

**Deconstructing the Definitive Recording:  
Elgar's Cello Concerto and the Influence of Jacqueline du Pré**

Accounts of Jacqueline du Pré's 1965 recording session for the Elgar Cello Concerto with Sir John Barbirolli border on mythical. Only twenty years old at the time, du Pré impressed the audio engineers and symphony members so much that word of a historic performance quickly spread to an audience of local music enthusiasts, who arrived after a break to witness the remainder of the session.<sup>1</sup> Reviewers of the recording uniformly praised the passion and depth of du Pré's interpretation; one reviewer went so far as to dub the disc "the standard version of the concerto, with or without critical acclaim."<sup>2</sup> Even du Pré seemed to sense that the recording session would become legendary. Despite the fact that the final recording was produced from thirty-seven takes spanning the entirety of the Concerto, du Pré hinted to her friends that "she had played the concerto straight through," as if the recording were the result of a single inspired performance rather than a less glamorous day of false starts and retakes.<sup>3</sup>

Without doubt, du Pré's recording is one of the most respected interpretations of the Concerto. Presumably because of the effectiveness of the recording and the attention it received, the famous cellist Mstislav Rostropovich "erased the concerto from his repertory" after the recording was released.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it comes as no surprise that in the wake of such a respected and widely distributed rendition, amateur and professional cellists alike would be conscious of du Pré's stylistic choices and perhaps imitate their most attractive features. Indeed, it is not unusual to assume that iconic recordings like du Pré's recording of the Elgar Concerto or Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations bear disproportionate influence on

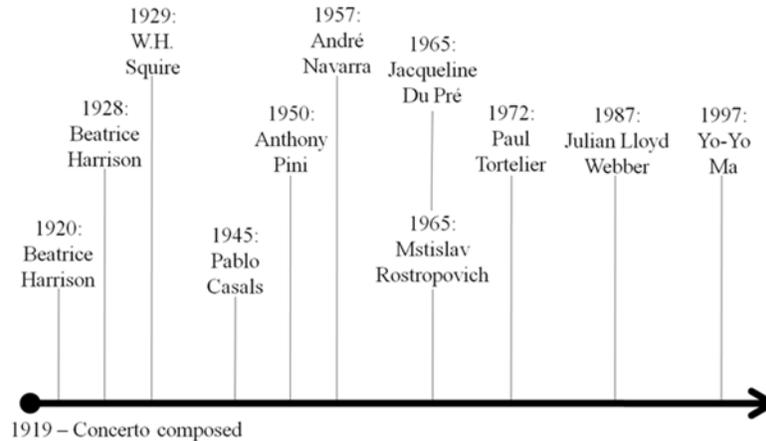
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<sup>1</sup> Norman Lebrecht, *The Life and Death of Classical Music* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 208-209.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, "New Standard Version of the Elgar Cello Concerto," February 19, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary du Pré and Piers du Pré, *A Genius in the Family: An Intimate Memoir of Jacqueline du Pré* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 172.

<sup>4</sup> Lebrecht, *The Life and Death of Classical Music*, 209.



**Figure 1: A survey of recordings of Elgar's Cello Concerto**

later generations of performers. Even so, most landmark recordings still leave room for later performers to produce contrasting yet respected renditions of the same music; for example, pianist András Schiff's recording of the Goldberg Variations was praised for a unique style of ornamentation and choice of repeats that contrasted with Gould's playing.<sup>5</sup> In the case of du Pré's Elgar Concerto, however, the 1965 recording appears to have effectively stifled creative contributions to the piece. Even award-winning modern interpretations of the Concerto, such as Julian Lloyd Webber's 1987 recording with Yehudi Menuhin, are remarkably similar in terms of tempo, rubato, tone, and most other interpretive decisions. It appears that artists are so careful to respect du Pré's legacy that they consciously or subconsciously dampen their own stylistic tendencies. Only now are artists beginning to differentiate themselves from du Pré's markedly dramatic and emotional style, and their work is met with varying degrees of enthusiasm from critics and audiences.

Fortunately, the recording history of the Elgar Cello Concerto, illustrated in Figure 1, extends for several decades before the 1965 du Pré recording nearly to the original composition of the piece in 1919. These recordings, dating back to 1920 and 1928 with cellist Beatrice

<sup>5</sup> Paul Shoemaker, "BACH JS Goldberg Variations Schiff ECM NEW SERIES 1825 [PSh]: Classical CD Reviews," MusicWeb International, [http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/July04/Bach\\_Goldberg\\_Schiff.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/July04/Bach_Goldberg_Schiff.htm) (accessed December 1, 2008).

Harrison under the baton of Edward Elgar himself, reveal a wide array of potential interpretations with differences extending far beyond those that might be expected given the evolution of string-playing style that has occurred over the last century. Several even appear to express divergent conceptions of the piece itself, from an epic tone poem emphasizing the *nobilmente* marking that appears so often in Elgar's music to a more personal, parsed narrative bringing out smaller-scale features. In many cases these interpretations represent effective alternatives to du Pré's take on the Concerto. In fact, given that Elgar personally conducted the Harrison recordings and voiced his approval of Pablo Casals's interpretation, the recordings from these two artists certainly reveal the piece as Elgar would have heard it and potentially how he intended it to be played—to the extent that he had preferences in this regard.

