Is Diversity in Musical Performance Truly in Decline? The Evidence of Sound Recordings

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In the contemporary literature on recorded performance, the standard view is that today there is less diversity among interpretations of concert-hall music than in the first decades of the twentieth century.[1] When explaining this lack of diversity, commentators generally point to specific record industry practices and the way performers use sound recordings. It is often claimed that with the advent of the tape recorder and the increased opportunity for editing, technical precision has become the over-riding factor in performance, which results in a less risky, more uniform approach to interpretation. It is also maintained that younger performers learn pieces by listening to records rather than studying scores, which fosters imitation over individual interpretation.

There is considerable argument supporting the claim of reduced diversity in contemporary performance. It is undeniable that the recording business expects proficiency and efficiency in keeping production costs down. Artists often need to repeat performances at the same tempo and in the same vain otherwise editing becomes almost impossible. Preferred, of course, is a performance that can be recorded quickly and which requires little editing. This fosters the 'be reliable, play it safe and accurate' mentality. So it is easy to see how these technical demands lead to a situation where performance, which is expected to be ephemeral and unrepeatable, becomes routine. One of the factors influencing concert performance practice and national or other schools of performance traditions since the last decades of the twentieth century is the mobility of performers and conductors. In the 1970s musicians generally trained in their home country, but nowadays young players travel the world and take degrees at various conservatories in different countries, even continents, and they seek employment internationally.

[1] The main exponent on this point of view is Robert Philip, author of *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) and *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2004). Philip's influence extends to many other British authors and musicians, and could, for example, be felt in the undercurrent of tone at a residential seminar of the Centre for the Historical Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM), Royal Holloway, 14–16 April 2005.

Some observers claim that, for instance, the brass of Russian orchestras and the woodwind of French orchestras have lost their characteristic sound that made them recognisably different from their German or American counterparts.[2] One could argue for similar trends in the area of historically informed performance (HIP), once experimental and vulnerable, now perhaps standardised and mainstream. Freelance period-instrument musicians play in a variety of ensembles under different conductors. The name of the ensemble might differ from occasion to occasion but the actual musicians playing in them could easily be much the same, thereby limiting the opportunity for developing idiosyncratic approaches. Moreover, conductors directing period ensembles as well as traditional orchestras disseminate particular stylistic characteristics weakening the divide between HIP and the mainstream.[3] The stereotype of the jet-setting celebrity conductor having little rehearsal time with prestigious orchestras makes it hard to imagine how an individual or distinctive interpretation may be born.[4] But is this really what we hear on sound recordings? Is the current scene truly that uniform, or, rather, was the past really that much different?

In this article I will help revive the view that every generation has its own conventions regarding performance style. In any particular decade or twenty-year period the range of expression may be broader or narrower, the expressive vocabulary bolder or more nuanced; there may be trends that emerge and evolve over several generations and therefore are present over many decades in one form or another. And there may be characteristics and trends that are short-lived. Certain expressive devices may be easier to recognise and study in solo and chamber music but less typical in orchestral repertoire while other expressive devices may be valid across most genres and instruments. To hear these trends one has to become intimately familiar with the conventions of each generation of recording artists and to keep in mind not only the date of recording but the age of the artist.

Tempo and Interpretative Approach

The widespread claim regarding the decline of individuality in performance can be likened to two other widely held, but not necessarily valid, views: first, that today's performances are played faster than earlier ones, and, second, that literalism in performance is a 'modern' aesthetic ideal.[5] In relation to both points of view, more recent and systematically collected evidence seems to imply that in every period there are artists who play fast and literal and those who provide a more subjective interpretation and/or slower tempi. Carruthers, for instance, has provided evidence for the existence of a literalistic school of Bach playing among pianists in

[2] Philip, *Performing Music*; José A. Bowen, 'The Rise of Conducting,' *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* ed. José Bowen (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 93–113.

[3] Soloists also cross with increasing ease between modern and period instruments (for example, Yo-Yo Ma, Sergiu Luca, Christoph Poppen and Bart van Oort). See also Heidi Waleson, 'Mainstream Musicians Performing in Style,' *Early Music America* 10.4 (2004): 24–27, 39.

[4] Bowen, 'Rise of Conducting'; Norman Lebrecht, *The Maestro Myth: Great Conductors in Pursuit of Power* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing, 1991).

[5] Both views have been advanced by Taruskin on several occasions, for example in his *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford & New York: OUP, 1995). The same views have often been repeated in spite of growing evidence challenging the analysis, for example, José A. Bowen, 'Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance,' *Journal of Musicological Research* 16.2 (1996): 111–56; Martin Elste, *Meilensteine der Bach-Interpretation 1750–2000* (Stuttgart, Weimar & Kassel: Metzler-Bärenreiter, 2000); Dorottya Fabian, *Bach Performance Practice 1945–1975: A Review of Sound Recordings and Literature* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2003).

the nineteenth century.[6] Bowen and others reviewed the development of conducting and traced the 'literalist' approach from Berlioz and Mendelssohn through Richard Strauss to Toscanini, Böhm and Gardiner and the 'subjectivist' from Beethoven, Wagner and Liszt through Mahler and to Furtwängler and Levine.[7] There are problems with such categorisation, of course, as aspects of interpretative style may overlap. Karajan, *not* Toscanini, has the steadier tempo;[8] Harnoncourt is quite liberal and characterful in his interpretation in spite of his sometimes categorical rhetoric; Herreweghe is often rather understated and flat notwithstanding of his more flexible rhetoric; Abbado or Solti represent yet another kind of combination of 'being true to the score' and interpreting it.

The study of tempo choices and interpretative approaches in Bach's solo violin works reveal similar results (see Figure 1). Movements are as fast or slow at the beginning of the twentieth century as at the end. In fact violinists playing on period instruments tend to play somewhat slower than their mainstream colleagues.[9] Both 'literalistic' and 'subjective' interpretations are available from across the entire century of recording, for instance Busch (1929), Telmányi (1954) and Kremer (1975) represent literalistic interpretations, while Huberman (1942), Perlman (1988) or Huggett (1995) represent subjective interpretations.

