

**Studying Recordings: The Evolution of a Discipline**  
**Robert Philip**

**Keynote paper given at the RMA/CHARM Conference, Royal Holloway,  
University of London, 13 September 2007**

When I started work on my Ph.D. in 1968, on ‘Changing orchestral style 1920-1950 as shown by gramophone recordings’, I was not aware of anyone else working on recordings at a postgraduate level. Now, nearly forty years later, the study of recordings is to be found in universities across the world, serious amounts of public money are being spent on research, and recordings are the focus of the RMA conference. I welcome this development, and the huge range of approaches to recordings that are revealed in the papers for this conference. In this paper, I have tried to focus on some of the things that seem to me essential to the study of recordings, and particularly recorded performance, and to think about how we, as musicologists, might engage with this musical material.

At an early CHARM Advisory Board meeting, we were discussing the problem of getting more musicians involved with CHARM. One of our number (who might or not want to be identified) said that this was a hopeless aspiration because ‘musicians and musicologists speak totally different languages’. If this is so, what should we do about it? And why might musicologists want to engage with musicians?

My feeling is that when musicologists are interested in engaging with musicians, they are usually much more concerned to teach them than to learn from them. Of course this can have very good results. The interaction between scholars and musicians in the performance of old repertoire have been going on for more than a century, and it has produced results that have been satisfying for musicians, musicologists and audiences. J.S.Bach, Haydn, Handel, Berlioz, Beethoven, and countless composers in the so-called Early Music field have reached the music-loving public in ways that have been seriously enhanced by the intervention of musicologists with their research and their editions. This is probably the most direct way in which musicologists have an impact on musicians and performance, and reach the general music-loving public.

But a lot of musicology has traditionally been evasive in the way it shies away from the sound of music in performance, and the musicians who perform it. We have long had the area of ‘performance practice’, but it’s only in recent years that this has generally included the study of actual performers in performance, live or recorded. Now there is a drive towards a new concept – outreach, ‘knowledge transfer’, and whatever the next term is. This is fine, though it is based on the idea that we transfer our knowledge to grateful recipients. Not the other way round. But I think it’s an inescapable truth that musicians don’t need us nearly as much as we need them. The best musicians are largely self-sufficient, needing the help of scholars from time to time, but basically best at making their own judgements about what they do. We are the ones that need the dialogue. So we should learn to listen to musicians, and be aware of the danger of creating yet another discipline that is merely self-referring, and has little to do with the ideas and practicalities and vision of the people whose activities and products we study.

It is my impression that musicology is far behind other disciplines in its links with the wider world. The greatest thinkers in Literature, History, Art History, spend a large proportion of their time writing and talking in a way that is comprehensible to the ordinary intelligent reader and listener. Our television screens and radios have made the leading figures familiar, and virtually all of them talk intelligibly to their audience. Where are the musicologists? You might say that this just shows the public's general lack of interest in classical music, and other 'serious' musical genres. But part of this problem is surely musicologists' difficulty in communicating with a wider audience in ways that they understand.

But to come back to communication with musicians. They are specialists. It's just that they are not the same kind of specialist as musicologists. They do indeed speak a different language. And it seems to me that we would do well to learn their language and to engage with it.

By way of example, here are a few quotes from Artur Schnabel. I have recently been doing some work on the papers of Clifford Curzon, which have been lying almost unread in the British Library since they were given to the library after his death in 1982. Curzon kept detailed notes of his lessons with Schnabel, whom he continued to visit over two decades, up until Schnabel's death in 1951. Here are some of Schnabel's more striking observations, as noted by Curzon:

'Sounds will fall into their right place in a phrase when they are part of the *right movement* to a certain climax or phrase-point.'

'Melody is given life by the form and colouring of the accompaniment.'

'We can play a passage quickly or slowly at the same tempo!'

(About Brahms's Intermezzo/lullaby Opus 117 No 1): 'Think of the singing mother, not the sleeping child!'

'Maestoso is always mistaken for Grave. Maestoso is majestic and always means light, easy, uprising – not downtrodden, as most people think of the term.'

'Upbeats are never a matter of dynamics but of movement – they belong rhythmically to the next phrase and not the previous.'

'First hear, and then play.'

