

“UND LASS’ DIE UHREN ALLE, ALLE STEHN”

LISTENING TO LATE ROMANTIC MUSIC IN MONAURAL SOUND: AN APOLOGY

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On 26 July 1960, Herbert von Karajan inaugurated the Großes Festspielhaus by conducting *Der Rosenkavalier*, starring Lisa Della Casa’s unapproachable Marschallin. The performance was of such excellent standards that it is not an exaggeration to claim that it forged an unbreakable bond between Strauss’s masterpiece and the new venue – that *Der Rosenkavalier* served as “Bühnenweihfestspiel” for the Großes Festspielhaus, as *Parsifal* did for Bayreuth.¹ The evening was recorded by the Österreichischen Rundfunk, in monaural sound, and subsequently published in 1999 by Deutsche Grammophon, the label most closely associated with Karajan. According to Gottfried Kraus, this production of *Der Rosenkavalier* “was the first time that Karajan had exploited the mass media in marketing a work”,² which indicates that he deemed the occasion an especially important one. By 1960, Deutsche Grammophon had integrated the red-labeled “STEREO” into their golden cartouche. Why, then, did Karajan not propose to the label’s executive committee to send their engineers and equipment to Salzburg and produce a state-of-the-art, high-fidelity stereo recording of such a momentous event? Surely, at the start of the decade in which the dual-channel format would become fixed as the standard-bearer of sonic fidelity, this would have been a *coup d’éclat* with long-lasting commercial and artistic effects. It is probable that live recording and high-fidelity appeared to be incompatible in the early days of stereo, and that Deutsche Grammophon preferred to leave the recording of live concerts to the radio.

As it stands in its monaural sound, this “*Rosenkavalier* for the ages” remains a favorite of music lovers and critics.³ One reason is simply the quality of the music-making, as noted by Kraus:

Between them, [the] outstanding Viennese cast and the Vienna Philharmonic under Karajan not only provided a festive beginning to a brilliant

1 This provocative connection was suggested by Matthew Werley.

2 Gottfried Kraus, “Karajan’s 1960 *Rosenkavalier*”, in: Herbert von Karajan, *Richard Strauss: Der Rosenkavalier* (Deutsche Grammophon, CD 453 200 2, 1999), 13.

3 See Jean-Charles Hoffelé and Piotr Kaminsky, *Les indispensables du disque compact classique* (Paris: Fayard 1994), 1560–561.

new chapter in the history of the Salzburg Festival, they also left a record of the event in the form of a live recording that no studio recording can hope to match[.]⁴

But could it be that part of this recording's enduring appeal comes precisely from its monaural sound – that what may seem at first a regrettable defect or a missed opportunity is in fact one of its main assets?

Initiation

Near the town I grew up in, there once was a small shop called Piano Centre Genand. Monsieur Genand sold and repaired pianos, while Madame Genand sold Compact Discs. The storefront presented Mme Genand's colours straightforwardly: big promotional posters of RCA albums by Toscanini conducting Verdi and Wagner. Inside the shop were busts of these two composers and countless floor-to-ceiling piles of discs growing up like a jungle around numerous pianos. Patrons could sit at a desk and listen to potential purchases on headphones. To the classical music lover, this was the Library of Alexandria. I took a habit of going there several times a week, looking for recent recordings of recent works. Soon Mme Genand started making suggestions, proposing recordings of late Romantic works conducted by Arturo Toscanini, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Hans Knappertsbusch, Clemens Krauss, Karl Böhm, or Rudolf Kempe. Most of the time these were transfers of old mono discs, sometimes even bootlegs of live performances in which entire chunks of music would fall in pitch for a few seconds as if the roof were collapsing.⁵ I would ask: "How can you listen to this? It sounds *awful*!" And she would reply: "But listen to the *singing* ..."

Mme Genand was especially fond of Richard Strauss. After she introduced me to his music, I sought to buy spectacular digital recordings in stereo hi-fi, such as the 1981 *Alpensinfonie* conducted by Herbert von Karajan. She would direct me instead either to live recordings (usually in mono), or to pre-World War II recordings. In both cases the recorded sound was unappealing when compared to what I was used listening to. It seemed especially counter-intuitive to listen to Strauss, whose compositions are characterized by their rarely matched orchestral inventiveness, on records plagued by all sorts of undesirable noises and in which considerable amounts of musical information are missing.

It was perhaps not a coincidence that Strauss, the last great composer in the Romantic tradition, died precisely at the time when recording technology was making enormous advances, soon becoming capable of capturing the widest dynamics and the subtlest sonic shades, and that Karajan, one of the prominent conductors of Strauss's music, happened

4 Kraus, "Karajan's 1960 *Rosenkavalier*" (1999), 14.

5 As in Frida Leider's Immolation Scene from Furtwängler's 1938 Covent Garden *Götterdämmerung*.



Figure 1: Electro-acoustic soundroom of the Gro8es Festspielhaus with mixing board and reel-to-reel tape recorder (Source: *Das neue Salzburger Festspielhaus: Zur Er6ffnung am 26. Juli 1960*, Salzburg: Residenz Verlag 1960)

to be deeply interested in recording technology.⁶ Strauss, Karajan, and hi-fi stereo are a match made in heaven. When assessing the peculiar acoustics of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, Strauss himself unambiguously expressed his preference for concert halls giving primacy to the orchestra:

6 From early experimental stereo recorded on tape (the 1944 Finale of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony), to LPs, to CDs; from analog to digital; from VHS to LaserDiscs, Karajan enthusiastically participated in every new step of technological development.