The study of other Bach repertoires yields comparable outcomes.[10] Tempo choices in recordings of the Passions, Brandenburg Concertos and *Goldberg Variations* indicate that there are musicians who tend to perform fast movements very fast and slow movements rather slowly (for example, Newman, Casals, Gould), while others seem to avoid 'extreme' tempi and create less of a contrast in tempo between fast and slow movements (for example, Collegium Aureum, Leonhardt, Harnoncourt).[11] This finding agrees with conclusions made by Newman and Turner regarding tempo choices in Beethoven recordings: instead of a trend for the alleged speeding up of tempo, their findings also conclude that 'individual artistic temperament and athletic prowess have influenced the choice and flexibility of tempo quite as much as historical attitudes have.'[12] Further, Turner emphasises that 'the variety of tempi at any one time is far more remarkable than any tentative historical trend derived from the data.'[13]

Apart from tempo choices, there is also evidence that the overall effect of interpretations remains varied. An investigation of 'Variation VII' from Bach's *Goldberg Variations* showed that performers achieved a variety of musical expression through diverse manipulations of

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[6] Glen Carruthers, 'Subjectivity, Objectivity and Authenticity in Nineteenth-century Bach Interpretation,' *Canadian University Music Review* 12.1 (1992): 95–112.

[7] José A. Bowen, 'Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Wagner as Conductors: The Origins of the Ideal of "Fidelity to the Composer,"' *Performance Practice Review* 6.1 (1993): 77–88; José A. Bowen, 'The Missing Link: Franz Liszt the Conductor,' *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis* 24 (2000): 125–50; Bowen, 'Rise of Conducting'; José A. Bowen and R. Holden, 'The Central European Tradition,' *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* ed. José A. Bowen (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 114–33.

[8] Bowen, 'Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility.'

[9] Compare, for instance, Zehetmair's recording (Teldec, 903176138-2, 1983) with Podger's (Channel Classics, CCS 12198 and CCS 14498, 1999).

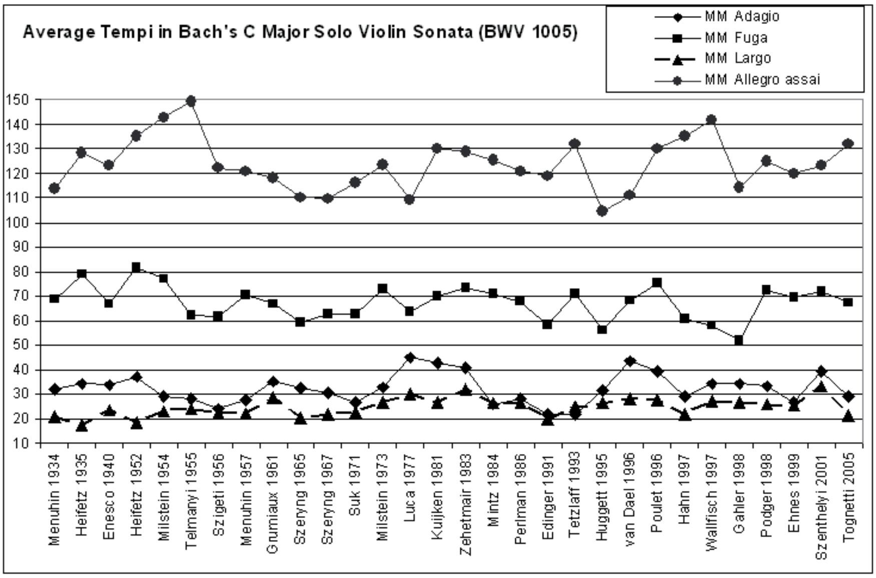
[10] See Fabian, *Bach Performance Practice*.

[11] Discographic detail, further discussion, tables and graphs of durations are available in Fabian, *Bach Performance Practice*, 102–24 (especially 119) or online at <http://empa.arts.unsw.edu.au/research/em/bach.html>.

[12] William S. Newman, *Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing his Piano Music his Way* (New York: Norton, 1988) 120.

[13] Richard Turner, Style and Tradition in String Quartet Performance: A Study of 32 Recordings of Beethoven's Op. 131 Quartet, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2004, 55.

Figure 1. Average tempi taken by performers in the C-Major Sonata for Solo Violin, listed in chronological order. The speeding up is not evident in any of the movements. The result is similar in the other works as well. Metronome value was calculated from duration, discounting final ritards and fermatas.



performance parameters throughout the recorded history of the work.[14] The study of thirty-four commercial recordings released between 1933 and 2000 found no trend in terms of articulation, tempo or dotting but showed that nearly all performers used overdotting. Those who played more legato inclined to play more slowly than those who used a more staccato articulation (see Figure 2). These performance variables made listeners feel that the interpretations of 'Variation VII' represented five distinct musico-aesthetic characters, including the most common gigue-like merry, bright or joyous character and the siciliano-like tranquil or serene, pastoral character. Although in the mid-1970s Bach's *Handexamplar* was rediscovered in which he specified this variation to be played 'al tempo di giga,'[15] only a slight trend for a gigue-like interpretation could be demonstrated among these recordings (see Figure 3). The choice of instrument (piano or harpsichord) seemed to be more decisive for the perceived musical character, with piano versions tending towards the pastoral and those on the harpsichord towards the gigue.[16] Studies of other repertoires offer further evidence for such diversity in interpretative approach.[17]

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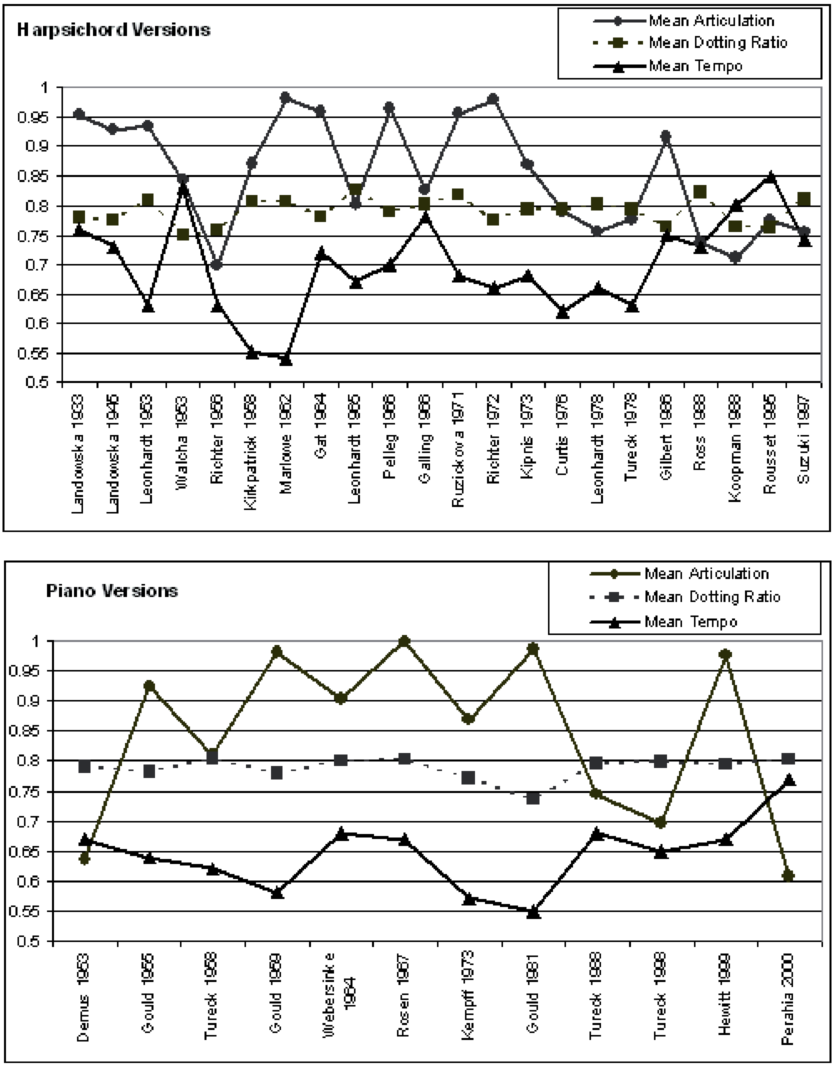
[14] Dorottya Fabian and Emery Schubert, 'Expressive Devices and Perceived Musical Character in 34 Performances of Variation 7 from Bach's *Goldberg Variations,' Musicae Scientiae Special Issue* (2003–2004): 49–68.

