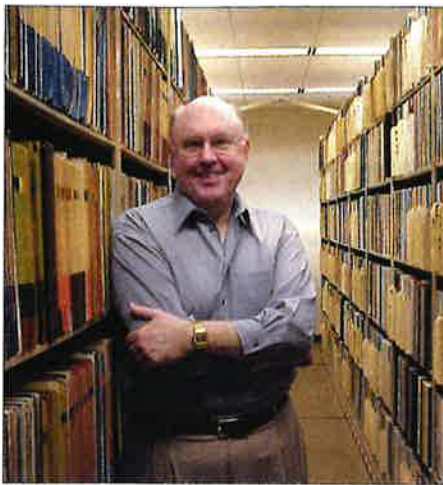


Too many records

For many of us the satisfaction of record collecting, as well as its justification, lies in the way it combines the thrill of discovery with a sharpening of aesthetic values – both becoming gradually encased, over the years, in a warm glow of nostalgia. As one who has specialized in pianists and piano repertoire for over 40 years, I can remember embarking on this voyage at a time when each new LP release of Rubinstein or Horowitz was a major event, when newcomers like Glenn Gould and Van Cliburn (not to mention exotic foreigners like Gilels and Richter) immediately aroused great interest, and when occasional resuscitations of people from what seemed the distant past (Lhévinne, Paderewski, Bauer) broadened our horizons still further. Among pianophiles, there are two incentives that have always loomed particularly large: (1) the vastness, the immensity of the piano literature itself; and (2) a fascination with all that goes into piano technique and interpretation.

This was a time, now vanished, when searching for the new and the old in the welcoming atmosphere of small but well-stocked record shops was a pleasure – with each dealer offering attractions just a bit different from the others. It was also a time when the available information about pianists and their recordings, while hardly vast, provided more than ample stimulation. For instance, the late Harold C. Schonberg was a staunch advocate for the playing of Hofmann, Rachmaninov and their ilk, not just in his book *The Great Pianists* but also in his Sunday pieces for *The New York Times*. Another book, *Speaking of Pianists* by Abram Chasins, brought us vivid first-hand glimpses of the Golden Age of Pianism. And during his brief lifetime, the Polish *émigré* pianist-critic Jan Holcman opened our ears to the true significance of historic recordings and the diverse elements that constitute great piano playing.

I mentioned the broadening of horizons. No one back then could have predicted that this broadening would become an outright explosion by way of two phenomena: the ready availability (whether 'under the counter' or through judicious trading) of live 'private' recordings, and the arrival of the compact disc. As far as I am concerned, the main contribution of CDs to the piano world has not been their sonic superiority, but rather their embrace of a vast panorama of historic material. Despite ominous signs in the present-day market-place, we have benefited tremendously, during the CD's 20-year history, from the devoted efforts of several intelligent, skilled reissue producers and engineers. As a result, the entire legacies of many (if not most) of the great pianists of an earlier era, hitherto difficult or impossible of access, can now be easily heard by all – whether for scholarly examination or for sheer listening pleasure.



Donald Manildi

John Davis

I vividly recall a warm spring afternoon in 1967 when, as an undergraduate, I opened my university mailbox to discover an announcement of a newly founded organization calling itself the International Piano Library. Its Manhattan headquarters were then located in the basement of an Upper West Side apartment building. The IPL's objective was to collect, preserve and disseminate everything relating to the performance and history of the classical piano repertoire – starting with all conceivable recordings and scores that could be located. Theirs was truly a ground-breaking enterprise, and IPL's initial offering to contributing members was something of a Holy Grail to pianophiles: Josef Hofmann's 1936 broadcast performance of the Chopin F minor Concerto. Other releases of equal rarity soon followed, and thus the floodgates were opened to a full assessment of the various pianistic schools and traditions. Little did I dream that some 25 years later, after the IPL had moved to the University of Maryland and became known as IPAM, I would assume the position of curator of that unique collection.

At this moment, with over a century of recorded sound behind us, I can easily set forth my view that we indeed have too many, as well as too few, recordings. Let me explain. A constant, nearly insane duplication of standard repertoire has glutted the catalogues with an excess of perfectly respectable, solidly competent, ultimately boring performances that are outclassed by a much smaller quantity of truly great interpretations. These discs may perhaps have a certain limited value; but for anyone wishing to hear specific works under the best possible auspices, they are expendable. Mere respectability is insufficient when every new version will inevitably be measured against established standards. As Schonberg aptly put it, way back in 1955: 'We don't expect a scared debutante to walk onto the stage of Town Hall

and reincarnate all the glories of Rachmaninoff's performance of [Schumann's] *Carnaval*, but on a record the Rachmaninoff standards definitely do apply. And why not? After all, he recorded the work too, and any pianist who attempts it on discs is thus putting himself into direct competition with the Russian giant.' (Schonberg, of course, would never overlook the undeniable advantage of having numerous contrasting interpretations to select from.)

Which brings me to 'too few recordings'. I am now speaking of what might have been, what could have been, what should have been. Think about it – it is perfectly within the realm of possibility that we could at this moment be listening to Leopold Godowsky playing his own *Passacaglia* and his *Studies on Chopin Etudes*; to Josef Lhévinne tackling *Islamey* and the Brahms *Paganini Variations*; to Rachmaninov and Horowitz as duo-pianists, to Hofmann in the Schumann *Fantasia*, and so on and so forth, far into the night. These missed opportunities are the result of administrative short-sightedness and an inability to view recordings as irreplaceable documents for posterity. There is one hope, however, but it is a form of technology that still awaits development: time-travel. Perhaps someone from a future generation may be able to set time-and-space co-ordinates that will return him or her, inconspicuously, to those occasions when such performances actually took place. A hidden digital recording device will capture those performances and the time-traveller will transport them back to the present. Let's go further, shall we? Why not capture Mozart and Beethoven premiering their new concertos? Or Chopin and Liszt playing their own works?

But from another, more sober angle, we indeed have access, in a certain sense, to time-travel via existing recordings. When I press the 'play' button to hear William Kapell in Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, I am not merely going back to March 19th, 1945, when Kapell set down his blazing performance in the New York studios of RCA Victor. I am also re-living my unforgettable first encounter with this recording and, simultaneously, I am transporting Kapell to the here and now. Such is the miracle, if you will, of recorded sound. Yet the question is still asked as to why fanatical collectors indulge themselves in this fashion. At least part of the answer lies in the true meaning of the term 'nostalgia'. In the original Greek, it means 'homesickness'. Every time we carry a portion of the past (idealized as it may be) to the present, we return home to our formative experiences. As we re-visit and re-evaluate those experiences, we heighten our current awareness. Finally, the repeatability of it all gives us unlimited opportunities for contemplation, gratification and self-renewal. *Donald Manildi*