Admittedly voice and word are used to better effect in the festival theater than in a theater with a visible, and, frequently, a raised orchestra. But many of the inexhaustible riches of the score are lost at Bayreuth [...] And in which, after all, is a civilised audience more interested: in the opera and the singers? Or in the orchestra? I think the latter.⁷

Why, then, bother listening to old recordings, which seemed to betray the very spirit and purpose of Strauss's music? Mme Genand's answer was, once again, the singing, along with the quality of the conducting, which she felt to be at once more involved and more relaxed in early recordings and in live productions. To Karajan's impeccably recorded 1956 *Rosenkavalier* with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf,⁸ she preferred the 1960 live from Salzburg. And she could not live without the 1933 abridged recording with Lotte Lehmann, Elisabeth Schumann, and Maria Olszewska.

By means of Mme Genand's passionate insistence, I became enamored with the sound of old mono recordings, and with the free way of making music they enclose. She taught me to listen through the veil of surface noise, and to put modern prejudices about musical expressivity aside. The merits of studio-processed high-fidelity stereo are obvious to the ear: it is the ideal technology to reproduce complex orchestral music. When serving the conducting of Karajan and the music of Strauss, it produced some of the most impressive sonic landscapes of the twentieth century. But many listeners keep returning to old, scratchy mono recordings, and to live performances recorded in monaural sound. In both of these, the beguiling orchestral lushness characteristic of Strauss and of Karajan is greatly reduced. What, then, constitutes the irresistible allure of old and/or live mono records when listening to late Romantic orchestral and operatic music?

History

Robert Philip has shown how carefully edited and meticulously engineered recordings have tended to shape performance practice over the twentieth century:

The most obvious effect of getting used to hearing one's own recordings, as professional musicians do today, is to become highly self-critical about details. Any tiny blemish or inaccuracy takes on hideously exaggerated proportions. Making a recording becomes a process of detailed self-examination which would have been impossible a century ago. Seeking after

7 Richard Strauss, *Recollections and Reflections*, translated by L. J. Lawrence (London: Boosey & Hawkes 1953), 70.

8 Recorded and issued in mono. A stereo test version was done simultaneously and served for the 2017 Warner Classics reissue.

precision and clarity becomes a habit, so that, in the concert hall too, musicians aim for technical perfection – often, it seems, above anything else.⁹

The phenomenon described by Philip is conveniently designated by Mark Katz as the “phonograph effect”.¹⁰ Its main consequence is the progressive abandonment, roughly from the 1940s onwards, of an unfettered approach to vibrato, portamento, and rubato inherited from the 19th century.¹¹

Although records initiated the process by which musicians gradually abandoned expressive techniques that later appeared as mannerisms, such sonic documents from the first half of the 20th century serve as witnesses to how musicians of the long 19th century performed – an invaluable advantage denied to Baroque musicians in quest of “authentic” interpretations. We can listen to how Strauss conducted his own works, and to conductors who collaborated closely with Strauss, as well as to singers Strauss had in mind when writing a role, or that he personally coached, rehearsed and conducted.¹²

Sound

Although it might seem paradoxical at first, old mono recordings, when well engineered, compete with stereo precisely where we would expect them to be lacking: sonically. Mono does not mean bad sound, just as stereo does not mean good sound. It is a difference not in quality but in kind, and perhaps in intention. Writing in 1959, W. S. Barrell, who partook in the recordings made by Columbia in Bayreuth in 1927, reminisced:

It is interesting to compare the recording technique of those early days with that of today. We used only one microphone and had no tone controls of any

9 Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004), 25. See also Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992). Theodor Adorno (“On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening”, in: *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt [New York: Continuum 1985], 270–299; here 284) made similar observations as early as 1938 in reference to Toscanini – curiously, given the almost supernatural intensity and liveliness of the latter’s conducting: “Perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification. It presents it as already complete from the very first note. The performance sounds like its own phonograph record”.

10 Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 2004), 1–7. Katz discusses many other forms of “phonograph effects”, such as the “feedback loop”, when listeners expect performers to reproduce exactly, in concert, their own studio recording of a piece. Philip and Katz’s books are discussed in Alex Ross, “The Record Effect”, *The New Yorker* (6 June 2005).

11 See David Breckbill, *The Bayreuth Singing Style Around 1900* (Ph.D. Diss, University of California, Berkeley 1991); Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Portamento and Musical Meaning”, *Journal of Musicological Research*, 25/3–4 (2006), 233–61. The same phenomenon is observable when comparing old and recent jazz records.

12 The Hermann May archives, issued as a series of CD box-sets in 1994 by Koch Schwann under the title “Edition Wiener Staatsoper Live”, feature numerous such excerpts (see in particular volumes 1, 3, 5, 15, and 21).

kind. Alterations in balance, etc., could be made only by changing the orchestral seating or the positioning of the single microphone. Today a battery of microphones with individual bass and treble controls together with other electrical aids are on tap: one often feels that much of the art of recording has been replaced by the “knob” and screwdriver. [...] The recordings which we obtained, especially the *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan* excerpts, were, from a technical point of view, outstandingly fine, even by today’s standard.¹³

In these early days sound engineers proceeded in what was essentially a musical fashion: a purely acoustic consideration of how variously disposed musical instruments ended up blending onto a record through a single microphone. Thus the records they produced are often characterized by the naturalness of the orchestral balance and of the instrumental timbres. The sonic interest of early mono recordings of the symphonic and operatic repertoire also comes from the orchestral sound of that era, which had more character and was more varied, because orchestras, as well as individual performers, had not yet been transformed by the phonograph effect.¹⁴

Spontaneity

Mono records are either “old” (roughly pre-1950s), or made at a live performance, or both, while stereo records are more recent, and generally made in the studio. But Duke Ellington’s stereo recording of “Black and Tan Fantasy” dates from 1932,¹⁵ and some of Karajan’s Deutsche Grammophon albums from the 1980s were recorded in exemplary stereo at live performances.¹⁶ Keeping such exceptions in mind, let us consider the following dichotomy: on one side mono/old/live recordings; and on the other stereo/recent/studio recordings. Admittedly this is a generalization, but accepting it we can propose that mono tends to be associated *doubly* with more spontaneous and expressive ways of making music.

