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Operas, Ethics, and Elektra: A Return to the Recordings of John Culshaw

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Reviewed by Nicholas Clark and Michele Spanghero

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> *If there is any secret about the sort of work we have been doing in Vienna over the past few years, it has finally nothing to do with bigger and better machines, although they certainly increase efficiency: it has to do with trying to get to the heart of a score before you record a note of it, so that before you begin you have a concept of what the final record is going to sound like. This concept may, of course, be right or wrong; it may be sustained or modified as things progress; but the important thing is that it should be there to start with, for the catalogues are full of examples to show what happens when it isn't.*
>
> *John Culshaw, "Three for the Road,"* Gramophone *(March 1968): 474.*

Amid the wealth of opera recordings produced in the mid-twentieth century, the sets released by the Decca Record Company continue to resound with critics and listeners alike. [1] Crucial to their production and success was John Culshaw, Classical Artists and Repertoire Manager for Decca from 1956 to 1967. Culshaw's work in opera—which includes the first complete stereo release of Wagner's mammoth *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1959-1966)—blazed a progressive trail. His aesthetic as a producer envisioned opera on record not as a simulacrum of a live opera house performance but as an independent realization subject to its own conventions. Such an approach boldly seized the opportunities offered by stereophonic sound and the recording studio: "the ideal stereo version of any opera must be a production in its own right *within its own medium* [Culshaw's italics]. It is not meant to put the listener in his favorite seat at the opera house: it should not even try. Within its own terms, it can do much better." [2] In attempting to do "better," however, Culshaw sparked a complex discourse concerning the relationship of recorded opera with "liveness" and audio-visual media. Though the studio recording practices of Culshaw's heyday are now a distant memory, their legacy still reverberates in the present.

While the Decca *Ring* continues to attract discursive attention in this regard, several Culshaw-produced operas in the Decca catalogue remain underexplored—for example, the 1967 recording of Richard Strauss's 1909 opera *Elektra*, one of Culshaw's last projects for the company. [3] For casual listeners and connoisseurs alike, the Decca *Elektra* remains an impressive interpretation featuring a formidable group of performers: soprano Birgit Nilsson as Elektra, the ever-versatile mezzo-soprano Regina Resnik as Elektra's mother Klytämnestra, soprano Marie Collier as Elektra's sister Chrysothemis, and a tremendous supporting cast led by conductor Georg Solti (not yet then "Sir") with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. [4] No less remarkable was Decca's veteran recording team assembled for the project: producer Christopher Raeburn, who assisted Culshaw with the singers; engineers Gordon Parry and James Brown; and tape editor Jack Law. [5]

Despite such distinguished participants on the Decca *Elektra*, critical response to the final recording was divided. Some critics were wowed, others were more equivocal in their assessment. Apart from quibbles with the performances of the principal artists, Culshaw's choices as producer received the severest scrutiny. He normally responded to such criticisms in an oblique manner, yet on this occasion he was provoked to "join battle" against Conrad L. Osborne, whose review in *High Fidelity* magazine took the producer and his methods strongly to task. While Culshaw cast him as a *custos morum* of stolid operatic tradition, Osborne nevertheless provided a sustained and insightful critique of recorded opera and Culshaw's approach. Far from being a petty debate, their rejoinders help illuminate the various discourses of aesthetic criticism that surround works of recorded art, broadly speaking, as well as ethical repercussions which, though diffuse, are no less consequential. [6]

Putting *Elektra* on Record

In a *Gramophone* essay titled "Three for the Road," Culshaw laid out the primary goals for Decca's recording of *Elektra*. (It remains one of his few substantial commentaries on the project.) Apart from the opera being a self-professed favorite, "*Elektra* had never been properly recorded in either the musical or the technical sense, for earlier versions had suffered from cuts and from a type of balance which perversely made the text audible at the expense of Strauss's music." [7] Here Culshaw targeted the only other stereophonic release of the work, produced by Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft (DGG) in 1960. [8] Elsewhere his critique was more explicit: "Some people think that the orchestra plays too dominating a part in the Decca *Ring*, and naturally I disagree with them; such people probably like the DGG *Elektra*, which to my ear is unbearable because of the unvarying proximity of the voices and the swimming bath diffusion of the orchestra." [9]

