Early Recordings and Musical Style.

By Robert Philip. Cambridge University Press, 1992. 274 pp.

This is something new and luckily – or rather by Robert Philip's sheer application – it is also very good. Philip has taken records of orchestral and instrumental music made between 1900-1950, the preponderance before 1940, and analyzed the playing in terms of degree of tempo fluctuation, rubato, rhythmic character, portamento and vibrato, closely measuring the changes over the period and pointing lessons for the future. He has drawn on 156 works by 49 composers and a total of 337 recordings; many of these recordings are analyzed at different points in the text for varying purposes. Amongst these are eight versions of the Brahms 1st Symphony, nine of Chopin's 2nd Piano Sonata and of the Brahms 2nd Symphony, eleven of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, and no less than twelve of Mozart's Symphony No.40 and Beethoven's *Kreutzer* Sonata. The minute examination to which some of the recordings are subjected is, as will be shown, revealing, but hardly less valuable is the integration into Philip's commentary of reference to an extremely wide range of contemporary literature which serves to point the way to and underpin his conclusions drawn from the recordings themselves.

With this book, gramophone history has come of age. Forty years ago (when your reviewer started serious listening) an interest in old orchestral and instrumental recordings was regarded as rather quaint. Stacks of discarded 78s sat in junk shops and the history which they embodied was disregarded in favor of the latest wunder aus Karajan usw. The climate has changed gradually (the position of vocal recording has always been rather different) and, with this, the availability of source material, so much so that, had Philip begun his task today, he would have had to stray from the CD catalog only in limited fields for his exploratory purposes.

As Philip explains, however, his work was founded on his explorations over many years on the 78 record libraries at Cambridge University (lying covered in dust and ignored) and the BBC. Possibly as a consequence of their limitations, or an inevitable selectivity in their use, some of Philip's conclusions will seem a little surprising to those who might have chosen different recordings to illustrate identical interpretive problems. This does not mean that Philip's general conclusions are invalidated. For the greater part, they are well-founded, and, as it seems, indisputable. There are, nonetheless, areas in which room for dispute remains as a result of a choice of recordings which is either injudicious or insufficiently explored. Unwittingly, perhaps, these very areas illustrate the limitations which records have for the historian of performance styles.

The chapters on flexibility of tempo and tempo rubato are the principal sufferers in this respect. The general thesis in regard to flexibility, that the passage of time saw a gradual tightening-up of approach by conductors and instrumentalists during the first half of the century, is beyond dispute. But some of the details disturb. It is strange, for example to read that Toscanini became more flexible in romantic works as time progressed, limiting the notorious progress towards an apparent rigidity to classical works (p.21). Philip relies for this, in relation to romantic works, solely on a comparison between the conductor's pre- and post-War recordings of Brahms' *Tragic Overture* and *Haydn* Variations; but the 1953 *Tragic Overture* was amongst that substantial number of performances from Toscanini's last season which evidenced a failure of powers. Comparison with the 1952 Philharmonia performance would have shown a different story (the timings give it away: 1937 12'40"; 1952 12'15"; 1953 13'50").

Similarly, selected Stokowski and Klemperer recordings are used to illustrate the tightening-up (or evening-out) process (p.24). Stokowski's Brahms 1st Symphony from 1928 and 1972 show him latterly "much more restrained in his tempo fluctuations". True, but this ignores Stokowski's complex interpretative development which runs somewhat contrary to the general thesis: reference to his recordings of the 1930s, and in particular to his 1936 and 1945 versions of the Brahms 1st would have set in context what were, in fact, relative restraint in his early and late recordings. The same work, in Klemperer's 1928 and 1957 recordings, is used to illustrate the same trend, but other contemporary Klemperer recordings show that early Brahms 1st to have been atypical in its relative romantic freedom. Had, for example, his early Beethoven 8th (1926) been used for illustrative purposes, the thesis would have fallen flat.

