

**Neal Peres Da Costa. *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing***

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**Reviewed by Anna Scott**

Twenty years ago, Robert Philip predicted that when modern reconstructions of 'authentic' Elgar performances met authentic Elgar as he was recorded, there would be 'a collision between two worlds, a real world which no longer exists, and a reconstructed world which never wholly existed except in the imagination.'<sup>1</sup> Those of us who may have smugly anticipated this cataclysm have since witnessed a strange stalemate: mainstream pianists continue to view the late-Romantic stylistic elements of early recordings as remnants of that epoch's as-yet-unbridled sentimentalism and shoddy technique, while period pianists continue to rely heavily upon documentary evidence, ignoring what early recordings might teach us about the rational limits of historical recreationist practices based on non-sounding traces.

It is thus with relief that Neal Peres Da Costa's *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* takes its place among the extraordinarily few resources available to pianists interested in bridging this divide. Accompanied by an easily navigated companion website, here

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance 1900–1950* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 228.

the author has meticulously assembled both textual and recorded evidence of four unnotated devices characteristic of late nineteenth-century pianism: dislocation, arpeggiation, metrical rubato and tempo modification. While he amply demonstrates the expressive motivations and historical origins of these devices, Peres Da Costa excels in his virtuosic cross-examination of how late Romantic musicians prescribed their appropriate use in treatises and scores, as compared to what they actually did in their recordings. Because early recordings expose a much more frequent and extreme application of these expressive devices in practice than could ever have been determined from the documentary evidence alone, the author puts forth a powerful argument against orthodox readings of historical texts of any kind.

In an informative opening chapter detailing the evolution of recording technologies, Peres Da Costa includes vivid anecdotes such as the description of a 1906 recording session with Adelina Patti, accompanied by pianist Alfredo Barili (pp. 14–15). Barili was instructed to play loudly and with unvarying dynamics while perched perilously atop a column of boxes; Patti was on a moveable platform so that the dynamic range of her voice could be artificially manipulated by moving her either closer to or further away from the gramophone's trumpet.

Thankfully, Peres Da Costa concedes that early twentieth-century recordings still captured something of the distinct musical personalities of these artists. The tendency today is to see early recordings as acts of technology rather than music: 'tactile monuments in music's necropolis,'<sup>2</sup> whose inherently artificial and distancing editorial interventions, technological obstacles and bizarre working conditions were too oppressive to have captured anything worthy of dissection today. I'm inclined to agree with Peres Da Costa, who points out that in spite of arguably *more* intervention today, pianists' recordings still capture the essential and idiosyncratic qualities of their personal performing styles (p. 29)—so why should it have been any different a century ago?

Given Peres Da Costa's reputation as a historical keyboardist, it is also a relief to see little mention of instrumentation here. While many of the pianists profiled in *Off the Record* continued to use dislocation and arpeggiation well into the 1950s, these devices still tend only to be discussed as evidence of past musicians' negotiation of the qualities of pre-modern instruments. It is highly unlikely, however, that Graf fortepianos or 1897 Steinways were available in every recording studio, so perhaps nineteenth-century style and tool are not as intertwined as we might like to think. By formulating his arguments without directly referring to the instruments used, Peres Da Costa has implicitly invited *all* pianists to experiment with the expressive possibilities afforded by these devices: an important advancement in late Romantic performance practice discourse.

Even more vital is how the evidence so expertly presented and assembled in *Off the Record* is appraised from the locus of the author's expertise as a performer—one interested in seeing a work from 'new or different perspectives, amplifying the choices available in its realization' (p. xxv). Rather than a pointillist approach to applying historical knowledge with a view to getting something 'right,' here we see how one element can catalyse the unravelling of a whole work or repertoire as an open-ended field of new possibilities. To this end, however, I wonder if Peres Da Costa has gone quite far enough.

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<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Abbate, 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?' *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 510, quoted in Nicholas Cook, 'Methods for Analyzing Recordings,' *Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Rink (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), 242.