Because performers not yet made self-conscious by the phonograph effect were not limited by an illusory quest for perfection, the music making on mono records issued from the 1910s to 1940s is characterized by directness and frankness. Often these performers did not see the record as a significant artifact, and did not behave differently in the studio than onstage,¹⁷ another factor contributing to the heightened spontaneity heard

13 W. S. Barrell, “I Was There – No. 4”, *The Gramophone* (January 1959), 390.

14 The remarkable distinctiveness displayed by various American orchestras in 1920s and 40s recordings of Strauss’s works can be observed in *Legendary Strauss Recordings: Beecham, Koussevitzky, Mengelberg, Stock, Stokowski* (RCA, CD 9026-60929-2, 1992).

15 Whether the discs were intended to be stereo or to offer two alternative mono perspectives on the sound is a debated question. See John McDonough, “1932 Duke Ellington Stereo: Was It Unheard-Of Experiment Or Accident?”, *Chicago Tribune* (30 June 1985).

16 Such as the celebrated Mahler Ninth from the 1982 Berliner Festwochen.

17 Such a casual attitude is evidenced in Francis Planté’s 1928 Columbia recording of Chopin’s Etude op. 10,

on their records. Old mono recordings made in the studio often possess the spontaneity of live recordings, only lacking a degree of involvement with an audience.

From the 1960s onwards, when stereo became the standard, mono recordings were often captures of live concerts made by the radio. On such recordings, music making tends to be more spontaneous than in the studio, and not surprisingly so as by this time the phonograph effect was influencing virtually every performer, and also because conditions in the studio (though more comfortable than in earlier days) were increasingly sanitized and regimented.

Artificiality

With the enhanced precision of hi-fi stereo recorded sound comes also the facilitated ability to edit the music. This asks the question of authenticity. Studio/stereo recordings are products meant to be enjoyed in the comfort of one's home, with no interference of other sounds: singers moving around the stage, musician's chairs creaking, audience members coughing, disc surface noise or tape hiss. The absence of any extraneous noise is in itself a sure indicator of the artificiality of the product, and we probably perceive it as unnatural in the depths of our unconscious.¹⁸ Highly edited studio artifacts are meant to be consumed as products. To borrow from Marxist terminology, they are the result of a commodification of music, and indeed they do have a tendency to turn into a fetish: some *mélomanes* seem more interested in listening to their speakers than to the music that comes out of them, or in how well the music was recorded rather than in how well it was performed.¹⁹ Mono recordings convey an opposite meaning to the listener. We tend to trust what we hear. Cuts could not be made in old studio recordings (although from the mid-1940s magnetic tape already allowed for splices, these probably remained a rare occurrence until the 1950s), and errors could not yet be edited out by the magic of multi-

no. 7 in C. Planté strikes a few wrong notes in the final chord, after which he is heard saying: “*Merde!*”

18 Moses Asch, who recorded many important blues, folk and jazz musicians in the 1940s and 1950s, refused the new stereo technology because “it lied about the location of the performers”. He preferred mono because “he favored an approach that would allow the entire performance to be recorded through one microphone and rely on the musicianship of the performers to ensure that the sound was balanced”. See “Legacy Honorees”, unsigned, website of the Smithsonian Institution: <https://folklife.si.edu/legacy-honorees/moses-asch/smithsonian> (accessed 15 September 2021).

19 Adorno (“On the Fetish-Character in Music” [New York 1985], 277) considered an audience’s preference for a superlative instrument to be a form of musical fetishism: “One promptly goes into raptures at the well-announced sound of a Stradivarius or Amati, which only the ear of a specialist can tell from that of a good modern violin, forgetting in the process to listen to the composition and the execution”. In my view, Adorno is confusing the fetish with the sacred (arguably its exact opposite). A great musician needs a great instrument, just as King Arthur needs Excalibur. The incomparable craft that made the instrument or weapon is the equivalent of the craft of the outstanding musician or knight. Audience members are keen to participate in an event uniting the craft of Guarneri del Gesù to that of Jascha Heifetz: they realize the transcendental potential of such an encounter. A hi-fi set up, on the contrary, is no instrument: if it is itself the result of the craft of its makers, to be operated it does not require any craft other than the turning of knobs.

track recording.²⁰ If mono is not more realistic than stereo from a sonic perspective, it is arguably more realistic from an interpretative one: what we hear is what was performed.

The point just made is also true for later live recordings: by and large, what we hear is what was performed.²¹ In the case of Karajan the distinction between studio/stereo and live/mono recordings is especially pregnant.²² As is well-known, he managed every detail of his production and of his self-image. Because of this control, both records and image are often experienced as artificial constructions. While Karajan was alive, very few, if any, bootleg recordings were available, so that his dominion over his own image was near-complete. Now we have access to many such documents,²³ and if one accepts to sacrifice the characteristic sonic splendor and comfort offered by the Deutsche Grammophon albums, one gains access to a different Karajan: a conductor intensely involved in the moment, capable of generating incredibly powerful musical momentum without the help of the potentiometer.²⁴

Awareness of Karajan's capabilities, as disclosed in live recordings, informs (in return) how we listen to his studio recordings. In his 1984 digital "remake" of the Prelude to Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*,²⁵ the crescendo to the climax seems impossible. We are tempted to assume that it was artificially boosted. By listening closely to the brass, however, we perceive that they are blowing harder and harder, their timbre becoming increasingly metallic and harsh. At the climax itself, the collective tone of the brass is on the verge of breaking, which, for musicians of this level, is a sure sign that they have reached the very extremes of their lung capacity, at the risk of losing control of their emission. The intensity of the climax obtained by Karajan is real.