[15] Christoph Wolff, ed., *J.S. Bach Goldberg Variations: Fourth Part of the Clavier Übung BWV 988* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1977).

[16] Emery Schubert and Dorottya Fabian, 'An Experimental Investigation of Musical Character Portrayed by Piano versus Harpsichord Performances of a J.S. Bach Excerpt,' *Aesthetics and Experience in Music Performance*, ed. Elizabeth Mackinlay, Dennis Collins and Samantha Owens (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005) 77–94.

[17] See, for example, Turner, Style and Tradition; Bruno Repp, 'Diversity and Commonality in Music Performance: An Analysis of Timing Microstructure in Schumann's "Träumerei,"' *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 92.5 (1992): 2546–68; John Rink, 'The Line of Argument in Chopin's E-minor Prelude,' *Early Music* 29.3 (2001): 435–44.

Figure 2. Mean articulation and dotting ratios as well as tempo in harpsichord and piano versions of 'Variation VII' from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, listed in chronological order from 1933 to 2000 (beat per minute tempo was divided by 100 to allow overlay with the scale of dotting and articulation). The smaller the articulation ratio, the more staccato the performance (that is, 1 = legato). Literal dotting ratio is 0.75, which means that there is only one performance (Walcha on harpsichord in 1953) that has literal dotting and one that has an under-dotted average dotting ratio (Gould on piano in 1981).



Uniformity in Early Recordings

Perhaps even more noteworthy on the topic of diversity is that Philip himself provides overwhelming evidence for a convention—and thus a degree of uniformity—in interpretative style among recordings from the early 1900s to the 1940s.[18] These conventions include a slapdash attitude to ensemble and rhythm, frequent use of portamento, a tendency to slow down for the

[18] Philip, *Early Recordings* and *Performing Music*.

Figure 3. Perceived musical character in piano and harpsichord performances of 'Variation VII' from Bach's *Goldberg Variations,* listed in chronological order. Recordings released after the publication of the new Urtext score by Wolff in 1977 are shown below the dotted line.

Date	Performer	'Gigue'	'Siciliano'	Other
1933	Landowska			harpsichord
1945	Landowska	harpsichord		
1953	Demus	piano		
1953	Leonhardt	harpsichord		
1953	Walcha			harpsichord
1955	Gould		piano	
1956	Richter, Karl	harpsichord		
1958	Kirkpatrick			harpsichord
1958	Tureck		piano	
1959	Gould		piano	
1962	Marlowe		harpsichord	
1963	Gat	harpsichord		
1964	Webersinke		piano	
1965	Leonhardt	harpsichord		
1966	Galling	harpsichord		
1966	Pelleg	harpsichord		
1967	Rosen		piano	
1971	Růžičková		harpsichord	
1972	Richter, Karl		harpsichord	
1973	Kempff		piano	
1973	Kipnis	harpsichord		
1976	Curtis	harpsichord		
1978	Leonhardt	harpsichord		
1978	Tureck		harpsichord	
1981	Gould		piano	
1986	Gilbert	harpsichord		
1988	Koopman			harpsichord
1988	Ross	harpsichord		
1988	Tureck	piano		
1995	Rousset			harpsichord
1997	Suzuki	harpsichord		
1998	Tureck	piano		
1999	Hewitt		piano	
2000	Perahia	piano		
	Total instrument:	**Piano: 4** **Harpsichord: 13**	**Piano: 8** **Harpsichord: 4**	**Piano: 0** **Harpsichord: 5**

second subject of sonata movements,[19] different interpretations of the main theme by the pianist and the violinists (for instance in Schubert's A-major sonata as recorded by Rachmaninoff and Kreisler), and an inclination to play pairs of notes unequally, as in Beethoven's opus 96, G-major violin sonata, recorded by Tovey and Fachiri.[20]

These observations are supported by other scholars studying early sound recordings. In surveying late nineteenth-century piano performances in surviving piano rolls and recordings, Peres Da Costa highlights the tendency for rolling chords and the non-concordance of hands.[21] Milsom, in a review of late nineteenth-century violin playing, notices the overwhelming use of portamento and flexibility with regards to rhythm and tempo.[22] After some twenty years of studying acoustic recordings of early twentieth-century singers, Trezise also acknowledges the existence of particular conventions in terms of voice production, use of portamento and other expressive devices specific to the era.[23]

On the other hand, Rosen refutes the claim that all pianists from 'the first quarter of the twentieth century … continuously delayed the melody note in the right hand' and played with constant rise and fall of tempo. 'It was not systematically but sparingly employed by the *finest* artist.'[24] Rosen singles out Paderewski (1860–1941) 'in whose hands [the practice] was almost monotonously omnipresent,' and mentions the American Harold Bauer (1871–1951) as another example, but asserts that Josef Hofmann (1876–1957), for instance, only used the dislocation of hands for particular effect. Importantly Rosen claims that this kind of rubato is 'rare in the playing of Horowitz [1903–1989] and Schnabel [1882–1951], and almost completely absent from the playing of Arthur Rubinstein [1887–1982], Rudolf Serkin [1903–1991], and most of their contemporaries.'[25] This list, however, names the next generation of pianists, starting at around 1915, whereas those studied by Peres Da Costa or those mentioned by Rosen previously had been recording since the beginning of the century or earlier. It is noteworthy that a few pages later, Rosen, just like Butt, who was writing more specifically about Bach performance during the 1980s and 1990s, highlights the role played by the 'anxiety of influence' in defining performance styles: 'the reaction of each generation to the one before is commonly profound.'[26]

Case Studies

My own studies confirm the above remarks. For example, Vladimir de Pachmann's (1848–1933) performance of Chopin's Nocturne in E♭ major, op. 9, no. 2, recorded in 1915, is noteworthy.[27]

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[19] Corroborated by Bowen, 'Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility.'

