change in the technical means of presentation of music has been to the detriment of the composer, who wrote his works for live performances in the concert hall. But during the last century new technical resources and different media were customarily used in performances of music written for quite different groupings of instruments and sizes of halls. As early as 1784, a century after his death, Handel's "Messiah" was performed at Westminster Abbey with an orchestra of 250 players and an enormous choir, whereas for his first performance of the work, Handel had only forty instrumentalists and twenty voices at his disposition. Bach is played on concert grands and electric organs today, and the modern devices of lighting and scenery at the present Bayreuth Festivals are very much beyond Wagner's conception. Mozart's operas are performed in halls ten times as big as the theatres he wrote them for. This means that the original cast, performer, instrument or hall for which the composer wrote has vanished into oblivion. The record is only yet another link in the chain of new material means of performance, and does not alone establish a radically new principle of the reproduction of a score.

The only measure of faithful performance is that of adherence to the truth of the score. On this basis, the record generally gives us greater faithfulness than the living performance.

During a concert, the performer, as we have seen, is not in complete control of all the elements involved in order to guarantee perfection. The final product of a record is always the result of a tremendous amount of study, worry, and dedication to achieve perfection. A careful research of all the acoustical problems involved is

being carried out (hall or studio characteristics, reverberation, diffusion or reflection of sound, resonance, phase differences, dynamic values, and so on). Infinite experiments are being made in placing the musicians and microphones. Every attempt is made to eliminate the slightest mistake in interpretation. For the first time in the history of musical performances, nothing is left to chance: each record is meant to be a definite and perfect realization of the score, not only in its artistic meaning, but, also, in all its acoustical implications.

"High Fidelity" Implies Perfection

This should be the real meaning of "high fidelity." This now so-much-abused label should be much more than a description of design qualifications or recording techniques. Actually it implies a new meaning—that of sound production in the spirit of utter faithfulness to the score in all its aspects to an extent no composer had ever dreamed to be possible. During the last decades, the much discussed "fidelity" to the scores of composers, championed by men like Mahler and Toscanini, meant only the exact realization of every detail of the score as written down by the composer. Today real "high fidelity" is a great deal more: the performer and the artistic director of a recording are constantly checking over the complete realization of the score and the exactitude of its musical and dynamic values. But also, working with the sound engineer, the perfect acoustical balance with all its implications from the point of view of the listener—something which the conductor in the concert hall, standing as close as he does to his orchestra, can seldom achieve. Musicians like Hermann Scherchen claim the necessity of recording each composer's works within a specific sound atmosphere, according to the style of each work. Some of the most alert artists even go so far as to try to develop a specific recording style, which might be of the greatest importance for the future of the LP record, and might reflect upon concert-hall performances in the same way in which the development of the cinema and television have affected the stage.

Therefore an acoustical clarity and balance is reached on the record which permits us to hear details frequently lost in the concert hall. Although the power output of home music is infinitely smaller and the whole impact is received from only one single source (or from two in stereophonic reproduction), our ears quickly get used to the different sound level and quality, and we have no difficulty in identifying the truth of a reproduction as much as the definition of details—solo passages, both instrumental and vocal, polyphonic texture, rhythmic and accompanying figures, balance of dynamic values, and so on.

Although pleasure in the sound qualifies themselves afforded by a good equipment has won many friends to the enjoyment of music, "high fidelity" in its broadest sense means a reevaluation of the artistic content of a composition. Hi-fi in the current sense has no artistic value by itself. It gives only limited pleasure in its sonorous virtuosity, much as a pianist gives pleasure through the agility of his fingers. But, as in all

virtuosity, it accomplishes its whole reason for being only if it is put to the service of art. Many outstanding "hi-fi" recordings, with mediocre performances, show us the danger of this new road opened up to us by electronic achievement.

Fame Through Records

The new world of the record (or the tape) has reached its autonomy, although many of its problems are still submitted to renewed exploration and solution. Many artists became famous recording artists who had never achieved fame through personal appearances. There are wonderful conductors and singers on records—*phonogenic* artists, as Igor Markévitch calls them—who are failures in the concert hall, and others—Maria Callas, to name only one famous example—who seldom give us the emotion on a record which they are able to project from a stage.

In a recent interesting article in the Saturday Review, in which Irving Kolodin spoke of the disappointment to the public of certain famous recording artists when they were heard in person, he stated:

"It may be that the end of the film actor's purpose is to make films, whereas the end of the record performer's purpose is to make his name known in the concert hall or opera theatre. Thus, the film is an entity in itself, whereas the record is but an intermediate step to the point of true celebrity."

Why an intermediate step? If we admit that true celebrity can be reached in films by an actor who has never appeared on Broadway, why not admit that true celebrity can be reached by an artist who has never been applauded in Carnegie Hall? We firmly believe that the world of the record is strong enough (and will continually grow stronger) so that certain artists who achieve fame in this medium will consider it an end in itself, especially since being successful in the record world brings with it an economic reward in many cases superior to the fees earned in public appearances. These two worlds of sound production are already so widely split apart that in tests made by the Dutch Philips between the same pieces played by records and by living musicians, only 17 per cent out of 300 listeners (including professional musicians) were able to give the right answer.

This means that in spite of the enormous difference between the two means of sound reproduction, the record and its reproduction have already conquered most of the qualities of the living performance, to a point at which the specific characteristics of the recorded sound (including its shortcomings) appear to the listener, educated in the concert hall, less striking than the similarities between both of them.

Probably we are only half way along the road in the exploration of electronic sound reproduction. This is one reason more why we should give up the comparison of artists and recordings with living performances. Artists on records should be judged exclusively on their own merits as recording artists, and records should be evaluated on the highest level of present recording techniques.