20 There are examples of early multitrack recordings, such as Sidney Bechet's 1941 "The Sheikh of Araby", but these were by far not the rule. See John Corbett, "Playing with Themselves", *Chicago Reader* (2 February 1995).

21 Although recent live recordings often combine several evenings of performance, older ones are usually the direct testimony of a single evening of music.

22 A view shared by Gottfried Kraus ("Karajan's 1960 *Rosenkavalier*" [Hamburg 1999], 14): "Although Karajan is generally remembered as a passionate perfectionist who preferred to mould every musical nuance in the studio, it is no less true of him than it is of so many other artists: the vitality and spontaneity of the live recording create a far more powerful impression than any studio recording".

23 To mention a few personal favourites: the 23.07.1952 Bayreuth *Tristan*, the 28.01.1978 Berlin Beethoven 7th, the 12.08.1951 Bayreuth *Walküre Act III*, the 30.05.1969 Moscow *Heldenleben*, the 28.05.1969 Moscow Beethoven 5th and 6th, the 13.08.1972 Salzburg Schumann 4th, the 31.07.1962 Salzburg *Trovatore*, the 11.06.1964 Vienna *Frau Ohne Schatten*, and of course the 26.07.1960 Salzburg *Rosenkavalier*. C.f. John Hunt, *Philharmonic Autocrat: The Discography of Herbert von Karajan* (London: Travis & Emery 2016).

24 Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who played cello under Karajan's baton in the Wiener Symphoniker, was struck by this ability: "Das Spezielle bei Karajan war das Mobilisieren von Reserven. Er hat nie gesagt, dass man mit den Kräften sparen soll, wenn zum Beispiel ein grosses Crescendo war, sondern er hat verlangt, dass man alles gibt und hat es dann verstanden, durch seine Kraft und durch seine Ausstrahlung noch Reserven zu mobilisieren. Das hat natürlich eine enorme Wirkung". In: Monika Mertl, *Nikolaus Harnoncourt: Vom Denken des Herzens: Eine Biographie* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag 2004), 116.

25 Herbert von Karajan, *Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde, Tannhäuser, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, CD 439 022 2, 1984).

Imagination

The main problem with hi-fi stereo paradoxically comes from its main advantage: the sound is too detailed. The listener to old mono recordings has to do a conscious effort to “break the sound barrier” caused by surface noise and to reconstitute musical information that might be missing. Igor Stravinsky, in one of his Harvard addresses, said of focused listeners that they become “the composer’s partner”. He added:

This exceptional participation gives the partner such lively pleasure that it unites him in a certain measure with the mind that conceived and realized the work to which he is listening, giving him the illusion of identifying himself with the creator. That is the meaning of Raphael’s famous adage: to understand is to equal.²⁶

Old mono recordings, by creating more resistance and thus stimulating the imagination, facilitate this rare occurrence of the fully engaged listener. They ask the mind to magnify what the senses provide, inviting it to participate dynamically in the three-step process conjoining performance, recording, and listening. Recent stereo recordings provide more details than one would normally hear in the concert hall, thereby overwhelming the senses and putting the mind in a state of passive receptivity.

Plotinus

The defining characteristic of mono recordings, as indicated by their name, is their “oneness”: they present the music as one sound, a concentration of all the constituent parts into a seamless whole. The fundamental quality of mono, then, is that it *blends*.

In *My Life*, Richard Wagner criticized the habitual sitting plan of orchestras in his time:

Even some great and celebrated orchestras of the present day still retain the custom of dividing the mass of instruments into two halves, the string and the wind instruments, an arrangement that denotes roughness and a lack of understanding of the sound of the orchestra, which ought to blend harmoniously and be well balanced.²⁷

An anecdote relayed by Geoffrey Skelton indicates that Wagner’s concern for the blending of sounds was not limited to their instrumental source in the orchestra, but also to the acoustic properties of the venue in which they are emitted:

26 Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1947), 133–34.

27 Richard Wagner, *My Life* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company 1936), 343.

Arriving late at the Conservatoire to hear Habeneck rehearsing a Beethoven symphony, he was put in a room divided from the main concert hall by a partition stopping short of the ceiling. As he recalled to his friend Felix Dräseke twenty years later, the sound of the orchestra reaching over the partition amazed him: the music, freed of all mechanical side-effects, “came to the ear in a compact and ethereal sort of unity”.²⁸

Wagner was struck not only by the effect of an invisible orchestra on the eye (which helps shifting the listener’s focus from musicians to music), but also by the effect of hearing the orchestra through an interposed screen amalgamating the sounds of the instruments. This experience later contributed to Wagner’s decision to completely hide the orchestra in Bayreuth.²⁹ There, the orchestra is not only sunken under the stage, it is also separated from the audience by a curved wood panel, so that no sound reaches out directly and that all sounds are blended together.³⁰ Wagner wrote music employing close to a hundred musicians performing on a wide variety of instruments, in an infinitely rich combination of melodies, rhythms, and timbres. Yet he wanted this great diversity of sounds to be fused into one.³¹

Melos

The acoustic blending effectuated by the Bayreuth pit and its wooden panels goes hand in hand with Wagner’s advice to conductors to seek the “*melos*” of the music:

I received a good lesson at Paris in 1839, when I heard the orchestra of the Conservatoire rehearse the enigmatical Ninth Symphony. The scales

