

— ROBERT PHILIP —

# EARLY RECORDINGS AND MUSICAL STYLE



CHANGING TASTES IN  
INSTRUMENTAL PERFORMANCE  
1900-1950

*Early recordings and musical style*  
*Changing tastes in instrumental performance,*  
*1900–1950*

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ROBERT PHILIP

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## Acknowledgments

My work on early recordings (that is, records of the 78 rpm period) dates back to an afternoon in Cambridge in 1968, when I was trying to find a research topic for a Ph.D. dissertation. I had formed a vague idea that the history of recording was an important subject which nobody was taking seriously, and I walked into the Music Faculty library to ask the advice of the ever-helpful curator, the late Charles Cudworth, who was then the only person in Cambridge who knew much about recordings. He led me into an inner room, gestured towards shelves of dusty 78 rpm records (many of them uncatalogued), and suggested that I work on those. That conversation led to a Ph.D. dissertation on changing orchestral style, which in turn supplied me with material for my first broadcasts on Radio 3, produced by Robert Layton. John Lade, head of the Gramophone Department at the BBC, then gave me many opportunities to appear on the Saturday morning 'Record Review' programme, and offered me my first series, 'The Long-Playing Era'. This, and other series which followed on Radio 3 and the World Service, were produced by Patrick Lambert, whose infectious enthusiasm for recordings has helped me in my work over the years. Other BBC producers with whom I have worked happily include Arthur Johnson, Christine Hardwick, Andrew Lyle, Anthony Cheevers and Nick Morgan. All of them have indirectly contributed to this book, because most of these broadcasts have been about recordings, old and new. This material has enabled me to develop that first vague idea, with which I embarked on my Ph.D., into a conviction that old recordings provide a vital key to our understanding of past and present performance practice.

My ideas on the relationship between early recordings and the more distant past, which form an important part of this book, were sparked off by Richard Abram, who had the provocative idea of inviting me to write an article for *Early Music* on Elgar's recordings. This was followed by an invitation from Stanley Sadie to write a chapter on early twentieth-century performance for the New Grove handbook, *Performance Practice*, and it was the preparation of this chapter which developed my interest in the written documents of the period. In a more general way, my colleagues in the Open University (where I work as a BBC producer) have enlightened me over the years about the nature of historical evidence and our understanding of it. This is what the book is

fundamentally about, and I could not have written it without this broader perspective.

Acknowledgement is due to EMI for the photograph on the jacket, which shows the orchestra assembled for Elgar's first recording session in 1914 (contrary to what has been written elsewhere, it clearly does not show the musicians in their playing positions; they have been crammed into the field of view of the camera, with most of the music stands removed). The source of all other copyright material is given in the text and notes.

I had no idea when I first started writing this book how complex the subject would prove to be, and it has taken, on and off, fifteen years to write it. I must therefore thank not just one editor, but a succession of editors at Cambridge University Press: principally Penny Souster and her colleagues who saw the finished book through the press, but also her predecessors Rosemary Dooley and Claire Davies-Jones, who, often to my surprise, continued to think the book was worth waiting for. I hope they were right. My wife, Maria Lukianowicz, also bears considerable responsibility for its completion. I particularly remember a point about five years ago when I had finally decided that I had neither the material nor the competence to write it, and she persuaded me otherwise. Again, I hope she was right. Finally, I also hope that my daughters, Charlotte and Lara, will in the end see the point of what they have had to put up with for the last eleven and five years respectively, and in that hope I dedicate the book to them.

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## *Introduction*

Twenty years ago, music historians paid virtually no attention to early twentieth-century recordings. At best they were thought to have a period charm, but they certainly had nothing to teach the sophisticated modern musician about the history of performance. They were old enough to be old-fashioned, but too recent to be historical. Even now, the performing habits of the early twentieth century are, on the whole, habits which musicians would like to think they have outgrown. Scholars in the field of nineteenth-century performance have recently begun to take early recordings seriously, but study of them is in its infancy.

The reasons for examining early twentieth-century performance are compelling. In the first place, it is the earliest period from which the primary source material has survived. For earlier periods we have documents and instruments, but no performances (except as played by a few mechanical instruments, such as barrel organs). For the early twentieth century we have the performances themselves, often recorded by the composers or by musicians of whom they approved. We do not have to conjecture about how Elgar or Rachmaninoff or Stravinsky or Bartók performed their own works in the 1920s on the basis of documentary evidence; we *know* how they performed them, at least in the recording studio.

