

Reviewing critical practice: An analysis of Gramophone's reviews of Beethoven's piano sonatas, 1923-2010

Abstract

The study offers an overview of a large sample of music performance criticism [in the British classical music market](#) through the analysis of reviews of Beethoven's piano sonata recordings (n=845) published in the [magazine](#) *Gramophone* between 1923 and 2010. Reviews were collected from the *Gramophone* archive, and descriptive and inferential statistics were used to explore the reviews' metadata: issue, text length, repertoire, release status, pianists reviewed and critics. There were a large number of recordings (n=641) and pianists (n=216) considered during this period, with reviews provided by 52 critics. However, reviews were concentrated around only a small number of authors and performers. The most frequently published critics had long careers and a high level of familiarity with the repertoire and its interpretations. Comparisons between performances were found to be a characterizing trait of critical practice, and [the](#) most often reviewed pianists corresponded to those most frequently used for comparisons. Besides new recordings, there were many reviews of re-issues (n=2045), although this pattern decreased in later decades. The findings emphasize the importance of the comparative element for the evaluation of performances and the necessity to account for the peculiar nature of recorded versus live performance to understand the processes behind critical practice. Further [more](#), taken together [the](#) results suggest that critics [may](#) have an important role as filters of choice in the musical market.

In the Western classical tradition, music criticism is a well-established practice with origins in the late seventeenth century (Cowart, 1981). Much more recent, however, is the emergence of music *performance* criticism – that is, criticism of live or recorded performances in which the main object is the *realization* of the work being performed, not the work itself.

This form of criticism developed during the course of the twentieth century, influenced by developments in recording technology, the decrease ~~of~~in performances of new compositions and the establishment of a canon of classical music repertoire, and the consequent elevation of the performer from the status of executor to that of *interpreter*. Critics had suddenly a new challenge with which to cope: reviewing and comparing different interpretations of the same piece by different performers (Monelle, 2002). Performance criticism spread and entered newspapers as well as specialist magazines such as *The Gramophone* (now *Gramophone*), which was founded in 1923 and rose ~~is~~ing rapidly to become one of the most authoritative voices for criticism of classical music performance ~~in the~~during the last century.

Studies on criticism

Performance criticism is a phenomenon of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, and still an unexplored one. In fact, despite that criticism has been largely dealt with in musicology, these studies focused mainly on criticism from its origins to its flourish in

the nineteenth century. Inquiries ~~may tend to~~ focus on a specific geographical area (McColl, 1996), repertoire (Cowart, 1981; Morrow, 1997; Wallace, 1986), institution (Ellis, 1995; Flynn, 1997; Morgan, 2010) or author (Reid, 1984). They discuss the institution of music criticism in its cultural and historical context, addressing a wide palette of themes emerging from critics' writings, like changes in musical taste and ~~in~~ the role of critics, the relationship between music, music criticism and society, and changes in ~~the ways of listening to~~ music listening habits (Morgan, 2010). But the form of criticism taken by all these studies is almost purely criticism of musical compositions (or compositional genres, styles, tendencies) and meta-criticism.

A part-exception to this is Morgan's (2010) investigation of texts published in the *Gramophone* between 1923 and 1931, and written by critics and readers who were members of Britain's National Gramophonic Society. Through the analysis of these texts Morgan discusses how patterns of listening and thinking about music changed in response to the advent of recording technology and what function the first *Gramophone* critics held in this process. Morgan's study ~~offers a first case of~~ is the first investigation of ~~reviews of~~ recorded performances reviews, even though these were just a minority of the texts analysed. However, recording technology was in its infancy during the period analysed and the change in focus from criticism of the work to ~~the that of the~~ performance ~~in criticism~~ had yet to occur. As Morgan states, critiques of performances in the 1920s showed a lack of specificity and detail, thus appearing to today's reader as

vague and unprecise. According to Morgan this may reflect partly the non-musical background of the founders and first critics of the magazine; on the other hand, this is also due to the still marginal concern for performative issues by-in listeners, who were primarily inclined to discuss the work performed and the quality of the recording.

Besides musicology, philosophy of art has long been concerned with criticism and related topics. In recent decades analytic philosophers have offered important contributions to the critical discourse by-through extensively discussing extensive discussion of issues like-such as the nature and localization of the value of works of art (Beardsley, 1965; Budd, 1995; Dickie, 2000; Levinson, 2004, 2009), the process of criticism and the importance of reasons for value judgements (Beardsley, 1982; Carroll, 2009; Hopkins, 2006), the existence and nature of principles of aesthetic value (Beardsley, 1962; 1968; Dickie, 1987; Levinson, 2002), the intersubjective validity of aesthetic value-judgement (Budd, 2007), the nature of aesthetic concepts (Aschenbrenner, 1981; Sibley, 1959), as well as specific issues related to the use of language by critics like the distinction between thin and thick concepts (the former being purely evaluative, the latter being descriptive concepts with an evaluative component, see Bonzon, 2009; Elstein & Hurka, 2009) and the use of metaphors (Grant, 2010). These papers discuss topics relevant to art criticism in general, and thus can be applied to inform any investigation of this practice. However, as it is appropriate to their

philosophical nature, they do not offer nor look (systematically) into real world examples of criticism.