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- 28 Geoffrey Skelton, “The Idea of Bayreuth”, in: *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), 389–411; here, 390–391. This anecdote, true or not, might have inspired a crucial scene at the end of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The narrator, like Wagner, arrives late at a concert given in the salon of the Duc de Guermantes, and hears Vinteuil’s Septuor through closed doors, experiencing the epiphany that sets in motion his vocation to be a writer, and causing the entire novel to come into existence. It is striking that in Proust’s drafts the music heard by the narrator was Act II and the *Karfreitagszauber* from Act III of *Parsifal*. See Christophe Imperiali, *En quête de Parsifal: Étude sur un mythe littéraire* (Ph.D. Diss., Université de Lausanne and Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne 2008), 555–568.
- 29 Skelton, “The Idea of Bayreuth” (Cambridge 1979), 390. The actual model for Bayreuth (darkened auditorium, raked seating, wood structure, conductor and orchestra out of sight in a deep pit) was the Riga theatre. See also Robert Hartford, *Bayreuth: the Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980), 16–17.
- 30 According to Chris Walton (“Upstairs, downstairs: acoustics and tempi in Wagner’s ‘Traume’ and *Siegfried Idyll*”, *The Musical Times*, 153/1918 [2012], 7–18), Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll* was composed and orchestrated so that its sounds would blend well, not in the reverberant Tribschen staircase in which it was first performed, but when heard, as did the dedicatee Cosima, through the closed doors of the bedroom.
- 31 Albert Lavignac (*The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner and His Festival Theatre in Bayreuth*, trans. Esther Singleton [New York: Dodd, Mead and Co. 1906], 252) writes that at Bayreuth “the whole [orchestral] combination is admirably blended with an incomparable softness, harmoniousness, and fullness”. Lavignac’s original French word for “blended” is “*fondû*”, which means “melted” or “fused”, and is associated to metal casting.

fell from my eyes; I came to understand the value of *correct* execution and the secret of a good performance. The orchestra had learnt to look for Beethoven's *melody* in every bar [...]; and the orchestra *sang* the melody. *This was the secret.*³²

In my understanding, “Beethoven’s melody” – the *melos* of his symphony – does not mean the tune of a given passage;³³ rather, it designates the coming together of all the constituent parts (melody, harmony, rhythm, phrasing, timbre, dynamics, form, etc.) into a single expressive, coherent, meaningful entity: a symphony becoming Gregorian chant.³⁴

Singers

When singers are present, they naturally carry the *melos*: they are the binding element of the music’s texture, its vanishing point. No matter how numerous the orchestral instruments, they all meet in the singer’s voice.³⁵ Old mono recordings or recent live recordings, when the microphone is well placed and a good balance is achieved between singers and orchestra, are better able to gather Wagner’s or Strauss’s complex orchestrations and subdue them to the singer’s authority.

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- 32 Richard Wagner, *On Conducting*, trans. Edward Dannreuther (London: William Reeves, 1897), 15. Dannreuther adds to the text his own definition of *melos*: a “melody in all its aspects”. On the next page, concerning a passage of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Wagner indicates what we can take to be some of these aspects: “movement (*Bewegung*) and sustained tone (*gehaltenen Ton*), with a definite degree of power (*Gesetz der Dynamik*)”. It is telling that the two experiences – the one about a screen’s blending powers and the one about the *melos* – are remembered by Wagner as having occurred in the same place (the Paris Conservatoire) and time (1839). It might even have been the very same rehearsal.
- 33 See discussion of Wagner’s *melos* in Chris Walton, *Richard Wagner’s Essays On Conducting: A New Translation with Critical Commentary* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press 2021), 229–38. Although he provides a detailed account of how the term has been used since Wagner introduced it, Walton doubts that it designates anything more than melody: “It seems that everyone finds it more attractive to say that a conductor has to draw out the *melos*, rather than just saying he lets us hear the tune” (233).
- 34 Wagner realises precisely this effect in the Prelude to Act I of *Parsifal*. Strauss (*Recollections*, 55) designates three “clearly defined groups of expression” in *Parsifal*. The passages associated with the main thematic materials of the Prelude he describes in these terms: “The liturgy: [...] to be sung without sentimental *ritardandi* with Sistine ‘objectivity’: the purely ecclesial element”. Wagner’s efforts (*melos*, Bayreuth’s acoustic, *Parsifal* orchestration) to make his music coalesce are indeed of a religious nature, a musical equivalent of the Christian Communion. Not surprisingly, this aspect was caricatured by Friedrich Nietzsche (*Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici [New York: Gordon Press 1974], 61): “In Bayreuth people are only upright in the mass; the individual lies, he even lies to himself. [...] In the theatre one becomes mob, herd, woman, Pharisee, electing cattle, patron, idiot – Wagnerite: there, the most personal conscience is bound to submit to the levelling charm of the great multitude, there the neighbour rules, there one *becomes* a neighbour”.
- 35 There seems to be a major difference in approach between Strauss and Wagner in this regard. Walton (*Richard Wagner’s Essays On Conducting*, 235) mentions Hans Swarowsky’s claim that Strauss admired Verdi because he composed starting from the vocal line, whereas Strauss himself started from the orchestra and added the vocal line afterwards. According to Swarowsky, when Strauss saw a sketch for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, he understood that Wagner proceeded like Verdi, writing the singer’s melody first.

Secret

As we have seen, for Wagner “the secret of a good performance” is for the orchestra to “sing the melody”. On 22 May 1872, Wagner pointed to another, connected enigma in a message buried with the foundation stone of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus:

A secret here I deep have lain,
for centuries there may it rest:
while e’er the stone shall this contain,
its meaning may the world attest!³⁶

Mono and stereo delineate two distinct aesthetics of sound reproduction. What if this dichotomy pre-existed the introduction of recording technology, applying not only to sound reproduction, but to sound emission and concert hall as well? Perhaps the “secret” of Wagner’s message designates the unique – and to this day not replicated in any other theatre – acoustic properties of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. There, the efficiency of the sonic blending is such that not only is it difficult to tell instruments apart, or to hear distinctively which instruments are being used in unison with others, but – as many attendees have witnessed³⁷ – to tell when the sound begins and where it comes from. The effect is enhanced in *Parsifal*, which Wagner orchestrated with Bayreuth’s acoustic specificities in mind.

