

Rachmaninoff Plays Rachmaninoff... Plays Rachmaninoff?: A Sonic Comparison of his C♯ Minor Prelude on Roll and Record

Allison Wente
Assistant Professor of Music
The State University of New York at Fredonia

As recording devices, the reproducing piano and phonograph decouple the time of listening to music from the time of the body laboring to make music. That is, recording technologies divide musical experience into listening and performing. They thereby construct an abstract interval between them that is filled or traversed by a new commodity, the recording. As numerous scholars have shown, the recording and its efficient commodity form fundamentally transformed both performance and listening. Less understood is how different modalities of recorded performance — the reproducing piano and phonograph — establish different theoretical models for capturing and storing music.

In this paper I explore the ways in which the roll and record emphasize and embody these different models with what they capture and store. Each technology filters and amplifies a performance by taking and storing certain aspects while discarding others. For example, neither the reproducing piano nor phonograph reproduces the visual spectacle of the performer's laboring body over the keys (although many models of player piano require a skilled operator to draw out a musical performance from the roll's stored data). The phonograph provides only the aural portion of a performance, while the reproducing piano roll's dancing keys indexically signify the movements of the performer's laboring hands and simultaneously draw attention to the empty bench, to the negative space where the performer's body should be.

To illustrate the depth of ideological difference between these technologies, I use

sonic visualization software to analyze the tempo, dynamic, and interpretational variances of two 1919 recordings, one roll and one record, of Rachmaninoff playing his famous C# Minor Prelude as a case study. My analysis shows that the two media capture and present an experiential difference: the way the experience of time is transformed by the modality in which a performance is stored. Editing is key to this differentiation — piano rolls could be and were edited to perfection; phonograph records, captured all at once, often required several takes from the performer and even then a “perfect” take was impossible. Looking closely at two contemporaneous recordings creates a unique vantage point for exploring the theoretical differences between early twentieth-century recording media and what they store, and also provides the opportunity for commentary on the mechanical reproduction of musical labor in the early twentieth century.