Recently, sociology and cultural studies have also turned to ~~the~~ critical practice with increasing interest, in particular recognizing criticism ~~the role of as a~~ gatekeeper of taste (Schmutz, Van Venrooij, Janssen, & Verboord, 2010, p. 501), offering ~~legitimation-legitimacy~~ to a cultural institution, ~~thereby~~ giving it the status of Art. Baumann (2001) argued that American critics offered a legitimating ideology for Hollywood movies to be acknowledged as an art form, and in music the same is claimed to have happened with jazz (Lopes, 2002, cited in Schmutz, Van Venrooij, Janssen, & Verboord, 2010) and rock (Regev, 1994).

The rising interest in criticism from sociology and cultural studies brought some of the first ~~large scale~~ systematic explorations of ~~large sets of~~ critical writings. In one such study, Schmutz et al. (2010) investigated changes in newspapers' coverage of popular music by observing the style and genre of repertoire reviewed, ~~and as well as~~ the type and length of critical writings published in newspapers in Germany, France, United States and the Netherlands between 1955 and 2005. Their findings showed a rising prominence of popular music across ~~the~~ decades in all four countries, accompanied by a shift toward an evaluative and properly critical approach to the emerging art form, ~~that which all~~ pointed to ~~an the~~ increasing legitimacy of popular music (p. 505).

Schmutz et al. (2010) offered ~~an~~ an example of ~~the~~ insights that may be gained through the observation of criticism metadata. The focus on popular music in ~~this~~ study ~~however,~~ makes the distinction between criticism and performance criticism ~~irrelevant, since popular~~ irrelevant. ~~The popular~~ music repertoire reflects a model of musical performance in which the notion of work and that of performance are not as separate as they are in classical music, and where the construct of interpretation ~~therefore~~ plays ~~therefore~~ a different and arguably marginal role.

Aims of the present study

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can now look back at ~~almost~~ one hundred years of ~~performance~~ criticism ~~of recorded performance (Elste, 1989)~~. This material offers fertile and still largely unexplored terrain of enquiry, in which decades of ~~history of~~ ~~historical~~ interpretation are witnessed through the eyes and ears of seasoned listeners. ~~A better understanding of the phenomena underpinning the appreciation and evaluation of performances can be gained by~~ ~~By~~ looking at what critics wrote, what ~~features of the~~ performance ~~features~~ they considered worthy of critical attention, and how they described and reacted to different personalities and interpretive styles, ~~a better understanding can be gained of the phenomena underpinning the appreciation and evaluation of performances~~. A systematic examination of music performance criticism, ~~however,~~ offers information relevant to musical practice even without discussing

critics' claims and arguments. Through an overview of a large sample of published performance criticism available today, the present study offers a first attempt at a systematic, explorative analysis of metadata of performance criticism and discusses the relevance of this ~~heritage of~~ material's heritage for understanding the processes behind experts' evaluations and their implications for the musical practice.

Method

The present sample of criticisms chosen for ~~this~~ examination encompasses all reviews of commercial recordings of L. v. Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas published in the British monthly magazine *Gramophone* between April 1923 and September 2010. While circumscribing the study to the British music market, the choice of the *Gramophone* as the source for material allows us to analyse a vast review corpus of a specific repertoire over 87 years, published in a leading magazine for reviews of classical music recordings. Every page of the recently opened online magazine issues archive from this period was read in order to extract the reviews (1050 issues: www.gramophone.net¹).

The Rreviews² texts were collected in Microsoft Word documents, and a database was compiled with the following information: issue (date, page); sonata(s)

¹ Opened in 2009 but no longer available publicly. Access to the digital collection of *Gramophone* reviews, including all texts used in this study, can now be purchased as application for iPad, desktop or tablet.

reviewed; pianist(s) reviewed; label; critic; release status (i.e. new release, re-issue, first release of an old recording²~~-with old understood as >15 years~~); repertoire reviewed (i.e. only ~~one or more~~ Beethoven's sonatas or ~~one or more of~~ Beethoven's sonatas plus other works); presence of comparison(s) with different pianist(s); and length of the review (in words). Descriptive and exploratory data analyses were carried out on the whole dataset.

~~Following~~In the present article, ~~the analyses~~ results are grouped into four sections that focus~~ed~~ on ~~the~~ structure and length ~~of the text~~, the repertoire reviewed, ~~and~~ the pianists and ~~the~~ critics involved, respectively. These results are then discussed in the final part of the article.

Results

In total, 845 reviews of recordings of Beethoven's piano sonatas were found in the *Gramophone*. For six of them³, the text in the online *Gramophone* archive was

² These are cases of recordings produced several decades (between ca. 20 and 70 years) prior to their public release. Differently from other recordings – usually released a few months after their production – these recordings did not seem to be meant (or chosen) to be released publicly in the first instance (e.g. radio broadcasts, live concerts). The peculiarity of these recordings is underlined by critics, who emphasise in the reviews' titles – and sometimes again in the body of the reviews – the time and context of production (not mentioned for other recordings).

³ April 1959, p. 38; July 1969, p. 77; September 1978, p. 155; November 1992, p. 215; August 2000, p. 79; June 2003, p. unknown.

damaged, hence for these reviews information regarding text length and, partly in some cases, the name of the critic, release status and pianists reviewed could not be integrated into the analyses.