'Many pianists have simplicity which they put on as an effect – a nuance; but few have real simplicity, because the thing is simple.'

Of course musicians are not primarily speakers and writers, though some of them are good at it. Their job is to perform music. They are doers. And it seems to me that we would do well to learn from what they do, not just from what they say. It has often been said that performing is a sort of analysis. However far one goes along with that argument, it can't be denied that performing music certainly involves analysis at various levels. It involves decisions about what is more or less important, where something is going or has come from, when the climax reaches its peak, how much

repose is at this point, whether this phrase is really something quite new, or some sort of continuation. These things are going on in a musician's mind, though in ways that are not necessarily to be articulated in speech, and sometimes in ways that operate at levels below the conscious. What musicians say or write reveals only a tiny part of their knowledge and understanding. Music-making involves a lot of tacit knowledge – what Donald Rumsfeld referred to as 'unknown knows'. I presume that all of us in this room must be, or have been at some level, musicians as well as musicologists. Growing up as a child with understanding of music, one only gradually becomes aware of the nature of one's understanding. One learns to control, to manage, to use what began as unconscious understanding. One learns to apply techniques, and to refine both the technique and the understanding. Of course in later life it is easy to forget the process we went through, but sometimes it's useful to be reminded.

There's no better way of being reminded of what is involved in becoming a musician than learning a new instrument. A year ago I took up the cello, having been a keyboard and woodwind player all my life. It has been a fascinating and revealing experience. One thing I have learned is how much of the process of learning to play involves an understanding of the relationship between one's body and the instrument. I have a marvellous teacher, John Sharp, but before we first met I looked at books on cello-playing, read what famous players had written, tried things out. When I started having lessons, there was of course a lot of talk. My teacher tried to describe what I should be doing, what I was doing wrong. But the moment that understanding dawns is the moment that one's physical actions produce a desired result – the moment that action and sound become linked. When the teacher demonstrates, you see and hear the link. You try it, and the link is missing. But eventually the link is made, however tentatively, and you begin to know what you should be doing. That knowledge, reinforced by memory, gradually works its way below conscious effort, so that eventually you begin to do it without having to think hard about it. Having gradually learned what works, it eventually becomes simply the way that you play, the 'default' – at least I hope it does. But at the same time you have to remain alert, you have to maintain the ability to examine any aspect of what you are doing, without losing the body of understanding that you have built up.

How does this relate to the study of recordings? Of course the recordings of Casals or Feuermann are a far cry from this experience as a beginning cellist. And I'm not suggesting some sort of simplistic idea that one must be able to do something in order to understand its expert practitioners. But what learning the cello has reinforced in me is something that we, as musicologists and analysts, can easily forget: that music-making is an activity, involving a subtle and complex interplay between the physical person and the instrument – or just the person in the case of singers. And that whenever one tries to analyse sound as an abstract thing, one is in danger of bypassing what is the essence of music-making. We can't get too precious about this every time we put on a CD. But we should constantly try to understand what a musician is doing and why.

## **CD Examples: Schubert, Piano Trio in B flat, D 898, opening bars of slow movement**

### **Pablo Casals (cello)**

**a) with Alfred Cortot, Jacques Thibaud, recorded 1926**

**EMI CHS7 64057 2, from HMV DB947-950**

**b) with Eugene Istomin, Alexander Schneider, recorded 1951**

**PHILIPS GBL 5611**

Casals's playing of that line is very different in those two recordings. The most obvious difference is in the audible sliding, portamento. In 1926 there are seven portamenti, all different in effect and character. Sometimes there is a strong move up, sometimes a sorrowful drooping down. Sometimes the slide is audible only towards the end of the interval, like a sort of accent before the next note. Sometimes it seems like just a touch on the journey between one note and another, like briefly brushing against something as you pass. You could analyse in detail just what these different slides consist of, but their effect is richly diverse, coming over to the listener as having different expressive intentions.

In 1951 there is virtually no portamento, just a couple of hints of a slide. The vibrato is a little slower, and sparer. The line is more fragile, in tuning and in continuity. The overall shape of the line is nevertheless very similar: the journey is recognizably the same, but the player is noticing things a little differently as he revisits it. His playing seems to convey simplicity but not deadness – it is constantly alert to what is going on.