At the end of the essay, Culshaw observed that, to his ears, "the sound of *Elektra* is as good as, and possibly better than, anything Decca has done with the Vienna Philharmonic." Domination by the orchestra was a common critique of Culshaw's recordings, and the Decca *Elektra* would be no exception. For many listeners (and their equipment), the orchestras on Decca opera sets frequently overwhelmed the voices, which were not, according to some, always adequately captured. Birgit Nilsson was repeatedly critical of such instances, and the company's earlier recording of *Salome*, for which she sang the title role, was her case in point: "On the album cover the producer, John Culshaw, is quoted as saying, 'Never before has one been able to hear the triangle in a performance. Here for the first time you can hear this instrument.' I have nothing against the public's hearing the triangle, but I ask myself whether the voice of *Salome* is not at least as important. It is always lovely to hear one's voice praised but it is a bit

disappointing to hear that the sound is better live than on the recording. Or worse: that the voice sounds better on some pirated recordings than on takes from the studio.” [10] While the liner notes for *Salome* in fact contain no such quotation, Nilsson nevertheless identifies the power struggle inherent in recording: should the singers receive the advantage over the orchestra? [11] A few years before *Salome*, Culshaw had anticipated such complaints: “Are people who buy complete operas collecting voices or performances? If the answer is performances, then positions and perspectives matter (without them, the system is merely an improvement in sound quality and nothing else).” [12] The emphasis on “performance” meant that all components were subject to the totality of the opera’s presentation on record, musically *and* dramatically.

To that end, one of the major selling points of Decca’s *Elektra*—and the one aspect for which it was universally lauded—is its unabridged presentation of Strauss’s score. The opera endured a variety of cuts after its premiere that persist in recordings and contemporary productions. Presenting operas complete was an implicit aspect of Decca’s aesthetic, however, and Culshaw and Solti were adamant that the score be recorded in full; for Culshaw, sanctioned cuts never meant *permanent* cuts. Nilsson resisted, claiming the cuts amounted to nearly a third of the opera. Culshaw timed them at a meager seven minutes. Eventually, a compromise was reached to record the excisions in February 1967. Yet the availability of Nilsson and the touring schedule of the Vienna Philharmonic meant that an ad-hoc orchestra had to be assembled to record the missing minutes, which were then spliced into the master tape. Culshaw understood that such editing was noisome to some, but to him, the artistic ends justified the technological means: “Whatever some critics may say, I feel that this is a case where technology really came to the service of music, for without ‘immoral’ splices, and without superimposition, there would be no complete *Elektra* on the market today.” [13] His belief in the ultimate “service of music” would occasion similar defenses, which, as will be seen, abound with ethical implications.

Birgit Nilsson as Elektra wields an axe during a recording of Richard Strauss's *Elektra* at the Sofiensaal, Vienna, Spring 1966. Credit: Decca/Hanak/Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission.

Osborne contra Culshaw

Despite Culshaw's optimisms, *High Fidelity* critic Osborne described the recording as an "interesting but, so far as I'm concerned, unsuccessful production of *Elektra*." His February 1968 review "*Elektra*: A Stage Work Violated? or a New Sonic Miracle?" opens with a direct volley at Culshaw, never mentioned by name: "'Tis a tale of the powers and limitations of the producer. The powers are such these days that a producer is free to create almost any ambience, any effect he wishes. The limitation is that his efforts won't necessarily do what he thinks they will do for the work at hand." [14] Apart from "botched" effects, Osborne cited certain "sound environments" perceptible within scenes to suggest characters inhabiting different locations or worlds within the recording. (Here he focused on the opera's confrontation scene between Elektra and Klytämnestra.) Such choices distractingly fragmented the recording's continuity and demonstrated an incredible act of license. "Beautiful close-ups of the buttresses and gargoyles do not a picture of a cathedral make," Osborne observed in closing.

Osborne made similar—though more direct and cogent—remarks on producer intrusions in his otherwise positive review of Decca's set of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, released the previous year: "the device gets between me and the effect the music wants to make." [15] Here, he chalked up such choices to "confused aesthetic reasoning" that strives for "actuality" over "emotional and psychological verity." By attempting to engender a verisimilar stage atmosphere, according to Osborne, a recording took the risk of being too literal, which undermines its effect. The point is apt. As Culshaw

stressed repeatedly, a recording is by its very nature distinct from the stage. The acoustic conventions of the stage and effects that invoke them, however lightly, would seem to drag the recording counterintuitively back to the one thing it seemingly tries to avoid.