If these (omitted) illustrations buck the trend, so, too, do those significantly missing from the long list of Mozart G minor symphonies, stretching from 1926 to 1977 (p.20). If Malcolm Sargent in 1928 is to be examined, what about Toscanini in 1938 and 1950 and Furtwängler in 1948/49? The extreme flexibility of the first two and the relative lack of deviation from the straight and narrow of Furtwängler do not fit in with the particular point sought to be made about the others in regard to the acceptability of greater tempo fluctuations, both in decrease and increase, at the earlier recording dates. In truth, the omitted performances illustrate nothing more than the extraordinarily powerful personalities of the two conductors concerned, whose musical personalities developed with little reference to the trends of the times. Furtwängler is almost wholly missing from the book, perhaps on that very account. Toscanini changed over the years from an early proto-Germanic approach, of which the gramophone captured next to nothing, to his latterday unencrusted directness, and that change stemmed wholly from his personal thought and convictions, and not at all from the zeitgeist or public taste.

This is not nit-picking: it leads directly to the substantial reservations to be made about Philip's chapter on flexibility of tempo, at least so far as it concerns orchestral practice. There is a danger, not wholly avoided here, of placing too much reliance upon what are not more than musical snap-shots of how an artist felt on the day of recording, and of placing exclusive reliance upon what we have while ignoring what is significantly missing. As to the first, Weingartner's VPO recording of the *Eroica* (1936) is a particular illustration. Philip uses it (p.23) to suggest that Weingartner was more flexible than his writings and reputation might suggest, pointing out that the first movement is only "slightly flexible", while in the second the "changes of tempo go far beyond those heard in most pre-War and modern performances". In fact, there are some pretty noticeable tempo modifications in the first movement at measure 45 (dealt with by Philip, inappropriately in view of its character, in the chapter on rhythmic style (p.78)) and again at 83. These are virtually absent just a year before in a 1936 Salzburg broadcast, as are the fluctuations observed by Philip in the second movement. Why was this? Did Weingartner find extra stimulation in the recording studio, or were the distentions intended as a demonstration of his remarks about the handling of these passages in the first movement in his book on the performance of Beethoven? The second explanation is hardly consistent with the way he ignores his own recommendations, as rightly noted by Philip, in the second movement. Perhaps it reveals no more than Weingartner's mood on the day. Of how many recordings, with attendant dangers for putative generalizations, lessons to be drawn and so on, must that be the case?

As to what is missing, the true significance for flexibility of tempo in the orches-

tral field lies hidden in the book's sub-title: changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950. While individual instrumental recordings could reflect with some (albeit varying) reliability the player's approach from the start of the century, serious orchestral recording began only with Nikisch in 1913; and aside from a few discs by Strauss and Toscanini, only in 1923 did another first ranker, Weingartner, begin a more systematic documentation permitting a proper evaluation of interpretative approach. Before that date, then, for the most part only hints and scraps by a few greats, and nothing at all from other supreme masters who could have – but did not – make orchestra recordings, such as Mahler, Richter and Steinbach.

It is these significant absences which enable Philip, as it would seem, to fit the pattern of available recordings too neatly into the framework of the written references with which he chooses to introduce the chapter as a whole. These, to a degree rightly, emphasize "a general acceptance in the early twentieth century of the needs for flexibility of tempo" (p.8) and the way in which that approach was exemplified by (among others) Mahler, detailed descriptions of whose approach to matters of tempo modification survive. In that context, Weingartner and Toscanini are seen as "the leading pioneers against the tradition of flexible tempo" (p.13). Actually, however, as Weingartner made clear in his own writings, in particular in his observations about Richter, that "tradition" never stood alone: there were always conductors who could not be categorized as belong to the "general acceptance". Here the absence of any recordings by Richter, Steinbach (Brahms's favorite, greatly admired by Toscanini, Boult and Fritz Busch), and so few by Muck, obscure the huge variety of styles prevalent among conductors in the first years of the century.[1] Hints there are: the architectural integrity of Muck's finale of Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony (1917) stands in startling contrast with Mengelberg (1928), but to have included that comparison would not have fitted the pattern which Philip aims to establish.