How can we do justice to such material? The best way is to try to explore both its sound and its rich origins, its background, possible reasons, implications, hints, trying to explain why it is as it is, why it sounds as it sounds, what makes the two versions different and yet recognizably by the same musician. Above all, we have to learn to keep our ears and minds open. By choosing one particular method of analysis, or one particular aspect of performance, we are in danger of ignoring everything else, all the other ingredients that go to make up the whole. And we have to understand the whole if we are fully to understand the particular. (By the way, I'm not claiming that I can do all this. I've done plenty of looking at isolated details. But at some point we have to be aware of the context).

So what might we think about and look at to illuminate these recordings? We might consider Casals's teaching, particularly on vibrato, portamento, tone production, phrasing. There are reminiscences of him by his pupils. There is the question of his character, his sensitivity, pride. There is his age: he was 49 when he made the first of those recordings, 74 when he made the second. We could explore the relevance of this to our impressions of strength and frailty in the two recordings. There are reviews of his recordings and concerts: how did this sound to his audiences and critics? There are the qualities and circumstances of the recordings, his distance from the microphone(s), his placing in relation to the pianist. One might consider the possibility that he felt that an extra degree of warmth was needed to get through to his invisible audience through the surface noise of the 78 disc (which might affect vibrato, portamento, the projection of the tone and the shape of the line). He perhaps felt he didn't have to worry so much about this in the later recording.

What fingerings might he have used? Did he change his fingering between the two recordings, or merely disguise the sliding? And there is the question of how we perceive this difference. This partly depends on the order in which you hear the two recordings. If you play the earlier one first, you get the sense of portamenti having been removed in the later one. If you hear the earlier recording second, you have a sense of portamenti having been added. Inevitably, we also find ourselves comparing what we hear with modern ideas of cello-playing. But we have to be aware that there is nothing fixed about modern playing either. I'm sure I could find you half a dozen modern recordings of that piece in which cellists would do quite different things. Some would have a prominent portamento or two at important intervals, some would have several discreet portamenti, and some would have none. And modern vibrato also varies, in its speed, its consistency, its prominence and fluctuation of pitch. But I don't think you'd find a modern cellist playing this line quite as Casals does in either of those two recordings. The earlier would now be thought a little old-fashioned in its portamenti, despite the subtlety; the later one would be thought a bit thin, with slightly uncertain tuning. Nevertheless, the eloquence of the line that Casals projects, in both recordings, is impressive to modern cellists and listeners in its own terms.

Another thing to bear in mind is that portamento is not just portamento. It is easy to represent it as a line on a score, and I use this method myself. But that is not an end to it. Of course we are familiar with the different sorts of portamento – faster, slower, louder, quieter, continuous, interrupted, moving on a single finger, with a change of finger, Flesch's 'B-portamento' and 'L-portamento'. But there is also the effect of a portamento. What is the dynamic of it? Sometimes it seems to join two notes together, sometimes it emphasises the gap between them. Sometimes it arrives gently at the second note, sometimes it creates an accent towards the arrival. Because of all these possibilities, it has an effect on rhythm. Where a beat is, and where a note seems to start, are affected by portamento. The relationship between instruments in a string quartet is affected by portamento. An inner line will suddenly become prominent, without being louder, because portamento draws your attention to a moment of transition. Portamento indeed *is* a moment of transition. You see it represented as a line on a page, and you come to think of it as an object. But what is its effect to the ear? Where is it going, and how? Why at that interval rather than any other? How much is practical, how much artistic? Are the slides placed randomly, or with purpose (or is the purpose to scatter them randomly, for variety?)

There are questions like this to be asked about any of the details of performance. And I'd sum them up by saying that the more we try to understand the subtleties and the reasons that lie behind the sounds that we hear, the more we understand the sounds themselves. This is all complex, it needs knowledge of instruments and how they are played, and good ears and judgement to make sense of it all. Modern computing tools can be a great help in analysing what is going on. It's tempting to try to cut through to a scientific approach, putting to one side anything that might be thought of as subjective. But there are dangers in this approach, which were first demonstrated to me when I was a music student.