By examining early recordings of the Concerto and other primary accounts about its performances before 1965, we can reveal the musical and cultural situation precipitating the sudden popularity of du Pré's performance and how subsequent events solidified her role as the Concerto's "consummate interpreter."<sup>6</sup> Additionally, through these sources it becomes clear that while du Pré's rendition undoubtedly is effective and well-developed, there is no reason that it should be the exclusive model performance of the piece. Instead, the recordings reveal a huge spectrum of interpretations, suggesting that Elgar would have been open to and indeed would have encouraged a wider array of readings of both marked and unmarked elements in the score.

### **Earliest Recordings of the Cello Concerto**

Of the late romantic and early modern composers, Edward Elgar was one of few to take recording technology seriously. While many of his contemporaries regarded recording as a

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<sup>6</sup> The Elgar Society, "Jacqueline du Pré: The concerto's consummate interpreter?," The Elgar Society, <http://www.elgar.org/3cello-b.htm> (accessed December 1, 2008).

passing fad suitable only for popular music, Elgar left over fifteen hours of compositions recorded under his baton, providing a lasting record of his personal interpretations and performance style.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, his diary and other writings indicate which recordings released after his compositions were published appealed to his tastes and sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> This evidence can be used to trace the Elgar's personal conception of his Cello Concerto nearly to the year it was composed. Despite the lukewarm reception initially granted to the Concerto by live audiences, Elgar revisited the piece in 1920 and again in 1928 in the recording studio, both times with Beatrice Harrison playing the solo part (see Figure 2). These two performances, the first an



**Figure 2: Beatrice Harrison recording the Concerto with Elgar**

abridged version that was “squeezed into the pint pot of two 78 discs” and the second a full performance captured using newer electric rather than acoustic technology,<sup>9</sup> show firsthand the composer's own interpretation of the score. We also have evidence from Elgar's writings indicating that he approved of and indeed enjoyed Pablo Casals's performances of the piece.<sup>10</sup> Although Casals waited until 1945, eleven years after Elgar's death, to record the Concerto, we can use the 1945 recording as an indication of Casals's overall approach to the piece, even if the particulars of his technique or performance style might have changed over time. Given a legacy so rich as to include both Elgar's personal recordings and his descriptions of preferred performances, we might expect the character of the Cello Concerto to have emerged so clearly that any astute musician could ascertain Elgar's intentions “between” the notes and instructions

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Day, “Elgar and Recording,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 184.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 322.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Anderson, “Elgar Restored,” *The Musical Times* 130, no. 1760 (1989): 617.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, 322.

marked on the score. Upon even a cursory examination of these earliest recordings of the Concerto, however, it becomes clear that unmarked—and in some cases marked—passages were intentionally left to the performer's discretion rather than being designed with some now forsaken performance practice in mind.

Since a substantial comparison of Harrison's and Casals's entire performances would require a larger-scale analysis, this study is limited to a few brief but telling excerpts from the fourth movement demonstrating the varied interpretations of the Concerto experienced by the composer himself. From a broad perspective, the two cellists certainly differ on their conceptions of the movement. Beatrice Harrison's recordings are faster overall and exhibit much less tempo variation, while Casals's is uniformly slower and includes many more liberties with tempo between sections and phrases. These differences in tempo make Casals's recording two minutes longer than Harrison's. Yet despite such remarkable dissimilarity in approach, at the four points in the score where Elgar provides a particular metronome marking, all three recordings agree with the given beat to a surprising degree of accuracy. The only exception to this rule is the final *Poco più lento* marking, for which Harrison proceeds at a pace somewhat faster than the marked 88 beats per minute in both of her recordings.

These divergent approaches to basic tempo illustrate the performers' contrasting ideas of *tempo rubato* as well as their overall ideas about the movement's character. Harrison's more steady beat and tendency to accelerate rather than slow down contribute to a stately, almost marching interpretation biased toward the more masculine first theme of the movement. Casals's more flexible timing and accentuation of *ritard* markings over *accelerandi* create a more singing effect directed toward the expressive, nearly weeping quality of the final theme, the very theme for which Harrison takes a faster tempo than marked in the score. Such a considerable difference

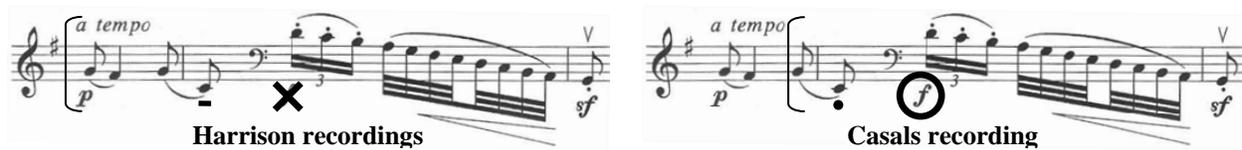


Figure 3: Tempo variation (beginning of *a tempo* marked with a bracket), dynamics, and staccato in measures 58-60