[20] Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, 105–9.

[21] Neal Peres Da Costa, Performing Practices in Late Nineteenth-century Piano Playing: Implications of the Relationship between Written Texts and Early Recordings, PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2002.

[22] David Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850–1900* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2003).

[23] Personal communication during a Symposium organised by the AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, Royal Holloway, Egham, UK, 14–16 April 2005.

[24] Charles Rosen, *Piano Notes*: *The Hidden World of the Pianist* (London: Penguin, 2002) 191, emphasis added.

[25] Rosen, *Piano Notes* 191.

[26] Rosen, *Piano Notes* 193; John Butt, 'Bach Recordings since 1980: A Mirror of Historical Performance,' *Bach Perspectives* 4, ed. David Schulenberg (Lincoln, NE & London: U of Nebraska Press, 1999) 181–98. Although neither Rosen nor Butt refers to Harold Bloom, it might be useful to mention Bloom's influential book, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1973) as a possible line of inquiry for future studies of performance practice.

[27] Columbia, L1124, re-issued on OPAL, CD 9840.

The melody in the right hand is almost constantly delayed, and some of the left hand chords are rolled (such as the third quaver in bar 24); rubato is subtle, mostly occurring on the beat or half-bar level and thus effecting rhythmic alterations while keeping a fairly steady tempo except for a few slight accelerandos after ritards, usually coinciding with 'a tempo' marking in the score. In some of the other pieces on the same disc one can hear a more frequent rolling of chords but the general approach to tempo is fairly similar.

Sarasate's violin transcription of the piece was recorded in 1903 by Franz Drdla (1868–1944).[28] In this performance one can hear some rolling of chords (usually the third in the groups of three quavers), more prominent slowing down of tempo and broadening of particular moments (for example, a pause on the high D in bars 4 and 8, and analogous bars, followed by ritenuto; a similar pause and ritenuto is performed in bars 6 and 13 again around the high D), but not much acceleration. The melody is less disjointed from the accompaniment, but in bar 16, for instance, the ornamental flourish is played unaccompanied and the beat is resumed (and added) after the violin has reached the dotted crotchet E. Similarly free, cadenza-like interpretations of other flourishes (for example, bar 14) are also common. The violin line is played fairly legato, with less concern for those subtle details in articulation, timing and nuancing that one can hear in Pachmann's version. There is also Popper's transcription for cello, recorded by Pablo Casals (1876–1973) in 1926.[29] Compared with Drdla's version, the phrasing is more flowing and long-range. Fluctuations in tempo are also different and more idiomatic of modern piano versions: acceleration (and crescendo) at the start of the phrase; slowing down (and decrescendo) at the end. There are a few upward portamenti in the second half, but otherwise Casals's playing is clean, the tone projected and with vibrato, but the ornamental flourishes are light and fast. There are no rolled chords in the accompaniment.

The differences between the earlier and later styles of tempo and rubato can be illustrated further by a comparison of Maud Powell's (1867–1920) 1915 violin performance of Schumann's *Träumerei* and Casals's version on the cello some fifteen years later.[30] The generational gap could not be more pronounced. Powell's thin vibrato, abundant use of portamento, free rhythm and tempo (there is a huge accelerando in the third phrase and an extraordinary slowing of tempo towards the end) is quite different from Casals's much more prominent and steady vibrato tone, clean pitching and narrower range of tempo fluctuation. Although Casals also speeds up slightly for the modulating third phrase and slows down for the ending, these tempo changes are far more subtle and within a narrower range than those employed by Powell. The co-ordination between piano accompaniment and solo line is also different in the two recordings: the ensemble in Powell's version is freer than in Casals's recording. The time-lag between the upbeat in the piano and violin parts is not simply haphazard or chance non-synchronisation: it seems rather that Powell knows exactly the sort of upbeat she wants to create.

The interpretations of Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* by Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), Leopold Auer (1845–1930) and Eugene Ysaÿe (1858–1931) are further examples of the earlier style. Auer's version of Dance No. 1 (1920)[31] is a little faster and has less obvious *portamenti* than Joachim's

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[28] Re-issued on Pearl, GEMM CD 9102.

[29] Naxos Historical, 8.110972.

[30] Powell (1915): Naxos, 8.110962; Casals (1930): Naxos, 8.110976.

[31] Re-issued on IDIS 276.

from 1903,[32] but presents virtuosic additional flourishes (for example, bars 35-36, 41–42) and chords or octaves when Joachim plays only single pitches (for example, the upbeat to the first repeated section). The portamenti in Joachim's recordings are strong and contribute to the *Zigeuner* (gypsy) style; the mostly downward direction is in line with nineteenth-century recommendations regarding the device. Joachim's rhythmic gestures are more pronounced and he seems to follow the dynamics of the printed score more closely than Auer. However, in Dance no. 2 his interpretation is more liberal. Ysaÿe's performance of Dance no. 5 (1912), re-released on the same recording, is free and fast; practically every bar or few bars that have semiquavers are rushed. Although Ysaÿe's vibrato sounds just a little more noticeable in the opening theme (and in its recurrences) than Auer's or Joachim's in similar patterns, they too employ vibrato in louder sections when they want the tone to project. There are also more upward portamenti in Ysaÿe's rendering of the work. These differences aside, the interpretations are similar in conception: strongly shaped rhythmic gestures, sharply characterised sections, portamento rather than vibrato, overdotting, and throw-away semiquaver flourishes. Although strong accents and rhythmic characterisation remain important qualities, by 1920, when Heifetz (1901–1987) made a recording,[33] technical brilliance and tone projection seem to have started to over-ride the liberalism of the older generation. Heifetz's version provides a more precisely synchronised ensemble, 'controlled' semiquaver runs, steady tempo that allows for strategic accelerations and ritards, and a vibrato tone that is prominent throughout. That these characteristics herald such new trends is heard in Toscha Seidel's 1940 recording.[34] Compared to Ysaÿe and Joachim, Seidel's performance sounds almost literalistic and the gypsy element is limited to a fairly wide and constant vibrato tone.[35]

The foregoing discussion confirms that—at least in Romantic repertoire—the older generation of pianists tended to roll chords and desynchronise melody and accompaniment. Their string player contemporaries used portamento mostly in downward motion; vibrato mainly for colouring notes or adding volume. The next generation curtailed portamento in favour of a steadier, more continuous and at times more prominent vibrato.[36] Ensemble playing started to become more precise; rhythm more measured but still 'gesture-full' and tempo fluctuations narrower in range, covering longer passages.