A visiting lecturer came to the Royal College of Music, and talked to us about the physics of music. Among other things, he demonstrated that it is impossible for a pianist to alter the tone quality of an individual note on a particular piano by the way

it is played. Stroking, hitting, accelerating with the finger, all make no difference at all: if a hammer strikes the string at a particular speed, it will produce a particular volume and a particular tone, and it will decay at a particular rate. You can demonstrate it, and measure it, and get consistent results, and that is that. As you'd expect, the pianists in the audience were outraged by this, and everyone else was amused. It was only years later that I began to understand the fundamental flaws in the way this demonstration had been put to us. It was a classic example of a result having been achieved by limiting the field of enquiry to measuring what was easily measurable, without asking what else might have an influence on the result. It took no account of the fact that pianists spend most of their time playing notes in combination, and that the instrument has many strings, which are often free to resonate because the dampers are raised – either a few of them in a chord, or all of them if the sustaining pedal is down. How a string vibrates when struck will partly depend whether it is already vibrating; and when you strike it, resonances on other strings will be set up, depending on which strings are free to vibrate. This combination of resonances creates a rich stew of effects in the soundboard, altering the tone colour and rate of decay. The ability to exploit this is at the heart of refined piano-playing. The pianist is like a great chef, who is constantly alert to the effect on the whole of each individual ingredient. (By the way, this is why good classical pianists don't like playing on electronic pianos. They can sound very like a real piano, if the notes are recorded from a good-quality piano. But the notes are recorded individually. If you play a chord on an electric piano, it is simply the individual notes played in combination. There is no soundboard, no cross-resonating between strings. You have lost vital tools that enable pianists to defy the simple mechanics of the piano, and to sound different from each other.)

On top of this, there is the perception of the listener. In piano music, we rarely hear a note in isolation. Quite apart from the effects that a pianist may exploit because of the subtle resonances of the instrument, we hear notes following each other, and in combination. A mezzo-forte middle C will sound quite different to us, depending on its relationship with what is below or above it, and what comes before and after it. It can be surprisingly loud, or surprisingly quiet, or follow seamlessly so that we scarcely notice it as an individual note.

What applies to piano tone applies in different ways to all aspects of performance. The elements of musical performance don't just co-exist as separate entities. They depend on each other, and affect each other, creating something that at its best is perceived as an organic whole. If you take one element and examine it, there is a danger that you may miss something else. This is particularly likely if the examination is not by ear. If you are listening to an element, you may spot that it depends on other things. But if you get a computer to do it, you may not. Take the concept of rhythm, for example. The most obvious aspect of rhythm is its timing. Is a dotted rhythm overdotted? Is the second beat of a waltz lengthened? Is that melody note late in relation to the bass? All these things can be measured and tabulated. But rhythm is intimately connected to dynamics and articulation. What a rhythm sounds like depends not just on its timing. This is the source of one of the major limitations of piano-rolls. They became remarkably sophisticated in their capturing of the timing of notes. But even the best did not capture the exact dynamic level of each and every note. This is why melodic rubato and the non-synchronisation of chords tend to sound clumsy on many piano-rolls. It's quite possible that the timing is pretty accurate. But

the dynamics are subtly wrong, and the relationship between a melody note and a bass note has been falsified. And this is compounded when the roll is played back on a different piano, without the pianist being able to adjust to it. Rachmaninoff's recordings and piano-rolls supply many illustrations of this, demonstrating that subtleties of dynamics, layering, foregrounding and distancing of threads in the texture, which are so vivid in the sound recordings, are much less evident in the piano-rolls.

**CD Examples: Rachmaninoff, 'Lilacs', Opus 21 No 5 (transcr. Rachmaninoff)**

**a) Sound recording 1942**

**RCA GD87766 (from matrix PCS-072132-1)**

**b) Ampico piano-roll 1922**

**DECCA 425 964 2**

One of the things that recordings encourage us to do is to compare performers and performances. This is the essence of most record reviewing, and I've done plenty of it in my time. You can put two extracts side by side in a radio programme, and demonstrate that one is slower than the other. It's a fascinating exercise, and it would be impossible without recordings. But I do begin to wonder whether this sort of comparison is wholly beneficial. Like so much to do with recordings, it diminishes the intentions, the meaning, the values, of the individual performance and performer. The recorded performance becomes a thing to be set beside another thing, in bits, like an object that is to be measured. It ceases to be a process, an activity, a cumulative experience (and of course the whole subject of editing adds a further complication). A good reviewer is aware of this danger, and uses this sort of comparison to illustrate a point to do with the overall experience of each performance. But the more detailed our analysis becomes, and the less it depends on our ears, the more remote the exercise is in danger of becoming.

