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Which Master's Voice?

'Wagner's music,' said Mark Twain, 'is better than it sounds.' The same could be said of a lot of early piano records. Raoul Pugno playing Chabrier in 1903 still puts most modern pianists to shame. There's no denying, however, that from the beginning, the recording of the piano has posed peculiar and often mysterious challenges. Technology has advanced steadily, Yet the problems persist, albeit in different ways, and the evidence is all around us. As we bask in the digital comfort of the late 20th century, we're still not in a position to be complacent.

The fact is that whatever their imperfections from a purely acoustical point of view, one finds in many of those old recordings a greater feeling of individuality, specifically in terms of tone, than we tend to hear today. Cortot, as captured on disc, produced a strikingly different sound from, say, Rubinstein, Horowitz, Rachmaninov or Gieseking, each of whom had his own very distinct 'tonal' signature. Edwin Fischer's tone, though no less beautiful, was very different from Harold Bauer's. And so it goes. Nor can this be explained away by the fact that they were playing different instruments. For a start, none of them made all his recordings on the same piano, yet the individuality of sound is consistent. As any experienced teacher of pianists can confirm, three different artists, playing consecutively on a single piano, can make it sound like three different instruments, in the space not only of an evening but of a mere half-hour - and all without the services of a tuner or technician.

But while the increasingly widespread impression of tonal uniformity among the pianists of our own time is entirely without foundation, it arises in part from a circumstance in which the record companies have always played a key role. Most music lovers, and many budding pianists, do not live in the major musical centres where the world's greatest pianists can regularly be heard live, and even those who do are more likely to encounter pianists on record or on radio than in the hall. Thus, their formative exposure to a given piece may be based not merely on the artistry and personality of their particular pianistic hero-figures but on a single performance, which can be endlessly repeated, studied and (often unconsciously) imitated. Since few aspiring musicians have a budget that allows for multiple recordings of a single work, a certain standardisation in outlook, and aural perspective, is almost inevitable. Another element in the impression of sameness, where quality of sound is concerned, is to some extent fostered, though not of course with that aim, by the record companies themselves. Wherever a 'house style' prevails, the cause of variety and individuality is correspondingly ill-served, and this applies equally to performance and to the music itself. If the chosen style favours a distant, reverberant acoustic, redolent of a large empty hall, then the spirit of music designed for small rooms, or even for the player alone, is bound to be distorted, particularly when it requires a crystalline clarity of texture, as in most of the Bach fugues originally conceived for the clavichord. But one needn't look beyond the authentic piano repertoire itself. The chosen Nimbus sound, for instance, was well suited to Martin Jones's complete Debussy cycle, and to his style of playing it, but proved a serious liability in the case of his equally distinguished Grainger cycle. His Brahms set falls somewhere in between - Brahms being both contrapuntally minded and sonically impressionistic (particularly in the later works),

while the acoustic in which Marta Deyanova's excellent Mozart sonata cycle is bathed suits neither the music nor her pianistic approach to it.

While pianists can cope with a dry acoustic by a judicious mix of finger legato and pedal-wash, when necessary, there's little if anything they can do to overcome the swamping properties of an over-reverberant acoustic. If Glenn Gould had recorded for Nimbus or the Connoisseur Society rather than Columbia/CBS/Sony, his reputation and influence might have been significantly different, certainly as a Bach player. As it happens, Gould was the first (and thus far the only) pianist to use and mix different recorded perspectives to purely and specifically musical ends, even within the same piece. In his superbly played if eccentrically processed Sibelius recital, he applied what he described as 'acoustical orchestration', recording a single performance in eight different perspectives, some very close, some very distant, and then mixing them in various combinations, loosely based on Sibelius's own orchestral practices in his symphonies and tone poems. But then Gould was a law unto himself, and Columbia seemed prepared to let him roam at will, wherever the spirit took him.