The distribution of reviews by decade is shown in Figure 1. In the first three decades (up to 1950), the publication rate was 2.659 reviews per year, with a trough in 1941-1950 (16 reviews) due to the severe conditions during World War II that affected both the magazine (for instance, by paper rationing) and the record industry production (Pollard, 1998). Subsequently (1950 – 2010), reviews were distributed relatively evenly, with an average rate of 12.94 reviews per year and a peak in 1961-1970 (150 reviews).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Structure and length

Soon after the launch of the magazine (by the early 1930s), reviews developed a clear two-part structure: titles containing information regarding the object being reviewed [piece(s); player(s); label; format, when appropriate original recording and price] and critical text. At the end of the text the review can be signed with either the name or initials of the author. Starting in 2000, reviews also present begin with a one sentence title-like statement ~~at the beginning of the text.~~

Critical text parts of the reviews (henceforth, simply *reviews*) are on average 411.74 words long (SD=278.81); their length oscillates between 10 and 2446 words. The 10-word review concerns Op. 13, “Pathétique” first movement performed by Frederic Lamond. It appeared in a miscellaneous section on September 1943 with the text “An impressive performance of one of Beethoven's masterpieces; brilliantly played” (unsigned). The 2446-words text is a review by Richard Osborne published on January 1992 concerning ~~the EMI's re-issue of 5 discs of~~ Arrau's recordings of Beethoven's five concertos, Variations on an original theme in C minor, and piano sonatas Opp. 27/2, 31/3, 53, 54, 57, 81a, 101, 110, 111 ~~(5 discs)~~.

~~Using a Kruskal-Wallis test,~~ Review length was found to be associated with different factors ~~such~~ as decade (~~Kruskal-Wallis test:~~ $H_8=60.5326$, $p<0.001$), and ~~review's~~ author ($H_{10}=41.361$, $p<0.001$, computed for the 10 most prolific critics, see Table 3 below).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Also repertoire and pianist reviewed were found to be correlated with ~~reviews~~² length. Reviews of recordings entailing mixed repertoire (Beethoven's sonatas plus something else) were longer (~~the difference was significant according to~~ Mann-Whitney test; $U=98,981.50$, $p<0.01$) and more varied in length than recordings of only

Beethoven's sonatas (Table 1), a fact that could be ~~brought back-asc~~cribed to the higher heterogeneity of quantity and nature of the repertoire discussed in those reviews. A moderate positive correlation was found between review length and pianist reviewed, with more often reviewed pianists (see Table 2 below) receiving ~~on average~~ longer reviews (mean=452.93 words) ~~than-compared to~~ less often reviewed ones (mean=369.78 words); $U=73,017.50$, $p<0.001$.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Repertoire

Recordings reviewed may entail a single sonata, groups of sonatas or the whole cycle of 32 pieces. Out of the 845 collected reviews, 322 concern recordings that include one or more of Beethoven's sonatas alongside ~~some-an~~other composition. These works might be Beethoven's Bagatelle or piano Concerti or works by other composers, and the section of review concerning these other works ~~can-ranged~~ from a few words to a more than 90% of the whole text.

Throughout the whole corpus of reviews, the four most often reviewed sonatas are (ranked ~~digressively~~in descending order): Op. 27/2 *Moonlight*, Op. 57 *Appassionata*, Op. 13 *Pathétique* and Op. 111. With the exception of a small group of sonatas (Op. 31/2 *Tempest*, Op. 53 *Waldstein*, Op. 81a *Les Adieux*, Op. 106, Op. 109

and Op. 110) all other sonatas are homogeneously spread around 75 instances each (Figure 3). Among the least reviewed sonatas we find the so-called ‘easy sonatas’ (Opp. 14, 49 and 79), together with Opp. 7, 22, 54 and 31/1.

Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas represent, together with the Well-tempered Clavier of Bach, a singular rare cases within classical music: along-over time, they have developed a strong identity as a group, or *cycle*, almost as if they were one entity. Using Joachim Kaiser’s words: “this intimate and adventurous path from c to c – Op. 2 No. 1 begins with the note c and the C minor sonata Op. 111 closes with c – these 32 works, performed always again and again, build a cosmos that is multitudinously rich, and yet as totality completely coherent” (Kaiser, 1975, p. 24, translation by the author).

The metaphor of the path and the strong feeling of completeness and variety linked to this cycle is justified by the fact that these 32 sonatas seem to reflect different periods in Beethoven’s professional and personal life: from the early Vienna period at the end of the eighteenth century through the *heroic style* period to the last years, signed by the highest technical and musical maturity but also by the tragedy of Beethoven’s deafness and increasing isolation. The connection between the 32 sonatas and the composer’s life is very strong, and it is not unusual to hear, for instance, that a young pianist can or should not perform Op. 111, no matter how musically gifted s/he is, since to perform this sonata properly (or even *fairly*) a certain maturity and experience with

life, not just with music, is needed ([see for instance Fischer, 1956, p. 14](#))⁴. With this background in mind, [the](#) distribution of sonatas ~~was explored~~ for the three periods of L. v. Beethoven's activity [was explored](#) separately (Opp. 2 to 28 first period; Opp. 31 to 78 second; Opp. 90 to 111 third).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

For each review three variables were computed that indicate – for each of the three Beethoven's periods – the total amount of sonatas present in the reviewed recording. Given the different quantity of sonatas that occur in each period (15 for the first, 11 for the second, and 6 for the third), the resulting values were standardized to allow for comparison between the three groups of sonatas. Mean standardized quantity of sonatas in each decade for each of the three periods is shown in [Figure Error!](#) [Reference source not found.](#)⁴, the first three decades are merged together due to the low number of reviews in those years.