When we as musicologists stop and examine, it is a bit like those slow-motion replays of athletes, which enable you to see how the arm moves to create the serve or the throw. Or those computer programmes that tell you the average speed of the serve. But this is only meaningful while we keep in our minds what the whole action, in real time, consists of. Someone who had never seen a tennis match, but had only seen slow-motion action replays, would have no idea what was really involved. We must keep going back to the real thing, in order for the analysis to remain meaningful. There is also a limit to the usefulness of such examination. For example, how useful is it to find out the average tempo throughout a performance? Unless the tempo is more or less constant, it is almost meaningless in musical terms. It is a bit like being told the average speed of all the shots in a tennis match. Some moments in music are like serves, others are drop-shots. A few years ago, on Radio 4's 'The News Quiz', Alen Coren produced a figure from an annual report of official government statistics. It revealed that the average number of legs per member of the British population had risen over the year to 1.99976 (or some such figure). This is not a useful average. Average is an abstraction, abstracted from a web of causes and effects.

Recordings enable us to repeat and freeze what is essentially dynamic. They provide us (to change the analogy) with the anaesthetic which enables us to see what cannot otherwise be seen. But just as the surgeon needs to understand how the body actually

operates in motion and consciousness, so we need to relate what we see to actual performance. In real experience of music-making, either as a musician or as a listener, much relies on memory. We perceive the progress, the narrative of music, its structure, through memory. We are able to compare our memory of one performance with our memory of another. Recordings allow us to bypass memory, or at least to rely only on short-term memory. We can put a few bars of one recording side by side with a few bars of another. We can demonstrate conclusively that one conductor takes a passage slower than another. But did it seem like that in performance? We can go further and bypass listening and memory altogether. Put the two recordings through a computer and measure the timings and the tempi. There is the answer in front of you, without the need to listen to a note.

By the way, I'm not developing a rant against the use of computer analysis. There's some very impressive work going on, producing genuinely musical insights. But I do think we have to be alert to the possible effects of any method of analysis that we use. Because it is always the case that a particular method of looking at something encourages a particular sort of vision.

You might say that what is on the recording is fixed – or at least on a particular version of a recording played through particular equipment. But how it appears to us depends on how we chose to listen, observe, analyse. For example, one of the standard ways to analyse tempo and rhythm is to input the beat by tapping into a computer. Nowadays some programmes enable tapping errors can be corrected, so that you end up with an accurate record of where the beats lie in the particular recorded performance. This, one might say, is an objective piece of information. There the beats are, that is what the performer did. That is the tempo, and this is how it varies. But this process encourages us to think of beat, tempo and rhythm in a particular way. A beat becomes a point on a sort of grid, extending from one end of the piece to the other. What we are finding are deviations either side of the lines on this grid. Some beats are early, some are late, some are squeezed together, others are spaced out. There they are on the screen or on paper. We can see them. They form visible shapes and patterns. But music is not something visible, despite the existence of scores and barlines. A beat is not a point. There is no grid. There is nothing out there from which to deviate until we create an expectation. Music starts from silence, and its sounds proceed, build up, accumulate in our memory to form an impression of ongoing events.

I experienced a vivid illustration of this a few years ago when I found myself standing in for a percussionist, playing the bass drum in Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man (I do recommend this as a cathartic experience). My job was to synchronise precisely with the timpanist. I learned very quickly that it was hopeless to watch his stick coming down on the drum. If I did, I was always early or late. The only way to do it was to watch his upswing, and then look away before the stick came down. That way I could synchronise with him every time. It's hopeless to try to synchronise with a point. You have to synchronise the move towards the beat, the dynamic expectation, the tension that leads to the release.