between the two interpretations has a marked effect on the audience's ear. Upon listening to one of Harrison's recordings, music critic Robert Anderson remarks that her interpretation "[reminds us] that the agonised pages towards the end of the finale should be done without a trace of exaggeration."<sup>11</sup> Contrastingly, in the 1947 play *The Linden Tree* by J.B. Priestley, one of the main characters listens to the Casals recording of Elgar's Cello Concerto, characterizing the ending to his daughter as "[w]andering through the darkening house of life—touching all the things he loved—crying Farewell—forever."<sup>12</sup> Although it would be difficult to produce a valid interpretation of the Concerto's conclusion without a more serious, almost sentimental tone, the "wandering," lugubrious pace Priestley ascribes to Casals's interpretation hardly would be an appropriate description of Harrison's steadier approach. In fact, this description foreshadows descriptions of du Pré's performances of the Concerto, which tended to be slower and more emotional; this link may be related to the fact that du Pré took master classes from Casals a few years before making the 1965 recording, although it is possible that the two performers came across this aspect of their performances independently. That said, the *New York Times* reported that one of du Pré's performances of the Concerto "brought tears to Casal's [*sic*] eyes," indicating that he found her approach effective and perhaps similar in character to his own.<sup>13</sup>

The major differences between the two performers' characterizations of the movement also are reflected in more local aspects of their playing. For example, Figure 3 shows a short

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, "Elgar Restored," 617.

<sup>12</sup> J.B. Priestley, *The Linden Tree: A Play in Two Acts and Four Scenes* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Ltd., 1948), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Raymond, "Steinberg Joins Casals at Fete," *New York Times*, June 8, 1969, 78.

motif in which the two recordings diverge in their interpretations of both written and unwritten musical qualities.<sup>14</sup> Here, the cello solo concludes a short contemplative passage with a sudden, quick falling scale. As would be expected, both of Harrison's recordings obey the *a tempo* as marked, hastily ending the passage with smooth bowing and little change in dynamics. Casals lingers in the slower tempo, beginning the *a tempo* with the falling fifth; he also makes the fall more emphatic by making the downward scale louder and playing the "C" ending the first part of the fall with a *staccato* bowing. Thus, Harrison treats the resolution of the contemplative moment as a regular occurrence, regarding the *a tempo* as an indication to continue not only the earlier speed, but also the earlier heroic tone, while Casals gives the phrase a more irregular pace and dynamic level, as if it is interrupting the earlier thoughtful passage in frustration.

In general, given that Elgar approved of both Casals's and Harrison's very different readings of the Concerto, the question as to how he would have intended the piece to be played is left unresolved. As Harrison reports in her autobiography, Elgar instructed her before performing his Concerto, "Don't mind about the notes or anything. Give 'em the spirit."<sup>15</sup> Such openness made the piece, whose score lacks the plethora of expressive markings found in most comparable concerti of its era, ripe for alternative interpretation by later artists. At the same time, however, it may have been this extreme flexibility that led to a group of critics and musicians seeking a missing "definitive" interpretation eventually provided by du Pré.

### **Interpretations of the Concerto Before 1965**

Several early interpreters of the Concerto other than Harrison and Elgar in the 1920s and

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<sup>14</sup> Tracks on the accompanying CD: 1 (Harrison, 1928), 2 (Casals).

<sup>15</sup> Beatrice Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales* (London: John Murray Ltd., 1985), 125.



**Figure 4:** Passage from the third movement; the early Harrison recording with Elgar and the later private recording with Princess Victoria accelerate conservatively starting before the *molto stringendo*; the later Harrison and Elgar recording exhibits a much larger tempo difference that starts later.

Casals in 1945 preserved their performances through recording. A diverse sampling of these recordings might include the following:

- An additional private recording of the Concerto's third movement with Beatrice Harrison accompanied on the piano by Princess Victoria in 1928
- William Henry Squire with the Hallé Orchestra, conducted by Hamilton Harty in 1929
- Anthony Pini with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Eduard van Beinum in 1950
- André Navarra with the Hallé Orchestra, conducted by John Barbirolli in 1957
- Mstislav Rostropovich with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky in 1965, one month before du Pré made her famous recording

These recordings widen the spectrum of potential readings of the Concerto as it was understood before 1965.

Most surprisingly, although Elgar granted Beatrice Harrison a significant amount of creative license in their recordings together, the recording of Harrison with Princess Victoria suggests that Harrison might have played the piece differently away from its composer. Despite being closer chronologically to Harrison and Elgar's later recording, the private recording without Elgar is more similar to the earlier 1920 recording, particularly in its use of *tempo rubato*. One passage in which this difference is particularly apparent is shown in Figure 4.<sup>16</sup>

The private recording exhibits a slight acceleration beginning two measures before the

<sup>16</sup> Tracks on the accompanying CD: 3 (1920), 4 (1928, private), 5 (1928, with Elgar).

*stringendo molto* marking, jumping to a somewhat faster pace at the *appassionato* a few measures later. This pattern is similar to the 1920 Harrison and Elgar recording, which also interprets the *stringendo* conservatively. Contrastingly, the 1928 recording with Elgar conducting ascribes a much larger effect to the combined *stringendo molto* and *appassionato* markings. In particular, the pace accelerates quickly at the *stringendo molto*, moving to a tempo for the *appassionato* that is more *allegro* or *allegretto* than the movement's *adagio*. Such a marked acceleration gives the movement a dramatic climax that rises above its overall melancholy character.