⁴ See also [Gramophone review, March 1988, p. 50](#). Here this view also seems implied in [Stephen Plaistow comments on Taub's recording of Op.111](#). After praising the “young American pianist” for his [“authentic Beethovenian energy, ... fuelled by the mind rather than the fingers alone”](#) he continues: [“Who said that pianists have to be old and grey before we can expect them to have insights into Beethoven's last sonatas?”](#)

A strong increase is observed over the course of the century in the mean number of sonatas entailed within one review (adding all sonatas together, Kruskal-Wallis test: ~~was significant~~, $H_8=118.70697$, $p<0.001$) as. ~~This could be interpreted as~~ consequence of the technological developments that allowed much longer recording time at lower production costs.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

~~It was also observed that the~~ The three groups of sonatas do not develop equally across decades. Late sonatas were ~~the~~ least common at the beginning of the 20th century, slowly increased their presence along the years and reached the other groups of sonatas in the 1970s and 1980s. In the last two decades ~~these late sonatas~~ then became the most prevalent group, high above the first and second period sonatas. First period sonatas were the most common in 1923-1950, but the least often reviewed at the end of the century (this despite the presence of the Moonlight sonata – which belongs to the first period and is the most ~~often~~ reviewed sonata overall ~~—in the first period~~).

Friedman's test showed a significant difference in the distribution of the three groups of sonatas, $\chi(2)=73.6768$, $p<0.001$. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction applied revealed significant differences between sonatas of the first and third period ($Z=7.444$, $SE=0.0549$, $p<0.001$) and of the second and third period ($Z=5.145$, $SE=0.0549$, $p<0.001$).

Re-issues

Out of the 845 reviews collected from the *Gramophone* 2045 (24.285%) were reviews of re-issued recordings. The term *re-issue* may relate to different kinds of products.

Here re-issue is used to indicate *any commercial release of a recording other than its first release*. According to this definition re-issues may be releases of a recording in a new format (e.g. 78rpm released as LP and then as Compact Disc), as well as recordings released in the same format more times by the same or by different label(s) (for instance, once as single disc and once as box set). In these terms re-issues may or may not include different degrees of engineering work.

Distribution of re-issues was strongly associated with the decade (Pearson's $\chi^2(16, N=844)=256.921, p<0.001, \Phi=0.552, p<0.001$, in the analysis re-issued and partly re-issued recordings (see distinction below) were merged in one category). Re-issues first appeared in 1951 (February, p. 24), with Alec Robertson reviewing a Decca LP re-issuing Backhaus's recording of Op. 109, in E major, and Chopin's "Funeral March" sonata. Their presence of re-issues increased toward the 1980s, when the ratio between new recordings and re-issues being reviewed was almost 1:1. After 1990 this tendency receded but was partly compensated for by a new phenomenon: old, unpublished recordings that were suddenly made commercially available. That is the ease, for instance, for For example, broadcast recordings which that were never commercially released or old recordings which were not selected for a published release

in the first instance. The first example of this kind is Josef Lhévinne's Op. 27/2, "Moonlight Sonata", originally recorded on piano rolls together with several other pieces on a Norman Evans Estonia-Ampico piano at the beginning of the century and released in September 1985 by L'Oiseau-Lyre. The interest toward old recordings ~~seems to have~~ has increased since then, so that in the 2000s almost one third (26.83%) of reviews concerned this kind of product. Within this picture, starting in the 1960s, a small number of reviews concerns partly re-issued recordings. That happens when there is a release of a group of sonatas, some of which are newly recorded while some others are taken from previously published material, for instance, in order to complete a cycle (Figure 5).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Pianists

Pianists reviewed in the collected *Gramophone* reviews number 216, but merely 17 of them cover 51.950% of all reviews. So, while Arrau was reviewed 53 times and Brendel 52 times, there are 117 pianists who are reviewed just once throughout the century.

Out of the 216 pianists, 81 were used by the reviewers for comparisons. Of the 16 performers most often used for comparison, 14 correspond with those included among the 17 most reviewed pianists (Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

It was reported that 2045 of the 845 collected reviews ~~are~~ were reviews of re-issued recordings. Of these, 1523 (74.5463%) are about these 17 most often reviewed performers, so that the ratio between new recordings and re-issues for those pianists is 1.546:1 while for the residual 199 performers it rises to 6.44:1. This difference in proportion is significant according to Pearson's Chi-Square, $\chi^2(1, N=775)=67.304$, $p<0.001$, $\Phi=-0.30295$, $p<0.001$ (Figure 6).

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Comparisons between pianists by reviewers, used to explain, justify or clarify a critical statement, were common, found in 41.28% of all reviews and 543.402% of the reviews of recordings entailing only Beethoven sonatas. Beginning in October 1953, comparisons were also stated officially in the titles of the reviews (Table 3).