Practically, in Bayreuth we hear the music *in mono* – and conversely, when we listen to mono recordings, the music undergoes an additional, final step in the blending process. With mono we experience something closer to what Wagner intended for his music. *Melos*, blending acoustics, convergence of the orchestra into the singer’s voice, *Parsifal* orchestration, and mono recorded sound, all contribute to the same unifying principle. If this is true, then the combination of these parameters culminates in Karl Muck’s August 1927 mono recording of *Parsifal*, made in Bayreuth for Columbia.³⁸

Unanimity

Today’s orchestras often sound like a collection of excellent soloists playing chamber music. As noted by Robert Philip,

36 “Hier schließ’ ich ein Geheimnis ein, da ruh’ es viele hundert Jahr’: so lange es verwahrt der Stein, macht es der Welt sich offenbar!” See Hartford, *Bayreuth: the Early Years* (Cambridge 1980), 26. I owe this connection to Matthew Werley.

37 See Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994), 8.

38 Although it was recorded onstage and not in the pit. See W. S. Barrell quote above.

Modern performances are often exactly together, very well disciplined, and in tune, but often lack the corporate spirit of messier performances of the past. Even Toscanini, famous in his day as a stickler for precisions, was far more concerned with spirit than with literal accuracy. Most of his recordings with the NBC Symphony Orchestra have moments which are looser in ensemble than what one hears from the leading orchestras of today. But the overwhelming impression is that everyone knows exactly what they are doing, and why. His recorded rehearsals make it clear that his driving force was passion: he spent far more of his time trying to get the orchestra to “sing” than to play accurately. Nowadays everything is exactly together, but sometimes one wonders what the point is. It is the difference between unanimity of purpose and unanimity of execution.³⁹

If, in earlier days, orchestras were “looser in ensemble”, the unanimity of purpose they displayed was corroborated by the concentrating effect of mono recordings. Today, orchestras play “exactly together”, but stereo tends to betray this unanimity of execution by separating their sound into each of its individual components. The “difference between unanimity of purpose and unanimity of execution” corresponds to the difference between mono and stereo.

Morality

In *Communism and Man*, Catholic apologist F. J. Sheed observed that although Karl Marx’s view of progress culminating in a classless society in which no one would oppress anyone was laudable, his philosophy rested on a fundamental omission. According to Sheed, Marx never asked the two most important questions a thinker interested in mankind’s destiny should ask: “What is man?” And: “What is good, or right, for man?”⁴⁰

In the same manner, we could ask: “What is music?” And: “What is good, or right, for music?” We could eschew these questions, for example by stating, as has been done, that music is ineffable, that it is useless to ask an eminently moral question in the case of so evanescent a thing.⁴¹ Or one could answer from a Catholic perspective: as men, what we have been endowed with by our Creator is a single, indivisible, unique and immortal soul, the aim of

39 Philip, *Performing Music* (New Haven, 2004), 87.

40 F. J. Sheed, *Communism and Man* (London: Sheed & Ward 1938), especially “Part II: Man” (93–127). Sheed’s father was “a true believer in Karl Marx” who “turned every meal into a monologue on Communism” (F. J. Sheed, *The Church and I* [London: The Catholic Book Club 1976], 193). The critique of Marx proposed by Sheed rests on the conviction that God created man. The opposite view – that man created God – finds an original presentation in George R. Stewart, *Man: An Autobiography* (London: Cassell and Company 1948).

41 But did not Schumann affirm in his *Advice To Young Musicians* (trans. Henry Hugo Pierson [Leipsic [sic] and New York: J. Schuberth & co, no date], 32): “The laws of morals are those of art” (Die Gesetze der Moral sind auch die der Kunst)?

which is to be reunited with God in the Beatific Vision, while conserving its individuality. The act of music making, proper to humans, realizes “in small” precisely such a trajectory: the rejoining of distinct voices into a harmonious whole, a whole that does not drown out the uniqueness of each of its constituting parts.⁴² And indeed, when music is being made at a high level, and we partake in it as performers or as listeners, many of us experience a forgetfulness of space and time, which is perhaps a glimpse of what a life unconstrained by space and time – the Beatific Vision – might be like.⁴³ This is perhaps why many musicians insist that they are vessels conveying something from above and beyond the material world, as claimed by the great fado singer Amalia Rodrigues: “My voice is due to God. I don’t sing fado, it sings me”.⁴⁴

If one accepts this definition of music, then the general answer to the second question: “What is good for music?” could be: anything that facilitates the coming together of the individual parts. When it comes to recording technology, this process is best achieved by mono recordings.

Spirits

The togetherness created by mono has an emotional dimension: it corresponds to the feelings of empathy we have for one another. It creates a warmth that transfers especially strongly to singers, and that in turn singers envelop listeners with. In this regard, comparing mono and stereo is like comparing candle light with electric bulbs. This human warmth, and mono’s capacity to concentrate the recorded sound, create a sense of heightened presence from the singers. Although this is highly subjective, I have always found that the personality of the great musicians on the older recordings comes across more vividly. With hi-fi stereo recordings, the voice is rendered more precisely, but I never get a sense of an actual presence – with old mono recordings (especially when listened to on a gramophone) there can be an eerie feeling that the singer’s spirit has been conjured into the room.⁴⁵

42 Albert Lavignac’s (*The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner* [New York: Dodd, Mead & Co 1906], 252) description of Wagner’s music is telling in this regard: “Each symphonic voice sings an independent part, having its individual meaning, replying to the others, and always appropriate to the nature and tone of the interpreting instrument, without any traces of the idiotic set forms of ordinary accompaniment, and without padding of any kind. Formerly people said that in Wagner there was no melody; I think I am more in the right in saying that there are no accompaniments, but only melodies laid one upon the other.”