Accounts of Elgar's early experiences conducting the Concerto reveal that he was less than comfortable with the third movement, allowing Harrison to lead the ensemble in particularly challenging sections.<sup>17</sup> The passage in question contains the most concentrated series of tempo and mood changes and would serve as a strong candidate for a passage with which Elgar struggled. Thus, Harrison may have taken charge of tempo choices at this point in early performances where Elgar still was getting his bearings on the piece; a similar assertion could be made about the recording with Princess Victoria, in which Harrison was respected as the more experienced artist in the pair. Additionally, because the private recording exhibits considerable *accelerandi* and *ritardandi* elsewhere in the movement and the piano part is not particularly challenging at the *appassionato* section, it is difficult to attribute the subtler tempo changes to Harrison's attempting to make the piece more approachable for her remarkably capable but still amateur accompanist. Contrastingly, by 1928, it is possible that Elgar was more comfortable with his composition and able to take more creative control over the passage's pace, explaining the sudden change in tempo at the *appassionato* that does not appear in the other recordings. Thus, put into historical context, it becomes likely that the more relaxed *stringendo* from the

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<sup>17</sup> Jerrold Moore, *An Elgar Discography* (London: British Institute of Recorded Sound, 1963), 32.



Figure 5: Squire's transition from one voice to another; stages of the transition are bracketed.

private recording and the earlier symphonic recording represents Harrison's idea of the passage rather than Elgar's. More generally, these observations reveal that even recordings made under the composer's baton were subject to the musical tastes of more than one artist. Evidently, Elgar embraced such artistic differences or at least was willing to have relatively different interpretations of the movement associated with his name.

Other early recordings of the Concerto reveal interpretive decisions closely linked to the particularities of various performers. For instance, the performance by William Henry Squire, the earliest-born cellist to have a major recording of the piece, exhibits many of the qualities of old-style cello playing, most notably slow *portamenti* played at the same dynamic level as the notes themselves and even emphasized at some points for dramatic effect. Even though Squire's technique may be considered antiquated and even melodramatic by modern performers, his particular use of *portamenti* and other rhetorical devices gives the piece a clearly-defined narrative style. This effect is best observed in Squire's recording of the fourth movement of the Concerto, which he portrays as a conversation between two contrasting voices. The first voice, characterized by short, nearly *marcato* bow strokes and limited *portamenti*, appears in its fullest form after the cadenza and *quasi recitative* sections at the beginning of the movement. The other voice, which appears in short contemplative passages in the first half of the movement, has a



Figure 6: André Navarra's more athletic interpretation ignores the circled harmonics.

much more luscious tone with frequent and vigorous *portamenti*, eventually gaining the spotlight in the second half of the movement, marked *Poco più lento*.

For Squire, the most important points in the movement are often those in which the two voices are put into conversation, as in the passage in Figure 5 (previous page).<sup>18</sup> This passage begins with the more lyrical voice, with a prominent slide from the high “A” down to middle “C” in the second measure. Similarly, the next four measures building on a diminished chord to a “B” are played with connected *legato* bow strokes and a light but prominent *portamento*. When this build is repeated starting on a “C#,” however, the slurs are downplayed or perhaps ignored completely in favor of much heavier, spaced bow strokes. The final transition to the original voice is made during the subsequent eighth note passage, which, despite the lack of *tenuto* marks, uses almost pulsing bows and limited vibrato. This species of alternation between voices emphasizes the Concerto as a dramatic narrative, perhaps inspired by Elgar’s *nobilmente* motif appearing at the very beginning and end of the four movements. Rather than reading the Concerto as having a single forlorn voice with moments of hope, Squire effectively separates the two voices and shows how they develop in parallel using a few key technical and stylistic approaches to distinguish their characters.

André Navarra accomplishes an opposite end by uniting the Concerto under a single more masculine voice. Navarra’s biographers note that he “looked more like an athlete than a

<sup>18</sup> Track 6 on the accompanying CD.

musician,”<sup>19</sup> and while his playing is often expressive, it is marked with a certain heaviness and athleticism brought about by wide vibrato and a heavy bow stroke. For instance, consider Navarra’s presentation of the passage from the second movement shown in Figure 6 (previous page).<sup>20</sup> In most performances of the Concerto, cellists use the half notes marked as harmonics as short moments of repose within the continuous sixteenth-note *ostinato* that characterizes the movement. For Navarra, however, these notes are just as intense as the measures that surround them; the harmonics are neglected for intense vibrato with loud, even dynamics “pegged” from the beginning of the note. This simple choice affecting relatively few measures gives the second movement a much more forceful, nearly relentless forward drive all the way to its last measures. Of course, Navarra’s exacting technique does not always bring about a driven tone; the same vibrato that intensifies longer notes in the second movement gives his performance of the third movement a unique singing quality.

Moving forward less than a decade from Navarra’s recording, Mstislav Rostropovich’s interpretation demonstrates that Elgar’s Cello Concerto was open to creative interpretations up to one month before du Pré’s recording was released in 1965. Rostropovich’s performance is closer to modern conceptions of the piece, although it differs from many modern recordings by having a more brilliant, often quick texture that shines through especially in the second and fourth movements. Despite the effective performance of the piece presented in this live recording, however, Rostropovich never returned to it in the studio. While du Pré’s performances may have had a subconscious effect on other cellists’ approaches to the Concerto, they had direct effect on Rostropovich’s choice to abandon the piece. He describes his hesitance to perform the Concerto in a 1995 interview with cellist Tim Janof:

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret Campbell, *The Great Cellists* (London: Chrysalis Books Group, 2004), 141.

<sup>20</sup> Track 7 on the accompanying CD.