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Critics

Among the 845 collected reviews, seven reviews (0.83%) were damaged so that it was not possible to read the name of the critic at the end of the text, and 73 reviews were unsigned (8.64%). Among initials, pseudonyms and names reported under the residual 765 reviews, it was possible to identify 52 different critics. And among them, just 10 critics wrote 530 reviews – that is, 62.72% of the whole corpus (Table 4).

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Most of these reviewers' activity is spread ~~along~~ across several decades, with an average of 21.32 years between the first and the last published reviews; the highest peak ~~reached by~~ was Stephen Plaistow at ~~'s~~ 41 years and 3 months. Two exceptions are Andrew Porter, who, ~~for what~~ concerns Beethoven's piano sonatas, was only active in the 1950s and Jed Distler, ~~the most recent of those critics,~~ who started reviewing Beethoven's sonatas in 2005. Seen chronologically, some of these reviewers significantly shaped the *Gramophone* critical output, contributing substantially to the overall set of reviews ~~of~~ for a given period. For instance, Andrew Porter wrote 34.75% of ~~the reviews of~~ Beethoven's piano sonatas reviews published in the 1950s, while Bryce Morrison and Jed Distler together produced the 58.56% of the reviews that appeared in the 2000s.

Discussion

These results raise several issues regarding the practice of ~~criticism of~~ recorded performance criticism and its relationship with the music recording market and music performance studies.

Agony of choice

There is a noticeable change in the repertoire reviewed over the last century. The distribution of sonatas seems to resemble ~~the a~~ “path to maturity” from early sonatas to Op.111. The increasing number of reviews of late sonatas in the later decades of the century should be taken cautiously, but ~~still it~~ is intriguing. If this change cannot be explained away as a random phenomenon, various questions arise. Is this tendency ~~really~~ reflected in the development of effective record production? If so, is it just a coincidence or does it mirror an effective shift in listeners’, performers’ and/or labels’ preferences, taste and expectations? What role did criticism play in this shift? Does it make sense to claim that, as the performer needs to mature before approaching Beethoven’s late sonatas, so does the listener? These and similar questions could be addressed from an historical and cultural perspective as well as from a psychological one, for example following Eliashberg and Shugan’s (1997) dichotomy and investigating critics’ role as influencers and predictors of listeners’ preferences.

Such a study ~~should then~~could move beyond issues of repertoire preference and examine preferences for particular interpretations. As ~~this the present~~ investigation suggests, there ~~must be~~are a large number of commercially available recordings from which listeners can choose. Alone, the *Gramophone* reviews cover 845 recordings, including 204 re-issues, produced by 216 different pianists. Since reviews published in this magazine presumably represent only a small selection of the recordings available on the market (consider, for example, the 23 pianists mentioned in the last section of the article who completed the recording of the Beethoven cycle and are not mentioned at all in the magazine), the amount of material seems impressively large. Already in 1951 Alec Robertson, reviewing Arrau's recording of the Moonlight sonata, complained that "we hardly needed another recording [*of this piece*]" (*Gramophone*, February 1951, p. 24). Since then the same sonata has been reviewed 176 times in the same magazine. And the *Gramophone* reviewer of 50 years Lionel Salter claims that this abundance of recordings puts an "intolerable strain" on the reviewer, when it comes to find "something fresh to say" about the nth performance of the same piece (Pollard, 1998, p. 201).

~~It is then~~Given this abundance of recorded material, it is legitimate to ask to what extent critics (and more so consumers) are ~~actually~~ able or have the necessary time, energy, and financial resources to distinguish between the many different interpretations and to appreciate their differences ~~when there are hundreds of recordings~~

~~at their disposal~~. Findings in decision-making research suggest that an increase in options (quantity of different versions of an item from which to choose) may paradoxically lead to paralysis of choice and dissatisfaction, even in the arts (Schwartz, 2008). In this scenario the critic's guidance – working as filter of choice – ~~seems to become~~ particularly significant. This is much more so since many critics tend to have long-lasting careers, writing ~~for the magazine~~ for several years or even decades. And in the second half of the 20th century, they also became increasingly specialized in a specific repertoire and some of them have come to be acknowledged worldwide as authorities in their field (Pollard, 1998, p. 200).

On the other hand, this high level of familiarity with the repertoire and its diverse interpretations may influence critics' attitudes and preferences towards certain performances in ways different from lesser degrees of familiarity, likely to be found among the general public (Levinson, 1987, 2002, 2010). This in turn ~~could suggest~~ that what may be considered a good performance by a ~~critic-listener~~ – a good value-for-money recording – may not be considered thus by a ~~listener-critic~~ who has a different level of musical expertise and listening history. Despite a conspicuous corpus of research addressing the influence of musical expertise on reliability and consistency of performance assessments (for a recent overview see Kinney, 2009), no study ~~so far to date~~ has investigated differences in the preference for one or the other interpretation between listeners with different levels of expertise (an exception being a preliminary

study carried out by the authors, see Alessandri, Eiholzer & Williamon, in press); and no study has taken into account the level and kind of expertise typically exhibited by music critics.

Comparative listening

A further observation that can be drawn from the findings is the weight ~~that the~~[given to the](#) comparative element ~~is given in the~~ reviewing practice. Comparisons between different interpretations/recordings emerged as a constitutive trait of *Gramophone* reviews, and Editor Jolly supports this observation claiming that the comparative element is the “characteristic that has set *Gramophone*’s reviews aside from its rivals” (Pollard, 1998, p. 202).

