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0521607442 - Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950

Robert Philip

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Until recently, early recordings were regarded as little more than old-fashioned curiosities by musicians. Scholars and musicians are now beginning to realise their importance as historical documents which preserve the performances of Elgar, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky and other composers, and of the musicians with whom they worked. In a more general way, recordings reveal the detailed performance practice of the early twentieth century and illustrate how styles have changed over the years. Early recordings also shed new light on nineteenth-century performance, but at the same time they highlight the limitations of our attempts to recreate the styles of the period before the development of recording.

In this fascinating and detailed study, Robert Philip argues that recordings of the early twentieth century provide an important, and hitherto neglected, resource in the history of musical performance. The book concentrates on aspects of performance which underwent the greatest change in the early twentieth century: rhythm, including flexibility of tempo, rubato and the treatment of rhythmic detail; the use of vibrato; and the employment of portamento by string players. The final chapters explore some of the implications of these changes, both for the study of earlier periods and for the understanding of our own attitudes to the music of the past.

The book contains informative tables, music examples and a discography and will be of interest to scholars and students of music history and performance practice as well as to musicians and collectors of historical recordings.

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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.