In his review of *Elektra*, Osborne suggested that such choices were indicative of an unavoidable reality: the change in the medium of presentation—here, from the stage to the recording—also risked changing the actual material presented. (Here his focus was, again, on the implied sound environments.) Osborne framed a fair question that could be read as a blunt challenge: “Can a work conceived and written by masters of the live theatre be translated in a new medium without extensive alteration?” Such alteration might not itself even be a conscious choice. As a solution, Osborne suggested that, instead of recording existing stage works, recording companies should commission new operas conceived specifically for the gramophone and therefore inherently attentive to the medium’s conventions: “Good or bad, it will be more valid than the technically accomplished violation of stage works.” He conceded, however, that some recordings of existing works were not without value: “mistakes along the way should be indulged. This *Elektra* should be heard by everyone seriously interested in opera and/or recordings, if only to ponder the aesthetics of the questions it raises.” By making the charge that a stage work had been violated, however, Osborne catapulted questions about the recording’s suitability into an ethical sphere that questioned the integrity of a work transplanted from its “intended” medium.

Producers and Reviewers Strike Back and Strike Again

Osborne’s review provoked a visceral response from Culshaw, which appeared eight months later in *High Fidelity* with the title “The Record Producer Strikes Back.” [16] The major thrust of the rebuttal concerned the consistent comparisons to live theatrical practice; after all, Culshaw reiterated, a recording operates under totally different sensory circumstances. After rehashing Osborne’s alleged “paroxysms of rage” at Culshaw’s having “massacred a masterpiece,” he zoomed in on Osborne’s choice of the word “violation” in his review. In Culshaw’s reading, that choice exposed the reviewer’s bias as a member “of that very tiny minority of people” constituting opera houses audiences versus the record-buying public. [17]

To Culshaw, the principal concern of the record producer was to reach those beyond that minority, to impact people who would likely never experience live opera, “to make the sound of the music more immediate than it could ever be when heard from most seats in most opera houses.” As a result, producers should not predicate recordings on live experience. They must instead ask, “‘will this make dramatic and musical sense in domestic surroundings to someone who may even be hearing the opera for the first time?’ In a word, the recording has to have impact, and I use the word without relating it to loudness.” Such impact was not above evoking “stage atmosphere” for dramatic means, but such attempts held the potential to echo live performances too strongly. [18]

Culshaw conceded that Osborne’s quandaries about the recording were valid yet easy to address: “These are good questions, but I don’t think anyone who has ever paid hard cash for opera on records would have the slightest difficulty in answering them. Where are we? We are not in the theatre; we are where music belongs: in the mind and in the emotions and in the imagination. And what is the audience/performer relationship? It is closer than it has ever been, precisely because there is no proscenium arch when you listen to records.” [19] The benefit of new media technologies rested on their capacity to foster this intimacy and remove the “conventions and obstacles” associated with live

performances. The producer, furthermore, also had an obligation to harness the rapidly developing technology of the twentieth century, “otherwise the record, as a growing means of musical communication, will die.” For Culshaw, the evangelical potential of the medium was paramount and should be cultivated further “because if performed art doesn’t adjust to life, life won’t adjust to performed art.”

The essays by Osborne and Culshaw occasioned a flurry of reader responses for and against both. Even John McClure, an eminent producer at Columbia Records, entered the fray. Osborne authored two contrasting rejoinders. The first was a fake feature, “Audiovideo in Review.” Published in the December 1968 issue of *High Fidelity*, it presented a tongue-in-cheek projection of an issue from December 2068. Using alter egos of the magazine’s critics and a range of absurd, futuristic recording neologisms, Osborne lampooned contemporary discourse on fusions of audio and video technology and the future awaiting the recording medium if current practice persisted. Throughout, Osborne trolls Culshaw on his own ground. The fusion of audio and video is indeed the future, and technology will allow all manner of marvels. But left unchecked, the results could veer towards the grotesque. The highlight of this false document is a review of a new “audiovisual capsule” of *Elektra* conducted by “Culshaw.” Adopting the pseudonym Piotr G. Dupinksky—an allusion to regular *High Fidelity* reviewer Peter G. Davis—Osborne skewers this hypothetical creation for its “all-out, Grand Guignol-style,” including the perfectly caught sound of Klytämnestra’s voice coming through a pane of glass.