The importance given to comparative judgements in reviews is consistent with the large number of recordings of the same repertoire and the fact that reviewers tend to work over many years, searching for better understanding of how various interpretations differ from each other. However, comparisons [in the present study](#) tended to focus on only a small number of pianists. This, as Schick (1996) suggests, could be explained by the sheer number of recordings available, which forces critics to “compare a new release only with their past favourites, which makes the task more practical but eternally rejects a slighted disk.” (Schick, 1996, p. 157). In any case these results raise questions ~~on~~ [regarding](#) the role of comparative judgement in music appreciation. In music research as

well as in the academic context, with few exceptions, performance evaluation is explored through a criterion based assessment procedure – in which a performance is judged in isolation, set against a set of commonly agreed criteria – rather than through norm referenced assessment – in which a performance is assessed through comparison, as being better or worse ~~than~~ another performance (McPherson & Schubert, 2004). The importance that criticism seems to attribute to the comparative element however suggests that it could be useful to reconsider the extent to which listening to various interpretations is actually done, or can be done, in a criterion based way.

Re-issues

Finally, ~~some reflection is needed on the presence of~~ awe consider the substantial ~~number~~ presence of re-issues among the recordings reviewed. Almost one quarter of all the reviews found in the *Gramophone* ~~are reviews of~~ concern re-issued recordings. That fact raises questions regarding the criteria behind the process of selection as to what to review, as well as the nature of a re-issue itself and the objective behind the published review.

In the second half of the century, the growing recording market imposed the need for more stringent selection of the material to be reviewed. The choice of so many re-issues over new recordings could then be striking at first: why should the *Gramophone* invest space in discussing performances already described and evaluated in previous years thus

ignoring new, possibly great recordings? What is the purpose of re-reviewing ~~one and~~ the same performance? An answer to this question is inevitably multifaceted. Editor Jolly, describing how the process of selection of recordings changed overtime, claims:

Today [1998] with some 400 discs arriving each month [...] decisions as to what to select for review are taken with the knowledge that every so often something superb is going to slip through the net. (James Jolly in Pollard, 1998, p. 203).

That suggests that quality (or assumed quality) is a criterion behind ~~the review~~ selection ~~of what to review~~. The choice of re-issues could then be seen as a way to reaffirm the value of an old recording over a new one (and of the magazine's decision to review it in the first place). But that alone cannot be a sufficient reason. Reviews of re-issues were evenly spread among long-lasting critics and other reviewers, suggesting that their presence is not due to seasoned critics' biases in terms of awareness and appreciation of older pianists. The quick growth in number of reviewed re-issues found between 1950s and 1970s can be ~~brought back~~ ascribed firstly to the availability of new technologies, ~~that which~~ explained the production of re-issues in the first place. However, the ground gaining movement of historical performance interpreters in those years might have also influenced this tendency, provoking critics to investigate the value of the new performance practice in relation to that of their mainstream counterparts.

The strong presence of re-issues suggests also that different issues of one and the same recording are considered to be two distinct sound objects. This could be understood in two ways. As said, the growth of re-issues [reviews](#) starting in 1951 may be explained by the technological innovations of subsequent decades: the introduction of the LP record by Decca in 1950, the following stereo recording in 1958 and later on, in 1983, the Philips/Sony digital recording and the CD (Dates relate to the UK market. See Pollard, 1998). It is a truism to claim that the 78rpm version and the LP or CD version of Schnabel's recordings of Beethoven's sonatas are not – aurally – the same object. Even within the same format, different re-mastering processes by different engineers create a significantly different end product. This apparently obvious claim however poses a question regarding the scope of music recording reviews. [Should reviewers comment on issues of recording quality?](#)

~~Despite that the very acousmatic nature of the listening experience recordings offer let us approach this sound object as a kind of portable version of a concert~~ [The average listener views music recordings as portable concerts](#) (Alessandri, 2011) ~~without necessarily being aware of recording issues~~. If in a concert review we expect critics to discuss the work and its performance, in a recording review reviewers need to take into account a third aspect, namely, the recording *as a* recording. Critics are aware of the complex nature of sound recording and of the different contributions offered by performers, producers, engineers and technical resources, [putting them in a unique](#)

position to review the recording as a whole. Of course it remains to be seen the extent to which this component enters the overall value judgement of the recording itself.

A second way in which a re-issue can be seen as a product other than its original release is what seems to be suggested by *Gramophone* editor Jolly when discussing the nature and purpose of a music review:

T. S. Eliot argued that every time a new poem is written the entire canon of poetry is changed irreversibly and, similarly, every time a work is reinterpreted the entire history of that work is subtly altered. When Claudio Abbado records a new Bruckner Ninth, his version has to take its place not just alongside all the other versions with the Vienna Philharmonic, or all the versions that have been recorded by Deutsche Grammophon, but alongside every version that has ever found its way on to disc (James Jolly in Pollard, 1998, p. 202).