But the importance of early twentieth-century recordings extends far beyond composers' own performances. The recordings have preserved the general performance practice of the period in great detail, and the detail includes habits which are scarcely mentioned, if at all, in written documents. The recordings therefore shed light on the limitations of documentary evidence in any period, not just in the early twentieth century.

Early twentieth-century recordings have a particular relevance to the study of performance practice in the nineteenth century. Many of the musicians heard on early recordings were brought up in the late, or in some cases mid, nineteenth century, and their performing styles can be seen as remnants of nineteenth-century style.

Recordings also show how performance has gradually changed from the early twentieth century to our own time. They demonstrate how the practices of the late twentieth century, including those which we take entirely for

granted, have evolved. The greatest value of this is that it forces us to question unspoken assumptions about modern taste, and about the ways in which we use it to justify our interpretation of earlier performance practice.

In the history of performance, the early twentieth century has an importance which has never applied to any period before it, and which will never occur again. It stands at the end of the era, stretching back over the centuries, in which knowledge of performance practice was imperfectly preserved in written documents, and at the beginning of the modern era, in which performance practice is (with minor limitations) preserved on recordings. The recordings of the early twentieth century are the link between these two eras, and they provide a valuable key to understanding both the development of modern performance practice, and the practices of earlier centuries.

This book therefore looks at aspects of early twentieth-century performance, as described in documents and preserved on records, and explores some of their implications. The potential scope is enormous, and the book makes no claim to cover the field. It is restricted to instrumental performance, apart from a few comparisons with singing, and it concentrates on the features of performance which have undergone the greatest change during the century – or to put it another way, the habits which make the performances on early recordings sound most old-fashioned to a modern listener.

The book is divided into four parts. The first three parts cover the three main topics:

I Rhythm, which is divided into chapters on flexibility of tempo, tempo rubato, and the treatment of patterns of long and short notes (notably dotted rhythms);

II Vibrato, divided into chapters on strings and woodwind;

III Portamento, both solo and orchestral.

Each chapter begins with the documentary evidence of the period: what did musicians recommend or claim, and how did their views change over the period? Then recordings are discussed, to show what musicians really did in practice. One of the themes running through the book is that musicians do not necessarily do what they say, or follow the advice of teachers or contemporary writers, and that in many cases it would be impossible to deduce everyday features of performance without the recordings. The importance of this for students of earlier periods is obvious.

Part IV explores some of the implications of these early twentieth-century habits and their evolution. Chapter 8 asks to what extent early twentieth-century recordings can be used to shed light on nineteenth-century practice. It may seem strange to put a chapter on the nineteenth century at the end of a book on the twentieth, rather than at the beginning, but the point is to show that we can only begin to get a realistic impression of nineteenth-century style if we start from a knowledge of early twentieth-century recordings and work backwards. The final chapter looks at some of the broader implications of the



recordings. What sort of evidence are they? What do they tell us about the evolution of modern style, and about our ability to recreate the styles of the past? The conclusions will not satisfy those who like neat and tidy answers to questions of performance practice. But the whole point about early recordings is that they present us with real history, not history as we would like it to be.



PART I

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RHYTHM

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## *Introduction*

The three chapters in Part I are about the most fundamental aspect of musical performance, rhythm, from the basic tempo, and the extent to which it changes within a movement, to the detailed relationship between one note and another.

Rhythmic habits have changed very greatly over the twentieth century. To a late twentieth-century listener, recordings from the early part of the century at first sound rhythmically strange in a number of ways. They seem hasty, slapdash and uncontrolled, in a manner which now sounds incompetent. But this impression is to do with style as well as competence. The impression of haste is caused partly by fast tempos, partly by a tendency to underemphasise rhythmic detail compared with modern performance. A slapdash impression is given by a more casual approach to note lengths and a more relaxed relationship between a melody and its accompaniment. Lack of control is suggested by flexibility of tempo, particularly a tendency to hurry in loud or energetic passages. All of these habits are generally avoided in modern performance, and rhythmic competence is now measured by the extent to which they have been successfully controlled.

Improving discipline has played some part in these changes. Orchestras, in particular, were often a great deal less rehearsed in the early years of the century than they are now, and the general level of rhythmic precision and unanimity was therefore lower. But when we find that the leading soloists and chamber groups also shared many of the rhythmic characteristics which now seem hasty, slapdash and uncontrolled, then it becomes clear that we are dealing with changes in style, not just in competence.