For the April 1969 issue of *High Fidelity*, Osborne authored a second, more conventional riposte that succinctly summarized his original positions against those of Culshaw and McClure. [20] Points are conceded, falsehoods are called out, and unanswered questions are highlighted. Osborne ended with a list of three long-range “investments” that record companies might pursue instead of consigning “operatic modernity” to the continued “slathering of century-old stage works with irrelevant melodramatic sound effects.” These include 1) using recording company resources to set up a “clearinghouse” for younger singers, 2) commissioning new operas solely for phonographic recording, and 3) a new “industry-supported workshop of the audio-visual arts.” Osborne admitted that his ideas had limited financial feasibility, but he reiterated how recorded opera limited its potentials by keeping itself to works conceived initially for the stage.

Culshaw offered no direct response to Osborne’s “investments,” but such topics were not unfamiliar to him. His posthumous memoir *Putting the Record Straight* (1981) offers frequent critiques of management at Decca signing up younger singers and promising them a range of projects without proper consideration of their longevity or the fiscal worth of the repertoire in question. [21] Whereas Culshaw commissioned the opera *Owen Wingrave* (1971) from Benjamin Britten for BBC Television, ostensibly answering Osborne’s second point, television opera could not claim to be new phenomenon in the 1970s. [22] Culshaw’s writings from the post-*Ring* period are also rife with propositions of new audio-visual convergences, which saw some realizations during his tenure at the BBC. One wonders what he would make of the twenty-first century phenomenon of live-streaming opera, something he presaged several times in his writings. [23] Finally, while he maintained an active schedule of lecturing and artistic consulting until his premature death in 1980, Culshaw lamentably never established a relationship with any developmental media enterprise.

Sir Georg Solti and John Culshaw sitting together during a recording of *Elektra* at the Sofiensaal, Vienna, Spring 1966. Credit: Decca/Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission.

Towards a "Culshavian" Ethic of Recorded Opera

Constructing an ethic for recorded opera on Culshaw's behalf remains complicated. Though ethical concerns abound in his writings, he made no attempt to codify such matters explicitly. The Osborne exchanges represent an attempt in that direction, and one wonders how, if he had responded to Osborne's second response, Culshaw would have provided further questions or clarifications. Further muddying matters is the extent to which Culshaw's aesthetic and ethical approaches can be seen to vary from recording to recording. While he stated over and over that stereo, as a medium, was what one made of it, Culshaw openly conceded that the boundaries of artistic judgment were not definite: "the question of how far to go in producing an opera for stereo is a tricky one." [24]

Despite these ambiguities, certain ethical threads in the debates on the Decca *Elektra* warrant reflection. They are mostly concerned with the politics of mediation: for example, the relationships between human and mechanical elements, the tension between live performance and recording, or even the political apportioning of the sonic space between voice and orchestra. But an ethics of opera recording must first contend with the space within which that system is to be grounded. Any construct of ethics must be grounded in a plane of social interaction and circulation, since ethics by its very nature depends upon the organization of a social group to inform what principles of behavior and/or belief are valued (or devalued) as well as how those principles are conveyed. [25] In the case of opera recordings, the social plane would appear to comprise

those who make records and those who consume them. However, the division between makers and consumers is blurred by the fact that all of them, through circulation, contribute in one way or another to the collective assigning of value to the recording and/or any of its subsidiary components.

Perhaps the most preclusive ethical component of opera recording is the act of listening, and, with it, the ethics and politics of listening. As Colin Symes observes, "as distinct from hearing, listening is *not* a natural process [Symes's emphasis] but one that is socially constructed, produced through powerful discourses associated with sound, such as those concerning the presentation of music." [26] For the makers of records, listening involved actively scrutinizing what was acceptable and what was not acceptable. For the audience of a record, listening was ostensibly more passive, though more than once Culshaw entertained the idea of a technology that would give the listener more control over what was aurally presented. He also addressed the serious ethical quandaries that a widespread "do-it-yourself" technology could inspire: "A whole new scale of values would emerge, and a method of measurement would have to be invented. Assuming the medium to be tape, would two and a half feet of Nilsson be worth more or less than the same length of Callas?" [27] In this way, the ethical aspect of listening would ultimately hinge on allegiances and assignments of value. Culshaw did not provide a final judgment on the DIY issue. He merely declared that such a technology had great value in investing the listener with an intimate knowledge of the music as a "performer" of sorts, and that such a development, in whatever form it may take, is part of an inevitable progress towards a more participatory listener.