New interpretations can shed light on the nature of older interpretations, and a critic's perspective and appreciation of a given performance can change overtime through exposition to different performances of the same or of other pieces. So for instance, Edward Greenfield reviewing Wilhelm Kempff's 80th birthday edition of Beethoven's sonatas and concertos claims:

Of these sets the earliest is of the Beethoven piano concertos, first issued in 1962. The fantasy, the sense of joy bringing a smile to the lips, is what above all strikes me afresh on hearing these performances again. That is so even in No. 3, which I remember disappointed me slightly when I

first reviewed it for these pages, slower and a little more staid than Kempff's earlier mono version (DG DGM18130, 12/55—now deleted). But in context with the others, the slower tempo for the first movement now seems no less convincing, the magic of Kempff wonderfully persuasive in the transition to the second subject for example (November 1975, p. 151).

In this perspective, reviewing a re-issued recording becomes an occasion to approach an old recording anew and re-evaluate it in the light of other recordings produced so far; when appropriate, [to](#) re-affirm its value as interpretation and maybe also its increased value in terms of recording quality, and finally, [to](#) make the readership aware of its availability in a new, improved, format. In the light of these reflections, re-issued recordings seem to be objects different from their first releases, standing on their own and with their own right to be reviewed ~~and~~. [T](#)heir substantial presence in the *Gramophone* material collected seems therefore to be justified.

Re-issues were also associated with the distribution of reviews among pianists. [Amongst](#) the 17 most often reviewed pianists are those who are usually acknowledged as great Beethoven interpreters, like Schnabel, Kempff and Brendel. With the exception of Richter, all pianists encompassed in this list ~~are ones who~~ completed the recording of all 32 sonatas. Within them are encompassed six of those eight performers who are the

only pianists to have recorded the whole of Beethoven's cycle more than once in the course of their lives.⁵

The fact of having recorded more sonatas, even all sonatas more than once, could explain the high number of reviews those pianists received. However, along the century many other pianists accomplished the task of recording all 32 sonatas: ~~according to a previous study (Alessandri, 2011)~~ by 2009 at least 64 pianists had completed or were in the process of completing the cycle (Alessandri, 2011). Here we have just a selection of 16 of them. Other performers who completed the cycle are mentioned in the *Gramophone*, even if only a part (often a small one) of their cycle is reviewed, and 23 of those 64 performers⁶ do not appear in the *Gramophone* pages at all. Hence the fact of

⁵ i.e. Arrau, Backhaus, Brendel, Barenboim, Gulda, Kempff, in addition: Paul Badura-Skoda and Bernard Roberts. Information is taken from a previous discographical project on Beethoven's piano sonatas. See (Alessandri, 2011).

⁶ Robert Benz, Muriel Chemin, Dino Ciani, Sequeira Costa, El Bacha Abdel Rahman, Maria Grinberg, Gotthard Kladetzky, Paul Komen, Michael Korstick, Christian Leotta, Michaël Lévinas, Seymour Lipkin, Andrea Lucchesini, Murray MacLachlan, Anne Øland, Georges Pludermacher, Akiyoshi Sako, Russel Sherman, Robert Silverman, David Allen Wehr, Gerard Willems, Yukio Yokoyama, Dieter Zechlin. Of course, this could at least partly be linked to the fact that Gramophone has been dealing to a largest extent with British releases. Unfortunately, a clear distinction between records available and records chosen for reviews is not possible due to the lack of comprehensive data on what records were issued in the UK in each given period. As indication however, out of the 23 cycles mentioned, 15 are currently available in Amazon.co.uk for purchase, 6 are available but only as import product, and 2 are not available.

having produced a high number of recordings of Beethoven's sonatas does not entirely explain ~~alone~~ the consistent presence of these pianists in the magazine reviews.

These performers did not just record Beethoven's sonatas: they produced recordings that, as it seems, passed the "test of time". Re-issues can be produced for marketing reasons, for instance to celebrate a specific circumstance (e.g. Kempff's 80th birthday) or to offer certain pieces in different couplings or groupings (e.g. complete cycle box set or, on the contrary, a choice of a few sonatas such as named or late sonatas). The high number of reviewed re-issues could then be seen as the music world's attention to and celebration of famous Beethoven pianists. However, as said during the past 90 years the main motivation behind the production of re-issues was arguably developments in the recording technology. If this is the case, recordings produced at the early stages of this developmental process were the ones that were candidates for later re-issues. In this perspective recordings produced in the 1980s or later seem to be twice disadvantaged in that the high quality level, durability and stability of the CD as a medium might have a direct consequence for the recording industry policy: re-issues are no longer needed. Once all great performances of the past will have been proposed in this new format it is difficult to see why a new release would be necessary (with the exceptions, mentioned above, of re-issues produced for

~~marketing reasons).~~⁷ ~~Supporting this, looking back at~~ Evidence for this can be seen in ~~Figure 5~~ ~~Figure 5~~ where we see ~~a decrease in reviews of re-issues that within~~ the last decade ~~reviews of re-issues decreased~~.

Regarding the pianists reviewed in this corpus of critical texts, ~~it might then be asked~~ ~~we might then consider~~ who would now be at the top of our frequency table had Schnabel, Arrau or Kempff lived two generations later and recorded in the CD era, and had Ohlsson, O’Conor or Fu’Tsong recorded these pieces in the early stages of sound recording technology. It could also be asked: who would we now celebrate as great Beethoven interpreters?

Conclusions

This article has provided an overview of a large sample of music performance criticism collected in the *Gramophone’s* archive, accompanied by reflections on the practice of criticism itself.

