

On the Record: an alternative approach to recording new works

Recently, when writing about something else entirely, I found myself having a little rant about how and when we record new works. '[P]remieres should be much less of a spectacle and, ideally, should not be recorded,' I wrote, and then nipped it in the bud. I want to get to the bottom of this dissatisfaction, though, and throw some ideas out there.

It's hard to imagine Glenn Gould agreeing to his very first performance of the Goldberg Variations being a) recorded and b) broadcast and c) released on disc. Performers of mainstream (historical) classical music build up a small and focused repertoire from their teenage years, performing the big works again and again, in competitions, small recitals, regional festivals etc., before they take them to the major stages of the world.

Which is why it is absurd to capture the very first outing of a brand-new work, as it takes its first tottering steps and gazes out at the world, startled and uncertain, and to consider this a satisfactory (if not the ultimate) documentation. Everyone, I'm sure, understands that it takes time for an interpretation of a new work to mature, especially one with complex material, and yet we forget to factor this in when thinking about recording contemporary music. Our obsession with the new wrongly privileges the premiere, and market forces have frozen us in a defensive attitude, fearful of the cost, fearful that the piece may not be performed again, fearful of putting the art before the economics. I don't believe that anyone has bad intentions, just bad habits.

It seems it's not only those of us in new music that are pushing back against the obsession with the premiere. Choreographer and performance maker Maija Hirvanen and curator Eva Neklyaeva write this:

What if we deconstruct the whole mechanism of stress, press, and complicatedness of the premiere? "The World Premiere," "The National Premiere." What if we see it for what it is, just one of the many moments of how the work comes out into the world? Feel it now, in your body, as just one moment of many—of many before and many after. Doesn't this make it more vivid, more alive?¹

Yes, yes it does. What a lovely vision!

In the name of balancing a rant with some practical solutions, I have drawn up some guidelines for an alternative approach to recording new works. These are grounded in my own experience, as a performer, curator and co-director of a record label. I am not ignoring the reality of economic pressures, nor the crisis within the recording industry, and what I propose in these guidelines is no more expensive than what currently happens: it is more considered and more fair. As with all propositions, flexibility is assumed and, if all parties are involved in the process, very much encouraged.

¹ 'Unlearning' in Maija Hirvanen and Eva Neklyaeva, *Practical Performance Magic: Recipes and Spills* (self-published, 2023), 65.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO RECORDING NEW WORKS

When recording new works, I propose the following guidelines:

1. Celebrate the first, second and third performances as live events (or recorded for the archive);
2. Cultivate the convention of capturing a 'mature' performance, or create the conditions for a studio recording;
3. Factor in a recording strategy when planning first performances, i.e. make it part of the commissioning process;
4. Distinguish clearly between recordings taken for the archive (which are useful as documentation) and recordings taken for public broadcast/commercial release;
5. Revive the practice of recording the general rehearsal (for patching) as well as the performance.

Additionally, it seems worth reiterating some basic guidelines:

- pay the performer(s) *something* for recording;
- offer the performer(s) danger money if recording a premiere, in recognition of the extra pressure it applies;
- always tell the performer(s) well in advance if a performance is due to be recorded or filmed for any purpose;
- always offer the performer(s) and composer(s) right of refusal before their work is broadcast or commercially released;
- work in partnership with the performer(s) and the composer(s).

