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In Search of a Lost Language: Performing in Early-Recorded Style in Viola and String Quartet Repertoires

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Summary

Early recordings made between the 1880s and mid-1930s reveal a wide gap between the performance practices of a century ago and those of today. Acknowledging this gap means questioning current beliefs that performers should conform to composers' intentions as represented by their scores and prevailing agreed-upon ideas about how those scores should sound. Early recordings also call into question our understanding of period texts, preserving numerous examples of musicians ignoring their own written performance directions. Furthermore, the practices heard on early recordings run counter to the 'neatness and tidiness,' regularity of pulse, and clarity of notated detail and structure that are viewed as integral to current professional performance standards. What these recordings also convey, however, is a more performer-led, communicative and moment-to-moment style of performance, like the unfolding of various events in a story, resulting from the wider-ranging creative possibilities historical performers had at their disposal. Though contemporary musicians often claim fidelity to composers' intentions, numerous recordings by those very composers and the musicians of their era are ignored when they conflict with modern performance norms. Many of today's musicians clearly prefer to avoid the risks associated with playing in ways familiar to the very composers to whom they pledge fidelity. Even historically-informed performers who take inspiration from early recordings often only apply early-recorded practices selectively, dismissing those they find displeasing, distasteful or jarring by pointing to the advanced age of the performers in question, period technological limitations, or the nervousness historical performers are said to have experienced in recording environments. This 'pick-and-choose' approach to applying early-recorded evidence results in playing that conforms more closely to current paradigms of score-adherent, structuralist and neat-and-tidy performance than it does to the evidence itself.

This thesis, together with its accompanying recorded portfolio, aims to circumvent the restrictive nature of modern performance practices while closing the gap between these practices and those heard on early recordings of viola solo, viola/piano and string quartet repertoires. The question this project thus aims to answer is: how might viola and string quartet playing in the performer-centered, moment-to-moment and communicative style heard on early recordings be brought about today? In order to achieve this aim, the study of relevant literatures on early-recorded style is combined with historical research and the detailed analysis and 'all-in' copying of early recordings—the latter of which involves

learning historical playing techniques on the viola, adjusting one's physical approach to the instrument, and imparting the 'all-in' copying method to colleagues in chamber music settings. The recorded portfolio uses a 'live' experimental lo-fi recording method similar to that encountered by many of the historical performers copied, in order to gain insights into how the original recordings were made, and how recording technologies and methods impact the decisions they, and we, make. This study is the first documented approach, in both kind and scale, to copying early-recorded viola solo, duo and string quartet performances, demonstrating the viability of incorporating extremely idiosyncratic and non-score-based practices in single- and multi-player contexts alike.

This text and recorded portfolio point to a re-thinking of the concept of *Werktreue*, predicated upon the notion that 19th-century performers enacted their fidelity to works and composers by creating altered and highly personalized versions of the detail, structure and time of composers' works. This re-thinking of *Werktreue* aims to circumvent current performance practices by giving players a theoretical framework within which to revitalize early-recorded style. Chapter One first contrasts the role of the performer today with that of the early-recorded era. Chapter Two then weighs 'live' lo-fi recording practices against modern hi-fi recording paradigms, pointing to the far-ranging effects that recording method and technology can have on performance style. Chapter Three analyzes recordings by all violists known to have made solo and viola/piano recordings prior to 1930, outlining the distance between modern expectations and the practices of Oskar Nedbal, Léon Van Hout, Arthur Post and Lionel Tertis, while also pointing to the similarities in approach between these violists and contemporaneous singers. Chapter Four analyzes the recordings of the Haagsche Toonkunstkwartet, and the Brüder-Post, Klingler and Czech Quartets, illustrating the wide-ranging stylistic diversity of the early-recorded era. Chapter Five then discusses the process of making the recorded portfolio, which includes 27 copies of historical recordings and extrapolations of early-recorded style in works for which no original exists. The resulting portfolio demonstrates a number of radically alternative approaches to canonic Western Art Music repertoires, thereby circumventing current restrictive performance paradigms, closing the gap between viola and string quartet practices both past and present, and rejuvenating the more personal, intimate and communicative playing styles heard on early recordings.