In the chapter on dislocation, for example, Carl Reinecke's 1905 Welte-Mignon piano-roll recording of a solo arrangement of the Larghetto from Mozart's Piano Concerto K. 537 is compared to both his notated arrangement of the work and his verbal advice as documented in a book on Mozart's concerti. Because Reinecke's recording contains significantly more dislocations than is indicated by either text, Peres Da Costa rightly concludes that 'strict adherence to Reinecke's notation would lead to ... a musical blandness compared with, for example, a Reinecke performance,' because he 'applied dislocation not only to the most poignant moments in the music but also to almost any part of the bar where it was possible' (pp. 87–88). Peres Da Costa describes his application of this knowledge on page 100:

In another recent live performance, I used dislocation to give poignant expression to the high notes of the piano part in bars 23 and 24 of the first movement of Brahms's Sonata Op. 78 for violin and piano. I also used it in many other places throughout the Sonata, whenever the urge took me.

While the accompanying sound excerpt confirms that his delayed upper melody notes indeed lend dramatic expression to these two bars, Peres Da Costa leaves the reader wondering about exactly where, why, and to what extent dislocation was used in the remainder of this performance. Was it 'many other places,' or 'anywhere possible'? If pianists are to be convinced that these devices were more than a 'meretricious sugar coating,'<sup>3</sup> the frequency of their use should not be seen to vary inversely with performer conviction.

Though he should be commended for including them, Peres Da Costa's own performance excerpts are perhaps an unwitting demonstration of the extent to which the parameters of frequency and extremity continue to distance modern pianists' application of these devices from that of their late Romantic counterparts. While Peres Da Costa's Brahms performances are quite similar to those of Brahms's pupils Adelina de Lara and Ilona Eibenschütz with regards to the use of dislocation, arpeggiation and local rhythmic alteration, this is much less true of his large-scale tempo modifications. Unfortunately, many readers will not realise this, as the precipitously zealous rushing heard on the recordings of De Lara and Eibenschütz tends to occur before and after the short audio examples provided by the author.<sup>4</sup>

Peres Da Costa also avoids discussing other characteristic elements of late Romantic pianism such as improvisation and truncation, both of which can also be heard on Eibenschütz's recordings.<sup>5</sup> As far as it is possible to tell, the author hasn't experimented with these most extreme violations of textual authority in his own Brahms playing either, and it would be helpful to know why. Of course, his performances were probably never intended to be exact copies of early recordings, but as 'off the record' performers we must be wary of appearing to be guilty of the same crimes we have accused of others: namely, 'the application of only those practices that do not challenge current notions of good taste or that do not take us out of our comfort zone' (p. 310). For this reason, we need to be as elucidative of our experimental processes as possible.

<sup>3</sup> Will Crutchfield, 'Brahms, by Those Who Knew Him,' *Opus* 2.5 (1986): 18, quoted by Peres Da Costa, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> This can be heard, for example, in Adelina De Lara's rush in Brahms's Rhapsody op. 79, no. 2, bars 9–13 (immediately after audio ex. 2.42); and even more so when the same material returns in the A<sup>1</sup> section, bars 94–98. An even better example is Ilona Eibenschütz's recording of Brahms's Intermezzo op. 119, no. 2, from bar 10, and especially from bar 18 (after audio ex. 2.39). Both transfers can be found on GEMM CDS 99049.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular her recording of op. 119, no. 2, bb. 11–12.

Rather puzzlingly, Peres Da Costa states that he has chosen to focus on arpeggiation, dislocation and tempo modification because they are practices ‘not directly influenced by dynamics, tone, touch, and pedaling’ (p. 40)—parameters deemed unsuitable for study due to the limitations of early recording technologies. This is troubling both because studies into dynamics on early recordings are currently ongoing, and because any pianist can attest to the palpable urge to rush when getting louder. More importantly, I tend to agree with Nicholas Cook, who asserts that by restricting such studies to notational categories such as the placement of pitches in time, one effectively eliminates most of what there is to study before even starting, ‘including all the rhetorical, persuasive, or expressive effects that contribute so much to the meaning of music as performance.’<sup>6</sup>