**Figure 7:** The *quasi recitative* at the beginning of the fourth movement; early recordings play the bracketed measures with separation and marcato, while most recordings after du Pré have a more legato style; du Pré's audible bow lifts are marked with vertical arrows, and the rest during which the accompaniment has a pizzicato is circled.

The theme from the slow movement sounds like it's about first love, so I think it's more appropriate for a young person. My pupil Jacqueline du Pré played it much better than I because I didn't have the fresh perspective that a piece like that requires. After playing Don Quixote, the Shostakovich concertos, and other works, it was hard for me to go back to a piece like the Elgar.<sup>21</sup>

Evidently, Rostropovich did not consider his own rendition to bring enough new and valuable material to the Concerto to merit his performing it alongside du Pré, even if his live recording demonstrates that his and du Pré's interpretations diverge at several critical points.

### Introducing du Pré's Elgar Concerto

Rostropovich certainly was not alone in his reverence for du Pré's recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto. Since the year the recording was made, nearly every subsequent recording and major performance of the piece has been held up to du Pré's "gold standard" of interpretation and authenticity. Somewhat pejorative phrases such as "[n]o one will outdo du Pré's account"<sup>22</sup> and "du Pré's Elgar casts a long shadow"<sup>23</sup> decorate reviews of even major cellists' approaches to the piece; often times, these reviews do not even highlight particular aspects of du Pré's playing that make other cellists' interpretations inferior but simply assert that her recording is the

<sup>21</sup> Tim Janof, "Conversation with Mstislav Rostropovich," Internet Cello Society, <http://www.cello.org/newsletter/articles/rostopovich/rostopovich.htm> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Rick Jones, "Natalie Clein: Elgar Cello Concerto," *The Times*, September 22, 2007, TimesOnline, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/music/cd\\_reviews/article2484133.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/cd_reviews/article2484133.ece)

<sup>23</sup> Jessica Duchon, "Battle of the Hands," *The Independent*, September 5, 2007, BNet, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4158/is\\_/ai\\_n19499780](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_/ai_n19499780)

only one worth examining. Perhaps due in part to this reverence for du Pré's rendition, nearly any major review of the 1965 du Pré recording would serve as a sufficient survey of the virtues of her interpretation. Thus, this study focuses on the particular aspects of her performance that seem unrelated to earlier performance practice but immediately altered future cellists' visions of the piece. Of course, this analysis serves only to show the variety of interpretive possibilities that was lost shortly after the 1965 recording rather than to criticize or downplay the importance of du Pré's passionate playing. Her rendition is highly effective and as such deserves most of the attention it continues to receive, but earlier recordings indicate that it is by no means the only way to play the Concerto.

One passage in the Concerto that has experienced remarkable convergence in performance practice since du Pré is the *quasi recitative* section starting with the soloist's entrance at the beginning of the fourth movement; the first half of this section is shown in Figure 7 (previous page).<sup>24</sup> Recordings produced in the forty to fifty years preceding du Pré exhibit remarkable differences from one cellist to the next at this point. This degree of variation is fairly predictable given the near-cadenza feel of the passage, in which the orchestral accompaniment is particularly sparse. Furthermore, the *recitative* and later *espressivo* and *ad libitum* markings in the cello part reinforce that the cellist can interpret the passage as he or she sees fit. For example, Beatrice Harrison and William Henry Squire interpret the accented eighth notes of the F major chord preceding the thirty-second note run as suggesting a strong *marcato* feel, with significant space between each note and bow strokes that undoubtedly come from above the strings; Squire also gives the eighth notes in the preceding measure a similar strong and separated feel. Harrison takes a relatively fast tempo that stays fairly rigid through the

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<sup>24</sup> Tracks on the accompanying CD: 8 (Harrison), 9 (Squire), 10 (Rostropovich), 11 (du Pré), 12 (Tortelier), 13 (Webber), 14 (Clein).

passage; this reading may reflect the fact that the *ritard* at the end of the phrase is the only explicitly marked tempo change in the *quasi recitative* section. Rostropovich also takes a faster approach overall, with a more legato bow stroke, minor tempo fluctuation tending toward slower speeds, and audible breaks between short phrases.

The same phrase as interpreted by du Pré takes on a much more serious, almost wailing character. The entire *quasi recitative* is played at a much slower pace than almost any of the earlier recordings, with fluctuations in tempo tending toward even more measured speeds. Nearly all of the potential spacing between notes is removed in exchange for a much more legato approach; the only audible bow lifts in the passage occur within the first and last pairs of half notes, as shown in Figure 7. Additionally, du Pré and Barbirolli give the *pizzicato* in the strings during the rest in the second line of Figure 7 much more strength and placement within the phrase, effectively breaking the first half of the *quasi recitative* into an independent section with its own climax. On the whole, Du Pré's rhetorical strategies in this passage give it a lonely, singing quality that employs the orchestral accompaniment as a chorus to reinforce the dramatic tone of the soloist.