Let it be clear: Philip is persuasive in regard to solo instrumental practice, for the simple reason that reliable and representative evidence straddles the full length of his chosen period. If he is less persuasive about orchestral practice, it is because of gaps in that evidence of which, it is suggested, he might have shown greater awareness. Because of this, the general remarks in Philip's summarizing chapters which close the book about the implication which recorded evidence have for our knowledge of 19th century performance styles have, in this respect at least, a less persuasive force. Possibly the subject was too large in compass for a general survey such as this; it demands a book to itself.

Greater awareness of available evidence would also have assisted the chapter on instrumental rubato. Here the introduction, based on the differing prescriptions of contemporary pedagogues, is particularly detailed and illuminating, more so than its equivalent on flexibility of tempo. Philip rightly defines the three different kinds of rubato referred to in the writings: detailed tempo fluctuation, agogic accents, and separation of melody and accompaniment. The highly selective recordings used to pin down the elements analyzed on paper are therefore rather surprising. Where are the many Chopin experts captured on early recordings, such as Michalowski, Friedman, Hoffman, Lhevinne (to take some random names scatter over a generation), whose recordings could usefully have been prayed in aid? And why the reliance on late recordings by so many pianists widely acknowledged to be well past their best by the time of the examples chosen: d'Albert in 1916, Rosenthal in 1939, and the Paderewski and Pachmann of the late 1920s. Paderewski was always a highly variable recording artist and never more so than by 1930. As for Pachmann's recordings dating from the

period, they are notorious for their eccentricity and distortion of all musical sense, unworthy documents of an artist in his dotage. Small wonder that Philip, though admitting their age (p.69), finds that "the rubato of Paderewski and Pachmann now sounds rather clumsy and disorderly". Yet exquisite earlier documents of Pachmann in particular (the 1907 and 1909 G&Ts/pre-Dogs, the Victors of 1911-12 and some of the Columbias of 1915-16) would have conveyed a very different impression. The limitations upon Philip's choice of material tend in this important chapter to vitiate his conclusions about the extent to which recordings reflect the types of rubato described in the literature and the changes which they underwent in the course of the century toward's today's minimalist approach. Disappointing, too, is the absence of any attempt to analyze the recordings in terms of any of the schools of pianism – pupils of Liszt, Leschetitzky and so on – to discern whether their different pedigrees resulted in differing practices in this critical area.

Philip's greatest strength lies in his chapters on vibrato (both strings and wind) and portamento (both solo string and orchestral), for a variety of reasons. For one, his range of literary reference is detailed and apposite in demonstrating precisely what practice was, on paper, expected to be. Secondly, his choice of recordings, particularly in relation to solo portamento, is catholic, constrained neither by omission nor oversights, and is therefore capable of fully supporting his conclusions. Finally, it is here that the painstaking character of the analysis is most apparent. Countless hours seemingly were spent in notating exactly the number and character of slides in those passages played by the most eminent artists from Joachim, Sarasate and Ysaye onwards, and careful qualifications are made throughout out in reference to the possible effects of the age of the artists concerned and the negative experience of the early recording process upon what can now be heard.

The analysis fully supports Philip's conclusion (p.155) that in some cases recordings reflect the written evidence, in others they contradict it. There is no denying that in general terms, as vibrato has been used increasingly as an expressive device, so at the same time the use of portamento for the same purpose has decreased and been refined almost to the point of extinction. Spot-checking Philip's analyses, however, did suggest an over-eagerness to identify as portamento some (only a few out of many) instances which appeared – to these ears – as no more than a change of position. A slide marked, for example, in the second measure of the example on p.161 (the Bach two-violin concerto), as played by Adolf Busch and Frances Magnes, is not audible as such; nor at measure 15-16 on p.170 (Adolf Busch, Beethoven Op.131, first movement). Further, the portamento rightly observed in the Polonaise of the Bush ensemble's Brandenburg Concerto No.1 (p.189) must surely have been fully planned, given the entire absence of the device in the surrounding Minuet. But these reservations are indeed minor in the context of so much richly and accurately observed.