While the study of dynamics on early recordings is far from a perfect science, it is risky to suggest that they are an easily extricated dimension of performance. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson’s online book *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances* is an excellent resource for those looking to explore how dynamic nuances vary with other measurable parameters of recorded performances. Of particular interest is pianist Alfred Cortot, who is shown to have used changes in loudness and tempo repeatedly throughout his performances to draw attention to the structure of the music, as well as to express emotion.<sup>7</sup>

In general, Peres Da Costa’s volume clarifies the need for further studies into how the elements of late Romantic recorded style work *together* on a larger scale. In the opening eight bars of Adelina De Lara’s recording of Brahms’s Intermezzo op. 117, no. 1 (audio ex. 4.80), she indeed shapes each local phrase with dislocation, arpeggiation and metrical rubato, but she also creates one overarching eight-bar metaphrase by slightly rushing towards its apex and slowing towards its end. Furthermore, she frames this temporally unified musical space by emphasising its slower outer bars with wider and more frequent dislocations, and by using more arpeggiations over its faster middle. In other words, De Lara uses conscientiously integrated small- and large-scale manipulations of dislocation, arpeggiation and tempo in order to communicate her unique understanding of the shape, and thus meaning, of this work.

As an aside, there is a pesky inconsistency in the author’s excellent discussion of the places where Theodor Leschetizky’s recorded arpeggiations tend to correlate with the performance markings he added in his edition of Chopin’s Nocturne op. 27, no. 2. Peres Da Costa notes (p. 137) that one such parallel occurs at the *molto espressivo cantando* marking found in bar 70 (Figure 3.34). In the score excerpt, however, the marking is *calando*, not *cantando*. This might make a difference should the reader try to experiment with how arpeggiation here might work together with other parameters such as loudness and tempo modification, especially as it coincides with a crescendo. *Cantando* usually prompts a pianist to play in a more expressively vocal way (while either slowing or surging), while *calando* refers to a waning in both tone intensity and temporal motion.

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<sup>6</sup> Cook, ‘Methods for analyzing recordings,’ 233.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performance* (London: CHARM, 2009), ch. 6, paras 39–49, accessed 30 Oct. 2012, <[www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/studies/chapters/chap6.html](http://www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/studies/chapters/chap6.html)>. For more information on studying note loudnesses with Sonic Visualiser, see ch. 8.2, para. 56.

Finally, Peres Da Costa seems somewhat unwilling to explore the deeper reasons for why the more extreme elements of late Romantic style continue to prove so unpalatable to modern performers. Does it really come down to changing tastes and standards alone? I suspect it might have more to do with what these recordings, taken in their entirety, say about the canonic identities of our museum's most popular composer installations. Bernard D. Sherman remarked that 'HIP Brahms is thriving more than I expected, because it continues to rekindle musician's [*sic*] passion for Brahms.'<sup>8</sup> But perhaps modern historically informed Brahms is popular because it does not destabilise our ideas about how Brahms should sound, nor what it signifies, in quite the same ways as do the recordings of those who knew him. It is hard to imagine that Ilona Eibenschütz's hair-raising tempo fluctuations are reflective of her understanding of 'characteristic' Brahmsian clarity, control, seriousness and restraint.

Modern pianists are the inheritors of powerful ideas about who these composers were. Perhaps our 'off the record' performances will never approach theirs until we encourage the most dangerous elements of late Romantic recorded style to confront these ideas head on: a collision of sound and meaning made possible not through the nostalgic crackle of piano roll transfers, but with modern hands, hearts and ears. Only then will we know just how HIP any of us really want to be. In the meantime, Peres Da Costa's engagingly accessible questioning of modern historicist practices, and his reassertion of the need for *performer*-led performance-practice scholarship, will undoubtedly inspire legions of pianists looking to rethink their approaches to nineteenth-century repertoires. How radically they choose to do so, however, will be up to them.

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard D. Sherman, 'Orchestral Brahms and "Historically Informed Performance": A Progress Report,' <[http://bsherman.net/Brahms\\_Diapason\\_Sherman\\_English.htm](http://bsherman.net/Brahms_Diapason_Sherman_English.htm)>, quoted by Peres Da Costa, p. xxv.