The dramatic quality of du Pré's performance makes it stand out from those of her recorded predecessors, who gave the passage added weight but not nearly to the degree that she did in her 1965 recording. Both classes of interpretations serve as means to effective but contrasting ends. The faster approach sets the tone for the marching theme of the fourth movement while still marking the *recitative* as a contemplative and somewhat melancholy moment for the solo part. The slower, legato approach sets the *recitative* apart, providing a transitional "movement-within-a-movement" emphasizing the grief of the solo melodic line despite the orchestra's initial strong entry after the end of the romantic third movement. While

early recordings mostly prefer the former interpretation, major recordings after 1965 uniformly choose the latter. For instance, Julian Lloyd Webber's 1987 recording, which won the annual Brit award for a classical recording from the British Phonographic Industry,<sup>25</sup> sounds nearly identical to du Pré's recording at this point, with slightly less emphasis on the *pizzicato* in the strings. Natalie Clein, whose recording is being promoted as "the reference recording for the 21st century" with du Pré's recording being the "reference recording of the 20th century,"<sup>26</sup> also follows suit with a similar legato performance of the passage in Figure 7. Note, however, that Clein's interpretation does diverge somewhat from du Pré's in the subsequent measures, lingering on the double-stops within the short cadenza; also, in the passage in Figure 7, she makes nearly inaudible spaces between the second set of eighth notes that Harrison and Squire separate.

There exist several similar examples of passages in which du Pré's playing contrasts with that of earlier artists, but not with that of later artists, who seem merely to mimic her interpretation. More general differences in technique also exhibit similar patterns, such as the use of *portamenti*. By the time du Pré released her recording, *portamenti* had gone out of vogue as part of the common string playing technique. This is not to say that *portamenti* had been lost completely; instead, smaller, less emphasized slides were used "discretely" at particularly dramatic builds and falls.<sup>27</sup> Since Jacqueline du Pré's recording was released in the transitional period in which *portamenti* became unpopular, she had a unique chance to affect the modern conception of which slides are necessary or effective. Indeed, we find that her recording had

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<sup>25</sup> "Julian Lloyd Webber: Biography," Julian Lloyd Webber Official Website, [http://www.julianlloydwebber.com/concert\\_biography.asp](http://www.julianlloydwebber.com/concert_biography.asp) (accessed December 2, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> "Elgar Cello Concerto," Amazon.co.uk, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Elgar-Cello-Concerto-Natalie-Clein/dp/B000UNBQXC> (accessed December 3, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 97.

exactly this effect. Especially in the third movement, even slides that are not convenient in terms of fingering or cello technique are replicated in later recordings fairly accurately.

These more recent recordings reveal the marked immediate effect of du Pré's playing on performance practice of all four movements of the Concerto. This is not to say that all recordings now are identical. Clein's rendition of the fourth movement involves much more spacing and *détaché* bowing in the first theme than du Pré, and most artists, including Clein, Tortelier, and Lloyd Webber, do not move as quickly through the opening chords of the Concerto as du Pré. These localized differences, however, are not sufficient to bring about a different conception of the Concerto as a whole. While Squire, Harrison, and Navarra each give Elgar's Concerto a different dramatic theme or highlight contrasting lines within the various movements, modern artists only vary within a slim subset of the possible interpretive choices.

### **Cultural Authenticity in the 1965 Recording**

Jacqueline du Pré's recording of the Elgar Concerto is often regarded as an integral component of a larger effort by Barbirolli and others to "restore Elgar to his rightful position as the greatest English composer since Purcell."<sup>28</sup> In this light, musicians tend to consider du Pré's performances as faithfully capturing the "peculiarly English" style of the Concerto.<sup>29</sup> Some musicians even suggest that non-English performers—including the majority of popular cellists over the past century—would not understand the Concerto as well as an artist from its origin, as when conductor Norman Del Mar indicates that "continental interpreters [may] find it hard to

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<sup>28</sup> du Pré and du Pré, *A Genius in the Family*, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Del Mar, *Conducting Elgar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 108.



Figure 8: Du Pré's "fatal rubato" (circled)

come to terms with its total detachment and gentle sadness."<sup>30</sup> This viewpoint may have contributed to the hesitance of other performers to stray from du Pré's conceptualization.

In actuality, du Pré's performances represent very personal rather than nationalistic ideas about the Concerto. This difference can be observed starting in the first few lines of the piece. For instance, in a 1996 videotaped master class offered by William Pleeth, du Pré's principal cello teacher, Pleeth insists on several occasions that the performer not succumb to the "fatal mistake" of playing the circled motifs in Figure 8 with forward-moving rubato, shortchanging the notes with tenuto marks in each group of sixteenths.<sup>31, 32</sup> Given the number of times Pleeth mentions this "mistake" within the master class, it seems plausible if not likely that he would have insisted that du Pré not employ the "fatal" rubato during his lessons with her. In the 1965 recording, however, her interpretation begins to contrast with that espoused by Pleeth; in a later videotaped recording conducted by Daniel Barenboim, her interpretation borders on the "fatal" rubato against which he so strongly warns. Since Pleeth is generally considered a member of the English cello school and du Pré respected him as her "cello daddy" throughout the part of her career during which these recordings were made,<sup>33</sup> the rubato in this section clearly is a personal choice of du Pré rather than performance practice among English cellists. In fact, this passage is a rare point in the Concerto at which almost all the major recordings of the piece differ. While du Pré is not even consistent with her choices of rubato, many other artists, including Beatrice

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>31</sup> *William Pleeth Masterclass – A Life in Music, Vol. 3: Elgar – Concerto in E Minor*, VHS, directed by André Delacroix (Ann Arbor: Shar Productions Co., 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Track 15 on the accompanying CD.