No such liberties seem to have been extended to Columbia's other artists, however, and in the Sixties and early Seventies they seemed to have a house style of their own which achieved the outwardly impossible by making Serkin, Perahia, Graffman and Horowitz sound broadly similar in matters of tone. No better example exists of a recording team's inadvertent 'interpretative' power than the disparity in sound between the records Horowitz made for RCA and Columbia at around the time of his defection from the former to the latter. Nor was he best served in a number of later CD transfers whose principal aim seems to have been the elimination of surface noise - a process that incidentally obscured much of the subtlety and refinement of his playing, and much of his thrilling, percussive brilliance too. A case in point is his legendary 1951 account of his own fabulous transcription of Sousa's *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. It's still fabulous, but that unique edge of excitement has been blunted, to the detriment both of the recording and the listener's pleasure. Sad to say, however, this isn't by any means an isolated case. Indeed, in the first, heady euphoria of the CD age, the elimination of surface noise seems sometimes to have taken precedence over the artistic substance of the recording itself. EMI's CD remastering of Artur Schnabel's complete Beethoven sonata cycle, for example, drenched in the CEDAR noise-reduction process, is demonstrably less faithful to the subtleties of the playing than the original 78s (doubters need only turn to Pearl's revelatory remasterings to be convinced). And there are many other similar instances.

Cleanliness may, as the saying has it, be close to Godliness, but it's only one measure of virtue. In addition to its artistically disproportionate preoccupation with sonic hygiene, there are two respects, in particular, in which the CD age has given aspiring players a significantly distorted picture of pianistic reality. The first is a puritanical (hence fearful) obsession with perfection. Hard though it may be to credit, piano CDs often conceal not merely dozens but hundreds of edits. In some cases, though not many, the number rises to a thousand or more. This isn't to say that there's any shortage of reliably accurate pianists about, but wrong notes in concert are not unknown even to the likes of Pollini, Ashkenazy, Schiff, Barenboim, Perahia and even the late, legendary Sviatoslav Richter, than whom no one had or has a more comprehensive technique. Nor should wrong notes be regarded with the dread they now tend to engender. They may often, indeed, be the result, or the trigger, of genuine, spontaneous, unrepeatable inspiration. There's a lovely story of a studio session in the Thirties at which Schnabel characteristically delivered himself of a truly exalted but technically flawed performance. The producer (actually, I think it may even have been the conductor) suggested, in view of the fluffs, that 'it might be better' if they did another take. 'It might be better,' replied Schnabel, 'but it wouldn't be as good.'

The second major distortion of pianistic reality in the digital age is the tendency in some quarters to bathe the sound in a luxuriant stereo wash which does for the piano what colour filters and soft-focus lenses do for ageing female sex symbols. 'Hi-fi' it may be; high fidelity it isn't. There has never been a pianist in the world capable of drawing from the instrument the surround-sound opulence of stereophonic sunsets yet, to judge from innumerable CDs, such players abound. The result may be a sensual treat for the ear (as it is undoubtedly a spur to pianistic narcissism), but in its cosmetic overkill it's no truer a reflection of the way a piano really sounds than the best recordings of 1929. The fact is that the spatial bloom afforded by stereo is musically far less relevant, if relevant at all, to solo instruments than to orchestras, choirs or the larger chamber ensembles, and should therefore be applied with discretion and to purely musical ends (as it is, superbly, in Mitsuko Uchida's traversal of the Debussy *Études* for Philips and in Angela Hewitt's outstanding account of the Bach Partitas for Hyperion - these being only two examples among many).

One virtue of the noisy old days of the 78 is the fact that they demanded at least a measure of active, participatory, concentrated listening; you had to get through the surface noise to hear the musical essence of the performance at hand. Today, in our obsession with technology and market forces, the tendency, in music as elsewhere, is to lavish at least as much time, care, money and attention on the packaging and presentation of a product as on the substance of the product itself. We have, indeed, reached a point where all too many recordings, to paraphrase Mark Twain on Wagner, sound better than they are.