Another aspect of this ethical construction, hinted at previously, concerns the transportation of opera from a solely theatrical space into a purely acoustic space. A fully staged opera required, and still requires, a venue for collective gathering, even if it is not a conventional theatrical space. One consequence of phonographic records was a certain democratization of opera by liberating it from its traditional location(s) of performance. As Culshaw observed, "the sickness of opera has been, and is, that it is a very expensive and exclusive closed shop." [28] One also gets a sense that his responses to Osborne are a response to his perceptions of a wider elitism in opera culture, an elitism more detrimental than beneficial.

These elements culminate in perhaps the most politicizing component of the ethics of opera recording: the tenuous relationship recorded opera maintains with live performance. Critics of mid-century studio opera recordings had no qualms about deeming them "immoral" in comparison with live performances. Though studio recordings could impress, their "artificial" nature placed them in direct confrontation with the transitory and spontaneous experience of the opera house, which carried an implied "moral" authority. Culshaw himself saw the two as cohabiters, but his viewpoint was only one of many. The philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno, conventionally seen as the arch-nemesis of the "culture industry," saw much laudable potential in opera on record: "It allows for the optimal presentation of music, enabling it to recapture some of the force and intensity that had been worn threadbare in the opera houses. Objectification, that is, a concentration on music as the true object of opera, may be linked to a perception that is comparable to reading, to the immersion in a text." [29]

Many others, however, took a hostile stance. Sadler's Wells Opera administrator Norman Tucker described stereo opera as "an enormous menace." Harold Rosenthal, editor of the journal *Opera*, qualified begrudged praise for Decca's 1962 release of *Salome* with a caveat: "I am staggered. I am bowled over. And yet I feel there is some

element of cheating in that one has got something one would never get in the theatre.” [30] *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg took Culshaw’s colleagues at other companies to task in 1968: “So what comes out is a glossy, superbly engineered product that has no relation to life or to the music actually made in the concert hall. It is somewhat disconcerting to hear Victor and Columbia engineers admit that they are Culshawites. They are interested in sound, not content: in frequency response, not honest reproduction. In short, they are beginning to traffic primarily in gimmicks, many of those gimmicks, such as ‘added stereo,’ thoroughly dishonest.” [31]

Culshaw took to the offensive regarding such comments, taking the makers of live opera to task for, in his view, mistaking the problem: “People will always go to hear good performances and pay good money for them. What they will no longer tolerate is the third-rate, the shoddy, the apologetic repertory performance. Why should they, when they can hear the first-rate at home?” [32] Part of this push for perfection was the nature of the medium. A record was a thing to be played with a degree of repetition, and, as such, was not a place to enshrine errors. Culshaw addressed this concern frequently: “Flaws which float by in a concert are heard once and forgotten. Even in a live broadcast, when accidents can happen they pass in one ear and out the other. But on a record such flaws would become a major irritation on the second or third time of playing, so they have to be as far as possible eliminated.” [33] Furthermore, though preoccupations with sound were unavoidable with a purely aural medium, Culshaw arguably strove for an ideal balance between the acoustic and dramatic content in his recordings. This was exemplified in Decca’s controversial “SonicStage” technique. Introduced in marketing for Decca’s 1962 release of Strauss’s opera *Salome*, SonicStage initially encompassed Decca’s attempt at greater clarity of orchestral sound while affording more possibilities to the voice: “In one sense it is a *musical* advance because it reveals more of the musical texture without isolating or detaching any strand; but even more, it is a *dramatic* development, enabling the artists to convey extremely subtle shades of theatrical expression.” [34] The term SonicStage has also come to encompass how actual staging was employed during recording sessions to enhance such “expression.” Singers would act on a gridded stage with simplified but dramatically sensible movements, based on the opera’s stage directions. *Elektra* would be one of the final projects branded with the term, though the stress on sound quality and staging would persist at Decca in the following decades. In an ironic echo of Schonberg's excoriation of recording “gimmicks,” however, Culshaw later disparaged the term SonicStage as “childish.” [35]

Sir Georg Solti conducting a recording of Richard Strauss's Der Rosenkavalier, at the Sofiensaal, Vienna, November 1968. Credit: Decca/Hanak/Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission.

Attempting a Playback

John Culshaw's recordings, like those across various discographies, are representations and embodiments as much of the musical works they inscribe as of the aesthetics, values, and ethics of the individuals who made them. Within the embodied practice of recording, they remain a political reflection of what is both sonically and aesthetically desirable and preferable. In considering the possible tenets of an ethics of opera recording, certain points become salient. An ethics of opera recording is grounded on a social plane of interaction comprising diffuse stages of circulation. This social plane is populated by members of a record "community" who remain, regardless of their role or function as maker or consumer, assigners of value as listeners to the recording in question. There are many other aspects still to be teased out and critiqued not only within Culshaw's discourse but also within those of his contemporary producers and successors. The recordings keep us listening and reevaluating, as they were intended to do.