<sup>33</sup> Claude Kenneson, *Musical Prodigies: Perilous Journeys, Remarkable Lives* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2003), 323.

Harrison and Mstislav Rostropovich before the 1965 recording and Julian Lloyd Webber after it, give little attention to the tenuto marks and move nearly uniformly through the four sixteenth notes.

The inconsistencies between each of du Pré's performances of the Concerto indicate the personal rather than studied nature of her interpretation. For instance, consider one description of Jacqueline du Pré's final performance of the piece by her sister Hilary:

A few moments of tuning, a short pause, and she began. I suddenly jumped. She was slowing the tempo down. A few more bars and it became vividly clear. . . . No longer was she on the wooden platform of the Royal Festival Hall performing to an audience. Instead she was playing in the open air, as if in a huge grass field, and in front of her was a grave. . . . The grave was hers, and she knew it. I could almost see tears on her face. She was saying goodbye to herself, playing her own requiem.<sup>34</sup>

Such intense emotion conveyed through performances of a single piece of music only can be achieved when the performer is willing to cast away much of the "standard" performance practices in exchange for more personal interpretations. This passage and others indicate that many of du Pré's fundamental stylistic choices were made depending on her mood at the moment of the performance. In this way Jacqueline du Pré's reading of the Elgar Concerto is inexorably linked not to her heritage as an English cellist but rather to her own personality and feelings.

The fact that du Pré's recording became respected not only as a great performance but as a prototypically English performance of the Concerto may have more to do with timing and other external factors than with her playing. Ever since the piece was premiered, it remained dormant in the repertoire, awaiting an enthusiastic artist to champion its renewal. Elgar was one of the most prominent composers on the English musical scene during his career, writing popular orchestral, vocal, and chamber works that garnered exclusive premieres with famous performers

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<sup>34</sup> du Pré and du Pré, *A Genius in the Family*, 375.

and conductors. The Cello Concerto was particularly close to Elgar; near his death he mentioned to a friend, “If, after I’m dead, you hear someone whistling [the Concerto] on the Malvern Hills, don’t be alarmed. It’s only me.”<sup>35</sup> Such intimacy can be heard within the piece itself; musicologist Matthew Riley of the University of Birmingham notes that “[e]ven Elgar’s greatest admirers admit that in places the Cello Concerto comes close to self-pity,” perhaps reflecting its composer’s disillusionment over events surrounding the first World War.<sup>36</sup> Despite Elgar’s personal involvement with the piece, with a less-than-successful premiere by Felix Salmond, it entered the concert cello repertoire inconspicuously. A quick search of London’s *The Times* newspaper index reveals a number of reviews of Beatrice Harrison, Pablo Casals, and other cellists playing the piece in the decades after its publication to neutral effect; one reviewer characterized the piece as “a work that does not always or lightly yield up its secret,” reflecting the mysterious sparseness that characterizes the Concerto’s score and is likely to confuse its potential performers.<sup>37</sup>

When du Pré offered her interpretation in 1965, audiences in England and around the world were ready for the “secret” of Elgar’s Cello Concerto to be revealed. Relatively new tape recording technology made it possible to obtain higher-fidelity classical recordings that could be distributed to audiences worldwide.<sup>38</sup> Also, despite the fact that audiences for the Beatles may have been unlikely to overlap significantly with those for classical concerti, the so-called “British invasion” in popular music paved the way for English artists to introduce their work on a worldwide stage. These factors combined led audiences of both live and recorded performances

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<sup>35</sup> Brian Pedley, “Worcestershire’s Hope and Glory,” *The Times*, April 14, 2007, TimesOnline, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/holiday\\_type/music\\_and\\_travel/article1649640.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/holiday_type/music_and_travel/article1649640.ece)

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Riley, *Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32.

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, “Concert at the Albert Hall,” November 7, 1946.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Schoenherr, “Recording Technology History,” University of San Diego History Department, <http://history.sandiego.edu/GEN/recording/notes.html> (accessed December 1, 2008).

to be particularly susceptible to the charm of a young, charismatic English cellist whose “stage presence . . . was more typical of rock ‘n’ roll flamboyance than of classical restraint.”<sup>39</sup> Such a passionate image generated a deep contrast with the more gentle impression of the last champion of the Concerto, Beatrice Harrison, who was best known for holding musical soirees



**Figure 9: Beatrice Harrison and songbirds; this public image contrasted strongly with du Pré's less poised style.**

at her home in which performers would be accompanied in her gardens by nightingales and other songbirds (Figure 9).<sup>40</sup>

Shortly after Jacqueline du Pré's popularity as a charming classical star began to decline, the legitimacy of her interpretations was once again reinforced by the tragic story of her battle with multiple sclerosis and eventual death at age 42. Artists were understandably hesitant to approach such a cornerstone of du Pré's repertoire, a piece upon which she had developed a successful career and an adored musical personality. Not surprisingly, the Concerto itself became linked with du Pré's story, rather than the other way around. Countless English movies, television specials, plays, and other performances made after du Pré's entry and subsequent exit from the musical scene feature young women approaching Elgar's music, the Cello Concerto in particular, and finding there a personal connection; this theme has been repeated so many times that Riley asserts, “Today any renewal promised by the Romantic child in relation to Elgar's

<sup>39</sup> Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: Understanding the Stress-Disease Connection* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 22.