Bach Interpretation in Early Recordings

Many of the earliest sound recordings included works by Bach either in original form or in transcription, hence my focus on this composer. The 'Air on the G-string' from the Orchestral

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[32] Re-issued on OPAL, CD 9851.

[33] Brahms, 'Hungarian Dance no. 1,' HMV (78rpm), DA 245, re-issued on CD in Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California Press, 2004).

[34] Brahms, 'Hungarian Dance no. 1,' re-issued on Appian CDAPR 7016.

[35] Joachim's and Ysaye's violin playing are analysed in more detail in Dorottya Fabian, 'The Recordings of Joachim, Ysaÿe and Sarasate in Light of their Reception by Nineteenth-century British Critics,' *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 37.2 (2006): 189–211. The Hungarian Dances recordings are also discussed in Jonathan Bellman, 'Performing Brahms in the *Style Hongrois*,' *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style*, ed. Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 327–48; Katz, *Capturing Sound*.

[36] Katz links the increased prominence of vibrato to the advent of sound recording, arguing that it added personality in the absence of visual contact and helped project the tone into the recording equipment while also hiding imprecision in intonation; see Katz, *Capturing Sound* 85–98.

Suite no. 3, BWV 1068, performed by Hubay (1929), Rosé (1927) and Casals (1930)[37] will be compared, as well as movements from the solo sonatas and partitas played by Rosé (1928), Joachim (1903) and Thibaud (1905).[38]

Jenő Hubay (1858–1937) is the oldest in the first-named group. His rendering of the Air seems to represent some of the conventions typical of his generation. He plays the first long note piano and without vibrato but then launches into a feast of portamenti; he plays one between practically every descending interval (many just seconds) and plays them prominently with a slight crescendo into the next note. In such a context it is striking how much more subdued the occasional upward portamenti are, indicating that these may have arisen out of technical rather than expressive concerns. Vibrato becomes more audible in crescendo or forte sections (such as between bars 13 and 16). Arnold Rosé (1869–1946) was eleven years younger than Hubay. Primarily an orchestral violinist, Rosé was influenced by Joachim's playing. Similarities in these violinists' Bach interpretations have also been noted by Milsom.[39] Here Rosé takes a slower tempo and plays considerably fewer portamenti than Hubay. Rosé's vibrato, albeit still fairly narrow, is more perceptible than Hubay's. This could be due to a better recording quality, or to a changing aesthetic. The real difference, however, comes with Casals's version (see Figure 4). His playing has hardly any portamento, but projects an even, measurable vibrato. The much cleaner pitching and vibrato tone herald a new technique; his less legato phrasing and arch-like dynamics and tempo signal a new approach. The unpedalled, quasi staccato piano accompaniment is in line with the developing ideology of *neue Sachlichkeit* or 'new objectivity,' the performance equivalent of neo-classicism that came to the fore with the Bach revival of the 1920s and 1930s and remained in favour until well into the second half of the twentieth century in spite of growing criticism.[40] What betrays the new objectivity in this style of playing is the much cleaner pitching and steadier overall approach (that is, stricter rhythm, tempo). Vibrato forms a part of this technique as it fosters a more constant timbre thus assisting sustained phrasing with equally important, stable notes.

Performances of selected solo movements from Bach's repertoire provide further evidence of the older approach. Jacques Thibaud's (1880–1953) interpretation of the 'Gavotte en Rondeau' from the E-major Partita and Joachim's Bourrée from the B-minor Partita are eminently comparable: they both exemplify a gesture-rich, rhythmically conceived approach where pulse and the projection of rhythmic character dominate phrasing, bowing and tempo, achieving a flexible and strongly shaped performance. The Adagio movement of the G-minor Sonata in Joachim's and Rosé's versions are similarly reflective of this style of playing. Rhythm is not performed literally but in a way that creates a sense of ornamentation. The chords seem a bit over-played and harsh on Joachim's recording, but the more appealing execution on Rosé's version could again be due to better recording techniques and the age of the artist (in 1903 Joachim was 72, whereas when Rosé made this recording in 1928 he was only 58). It is also important to note that Joachim's vibrato in these Bach pieces is far less audible than

[37] Hubay is re-issued on IDIS 276; Rosé on Biddulph, LAB 056; Casals on NAXOS, 8.110976.

[38] Rosé is re-issued on Biddulph, LAB 055; Joachim on OPAL, 9851; Thibaud on Pearl, GEMM 9102

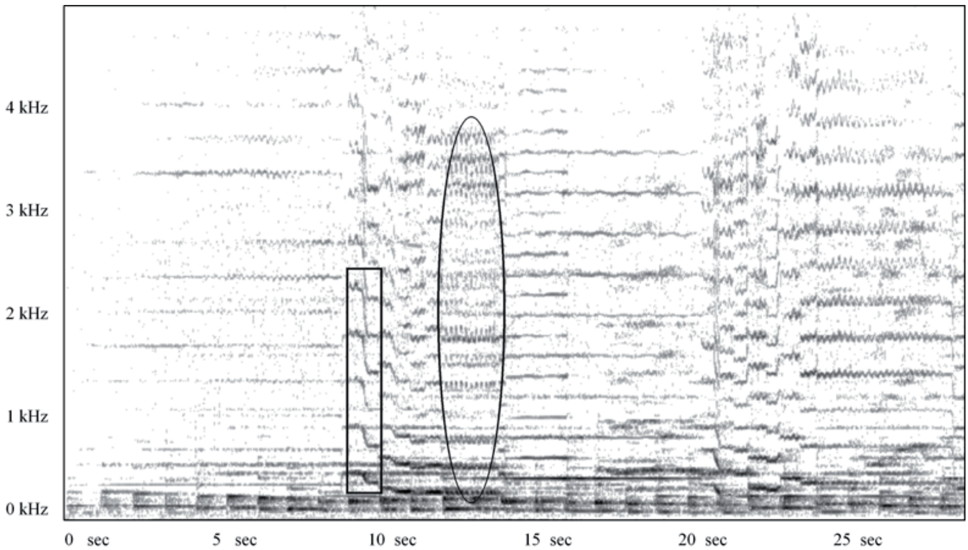
[39] Milsom, *Theory and Practice*.