This section divides the most obvious characteristics of early twentieth-century rhythm into three different topics: first, the overall flexibility of tempo; then different kinds of tempo rubato, including detailed changes of pace, the use of tenutos, and the dislocation of a melody from its accompaniment ('melodic rubato'); and finally a flexible attitude to the relationship between long and short notes, particularly dotted rhythms.

## *Flexibility of tempo*

Many writers from the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century recommend flexibility of tempo, and reject the idea that a piece of music should be played at a constant pace. Hugo Riemann (1897), writing on expression, advises,

First of all, in the matter of small changes of *tempo*, it may be remarked that hurrying implies intensification, and drawing back, the reverse; hence, as a rule, a slight urging, pressing forward is in place when the musical development becomes more intense, when it is positive; and, on the other hand, a tarrying, when it approaches the close. These changes must naturally be exceedingly minute in detached musical phrases, but can already become more important in a theme of a certain length; while for whole movements they are of such extent as to be seldom ignored in the notation.<sup>1</sup>

The singer David Ffrangcon-Davies (1906), in a book prefaced by Elgar, writes: 'An inelastic time-measurer, can never give us characteristic Bach or Beethoven, Mozart or Wagner. Metronome marks are never more than approximate at best.'<sup>2</sup> Arnold Dolmetsch (1916) argues that alterations of time are 'as old as music itself', and states, 'It is obvious that emotional feeling, if there be any, will cause the player to linger on particularly expressive notes and to hurry exciting passages.'<sup>3</sup>

Some writers are more cautious in their recommendation of tempo flexibility, and a number of them suggest that it is more appropriate in Romantic than in Classical music. The pianist Alfred Johnstone ([1910]) allows slight changes of tempo in Beethoven's compositions 'for the purpose of making clear the varied expressions of soul depicted in the music'. But it is only in modern music, from Chopin and Schumann onwards, that the varying of tempo has its full play: 'Capriciousness, then, is a characteristic of this modern emotional style; moods vary capriciously, and constant variations in the *tempo* is [sic] one of the means adopted to interpret these capricious moods.'<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the violinist Hans Wessely (1913), while cautioning against excessive freedom in Classical works, allows that 'More recent (French) compositions demand greater freedom of phrasing and time changes.'<sup>5</sup>

Some writers urge more general caution. Giovanni Clerici (1906), though allowing singers slight variations in pulse 'for the purposes of expression', objects to artists who 'interrupt the rhythm at any point they please', and writes

that 'as a whole, the pulsation goes throughout a movement at a given rate'.<sup>6</sup> Sterling Mackinlay (1910) advises singers that changes in tempo 'must be made with the utmost discretion. To launch out into making perpetual little alterations in time throughout the piece, quickening here, slowing up there, without rhyme or reason, is the sign of a poor singer. The great artist is a great timist, and is found to interfere but little with the *tempo* of a piece. Consequently, when he does so, he produces a marked effect ...'<sup>7</sup>

Despite these words of caution, there was a general acceptance in the early twentieth century of the need for flexibility of tempo. The ideas of Wagner and Bülow, who had advocated great flexibility, were still influential, and Wagner's essay *On Conducting* had been recently translated into English. Wagner states, 'We may consider it established that in classical music written in the later style *modification* of tempo is a *sine qua non*.'<sup>8</sup> By 'classical music in the later style' Wagner means music from Beethoven onwards, including his own.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the leading advocate of Wagner and Bülow's kind of flexibility was Mahler. He is reported by Natalie Bauer-Lechner to have said,

All the most important things – the tempo, the total conception and structuring of a work – are almost impossible to pin down. For here we are concerned with something living and flowing that can never be the same even twice in succession. That is why metronome markings are inadequate and almost worthless; for unless the work is vulgarly ground out in barrel-organ style, the tempo will already have changed by the end of the second bar.<sup>9</sup>

Bauer-Lechner heard Mahler demonstrate at the piano the importance of tempo fluctuation, giving among other examples the beginning of the variations in the last movement of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony (bar 12ff, *pizzicato*):

Mahler sang the passage as the bad conductors perform it, and said: 'They mistake this for the theme ... and consequently take it far too quickly, instead of realizing its true meaning. Beethoven is trying it out meditatively – then playfully – he is learning to walk – he gets into his stride gradually. That's why the latter part of it – like an answer – should follow rather more quickly.'<sup>10</sup>

