

**EARLY RECORDINGS OF PIANO PLAYING,
CHANGING OF PERFORMANCE STYLE****ÎNREGISTRĂRI TIMPURIILE ALE INTERPRETĂRII LA PIAN
ȘI SCHIMBĂRILE STILULUI INTERPRETATIV ÎN ACTUALITATE****MARCELL PETŐ,**

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In this article I would like to summarise my experiences with the early recordings of piano playing, share my thoughts about their importance and possibly open the door for the reader of a subject that has earned less attention by performing musicians today and which could, in my opinion, help them open new perspectives of understanding and performing music, and enrich their musicianship. The subject can practically affect the work of performing musicians, but it can be meaningful for everyone working in music.

Keywords: *early recordings, piano art, performance style, historical musical recordings*

Articolul reflectă experiența de lucru a autorului cu înregistrările vechi ale unor interpretări la pian, experiență pe care o împărtășește în speranța focusării atenției muzicienilor asupra importanței acestora, din perspectiva unor noi deschideri spre înțelegerea și interpretarea muzicii, spre îmbogățirea experiențelor de interpretare. Subiectul poate fi util atât muzicienilor-practicieni, cât și tuturor celor interesați de muzică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *înregistrări timpurii, arta de interpretare la pian, stil de interpretare, înregistrări documentate istoric*

The first recordings of classical music that survived and are worth to mention date from no earlier than 1897 [1]. When saying *early recordings*, I refer to those which were made in about the following 50 years so approximately between 1900 and 1950. How do these recordings sound to today's performers and what do they have to do with them? Before answering these questions, I would like to analyse a few problems.

Today the major part of the classical repertoire is available for everyone on recordings by different performers. It is natural for musicians to discover music history through recordings and they are even expected to do so. The use of this possibility has also become a fundamental element in the learning process: during our performance studies we get to know to pieces not only through the score but also with the help of recordings. However, it has not always been like this. Before recordings started to be numerous and easily available — so until not long ago — musicians were supposed to prepare their own interpretation based only on the written music, rarely heard live performances and the tradition: the help of teachers from older generations and written studies about performance practice.

I don't think that this possibility of obvious advantages should take our attention from certain details of the studied music that we should discover ourselves during the learning process. Namely listening to the interpretation of someone else unconsciously and unavoidably influences our own interpretation. It is not necessarily a problem, but as we generally listen to recordings of this era, we get used to certain ways of interpreting which are typical nowadays and which are perhaps also the results of the industrial number of recordings that are being made. Without judging these characteristics, we can say that they can become part of our own interpreting and lay down certain rules for us that we are unconsciously trying to follow. In my opinion it is worth to look at the characteristics of another era and find new perspectives to be a bit independent from what we already know well and to simply enrich our musical mind with something different and "new". Another — perhaps the most important — *raison d'être* of this topic roots in our reproductive performing tradition.

Performing music of preceding times doesn't have a long history, still the differences between the performers of its periods are significant. As we know, European music had been focusing on contemporary works up to the 19th century; musicians had to be familiar with the style of the actual period. The movement of rediscovering former works appeared and became a tradition thanks to Mendelssohn and his generation. In fact, we are continuing this tradition today as we perform pieces from centuries before again and again — at least reproductive performing takes a bigger part of performances than the contemporaries.

The essential problem of our reproductive performing is that regarding the major part of the repertoire we don't have the chance to hear the piece performed by its composer or his contemporaries. Beyond the (apparently) concrete information of the score we can only guess the characteristics and the principles of the performing style of the given era. But why cannot the score be enough for the reconstruction of a piece?

For a long time, musicology had identified music with its written form [2]. However, physically realised, performed music had always existed earlier than its notated version. In many cultures, nowadays music still only exists while it is being performed, and it is never notated. The written representation of the notes in the score (pitch, approximate — drastically simplified — duration and dynamics) is far not equal to the piece. Notating in the score can thus only serve the goal to preserve the main characteristics of a piece and to give guidelines for its performance — as most of the characteristics of a musical phenomenon cannot be precisely notated in our musical notation. And even if they could be, it wouldn't be possible to realise all of them, nor by the most suitable performer. The practically unnotatable details are very important though, what is more, the experience of the listener depends mostly on these. Therefore, it is necessary to have a performer who is — with sufficient knowledge, interpreting the score correctly, by the help of different tools — able to transmit the content of the piece. However, different performers have different approach to the same work, and they use — with certain similarities — different tools for expressing the musical content. Not to say that because of the complexity of the process, beyond a certain level of planning, no performer is able to repeat the exact same performance. Consequently, different performances of the same piece are going to be different; we could even say that every time it is a new piece that we can hear. This diversity of the renewal of compositions means the sense of reproductive performing.