[40] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Bach Defended against his Devotees,' *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967/1951) 133–46; Lawrence Dreyfus, 'Early Music Defended against its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century,' *Musical Quarterly* 69.3 (1983): 297–322; Bryan Gilliam, ed., *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).

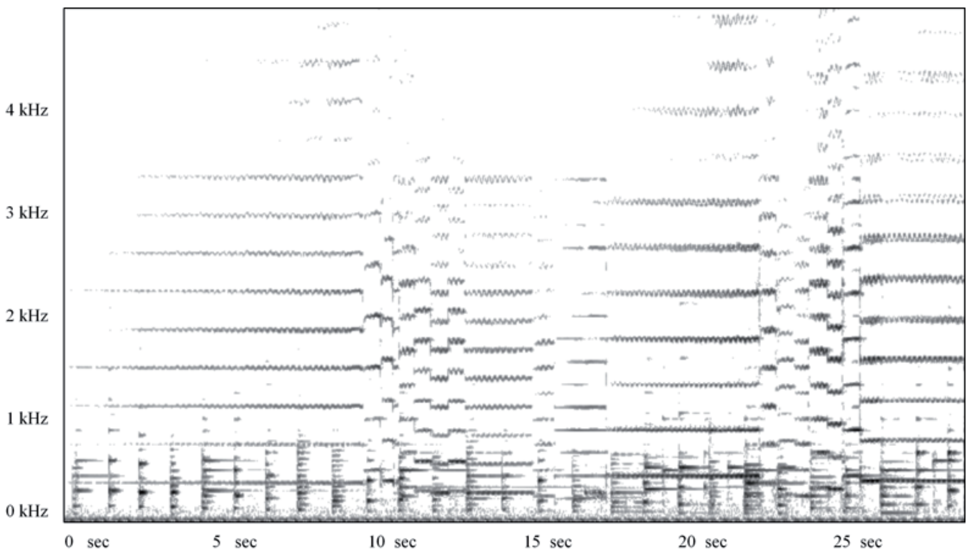
Figure 4. Spectrogram and waveform of (a) Hubay's and (b) Casals's recording of Bach's Air (from BWV 1068), bb. 1–3

Spectrograms visualise what the ear hears: pitch (vertical axis) sounding in time (horizontal axis). The intensity of the signal (or its colour) indicates volume. Note onsets are often marked by louder volume and hence more intense colour. Straight lines indicate the absence, curved or wiggly lines the presence of vibrato. This can often be better seen in the higher partials. Notice the straighter lines in Hubay's performance (especially at the beginning at 15–20 seconds), who plays a trill on the crotchet C'' (circled). There are also angled lines between pitches that indicate sliding (portamento). The first is marked with a rectangle. In Casals's interpretation the pitch is vibrated (steadily curved lines throughout) and each starts without sliding (fairly clear vertical demarcations with no angled lines). He takes a slower tempo and does not play a trill on C'' (the curves are that of vibrato, not trill). The clear black note-onsets at the bottom of the screen indicate the piano chords which are played staccato. The fundamental frequencies of the melody line are embedded around 300–600Hz.

a) Hubay



b) Casals



in the previously discussed *Hungarian Dance* implying that for him vibrato contributed to interpretative style and expression, rather than basic tone production as for most violinists of the middle of the twentieth century.

One can see tendencies for performance conventions and individuality even in this cursory examination of selected early recordings. Gradual changes in these trends may also be suggested. The more prominent and frequent use of *portamento* in the earlier artists' recordings, together with the less regulated and less obvious vibrato and a greater flexibility with rhythm and local tempo, slowly seem to give way to cleaner pitching, more even and perceptible vibrato, stricter ensemble and phrase-length tempo rubato. Instead of detailing how these and other performance characteristics change from the 1930s to the 1980s, I now wish to turn briefly to the current scene to show a similar interpretative diversity within a different uniformity.[41]

Diversity in Recent Bach Recordings

Several scholars have noted the increased diversification of performance styles, especially since the mid-1980s, and the role the historically informed performance movement has had in this diversification.[42] The reactions of younger players to the principles upheld by the previous generation are mirrored in a post-modernist perspective:

> As soon as it becomes acceptable to dislike what Bach might have wanted … historical evidence can be treated critically, and one can acknowledge that there is no absolute distinction between the choice of personal insight—or opinion—and historical accuracy.[43]

This reasoning describes an attitude that is not that different to the general outlook of performers from the beginning of the twentieth century. They also took the 'intentions of the composer' seriously, but simply interpreted such intentions differently. Whether a reaction to the immediate past or a search for something new and exciting,[44] the more liberal approach to historical evidence is changing the style of performance yet again. So diversity is not only achieved because of an existing contrast between HIP and modern or mainstream approaches.

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[41] I admit that omitting commentary on the 1940s–1980s evades the task of addressing the notion of uniformity when it was most apparent. That various trends did play important roles at particular times even during this period of 'Urtext mentality' is nevertheless clear from such studies as Nicholas Cook, 'The Domestic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or Record Sleeves and Reception,' *Composition, Performance, Reception: Studies in the Creative Process in Music*, ed. Wyndham Thomas (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 1998): 105–17; Uri Golomb, Expression and Meaning in Bach Performance: An Examination of the B-minor Mass on Record, PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 2004); Fabian, *Bach Performance Practice.* However, the limited availability of analytical data regarding performance style in this period does not enable the drawing of conclusions that may take into account individual differences and artistic distinctions.

[42] See, for example, Butt, 'Bach Recordings since 1980'; Michelle Dulak, 'The Quiet Metamorphosis of "Early Music",' *Repercussions* 2.2 (1993): 31–61.

[43] Butt, 'Bach Recordings since 1980' 191.

[44] When discussing changes in performance styles one should keep in mind the optimal complexity and preference-feedback hypotheses that make predictions about the effects of familiarity and subjective complexity on preference. See, for example, R.B. Zajonc, P. Shaver, C. Tavris and D. van Kneveld, 'Exposure, Satiation, and Stimulus Discriminability,' *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 21.3 (1972): 270–80; Colin Martindale, 'A Note on the Relationship between Prototypicality and Preference,' *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 14.1 (1996): 109–13. These predictions seem to imply that over-familiarity (boredom with the familiar) may have a significant impact on people wanting to seek something new. Given that concert-hall music has largely been canonical, it is the changing style of interpretations rather than new compositions that may provide variety, something new and exciting.