Mahler went rather beyond most of his contemporaries in his flexibility of tempo, as some of the remarks of hostile critics show. In Beethoven's Overture *Leonora* No. 3, Mahler habitually started the Allegro slowly, only reaching the main tempo at the forte repetition of the theme, and he accelerated in a similar way at the beginning of the presto coda. Mahler wrote from London, 'Apropos my performance of *Fidelio* – especially the *Leonora* overture was violently attacked and condemned by half the critics here.'<sup>11</sup> By contrast, one critic found this interpretation 'an accomplished masterpiece',<sup>12</sup> and it also met with the approval of Dukas. Hanslick praised Mahler's interpretation of the 'Eroica' Symphony,<sup>13</sup> and his performances of Wagner, which some critics

found full of 'arbitrary nuances', others praised for 'the natural and measured changes of tempo'.<sup>14</sup> When Richard Strauss visited Mahler in Leipzig for a performance of his Symphony in F minor, he remarked that Mahler 'seemed to me a remarkably intelligent musician and conductor, one of the few modern conductors to understand "modifications of tempo". On every subject he expressed excellent points of view, especially concerning Wagnerian tempos (unlike some of the accredited Wagner conductors of today).'<sup>15</sup>

Mahler's tempo modifications included not only slowing down for passages of great significance, but also speeding up to pass over passages requiring less emphasis. Bauer-Lechner writes,

The most extraordinary thing ... is that, although Mahler has every *cantilena* passage very *sostenuto*, never rushing like other conductors, his performances are usually shorter than theirs. (In a Wagner opera, this can sometimes make as much as half an hour's difference!) 'That', Mahler told me, 'is because most conductors don't understand how to distinguish what is unimportant from what is important. They put the same emphasis on everything, instead of passing lightly over what is less significant.'<sup>16</sup>

Mahler also seems to have expected more fluctuation of tempo in his own music than is made explicit in his scores. The published score of his Second Symphony (1897) contains a number of indications of changing mood, some of which suggest a change of tempo. But metronome markings are given only for the beginning of the first movement, in a note to the conductor. Here the basic tempo for the movement is given as ♩ = 84–92, apart from the opening figure on cellos and basses which is to be played ♩ = 144. Mahler's autograph score gives additional metronome markings later in the symphony, of which some add substantially to the indications in the published score, and others actually contradict them. For example at figure 2 of the first movement, where there is no marking in the published score, the autograph gives a rise in tempo to ♩ = 100. The third movement begins in the autograph at ♩ = 52, and rises to ♩ = 58 at bar 14. In the published score this is contradicted by 'sehr gemächlich, nicht eilen' (very leisurely, do not hurry).<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary comment on Mahler's conducting is unusually detailed, which is fortunate because he did not survive into the period of orchestral recordings. Comments on the conducting of Richard Strauss and Elgar, who did record their own works, are much less detailed than comments on Mahler, though, as examples from records will show, both conductors often used much more tempo fluctuation than is indicated in their own or other composers' scores. Strauss's approval of Mahler's tempo fluctuations has already been quoted. Leo Wurmser remembers a passage in *Der Rosenkavalier* where he first heard Strauss in the early 1930s suddenly change tempo (Act III, at the climax after the end of the trio, 4/4 D flat major):

Here Strauss, who had considerably broadened the end of the trio according to the metronome marks, suddenly dashed ahead in a big *stringendo* from the second bar

onwards; then he remained in the quicker tempo, and slowed down again with the diminuendo, so as to be back in the broad tempo when the tonic is regained and the oboe starts its solo phrase. He invariably did this, although there is no indication of it in the score; yet I have never heard anyone else do it, not even Clemens Krauss.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Wurmser remembers rehearsals for the first performance of *Arabella*, in which Krauss had inserted many flexibilities of tempo for dramatic effect. When Strauss took over the rehearsals he removed most of these additions, often commenting 'Simply. In time.'<sup>19</sup>