<sup>40</sup> David Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing: A Journey into the Mystery of Bird Song* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 142.

music seems increasingly stale.”<sup>41</sup> In this way, du Pré’s story has entered into the English musical consciousness as the story of the Concerto and the reason for its “peculiarly English” tone, firmly establishing du Pré as its sole legitimate interpreter and as the standard to which all modern recordings of the piece are compared.

### **Playing the Concerto for Modern Audiences**

To this day, performances of Elgar’s Cello Concerto continue to pay homage to du Pré’s playing. Even though the attractiveness of du Pré’s readings comes from her personality and individual connection to the piece’s tone and structure, cellists at all levels have studied the minutest details of her playing and integrated them into their own understanding of the Concerto. Such uniformity among interpretations raises the question of why the piece should be played at all in modern concert halls. If performances past 1965 truly represent reenactments of a single “great performance,” then it must be the case that the value of a more recent performance of Elgar’s Cello Concerto can be judged solely based on its similarity to du Pré’s interpretation. In this case, perhaps the piece is better relegated to the repertoire of MP3 players and CD collections, leaving cellists who pride themselves on their unique musical voices to pursue music that is more open to alternative presentations.

Fortunately, instead of deserting the piece in reverence for a great performer of the past, artists are beginning to re-explore the interpretive landscape of the Cello Concerto. The fact that Clein is willing to promote her recording as a sort of updated version of du Pré’s interpretation suggests that the unquestioning respect for du Pré’s rendition is waning. Additionally, while his most popular recording of Elgar’s Concerto exhibits the same signs of a du Pré-influenced interpretation, cellist Yo-Yo Ma begins to ascribe a unique, drawn-out tone to the piece in his

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<sup>41</sup> Riley, *Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination*, 142.

1997 live performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Daniel Barenboim. Ma rolls the opening chords of the piece, softening the introduction and making way for a more sentimental performance that uses shorter bows and *portamenti* in both the solo and *tutti* parts, with a style that makes reference to not only du Pré's playing but also to the older performance practices employed by Beatrice Harrison and William Henry Squire. This sort of exploration may have elicited mixed reactions from the audience but represents a crucial first step in reviving the creative aspects of performing Elgar's Cello Concerto. As an established concert cellist, Yo-Yo Ma has the chance to encourage his peers to perform similar experiments with the piece; while they might preserve certain effective elements of du Pré's interpretations, they can modify others to suit their personal preferences or to bring out alternative characters within the score.

Although the tragic premature death of Jacqueline du Pré makes it impossible to know how she might have advised future generations of cellists to play Elgar's Concerto, the personal nature of her interpretive decisions suggests that she would care more about cellists establishing their personal voices than about their imitating hers. By viewing du Pré's recording as a particularly effective performance in a long and varied line of interpretations of the Concerto, cellists can feel freer to contribute their own musical ideas to future interpretations of the work.

### Selected Discography

The following is a list of recordings of Elgar's Cello Concerto, many of which were referenced in this study. This list is by no means complete; it is intended only to provide a sampling of stylistic approaches to the Concerto and how they have changed or converged over time.

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Casals, Pablo. BBC Symphony Orchestra, with Adrian Boult (1945). *Dvořák: Cello Concerto;*

*Elgar: Cello Concerto; Bruch: Kol Nidrei*, EMI Classics (2005).

Clein, Natalie. Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with Vernon Handley (2007). *Elgar:*

*Cello Concerto*, EMI Classics (2007).

Harrison, Beatrice. Symphony Orchestra, with Edward Elgar (1920). *The Elgar Edition:*

*Elgar's Complete Recordings, 1914-1925*, Pavilion Records (1992).

Harrison, Beatrice. Accompanied by The Princess Victoria (1928). *The Harrison Sisters: An*

*English Music Heritage*, Claremont.

Harrison, Beatrice. New Symphony Orchestra, with Edward Elgar (1928). *Sir Edward Elgar*

*Conducts Elgar*, Dutton (2007).

Ma, Yo-Yo. London Symphony Orchestra, with André Previn (1985). *Elgar, Walton: Cello*

*Concertos*, CBS Masterworks (1990).

Ma, Yo-Yo. Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with Daniel Barenboim (1997). Video recording,

YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM9DPfp7-Ck> (accessed December 3, 2008).

Navarra, André. The Hallé Orchestra, with John Barbirolli (1957). *Elgar and Dvořák: Cello*

*Concertos*, Testament (2001).

Pini, Anthony. London Philharmonic Orchestra, with Eduard van Beinum (1950). *Great*

*Moments in Cello Playing*, Cello Classics (2001).

Rostropovich, Mstislav. London Symphony Orchestra, with Gennady Rozhdestvensky (1965).

*Haydn, Saint-Saëns, Elgar: Cello Concertos*, BBC Legends (2006).

Squire, William Henry. The Hallé Orchestra, with Hamilton Harty (1929). *The Recorded Cello:*

*Volume II*, Waldhurst (1992).

Tortelier, Paul. London Philharmonic Orchestra, with Adrian Boult (1972). *Elgar: Cello*

*Concerto; Brahms: Double Concerto; Debussy: Cello Sonata*, BBC Legends (2008).

Webber, Julian Lloyd. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, with Yehudi Menuhin (1986). *Elgar:*

*Cello Concerto/Enigma Variations*, Philips (1986).