The contrast between HIP and the mainstream has actually weakened during the last twenty years or so, to the extent that cross-fertilisation sometimes results in the 'mainstream offering little more than an imperfect facsimile of the HIP.' [45]

Rather, diversity can be found within the strands of HIP and the mainstream. Take, for instance, Bach's solo violin works recorded by Monica Huggett and Rachel Podger from the 1990s.[46] Both recordings represent contemporary HIP style, which is neither rigid nor literalistic but characterful, closely articulated with a strong pulse and projection of rhythmic groupings. There are even added ornaments in both recordings and an improvisation in lieu of the last reprise of the E Major Gavotte and Rondeau.[47] Nevertheless, the interpretations are quite distinct. Huggett's gestures are more angular and pronounced; Podger's tone more resonant and her phrasing more flowing, to list just two of the most prominent differences. Thomas Zehetmair, Christoph Tetzlaff and Miklós Szenthelyi also released the solo Bach set around the same period.[48] They play on modern violins but all three of them claim to have been inspired by historical performance practice and indeed this can be detected in the style of playing. Nevertheless Zehetmair tends to take movements very fast, and plays in a way that may be ideal for some and judged as mannered by others; Tetzlaff's tempi are more relaxed and his nuancing often more subtle and less frequent, while Szenthelyi's interpretation does not go very far in imitating the HIP style in terms of bowing and phrasing or even rhythmic projection. The contrast between modern and HIP playing becomes clear however, when one compares all these recordings with Hilary Hahn's from 1996–97.[49] Although other performers could also have been singled out, Hahn's disc ideally represents the impeccable modern violinist whose playing style and approach have not been influenced by HIP at all: long legato lines, even vibrato tone, seamless bowing and very little pulse or dance character are used.

One can also refer to recent versions of the Mass in B minor and the Brandenburg Concertos. Uri Golomb provides ample detail about recordings of the Mass over the entire twentieth century and the artistic-aesthetic ideologies informing the various types of interpretations.[50] Butt also comments on some recent developments and highlights the pictorial 'nailing' effect in the 'Crucifixus' movement on Jeffrey Thomas's 1992 recording.[51] Butt adds: 'the highly evocative interpretation … might recall the days when directors did not feel they always had to have the composer's notated direction before embarking on a vivid interpretation of the text.'[52] In contrast, Philippe Herreweghe's 1998 version is smooth and almost lyrical, focusing on rounded and sonorous tone quality,[53] while Helmut Rilling's 1999 recording[54] is a mix of

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[45] Butt, 'Bach Recordings since 1980' 184.

[46] Virgin Veritas, 5452052; Channel Classics, CCS 12198 and CCS 14498.

[47] Transcribed in Dorottya Fabian, 'Towards a Performance History of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin: Preliminary Investigations,' *Essays in Honor of László Somfai: Studies in the Sources and the Interpretation of Music*, ed. László Vikárius and Vera Lampert (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005) 87–108.

[48] Zehetmair, Teldec, 903176138-2 (1983); Tetzlaff, Virgin Classics, 5450892 (1994); Szenthelyi, Hungaroton, HCD 32071-2 (2002).

[49] Sony, SK 62793.

[50] Golomb, 'Expression and Meaning.'

[51] Koch International Classics, 3-7194-2.

[52] Butt, 'Bach Recordings since 1980' 191.

[53] Harmonia Mundi France, HMC 901614.15.

[54] Hänssler Edition Bachakademie, vol. 70, CD 92.070

various styles developed in the latter half of the century, in particular the German *Kantorei* tradition—which incorporates stylistic features that Golomb (after Butt) labels 'romantic modernism'—and HIP.[55] Apart from differences in tempo and approach to articulation, rhythm and phrasing, there is also a variety of sound worlds among the more recent recordings of this work depending on the size and constitution of the instrumental and vocal ensembles as well as on tone production and diction.

Among the Brandenburg Concerto recordings Nikolaus Harnoncourt's second version (1981) is worth singling out for its idiosyncratic violin solo (played by Alice Harnoncourt) in the first movement of the fourth concerto.[56] While most others (such as Trevor Pinnock's English Concert, 1982)[57] would provide steady accenting of a flowing 3/8 pulse, here the solo is almost free of tempo and meter, and only the tutti entries remind the listener of a steady rhythmic drive. Recordings of the Adagio movement of Concerto No. 1 made during the last twenty-five years also provide a variety of readings. In Christopher Hogwood's 1985 set,[58] for instance, the opening oboe solo is less legato than in the recording of the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin (1999).[59] In fact, Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music play the first two bars non-legato. The tempo is also somewhat faster, the tone straighter and dryer. There is an agogic accent (tiny delay) before the two demisemiquavers in the first bar, but otherwise the music flows fairly evenly, especially from bar three onwards, with fairly obvious stresses on downbeats. These opening bars in the Akademie für Alte Musik's recording are shaped differently: the legato is smooth and the melodic line is conceived in longer arches. However, through slight swells and other dynamic nuances, the small-note figures sound more ornamental. Microscopic tempo fluctuations also contribute to the effect. These details are readily audible and not limited to expert listening, as a pilot study conducted a few years ago revealed. In it, the abovementioned two excerpts from Bach's Brandenburg Concertos were rated along a five-point scale for their performance and aesthetic qualities by more than thirty university students.[60] Figure 5 charts their responses that indicate obvious differences in several dimensions.

Other Repertories

Obviously not only Bach's works are interpreted in diverse styles. For instance, Turner has studied interpretive styles in the recordings of Beethoven's Op. 131, while Somfai reports a distinct range among interpretations of Bartók's string quartets,[61] to single out just two recent papers that consider modern recordings as well as early ones. My own perfunctory listening finds great variety of interpretation in Beethoven's piano sonatas, Mozart's operas and violin

[55] Golomb, 'Expression and Meaning' 81.

[56] Teldec, 8.42823, XH 242 925-2.

[57] Archiv, 410 501-2.