In the fifty years since the release of Decca's *Elektra*, the sub-spheres of this circulation have been broadened considerably not only because of the proliferation of the recording in various analogue and digital forms, but also with the ever-expanding discography of the opera. Culshaw admitted that the Decca *Elektra* responded to what came before it, and Decca's release would surely elicit responses as well. In *Gramophone*'s survey of the discography of *Elektra* in 2013, the Decca *Elektra* came in as the "alternative choice" to the "top choice," Profil's 2004 release of the opera conducted by Semyon Bychkov. [36] As more recordings are created and released—many now recorded and edited from live performances—the circulation continues and the evaluation will start once again. While this circulation continues in print, the digital realm must also be examined as a prime site of circulation. Across the Internet, recordings are streamed or downloaded, bootlegs are furtively exchanged, and fierce debate rages about the merits of an individual conductor, a performer, a performance, and even the opera itself. Within this circulation, the ethical aspect of opera recording will continue to finesse itself in the manner of the medium it envelopes: attempt, assemble, playback, repeat. Of this point, John Culshaw would doubtless approve.

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Review

By Nicholas Clark

One of the projects undertaken by John Culshaw, following his move from Decca Records to become Head of music programmes at BBC Television, was to produce a semi-staged (if that is the correct phrase) version of *Winterreise*, recorded in the Snape Maltings Concert Hall in September 1970. Benjamin Britten accompanied tenor Peter Pears, who appeared in nineteenth-century costume and was filmed from a number of vantage points on stage. The pianist was concealed from view throughout – a decision that arose allegedly from Britten's insistence, but also from Culshaw's belief that concentration solely on the singer would focus the viewer/listener's awareness on the suffering experienced by Schubert's forlorn lover. Not having Britten in shot was seen by many as something of a risk, one that continues to divide critical opinion as to its success.

Culshaw, however, was never one to take a conventional stance, a point that is emphasized in this thought-provoking analysis of his 1967 Decca recording of Strauss's *Elektra*. This was Culshaw's final project for the label and it saw him working with a number of legendary artists, with Georg Solti, conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, at the musical helm. Ryan Prendergast investigates the background and process of the recording, as well as some of its reception history. He broadens his focus by reflecting on the not inconsequential responsibilities encountered by the performer, the recording engineer, and those who decide about whether to make opera available to the masses – all of which were of interest to Culshaw.

Two of Culshaw's key objectives for *Elektra* were: (1) to record the complete opera, including previous excisions; and (2) pay close attention to the dramatic integrity of the piece. The feasibility of translating the opera from the theatre, for which it was composed, to the recording studio, was fervently debated between Culshaw and reviewer Conrad L. Osborne. Useful points were raised by both men, from obviously contrasting perspectives, but one is struck particularly by Culshaw's theories on the importance of preserving opera past and present in the best quality format, and making

it universally accessible. The argument over whether the drama of live production either undermines that of a recording, equals, or surpasses it, is unlikely to be settled in the near future. From a historical point of view, though, it is fascinating to witness such an animated and informed discussion on the topic in the wake of the first full-length recording of *Elektra*. Culshaw's recording, we are informed, was the 'alternative choice' in *Gramophone*'s 2013 survey of the discography of the 1909 opera. (The 'top choice' was 'Profil Medien's 2004 release, conducted by Semyon Bychkov.)

Culshaw was a committed advocate for the possibilities afforded by preserving opera in audio-visual format, but neither his methods nor his ideas were readily accepted by everyone. A recording, Culshaw argued, placed the listener 'where music belongs: in the mind and in the emotions and in the imagination'. This mode of thinking connects the foresight and technical expertise of the recording engineer with the creativity and talent of the composer and performer. Prendergast focuses, in an essay rich with insights, on the context of this and other statements made by Culshaw. He comments perceptively on how Culshaw's sometimes prescient remarks were viewed fifty years ago and notes their relevance to the labyrinthine avenues (increased dramatically through the advent of the internet) of the recording industry of the early twenty-first century.