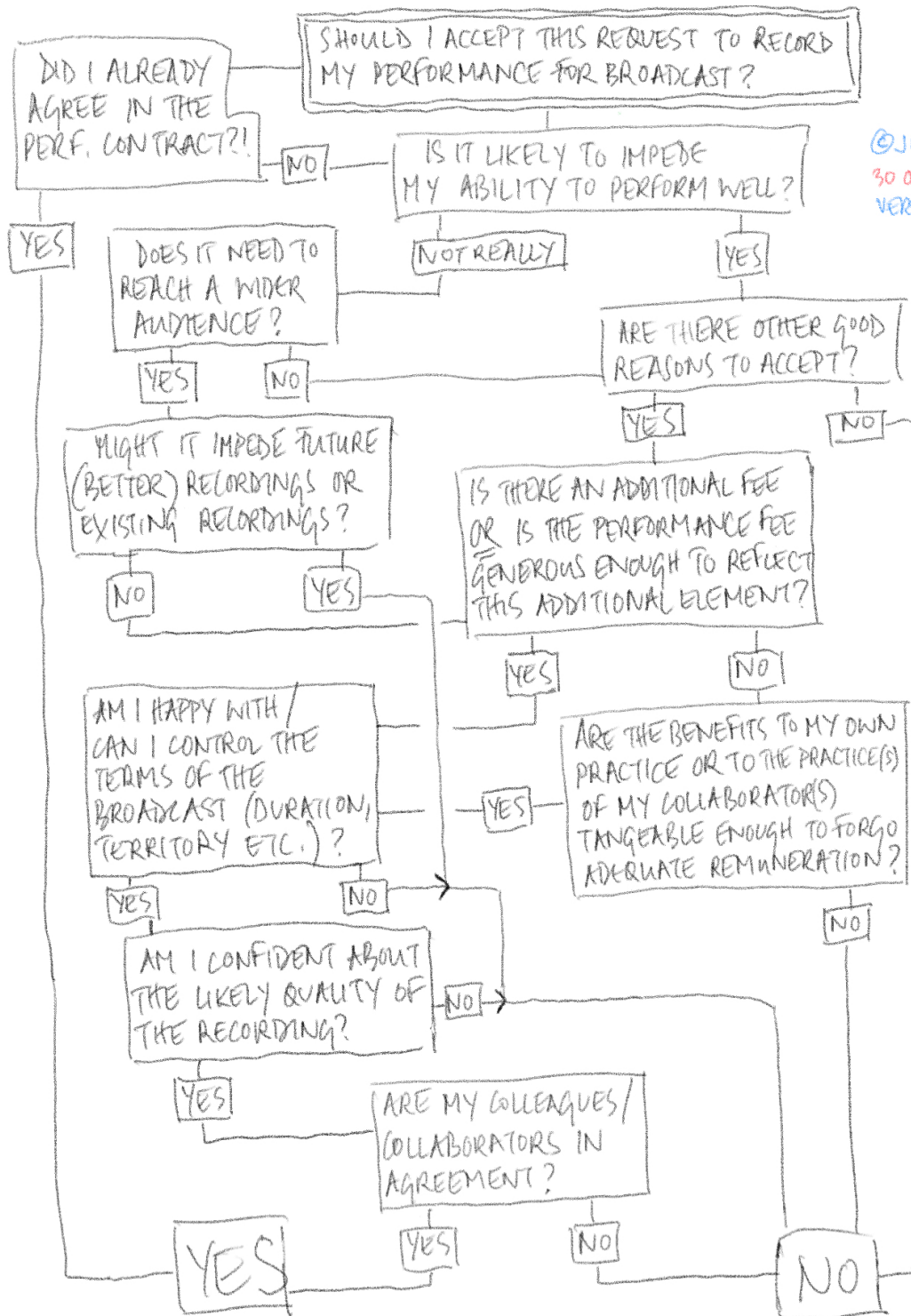
I offer you two examples that have shaped these guidelines:

The first and second performances of *Skin* by Rebecca Saunders were recorded at Donaueschinger Musiktage and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival respectively, in October/November 2016. The Donaueschingen performance was broadcast on SWR and then quickly released on CD as part of a festival round-up on NEOS; similarly the Huddersfield performance was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and released in 2022 (6 years later) on NMC. Those performances were among my first as a soloist on the international circuit. I was absolutely terrified. It was my first time singing Saunders, my first time working with the ensemble, my first time at Donaueschingen. In short, I was very much still finding my feet in that role and with that material, and though I have since gone on to perform the piece over 20 times, it is these first performances that are the official records of this piece. Nobody is interested in recording the piece properly (whether taking a live performance now that the interpretation has matured or of making a studio recording) precisely because these recordings exist.

The first performance of *the being/the world* by Catherine Lamb was recorded at WDR in March 2024 and broadcast shortly afterwards. The recording process was based on a standard concert performance and wasn't able to capture the spatial elements or subtle choreography of the piece; as a result, we have a recording that doesn't fully document the performance. What we have, in my opinion, is an adequate archive recording but it is otherwise of limited use because we didn't take the time to think carefully about what the piece required (it probably needed to be filmed). However, at the time there were no subsequent performances in the pipeline so I imagine we would all have opted to record it for the archive nonetheless.

To conclude, I share this flowchart I made back in 2021, during the pandemic, when everything was suddenly being recorded for an online audience, often without the performers being consulted or even told. I'm not sure that it led to anybody doing anything differently, but it made me feel better.

Juliet Fraser, 27 June 2024



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