



String Chamber Music of the Classical German School, 1840-1900: A Scholarly Investigation through Reconstructive Performance

PERFORMANCE EVIDENCE 2 – EARLY RECORDINGS

David Milsom, 2009 (revised May 2015)

The evidence of early recordings is, and is likely to remain, controversial. Notwithstanding the generally receptive response to pioneering works of study, such as Robert Philip's *Early Recordings and Musical Style – Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1992), many scholars have taken an ambivalent attitude to this potentially most direct form of performance evidence. At the present time, much research has been devoted to the subject of historic recordings – in the UK, the setting up of CHARM¹ in 2003 has opened up much (often empirical) research, and the breadth and scope of the 2007 CHARM/RMA conference at Royal Holloway (at which I presented on the subject of Marie Soldat-Roeger and gave a well-received evening lecture-recital) shows how much interest there is in them. In the US, for example, Stanford University now mounts an annual conference entitled 'Reactions to the Record', assembling scholars and performers to discuss the evidence of sound recordings in various contexts.

Much of this interest has been fuelled by two distinct groups of researchers: empirical musicologists and analysts, who have put recordings through increasingly sophisticated forms of computer analysis, and nineteenth-century performance scholars and performers seeking evidence for pre-twentieth century styles and practices in the earliest documents by the most chronologically distant musicians. At conferences and symposia such as those described above, these two worlds have come together beneficially in recent years. Nineteenth-century performance scholars have benefited from new analysis methods – my own study here, for example, using the Sonic Visualiser programme² promoted and disseminated by CHARM – whilst analysts more specifically working on the recordings themselves have been able to develop more in-depth insights into the historical context of what one hears.

Nonetheless, those who have spent much of their time trying to extrapolate from twentieth-century recordings evidence of the survival of nineteenth-century practices are always in danger of being dismissed for wishful thinking (or at worst, methodological unsoundness). In this respect the generic difficulties with studying early recordings are usually highlighted; this subject has been discussed by many scholars in many contexts and varying amounts of detail (I also touch on the matter

¹ www.charm.rhul.ac.uk

² Chris Cannam, Christian Landone, and Mark Sandler, *Sonic Visualiser: An Open Source Application for Viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files*, in Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference. www.sonicvisualiser.org

on numerous occasions in this project, especially in the Joachim and Soldat-Roeger articles). The principal difficulties might be summarised thus:

1. Early (especially pre-electric) recordings are of very poor quality, making the verisimilitude of what one hears relative to the original performance in dispute – the extent to which what one hears is a faithful recreation of the original performance is doubtful.
2. Apart from sound quality, early (especially pre-electric) recordings create unquantifiable interference with the original, intended performance style. This is particularly the case in relation to the inconveniences of the process (solo performers standing with their instruments inside the bell of the recording horn; singers being pulled and pushed away from and closer to the apparatus; musicians dashing from their orchestral places to play solos into individual recording horns; small orchestras with dubious re-scoring). The time limitations of the short (c.4-minute) disc sides raise doubts as to choice of tempi, etc. Time limits also affected repertoire recorded ('*encore*' pieces rather than major works, for example) whilst the commercial nature of the enterprise meant that records were made primarily to sell to the public, rather than to be of historical interest to future generations!
3. Many of the most interesting performers are the earliest-born. Whilst it is credible that Joachim (born 1831) or singer Charles Santley (born 1834) retained something of their nineteenth-century performance style at the time they recorded, they were very old. The extent to which old age and possible infirmity result in some of the peculiarities of what we hear on these discs is impossible to quantify.

This makes the study of early recordings difficult, but not impossible. Whilst tempo, pitch and timbre might well be interfered with by technological limitations and by general matters of performance security (such as intonation) with some of the performers in old age, matters of phrasing, tempo flexibility and even vibrato and portamento are likely to be represented reasonably faithfully in spite of these problems. Programmes such as Capo,³ used here to slow recorded music down without altering pitch, enable the listener to hear the mechanisms of portamento and vibrato much more easily.

In the context of this study, the evidence of relevant early recordings is seen as one form of contributory data to the acquisition of probable 'classical' German string performing practices. The project methodology, as described elsewhere, seeks to synergise this with the evidence of annotated performing editions and of course against the backdrop of treatises and other written evidence of performance theory of the nineteenth century.

Given that this study is primarily dedicated to the task of creating a recorded performance output (albeit research-based), I have not included comprehensive analyses of the early recordings that have influenced the project. Much of this work in fact dates from my scholarship before embarking on this project: *Theory and*

³ <http://supermegaultragroovy.com/products/capo/>

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Practice in Late Nineteenth Century Violin Performance 1850-1900 (Aldershot, 2003) examined many of the most important violin (and vocal) recordings relevant to this study. In the course of this AHRC fellowship, other recordings became relevant and were also studied closely. These included the string quartet discs made by the Klingler Quartet, including three items made in 1911-2⁴ (some of the earliest recordings of the string quartet genre), and the recordings of Marie Soldat-Roeger,⁵ a Joachim pupil noted for her parity to her teacher's style of playing. Soldat-Roeger recorded a number of extended items of classical repertoire which provide vital and interesting insights further to substantiate the written and recorded evidence of Joachim's own playing.⁶ Some reference to recordings by Joachim, Auer, Rosé and Soldat is made in the individual work files, including copies of scores with some of the key stylistic features (fingerings, vibrato and portamento markings, etc.) indicated. These analyses should be viewed in conjunction with more substantial scholarly work by Clive Brown and myself (see Bibliography), which provide the detailed background to this study.

⁴ Haydn, 3rd and 4th movements of Op. 64/5 quartet (1911), Schubert, 3rd movement of quartet in D minor D.810 (1911), Mozart, 3rd movements of quartets K.421 & K.428 (1912), & Schumann 2nd movement of quartet Op. 41/3 (1912); all re-issued on *The Great Recordings of German and Austrian String Quartets* Volume 7 (SGR-8507); see project Discography.

⁵ Odeon matrix numbers: Union A: 3000/1, 3002/3, 3006/8, 3012/3, 3009, 3004, 3005. The dates of these recordings are a little uncertain. Tully Potter (BVA 1 *The Recorded Violin* sleeve notes) places the date as c.1920, whilst the MUGI website biography (see footnote 12, below) places the date as 1926. They are obviously made by the acoustic process, however.

⁶ See my article *Marie Soldat-Roeger (1863-1955): Her Significance to the Study of Nineteenth-Century Performing Practices*, included in this project archive.