Review

By Michele Spanghero

1

There is no such thing as "truth" in audio recordings. Microphones always lie. (Even the most advanced binaural recordings cannot properly reproduce the acoustic experience of the audience.)

Since there is no truth, the moral issue is inherent to the act of recording and, at the same time, unsolvable.

Recording is a process, and every process requires choices. It goes without saying that every choice has ethical consequences.

Listening is a cultural process. Listening to mechanically reproduced sounds is regulated by technological standards that set new listening approaches.

Ethics is about right or wrong, and it includes rules and habits. Whether someone follows those habits and rules is an ethical decision. Whether someone or something is right or wrong is a function of moral judgment.

2

For many reasons, including economic ones, classical music records producers typically prefer to replicate the feeling of a live theater performance. John Culshaw instead chose to use all of the possibilities that recording technologies offered to create new experiences, and this evidently shocked (and probably still shocks) the melomaniacs. Culshaw created some kind of what we may call "sound design," or maybe "sound dramaturgy," on his records (e.g., emphasizing the panning of the orchestral sections), but I believe that the aural results of his Decca records are still astonishing.

Culshaw had foreseen the importance of the recording studio in modern music. Nowadays, 90% of the music we listen to is recorded and produced with overdubbing

and other editing processes. Today, the recording studio is used as a tool by musicians—or, rather, as an instrument itself. Sound design now completely invades our perception of reality; therefore, the issue of Culshaw's recordings seems to me almost rhetorical (but the world of opera is full of rhetoric and reactionaries). What I find attractive is that Culshaw's recordings evoked a very cinematic effect in my mind, and it is interesting to note that Culshaw's masterpiece is the Wagner collection, considering that Wagner is arguably the most cinematic composer.

Culshaw did not follow the habits of production for opera records. Therefore, some judged his work to be unethical. But to stage an opera means to interpret its score, so any new production, in any format, is always a “betrayal” of the composer's original intentions. The orchestra director is in charge of the musical interpretation of the score and is the main figure responsible towards the composer, the musicians, and the audience. Culshaw went beyond the conventional role of the producer and made technical choices that had drastic artistic results, so he probably stepped on the work of Solti and maybe Solti was the only one who would have had the right to complain about Culshaw. Did Solti ever complain about Culshaw's work?

3

I have a small collection of vinyl recordings of operas, due to my mother's passion for melodrama. I remember that I always had a weird feeling when hearing in those recordings the singers’ steps on the wooden stage or other ambient sounds. They reminded me of the presence of the stage and of the set thereupon, which I could not fully experience through the recording. I believe that those (accidental?) sounds may have two (of many) effects on the listener: fascination or frustration. As the Italian poet Leopardi wrote, when a sense is hindered, imagination replaces it. In the case of recordings, sound may stimulate a kind of "vision." This was probably Culshaw's intention: to stimulate listeners' visual and spatial imaginations by enhancing the stereophonic effect on his recordings.

Another aural memory from my vinyl collection, which came to my mind several times while reading Prendergast's essay: the amazing performance of soprano Katia Ricciarelli in Verdi’s *Requiem* as conducted by Abbado (DGG 1980). What made that recording unique is how Ricciarelli, at the end of her solo during “Libera me,” made an unexpected legato with an extremely difficult phrasing, including a pitch shift that was not actually required by Verdi's score. I remember listening to a radio interview a few years ago in which Ricciarelli explained how she had to perform that legato because she was overdubbing a previous recording that had been corrupted by a technical defect, and she was alone in the recording studio, without Abbado conducting her. Knowing that Abbado was very strict about rhythm, and since she had no references, she decided to make that hazardous legato to be "a tempo," without breathing. She had been able to do such a long legato only because she was in a recording studio, and she did it in “apnea” (her words); on stage, this would have been almost impossible. This story reminded me that, sometimes, studio recordings and overdubbing may give singers or other musicians the possibility to make memorable performances and better records.

Notes

1

At the time, Decca released its albums in North American on the label of its subsidiary, London Records.

2

John Culshaw, “The Stereo Approach to Opera,” *Saturday Review* (January 16, 1960): 74. Culshaw, like many writers on recording in this period, always identified the home listener as male.

3

Culshaw left Decca in October 1967 to become the Head of Music for BBC Television.