Now we can see that the role of the performer is essential in making music, in bringing the notated music to life. The tools used by a performer in order to transmit the content of a piece, and the ways of using them mean the *performance style* that characterizes the performer; the way how the performer diverges from the basic acoustic dimensions in order to emphasize the importance of musical components and to realise the intentions of the composer [3]. A performance style can characterize a single performer or a group (e.g. the performers of a nation or a culture) and the performers of a generation or an era.

Just like its role in music making, performance style is very complex and is a result of various things. As performers (just like any other humans) we are part of a process of a continuous interaction between our individuum and our *milieu*. Milieu means everything that has ever surrounded us: things from our everyday life as well as our musical experiences. The era we were born and grew up in, our home, environment, nationality, mother tongue etc. — all these things took part in forming our personality and our performing style. All the sources from which we built up our musical knowledge are also part of our milieu; our professors of music and everything that we learned from them, performances (and recordings) that we heard. We can also mention our experiences in other forms of art as well, and numerous other things — the list is long. Important is that — beyond the evident difference of each individuum — everyone has experienced a different milieu and a different interaction between milieu and individuum. The contrast in milieu, and therefore in performance style as well, can be even more impressive between performers of different eras — such as in the case of the early recordings.

The major part of the performers of the early recordings were born in the 19th century and the rest of them also at least before the 1st World War. This fact means already a lot when we talk about the milieu of a performer. It is enough to think about the historical events of the 20th century to see that the difference is huge. But we cannot forget about the technical development during this time either and about the way our everyday life has changed. Let's analyse some of these aspects, mostly those which can have the most influence on a musician!

“Life has been speeded up” — we have been saying already since a few decades and perhaps the diagnosis has more and more truth nowadays. E.g. it is already hard to imagine our life without internet, yet it was not so long when it became an essential part of it. “Time is money” — we say, and we run, because everyone does, and we feel we need to compete with the others in more and more things. We became used to get quickly what we want so maybe we also became less patient with things that we cannot speed up with technology. The concept of time must have been very different 100–150 years ago. I am not saying that in those times we didn't have to be efficient in work and try to save time, but I have the impression that people could take more time for things they chose to be important for them. I suppose that the priorities were different too, but for example today we can admire the architecture or the decorative art of this era: the objects that people surrounded themselves with in their everyday life — because they invested more time and energy in making them. I suppose that their relation with time was different from ours. Time plays an essential role in music making, and even if it is hard to prove it in practice, I believe that this relation had unconsciously made its influence on the performer and his/her music.

It would be very interesting to compare the general level of the noise pollution of this era and today. We could also draw a parallel between this and the growing of the cities and see how these changes influenced the everyday life of citizens. How much they were disturbed by noises, how many strangers they met every day, how far they had to travel and how, how far they were from nature and how much chance they had to enjoy it etc. Robert Schumann advises lots of walks to musicians [4]. Already this composer who lived in the first half of the 19th century found cities too disturbing and considered it very important to spend as much time as possible in nature (walking). I think this is surprising if we compare cities of his time with those today. It would be probably shocking for him (and his contemporaries) to experience today's citizen life.

We could continue the list of changes in everyday life during the last 100–150 years but let's focus on the musical aspects! In the 19th century listening to music was only possible in live performances so there was no chance to do it every day and everywhere and not for everyone. People could go to concerts sometimes or play at home for each other if they had instruments and could play them (in the case of musicians this possibility is evident). In both ways listening to music meant a special occasion and it had a great value. Nowadays we can find music almost everywhere: in a shop that we enter, in our car, in restaurants etc. or we can simply listen to anything at home any time. Despite the obvious advantages of this possibility we can say that listening to music has been devalued. 150 years ago it was an extraordinary thing, every time a kind of “celebration” so I think people used to appreciate it more and respect it with more attention. (Nowadays I have the impression that it can mean a difficulty for the audience to listen to an entire concert and focus on the music — perhaps it hasn't been always like that.) Also, the long tradition of making music at home together, not only for musicians but for a lot of amateurs as well, played an important role. (This beautiful habit has been disappearing from our life and one of its reasons may be the massive production of recordings.) I suppose that in these times people could experience the “magic”, the transcendental dimension of music more easily and naturally than we now.

Musicians did thus not have as many musical experiences as we do nowadays. In these circumstances the role of teachers and colleges is even more important. The major part of what they

could learn about music came from their professors/masters and from the written studies about music and performance. However, I don't see it as a deficiency. Perhaps their personal experiences were more intense and maybe they had to rely more on their own musical instinct that is, in my opinion, a positive exigency (as mentioned in the introduction, perhaps today we are too much influenced by other performers).