43 “Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit.”

44 Quoted in *The Guardian* (7 October 1999).

45 This impression may also stem from the effort that listening through the surface noise of old mono recordings requires from the imagination. In Richard Matheson’s *Bid Time Return* (New York: Viking Press 1975), the protagonist, who wishes to travel back in time to meet an actress he has fallen in love with by looking at an old photograph, manages to do so by intense and repeated listenings to Bruno Walter’s Columbia (stereo) recording of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony.

At the end of *Der Zauberberg*, it is not incidental that, when Hans Castorp takes part in a spiritualistic séance in which the guests and the medium try and contact his recently deceased cousin Joachim Ziemssen, a record plays a crucial role. Following Dr. Krokowski's instructions, the guests must not focus on the task at hand but rather talk and listen to music played on the gramophone, because only a floating attentiveness is helpful in such a séance. They listen to some light entertainment music. After an hour, Castorp suggests that they play a record of a song from Gounod's *Faust*. When listening to this record earlier in the novel, he had assimilated the singer's voice with the recently departed Ziemssen:

The singer, a character warmly sympathetic to our young man's heart, was called in the opera Valentine; but Hans Castorp named him by another and dearly familiar, sadness-evoking name; whose one-time bearer he had come largely to identify with the operatic character whom the wonder-box was making vocal – though the latter to be sure had a much more beautiful voice, a warm and powerful baritone.⁴⁶

With the help of this new record, and of the gramophone that plays it, the séance soon comes to a climax:

No one spoke. They listened [...] The record went on, came to the middle part, with skipping rhythm, the part about war and danger, gallant, god-fearing, French. After that the finale, in full volume, the orchestrally supported refrain of the beginning. "O Lord of heaven, hear me pray..." [...] The record had run off, with a last accord of horns. But no one stopped the machine. The needle went on scratching in the silence, as the disk whirled round.⁴⁷

Suddenly, in the near-obscurity of the room, Castorp sees his dead cousin Joachim sitting on a chair.⁴⁸

Part of the peculiar experience provided by old mono recordings is similar to Ziemssen's apparition. We are not simply listening to music or to a particular interpretation of a piece, not only to a voice we happen to particularly like or to expressive gestures we are

46 Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1927); Vintage Books edition, 1992, 649.

47 Ibid., 680.

48 In an essay written in 1923, "An Experience in the Occult" (in *Three Essays*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter [New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1929], 219–261), Mann recounted an actual séance in which he skeptically took part. A music-box plays an important role in the proceedings. When, to his own astonishment, a spirit appears, there is silence ("the music is still, we are all still"), but what comes to Mann's mind (245–46) is "the place in *Lohengrin*, in the first act, after Else's prayer, when the chorus begins in unison: 'Seht! Welch seltsam Wunder!' It was just like that".

especially moved by; we are listening first and foremost to a person. Strangely, although the fidelity is lower than with stereo, the sense of presence is higher.

Progress

A distinction should be made when assessing the results of the introduction of new technologies: some are desirable as actual improvements fixing problems with older formats, while some are better thought of as alternative approaches. In cinema the evolution from silent to talkies, as well as the introduction of tracking shots, brought the new art form to its fullness. In music the introduction of electrical recording technology allowed for incomparably better results than was possible with acoustic technology, which had such limitations that it tended to disfigure the works it recorded (for example by needing modified orchestrations and faster or shortened performances). But black and white films and mono recordings have their own perfection.

The general tendency, in the West at least, is to think that what is new is better. It is difficult for most artists, and for the industry, to resist spectacular and useful innovations. But advanced technologies can diminish the quality, meaning, and beauty of human life. In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Lebedev considers that trains, the railroad, and what they represent – increased speed of communication – are the Absinth Star of the Apocalypse, the contaminators of the sources of Life.⁴⁹ In H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountain of Madness*, an extra-terrestrial race, the Old Ones, understanding that technological developments that have made them immensely powerful have deprived their lives of meaning and purpose, decide to abandon technology entirely and to revert to their older ways.⁵⁰

Performers today find it difficult to listen to records if they are not in stereo hi-fi. They find the surface noise difficult to bear, and the expressive devices of a former era (vibrato, rubato, portamento) in bad taste. In so doing, they privilege comfort over beauty, and cut themselves off from a rich oral interpretative tradition not conveyed in the written scores. In the 1960s, Cecil Lewis, a Royal Air Corps pilot during World War I, wrote:

The changes men have seen in this half century can hardly be believed. Computers steer the pioneer and punch cards tell the weather. Reliability is on the Altar and Risk is in the Crypt. Loudspeakers read the time-table from the Pulpit and there is a new Creed which begins: "I believe in atomic fission, breaker of Heaven and Earth..."! As for the air, if aeroplanes which, in

⁴⁹ See Apocalypse 8:10-11.