4

Released in November 1967 on the Decca label as a 12” 33rpm two-record set with matrix numbers MET354-55 (mono) and SET354-55 (stereo). Released in December 1967 on the London label as a 12” 33rpm two-record set with matrix numbers A4269 (mono) and OSA1269 (stereo). First released on CD in October 1986 with matrix number 417 345.2DH as a two-disc set ADD. (Philip Stuart, *Decca Classical Discography*, 2017, https://eloquenceclassics.com/discographies/.) The recording has been subsequently remastered and rereleased on CD and as a download from the Decca Classics website under matrix number 475 8231 dor2 Decca ADD and as part of two complete sets of Solti’s Strauss operas for Decca, also available as a CD release and download.

5

The majority of the work was recorded in Vienna at Decca’s principal venue in the city, the Sofiensäle in the Third Distract. Sessions took place on June 14, September 11-17, November 30, 1966, and February 22, June 7-9 (for effects) and 14-15, 1967. Stuart, *Decca Classical Discography*.

6

In the notes below, I include only the principle citation for these articles, unless other materials are cited amid the discussion.

7

John Culshaw, “Three for the Road,” *Gramophone* (March 1968): 473-76.

8

Inge Borkh sang the title role on this recording, with the Dresden Staatskapelle under conductor Karl Böhm.

9

John Culshaw, “The Mellow Knob, or the Rise of Records and the Decline of the Concert Hall as Foreseen by Glenn Gould,” *Records and Recording* (November 1966): 27.

10

Birgit Nilsson, *La Nilsson*, trans. Doris Jung Popper (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 237.

11

In his liner notes for *Salome*, Culshaw does list certain moments in the orchestration that are more audible on the recording than in theatrical performances.

12

John Culshaw, “Songsters in Motion,” *High Fidelity* (November 1958): 136.

13

Culshaw, “Three for the Road,” 474. The orchestra comprised several principal players from the Vienna Philharmonic who had not gone on tour, alternate players, and instrumentalists from other ensembles in Vienna. Marie Collier, required for one cut, was later dubbed in at one of Decca’s studios in London.

14

Conrad L. Osborne, “*Elektra*: A Stage Work Violated? or a New Sonic Miracle?,” *High Fidelity* (February 1968): 77-78.

15

Conrad L. Osborne, “The Completion of London’s Ring—A *Walküre* to Fulfill All Promise,” *High Fidelity* (November 1966): 93-94, 158-59. *Die Walküre* was the final installment of the Decca *Ring*, which was recorded out of sequence.

16

John Culshaw, “The Record Producer Strikes Back,” *High Fidelity* (October 1968): 68-71.

17

It should be noted, however, that *High Fidelity* included reviews of live performances at this time, having recently subsumed *Musical America* into its installments. Critics like Osborne did double duty reviewing both live performances and recordings.

18

See John Culshaw, “Our Search for Stage Atmosphere,” *Records and Recording* (December 1957): 27.

19

This statement is ironic since the stage of “SonicStage” was conceived as a proscenium stage in all but name.

20

Conrad L. Osborne, “The Opera Reviewer Strikes Again,” *High Fidelity* (April 1969): 20, 24-25.

21

John Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight* (New York, NY: Viking, 1981). See his discussion of tenor James McCracken (340-52).

22

NBC was already a major proponent in the United States in the late 1940s.

23

See the final chapter ("coda") of John Culshaw, *Ring Resounding* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1967).

24

Culshaw, *Ring Resounding*, 13.

25

Circulation here is used in the sense of David Novak's discussion of the term: "Circulation is a nexus of cultural production that defines the things, places, and practices within its loops." See David Novak, *Japanoise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 17-18.

26

Colin Symes, *Setting the Record Straight* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 61.

27

Ibid.

28

Culshaw, *Ring Resounding*, 264.

29

Theodor W. Adorno, "Opera and the Long-Playing Record," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (1990): 64.

30

John Culshaw, Charles Reid, and Harold Rosenthal, "Kindling the Magic Spark," *High Fidelity* (November 1962): 46. Tucker's comment is referenced by the authors in this transcribed debate.

31

Harold C. Schonberg, "Pipsqueaks Sound Like Nilsson," *New York Times* (September 22, 1968).

32

John Culshaw, "The Challenge of Stereo Opera," *Records and Recording* (February 1962): 15.

33

John Culshaw, "What to Record and Who to Record It?" *Records and Recording* (March 1961): 47.

34

Culshaw, “The Challenge of Stereo Opera,” 15.

35

Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight*, 281.

36

Richard Lawrence, “An opera to die for,” *Gramophone* (September 2013): 104-106.

Biographies

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