In a similar way, the tempo that we perceive is not just a matter of measurable speed. It depends on the perception of the rate at which events occur and pass, and this varies with different performances for many reasons not directly to do with tempo. In the

case of a fast tempo, how fast it seems depends partly on our impression of what is humanly possible, and how close to the edge of possibility the performers are. This in turn depends on ensemble, clarity, technical proficiency, steadiness etc. Perception of slow tempi is also subtle. When does a tempo become too slow? This is partly a personal reaction: I find many slow tempi boring. I often feel that the performer is pretending that the time is filled with events, when in fact they are not filling it. I am continually being kept waiting for reasons that are not to do with the music. György Sebök had a good way of describing this. To a pianist who played at one of his master-classes he said, 'You don't play long notes. You just play short notes and hold them.' I've already quoted Schnabel's observation to Curzon: 'We can play a passage quickly or slowly in the same tempo!' These are tricky, even paradoxical, matters. But they are at the heart of how we perceive a performance of music, and how the music affects us in performance. We read the intentions, the psychological subtleties, of the performer, just as an animal reads the intentions of a predator or of a prey by the subtlest of signs.

There's much discussion of the fluctuations in tempo that are a feature of many older recorded performances. But this too is a subtle matter, and it certainly hasn't gone away in modern performance. A computer can measure accelerations and decelerations, but to the listener these have different *qualities*. An acceleration can seem impulsive, or uncontrolled, it can seem to be aiming precisely at a target, or to be dangerously wild. It can seem spontaneous or calculated. A deceleration can seem sluggish, calming, boring, cumulative, climactic. You can't easily measure such qualities, but they are what create the narrative of events, and give us more or less of the impression that the performer understands what the music is doing, and is conveying it to us. The reasons for slowing down or speeding up are very varied: they include the changing character of the music, the changing rate of events, technical difficulty, a desire to return to an earlier tempo. Simply measuring tempo is only a starting point for understanding these things.

The allegro of the first movement of Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet contains a number of moments at which players almost invariably adjust the tempo to some extent, for reasons that are embedded in the character of the music. You might imagine that the older recordings would tend to have more exaggerated tempo changes than the newer, but the picture is not as simple as that. The Quatuor Mosaïques, a renowned modern, period-instrument group recorded in 1991, change tempo to about the same extent as the Capet Quartet recorded in 1927/8. The Alban Berg Quartet (1978) and the Chilingirian (1979) make smaller adjustments, but they still make them. It seems that it is against the musical nature of this allegro to take it at a strictly constant pace. As the allegro opens at bar 23, the melody in the first violin is simple, with held minims on the first half of each bar, and with an accompaniment of continuous quavers. This encourages a fast tempo – it could almost be *alla breve*, though the indication is 4/4. The Quatuor Mosaïques set a tempo of crotchet = 156. Patterns of semiquavers begin to appear from bar 50. By bar 56 articulated scales alternate with slurred patterns of broken thirds which persist in all four parts. A tempo which seemed appropriate for the opening of the allegro cannot be sustained convincingly through this passage: density of information has increased substantially, and the music seems to demand more space if it is to be grasped clearly (by both players and listeners). Here the Mosaïques slow to crotchet = 136. At bar 71, there is a new theme, with a poised, dance-like character, and a pattern of triplet quavers.

Here quartets tend to slow down further (the Mosaïques to crotchet = 120). This is not because of the density of information, but because of the relaxed, swinging dance-rhythm, which seems to demand a little easing of the tempo. At bar 84 there is a forte passage, and running semiquavers return. Quartets signal the increased energy with an increase in tempo (the Mosaïques to crotchet = 136). By bar 91, the pattern of the opening theme has returned, and Mozart is working towards the recapitulation fifteen bars later. The Mosaïques increase the tempo further, to crotchet = 142 at bar 91, so that, at the recapitulation, they are able to slip seamlessly back into the opening theme at crotchet = 156 without any noticeable change of gear. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the performance by the Quatuor Mosaïques is the way that they make these subtle adjustments of tempo without drawing attention to them. The listener might well receive the impression that the movement is played at a more or less constant tempo. Because the players understand the changing character of the music so well, they are able to create the impression that every passage is at the 'right' tempo. The adjustments that they make in order to achieve this depend on an understanding of the reasons why each change of tempo is needed. It is not simply a pattern of changes imposed on the music.