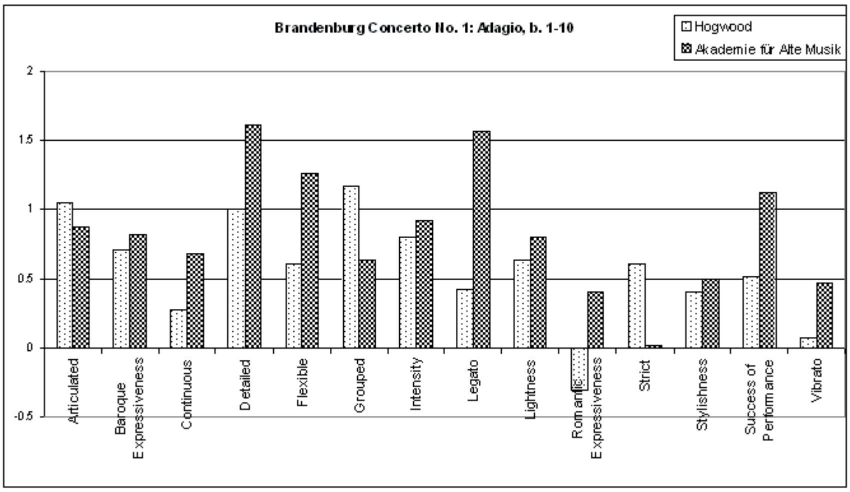
[58] L'Oiseau lyre, 455 700-2.

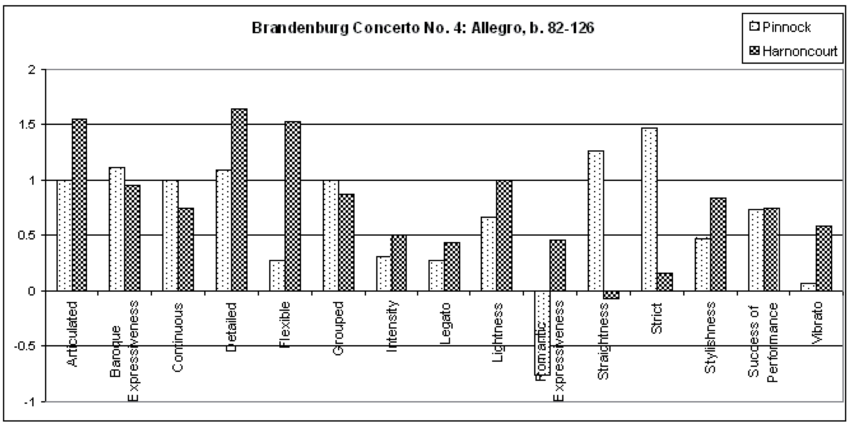
[59] Harmonia Mundi, HMX 2908074.

[60] For a description of the methodology see Dorottya Fabian and Emery Schubert, 'Is there Only One Way of being Expressive in Musical Performance? Lessons from Listeners' Reactions to Performances of J.S. Bach's Music,' *Proceedings on CD-ROM of the 7th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition, Sydney, 17–21 July 2002*, ed. Catherine Stevens, Denis Brunham, Gary McPherson, Emery Schubert and James Renwick (Adelaide: Causal Productions, 2002) 112–15.

[61] Turner, Style and Tradition; László Somfai, review of 'Bartók, Complete String Quartets/Keller Quartet' (Erato, 1995, 4509-98538-2), *Muzsika* 40.1 (1997): 35–36.

Figure 5. Ratings of various performance and aesthetic measures of two HIP recordings each of excerpts from Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, as perceived by thirty university students in a pilot study. 2 = very articulated, -2 = not at all articulated.





sonatas and Brahms's symphonies and chamber music. More particularly, one final example is worth considering: two recordings of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, conducted by Herreweghe (1994) and Harnoncourt (1992).[62] Even a cursory examination indicates major differences. The musicians of the Orchestre des Champs Élysées on Herreweghe's version play with very little vibrato (the opening chords, for instance), while the Chamber Orchestra of Europe under Harnoncourt has a lush and voluptuous sound. The overture on the former is rather crisp and hushed; on the latter more expansive with a greater range of dynamics and stronger tempo fluctuations.

Summary

Although more systematic studies are needed before a confident re-evaluation of current practices and their relationship to earlier ones may take place, it is nevertheless possible to

[62] Harmonia Mundi France, HMC 901502; Teldec/Aquarius, AQVR1582.

draw some preliminary conclusions regarding the history of recorded performance practice on the basis of the data presented here.

Aspects of the *early style* (approximately 1900 to 1930) that seem common to many recordings, repertories and artists include a variety of bowing and tone colour; fairly strong gestures and agogic stresses; slowly declining flexibility of ensemble, tempo and rhythm; decreasing use of dislocation of hands or arpeggiation of chords and downward portamento; and an increasing use of vibrato which is nevertheless less evenly executed than from about the 1930s onward. In contrast the *middle of the century* (from 1930 to 1980) favours a literalistic approach and thus concordance of hands and ensemble, even bowing and tone, precise rhythm and steady tempo. The expressive range is narrower, gestures are less bold but the sound is powerful and the technical display is brilliant. The *current style* (around 1985 to the present) maintains the technical proficiency of the previous period but the expressive range and vocabulary has, again, become wider. Many performers employ a less intense or continuous vibrato and provide for greater variety of tone colour; improvisation, melodic embellishment, flexed rhythm and tempo are becoming common once more. Interpretative gestures, melodic inflections can be strong and arresting but in early music performances these stem from the particular characteristics of early instruments and playing techniques. In other words performance practice has not simply 'come full circle' or reverted back to utilising the same expressive means as the generation of artists recording at the beginning of the twentieth century. There is a qualitative difference between the respective interpretative resources of today's performers and those at the beginning of the century, just as there is a difference in meaning between performers such as Joachim claiming to serve the composer's intentions and the mid-century artists who 'let the composer speak.'

The intervening half-century with its focus on technical proficiency and accuracy as well as the systematic revival of historical instruments and period-playing styles left its indelible mark on the musical consciousness and taste of performers, record producers and audiences alike. To appreciate the artistry and individuality of contemporary performers we need to better understand the origins and development of current performance conventions. We have to apply the same socio-historical and analytical methods to today's recordings that we use when discussing evidence from the past. It is imperative to keep in mind that today many more recordings are available of all the familiar pieces. Although it would seem that the instant accessibility of any number of alternative performances through recordings would encourage comparative listening (and reactive playing), throwing the emphasis on the manner of performance rather than the work being performed, in reality the structural properties of concert music limit the liberties musicians may take to project an individual or idiosyncratic interpretation. So the question remains, is it simply the recording industry that fosters homogeneity in performance, or what role does a canonical repertoire play in this process? A critical examination of this will also shed light on whether homogeneity is indeed the status quo. It might be that when more systematic substantiation becomes available of the recorded history of performance, those who glorify the early decades will be justified. However, the evidence might also show that there are just as many 'great' interpretations today as at earlier times.