Analysing these aspects, I have been creating a general image about musicians and performance in these times. I think that it is the general concept about music and performance, the attitude that is so different in them – the attitude of both the performer and the public towards music. I have the impression that – not being able to record and repeat it — performed music was expected to be first of all something more spontaneous and moving. People didn't go to a concert to “count the mistakes” of the performer, but primarily to have an emotional-intellectual experience. The performer had maybe more freedom in using all his/her tools in order to make this experience happen (which could practically mean even improvisation).

We shouldn't forget either that at this time the tradition of performing former works was still young. Musicians still performed their contemporaries' (and their own) pieces in a large number, maybe even more than music of preceding times. It means that they were still comfortable in this long tradition of working on the most recent compositions, like baroque musicians, accommodating to new ideas, following new movements — unlike most of the performers today who are trying to discover the “museum” of music and understand the language of previous centuries. I believe that this atmosphere is very important in performing music, especially in music of preceding times, for “filling the pieces with life”. The early recordings still carry this atmosphere throughout a century. Despite the bad sound quality of many of them sometimes it is still possible to feel something about this different attitude, how the performer touches the piece. I think we can learn something from them regarding this.

If we are playing music from the 19th century, these performers can obviously show us a way, as they had experienced the style of the period personally, many times even knew, heard or played and studied with the composer himself/herself. It happens for the first time in our music history that we can travel back 100 years in time and listen to someone playing. A century doesn't seem to be a great time compared to the dimensions of music history but regarding the history of performance it is. If not for the above-mentioned reasons, it is surely worth to listen to the early recordings if we realize that both our life and its musical part have changed much more during the last century than before during much less time. Therefore, it is interesting to see how it was before, and the early recordings can let us have a look in these times.

Nowadays most of the early recordings are available on Youtube. While listening to them, our first impressions might be the followings: we can hear many arpeggiated chords, even when it is not indicated in the score; tempi can be unusually fast or slow; we can hear mistakes; we might find the way of playing too much free, rhapsodic, “too romantic” in general. But let's not forget that although this is something new for us, we are listening to widely recognized artists who are representing the performance style of their era, the way of playing which was preferred by most of the public! Let's listen to some examples and try to find the reason of the mentioned musical phenomena!

Some Welte piano roll recordings preserved performances by Carl Reinecke (1824–1910) [5], German pianist, composer, conductor and teacher. The piano rolls don't have such a good quality as other recording techniques, but they reliably represent the tempi, dynamics and the use of pedal in the original performances. On a recording from 1905 Reinecke is playing the slow movement of the *piano concerto in D-major (KV 537)* of Mozart in his own transcription for piano solo [6]. Why is he arpeggiating so many chords? Maybe he wants to have a richer sound in order to imitate the orchestra. Another function of arpeggio is to mark certain harmonies which seem to have more importance than the others. These can be significant moments in the metric or the melodic structure, or harmonies with more dissonance. This is possible thanks to the effect of the arpeggio that the function of a harmony

becomes clearer if we can hear some of its notes first also separately and then together. Also, we can more easily differentiate melody and accompaniment.

Playing the soprano voice with a delay compared to the bass is — according to my experiences — something that we try to avoid nowadays. Let's listen to Fanny Davies (1861–1934) [7], student of Clara Schumann, playing the last movement (*Nicht schnell*) from Schumann's *Davidbündlertänze* in 1930! [8]. The first thing we might notice is that at least half of the bass notes are not sounding together with the soprano. However, if our ears were not trained in the way to spot that kind of “disorder”, in my opinion we would only hear that more interesting harmonies and melodic intervals are clear, they play an important role and they would take our attention. If we listen to the piece in an analytic way while looking at the score, we can realize that delays happen at these moments of importance. This gives an explanation to what the pianist is doing, perhaps not even consciously but intuitively.

On the same recording we can also observe the before mentioned rubato, the freedom in time that might sound too much for us. While listening to this performance, my first impression was that the music has a pleasing, natural pulsation and a good tempo. If we listen to the meter more carefully, we realize that the quarters in the 3/4 never have the same length, what is more, their difference is huge sometimes, but the general impression is still balanced. Mostly the first and the third quarters are longer, and the second quarters are shorter than their written duration. The explanation for that is like the one for the delay between bass and soprano: the pianist takes more time in more significant moments and moves on where there is less information.

We can find a lot more recordings, enjoy and analyse them, and discover more about the performance style 100 years ago. I only wanted to introduce this subject to people who haven't heard much about it yet, and to motivate musicians to be more open for new ideas in musical performance and to continue research in this topic.

We could look at the musical performance of our time from a different point of view, and we have seen what kind of things can influence our way of playing. We have had an analytic look into the musical performance of a former era, and we have heard some examples which can represent it. Probably not everyone will sympathize with the aesthetics of this time, but I hope it can be interesting and inspiring for everyone to listen to the early recordings and to think about their background. I believe that we can always learn from each other, so I think we shouldn't ignore performers from a former era when we have the chance, for the first time in music history, to reconnect with them in such a direct way.

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