Elgar is reported to have complained about performances of his music: 'Beethoven and Brahms ... wrote practically nothing but *allegro* and *andante*, and there seems to be no difficulty. I've done all I can to help players, but my efforts appear only to confuse them.'<sup>20</sup> The principal source of his dissatisfaction seems to have been inflexibility of tempo, judging from the following comment: 'I only know that my things are performed – when they go as *I* like – elastically and mystically people grumble – when they are conducted squarely and sound like a wooden box these people are pleased to say it's better.'<sup>21</sup> But Elgar's comments about performance are contradictory. Ernest Newman remembers, 'More than once he protested to me that all his music required was to be left alone to say what it had to say in its own way: the expression was *in* the music, and it was not only unnecessary but harmful for the conductor to add to it an expression of his own.'<sup>22</sup> Without recordings it would be difficult to know what to make of these contradictions. Elgar's scores, though full of detailed expression marks, contain few specific indications of tempo changes, and it is only when we turn to his own performances that we discover the full extent of his tempo flexibility.

The scores of Sibelius's symphonies do not contain metronome markings, but Sibelius's own metronome indications were published in a Finnish journal during World War II.<sup>23</sup> They reveal the full extent of tempo changes which Sibelius had in mind, but only partly indicated in the scores. Notable among these are gradual accelerandos in the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. In the first movement of the Fifth Symphony (1915, rev. 1916, 1919), four tempo indications are printed in the score between pages 30 and 66 (the end of the movement), beginning with the instruction, '*Allegro moderato (ma poco a poco stretto)*' (see table 1). What is not clear from the score is how long the instruction '*poco a poco stretto*' is to be applied. Is it to extend only over a few pages, with the subsequent instructions causing sudden increases in tempo later on, or does it apply to the whole of the rest of the movement, with the subsequent instructions simply marking stages in the accelerando? Sibelius's metronome markings show that he intends a continuous acceleration throughout, and he asks for a gradual change between each of the tempos. At the time the score was published, Sibelius did not regard it as necessary to indicate this accelerando in detail. The instruction '*poco a poco stretto*', with occasional reminders later, was clear enough to any conductor brought up in



Table 1. Sibelius, *Symphony No. 5, first movement*

Cue	Indication in score	Metronome marking
p. 30 (5th bar of N)	allegro moderato ( <i>ma poco a poco stretto</i> )	$\text{♩} = 80$
p. 39 (D)		$\text{♩} = 96$
p. 49 (K)	vivace molto	$\text{♩} = 104$
p. 52 (M)		$\text{♩} = 112$
p. 54 (N)		$\text{♩} = 126$
p. 60 (5th bar of Q)	presto	$\text{♩} = 138$
p. 64 (16 bars before S)	più presto	—

the performance practice of the time. What is striking to a late twentieth-century musician is the extent of the accelerando.  $\text{♩} = 138$  is extremely fast for the final Presto by modern standards. (Sibelius gives no marking for the *più presto* on p. 64, which he presumably intends to be even faster.) Even Sibelius's collaborator Kajanus, in his 1932 recording, adopts a more moderate pace for the final section. The Seventh Symphony (1924) contains similar examples where a gradual accelerando is intended by Sibelius, but not indicated unambiguously in the score. Recordings of these two symphonies, and Sibelius's markings in No. 7, are discussed later in this chapter.

After the first performance of *The Planets* in 1918, Holst wrote to the conductor Adrian Boult about 'Mars': 'You made it wonderfully clear – in fact *everything* came out clearly that wonderful morning. Now could you make more row? And work up more sense of climax? Perhaps hurry certain bits?'<sup>24</sup>

Marguerite Long reports that one of Fauré's favourite maxims, which he repeated often, was 'Nuance is the thing ... not a change of movement.'<sup>25</sup> However, one of the words which she uses most frequently when trying to convey Fauré's requirements is 'suppleness'. Writing on the metronome she says, 'There should be sufficient suppleness in the fluctuation of the phrasing, a thing which wavers, that it is impossible to advise inexorable rigidity throughout a piece by marking the time ...'<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, in her notes on the fourth Nocturne, Long writes: 'Fauré was very sparing with the expression "appassionato" so as not to give it its full range. One should play here [bar 52] "full steam ahead" but not brutally.'<sup>27</sup> About the Ballade, bar 94, she writes, 'do not trust the introduction of the marking "un poco più mosso", since the music here should correspond with the passage which precedes it'.<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to know how much faith to put in such comments, since it is impossible to separate Fauré's own views from those of Long herself. She does clearly suggest, however, that Fauré allowed more 'interpretation' of his music than Debussy or Ravel. Long quotes Ravel as saying 'I do not ask for my music