Philip closes the book with a chapter on the implications for the future of his preceding analyses. Summarizing, he says, (p.229) that the trend during the century has been "towards greater power, firmness, clarity, control, literalness, and evenness of expression, and away from informality, looseness, and unpredictability". That is doubtless largely true but, as has been suggested here, it is possible to question, at least in some areas, Philip's contention that the evidence of performing styles is so complete that, leaving aside some fundamental questions of modern style and taste, it permits reconstruction of early twentieth century performances (pp.229-30). To be fair, the author is extremely cautious about any such venture, suggesting that it would indeed by doomed to failure, given that all musicians involved would have to "unlearn" the

lessons of our generation about the function of vibrato, portamento and even of rhythm itself. Only time will tell whether Philip's insightful analyses and commentary will have any long-tern effect on future performances of late-romantic and early twentieth century music. At least anyone venturing to carry forward into that period that pioneering work of Norrington, Gardiner and others beyond their self-imposed limits will now be fully warned of the numberless pitfalls to be encountered in any such attempt. *Reviewed by Christopher Dyment*

Endnote

1. Space precludes discussion of reference in the literature but see in particular Fifield *True Artist and True Friend* (Hans Richter) pp. 463-464; Scholes *The Mirror of Music* Vol. 1 p.392 (Weingartner); Haslick *Music Criticisms 1846-99* ed. Pleasants pp.104-06 (on Wagner's performances of the *Eroica* Symphony in 1872); and those cited in the *ARSC Journal* (1986;18[1-3]:154-155). It may be noted that Hanslick's praise for Mahler's *Eroica* cited by Philip (p.8) went to its clarity and power; he did not mention tempo manipulation: see de la Grange *Mahler*, pp.489-90.

Bert Williams: a biography of the pioneer black comedian.

By Eric Ledell Smith. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co., 1993. 301 pp., notes, appendices, index, bibliography.

Though this book isn't without problems, it provides at least a fragmentary biography and some useful insights into the life, career and feelings of one of America's greatest theatric figures. With long-time partner George Walker, Williams managed to break through formidable color barriers and eventually elevate himself to the top of his profession.

Following their successful appearance at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City in 1896, the Williams and Walker team proceeded to star in a series of all-black musical comedies, beginning with "A lucky coon" and "The policy players" in 1899. Later shows, like "In Dahomey" (1903), "Abysinnia" (1906) and "Bandanna Land" (1907), were each long running shows on Broadway and on the road, due in no small part to the talents of Walker's wife, Ada (later Aida) Overton Walker, the skilled actress, dancer and choreographer.

Following the onset of George Walker's terminal illness in 1908, Williams eventually abandoned the musical comedy format to star, nearly annually, in the Ziegfeld Follies extravaganzas of the 1910s. His own death came prematurely in 1922 at the age of 46.

Smith is not the first to contribute a book-length treatise on Bert Williams. Mabel Rowland's 1923 *Bert Williams: son of laughter* was a postmortem tribute which contained stories and anecdotes from friends and professional colleagues. Ann Charters' 1970 biography *Nobody: the story of Bert Williams* discussed his career against the backdrop of the racially restricted social climate of his time.

Smith necessarily covers much of the same ground, though his work contributes new insights by way of his extensive research into contemporary resources, like performance reviews, newspaper articles and interviews, and various scholarly works. At least a few sources contain direct quotes from Williams (and Walker too, on occasion) which provide important insight into his own feelings and intellect. Quotes from oth-