**CD Example: Mozart, String Quartet in C, K 465 ('Dissonance'), first movement bars 23 – 106**  
**Quatuor Mosaïques (recorded 1991)**  
**ASTRÉE E8845**

To say that music is something we hear passing by in time, and that it is difficult to describe, is just stating the obvious. We need all the help we can get, particularly when we are trying to get at the subtleties of performance.

In our attempts to describe what we hear on a recording, we are in a similar position to the performer trying to understand the composer and the music. The most satisfactory performances are those in which we seem to perceive with absolute clarity what the composer meant. Of course different performances can seem to achieve this – the 'meaning' is not fixed. But clarity is the essence of great performance, and the essence of extracting and conveying meaning. And this involves a sort of focus that not only identifies meaning, but also excludes the meaningless, and does not seek to add to what is meant. The greatest performances are not those that seem most heavily weighted with meaning. Performers all too often seem anxious to demonstrate that they are deeply serious, by burdening the music with as much meaning as they can give it. But extra meaning beyond what is meant does not clarify, it obscures.

The same applies – at one stage removed – to our attempts to describe performance. Methods and language need to be exactly right for the purpose. It is difficult enough to describe music and performance in words. In order to do it at all, we have to make sure that we are using words with the utmost precision and clarity. New words, or words unfamiliar to musicians, may sometimes be needed. But do they clarify or obscure what one is trying to describe?

In other walks of life, all sorts of new words enter the language, for all sorts of reasons. At one end of the spectrum are new words that become necessary in the sciences, to describe things or concepts that involve new observation or new thinking

– string-theory, dark matter, quarks. Some of these are quirky, some are obscure to non-specialists, but when they are justified, they exist to describe something that is not described by any other word. At the other end of the spectrum is the latest cool jargon of the teenager. These words come from all sorts of backgrounds, and some of them stick and become generally familiar – ‘fit’ or ‘wicked’. I’m told that one of the latest examples is ‘lol’, originally an abbreviation for ‘laugh out loud’, but now used to mean funny or ridiculous, deployed as an adjective, an exclamation, even a verb. Many of these do not describe anything really new, but are a new and instantly fashionable label attached to something familiar. They are picked up to indicate that one is part of the ‘in’ crowd, up to the minute, street-wise, and all the other things that any self-respecting teenager wishes to be seen to be. Often there are unwritten rules about the circumstances in which these terms are appropriate or not, so that the novice can easily be tripped up. This is part of the point: the in crowd can feel superior when someone uses a word in a way that is naff, sad, or even lol. What about new words that enter musicology? Some of them are in the first category – necessary new words to describe new ideas. A good example, that I’ve learned from my Open University colleagues, is ‘entrainment’, a word taken from the biological sciences, and used to describe a broadly analogous concept in music – the ability in an ensemble to synchronise, to change pace, with such split-second accuracy that it seems to defy our understanding of response-times. That’s a good use of a word previously unfamiliar in music. But many of the words that creep in to musicology seem to me to belong more in the latter category, like the fashionable vocabulary of the teenager: new, or newly defined words that are used to make the writer seem important, serious, one of the academic cool gang.

This has been going on for a long time in academic writing, of course. Indeed, some musicologists have taken to this way of writing precisely to align themselves with other academic disciplines that have delighted in convoluted language. But too often this sort of language is used to make a small or simple idea appear big or complex. Sometimes we feel under pressure to do this for financial reasons. We think, rightly or wrongly, that grant-giving bodies are likely to be more impressed by complex language than by straightforward language. But this is only justified if the thought expressed in complex language is itself complex. Albert Einstein made the point well when he said, ‘Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.’

And that really brings me full circle to where I started, with the different languages of musicians and musicologists, and what we might learn from each other. The performance of music is subtle and complex, and performing musicians have skills and knowledge that are very difficult to excavate and describe. It is a huge and largely unexplored territory. There are many different ways of trying to find our way through it, many different methods of analysing, sifting, organising, contextualising, evaluating – as the papers at this conference will show. But one thing that needs to lie at the heart of our researches is an understanding that musicians can teach us as well as learn from us.