The exploratory and observational nature of the study, as well as the focus on one specific corpus of reviews, limit the generalisability of the results to the processes underpinning music criticism as a whole. However, reflections emerging from the

⁷ ~~With the exceptions, mentioned above, of re-issues produced for marketing reasons.~~ Of course, this claim assumes that with digital recording we have reached a kind of “final stage” of recording quality, assumption that is – at least – highly arguable.

investigation open questions that may inform musical practice and call for further investigation. In particular, three main points bear relevance for music performance studies: (1) the necessity to account for recording-specific features when examining the evaluation of recorded performances; (2) the importance of the comparative element for the evaluation of performances and, at the same time, the difficulty of comparing interpretations when there are hundreds of them at one's disposal; and (3) the delicate position of critics within the recording market, positioned as intermediaries between producers and consumers, potentially able to work as guidance for listeners but also possibly biased by their own extensive knowledge of different interpretations.

In general, the insights gained through the present study offer evidence of the potential that music performance criticism has as a source of information and understanding for musical practice. In a next step, the analysis of the selected sample of reviews should move beyond the level of metadata and enter the textual domain to examine what features of the performance, and of the recording, critics select for discussion and how the different elements inform the experts' evaluation of the final product.

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Tables

Table 1. Length of reviews concerning only Beethoven's sonatas and of those discussing mixed repertoire.

	<i>Reviews of only Beethoven's sonatas</i>	<i>Reviews of mixed repertoire</i>
Mean length (words)	358.71	454.76
SD	235.55	333.49
Range	10-1830	45-2446

Table 2. The 17 most often reviewed pianists. Highlighted names in grey refer to those pianists who also belong to the 16 performers most often used for comparisons. The two pianists most often used for comparison who do not appear in the table are Orazio Frugoni and Richard Goode.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Arrau, Claudio	53	Barenboim, Daniel	18
Brendel, Alfred	52	Gieseking, Walter	18
Kempff, Wilhelm	49	Gulda, Friedrich	16
Backhaus, Wilhelm	38	Lill, John	16
Ashkenazy, Vladimir	27	Michelangeli, A. B.	14
Richter, Sviatoslav	26	Kovacevich, Stephen	14
Schnabel, Artur	26	Pollini, Maurizio	14
Solomon	25	Serkin, Rudolf	13
Gilels, Emil	20		

Table 3. Examples of different kinds of comparisons found in *Gramophone*. A comparison made in the text body (top panel, used throughout the century) and comparison stated in the titles of the review (bottom panel, used starting in 1953).

January 1981, p.48

BEETHOVEN PIANO SONATAS, VOLUME 2 **Bernard Roberts**. Nimbus Direct to Disc D/C902 (four records, nas, £19.40). Notes included.

Roberts does not have all the tonal poise or intellectual quickness of **Schnabel** whose set of these same sonatas (HMV mono RLS754, three records to Roberts's four) is reviewed on page 998 of this issue. Among more recent cycles **Brendel's** (Philips 6768 004, 11/78) is the more enquiring, the more intellectually various, avoiding Roberts's tendency to slow the music unduly in moments of introspection...

June 1974, p. 74

PIANO SONATAS. **Friedrich Gulda**. Decca Eclipse ECS722-3 (two records, 99p each). ECS722: No. 21 in C major, Op. 53, "Waldstein"; No. 28 in A major, Op. 101. ECS723: No. 30 in E major, Op. 109; No. 31 in A flat major, Op. 110; No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111.

Selected bargain comparisons:

No. 21:

Brendel (6/64) (5/70) (R) TV34115DS

Nos. 28 and 32:

Rosen (5/70) 61127

Nos. 31 and 32:

Brendel (8/63) (3/70) (R) TV34113DS

Here are two further discs from Gulda's earlier cycle of Beethoven sonata recordings...

Of the two discs, though, this is of lesser interest, primarily because Gulda's account of the Waldstein Sonata, fleeting, deft and aerial (the semi-quaver flights in the first movement at times so deft they barely sound) is no challenge, ultimately, to the **Brendel** on Turnabout. Brendel plays with great economy of gesture, is as poised and fluent as Gulda is; but with Brendel I find the music is more strikingly articulated, the virtuoso demands more frankly met...

Table 4. The 10 most prolific reviewers identified in the collected corpus of reviews.

<i>Reviewer</i>	<i>Quantity of reviews written</i>	<i>Percentage (all reviews)</i>	<i>Period of activity</i>	<i>Percentage (for the period of activity)</i>
Richard Osborne	108	12.8	Apr '74 – Nov '04	27.34
Stephen Plaistow	88	10.4	Sep '61 – Dec '02	16.15
Joan Olive Chissell	65	7.7	Oct '68 – May '93	18.90
Bryce Morrison	60	7.1	Apr '92 – Jul '10	27.91
Roger Fiske	52	6.2	Jul '55 – Mar '86	11.93
Andrew Porter	41	4.9	Apr '54 – May '60	49.40
David J. Fanning	33	3.9	May '85 – Sep '02	17.01
Malcolm MacDonald	31	3.7	Sep '52 – Jul '84	6.95
Jed Distler	28	3.3	Oct '05 – Oct '09	52.83
Alec Robertson	24	2.8	Aug '34 – Jun '54	31.58