⁵⁰ The question of progress is of course at the heart of *The Magic Mountain*, and is discussed at length in the dialogues between Naphta and Settembrini. See also Ernst Jünger (*The Worker*), Romano Guardini (*Letters from Lake Como*), and Martin Heidegger (*The Question About Technology*).

my youth, trembled under the hand like living things, trembled today, they would be returned to servicing for overhaul. Of course it can't be helped; but what transport aircraft Captain today, hedged around with his safety gadgets and ground controls, does not long to send them all to the Devil, to vault into a cockpit, flip a switch and take off bareheaded into the wind? Perhaps not, perhaps the breed has changed; but I know which I would choose.⁵¹

There is such a thing as a “risk paradox”: when technology allows to do things “better”, although this almost invariably also means “safer”, risks increase along with the increase in possibilities brought about by the technological advances. The result is generally that we end up taking *fewer* risks. A faster car is more dangerous than a slower one: no one would drive around today without a seatbelt and a headrest. Similarly, hi-fi stereo provides a much more detailed image of what performers do, and for this very reason, mistakes or expressive exaggerations are strongly underlined. The risk taken by performers and which might cause a mistake, is higher if the recording is in hi-fi stereo, for the mistake will appear in the foreground. Mono, on the contrary, “protects” performers from such a crude light by blending mistakes and over-expressive gestures into the music. Mono is a kinder medium in which to scrutinize one's own performance, a flattering mirror; it is more human, more natural to the ear. Therefore the phonograph effect is less felt by performers recording in mono than in stereo.

Robert Philip notes about the self-consciousness induced by the phonograph effect: “[It] can be helpful or destructive, but now the genie is out of the bottle it cannot be put back. Once a musician has had the experience of listening to playbacks and adjusting to them, it is not possible to go back to a state of innocence”.⁵² Without trying to sneak their way under the Cherubim's flaming sword, musicians can decide, even today, not to rely on the hi-fi stereo recording process, and choose to record in monaural sound instead. They can also decide to avoid listening back to themselves while recording (for example by leaving it to the producer), and to avoid listening to their own recordings once issued. Coupled with a serious study of the recordings from the 1920s to 1940s, such renunciations can lead to a complete recovery of the freedom displayed by our elders in their music-making.⁵³ To make such a process possible, the first skill to acquire is to learn to listen to old recordings in spite of their imperfections: to accept taking the “risk” of engaging with recordings technologically far inferior to what our modern day can offer. But it is time to shed such tentativeness and perform once again “bareheaded into the wind”: vibrating notes, stealing time, sliding swaggerliciously into melody notes.

51 Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (London: Penguin 1963), Preface to the Second Edition, reprinted in the 2014 Penguin edition, xvii-xviii.

52 Philip, *Performing Music* (New Haven, 2004), 25.

53 Such an attempt is the topic of a recent doctoral thesis by Emlyn W. Stam, *In Search of a Lost Language: Performing in Early-Recorded Style in Viola and String Quartet Repertoires* (Ph.D. Diss., Leiden University 2019).

Veil

If surface noise is a veil that can distract from the music they cover, so is the gloss that high-fidelity studio recordings in stereo put on the music. This latter veil, with its shine and glitter, is perhaps harder to pierce than the former, for it maintains the listener in a state of subjugation, like a Grail Knight who surrendered to the spell of “furchtbar schöne” Kundry. The “stereo veil” is all the more insidious that it makes us believe that it does not exist. It pretends that it is not a veil but an objective rendering of the actual musical reality it reproduces: hence the term “high-fidelity”. Perhaps the greatest advantage of an old mono recording, then, is that it straightforwardly declares: “I am a record”. As I suggested above, unedited mono recordings can be accepted as truthful conveyors of a musical performance. But because of their surface noise, the listener to old mono recordings is never tempted to confuse reality with its mechanical reproduction. When it comes to recorded sound, we should echo Amfortas, and cry: “*Nein! Lasst ihn unenthüllt!*”

Drama

At times, the nature of monaural recorded sound aligns with the dramatic intent in the music. At the beginning of *Elektra*, after the chatter of the maids, there is a striking orchestral gesture that creates great momentum for Elektra’s entrance and first monologue (“Allein! Weh, ganz allein”). This passage is executed with impressive efficiency by Dimitri Mitropoulos in a mono live recording made in Salzburg on 7 August 1957. No stereo high-fidelity recording that I have heard matches this passage in intensity, and in its ability to convey the effect Strauss sought with his orchestration, which is precisely to represent a number of unruly elements coming together into one, sonically and rhythmically.

Conclusion

At the end of *Der Rosenkavalier*, conflicts are resolved as the Marschallin elegantly cedes her place near Octavian – “in Gottes Namen” – to Sophie, in the kind of “banal but non conventional” conclusion that only the greatest artists can achieve.⁵⁴ The critic Karl Heinz Ruppel considered that this had been an utterly convincing moment in the Salzburg performance of 26 July 1960 under Karajan: “The final trio [...] proved the

54 See René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1961), chapter XII.

overwhelming musical high point of the whole evening: *unparalleled was the way in which the three women's radiant voices blended with the orchestral sound*".⁵⁵ Sophie and Octavian are left alone. They sing to each other and over each other, finding it hard to believe that they are finally united:

SOPHIE

Ist ein Traum, kann nicht wirklich sein,
daß wir zwei beieinander sein,
beieinand' für alle Zeit
und Ewigkeit!

OCTAVIAN

Spür' nur Dich, spür' nur dich allein
und daß wir beieinander sein!
Geht all's sonst wie ein Traum dahin
vor meinem Sinn!

In Karajan's 1960 Salzburg live recording, their union is glorified by the monaural sound. The blending properties of mono, its "oneness", symbolize and consolidate acoustically the resolution of the drama, the union of Sophie and Octavian, so eloquently put into words and music by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, and so movingly sung by Sena Jurinac and Hilde Güden. At the beginning of this essay, I wondered why Karajan had not pressured Deutsche Grammophon to produce a high-fidelity stereo recording of this solemn evening of music. But there is no reason to be regretful about it. If this recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* sets a gold standard, it is not in spite of, but by *virtue* of its monaural sound. Dann "lass' die Uhren alle, alle stehn".

55 Quoted in Kraus, "Karajan's 1960 *Rosenkavalier*" (Hamburg 1999), 14–15 (italics mine).