Too Perfect Harmony
How Technology Fostered, and Detected, a Pianist's Alleged Plagiarism

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A piece of software used by Apple's iTunes has accidentally sparked a scandal in the classical music world -- and cast a shadow on the reputation of an obscure, deceased British pianist now accused of plagiarism.

The alleged hoax, in which the recorded works of pianist Joyce Hatto have been called into question, was uncovered using database software that automatically identifies CDs so that fans don't have to manually enter artist and track information when they load the music onto their computers. Technology helped enable the alleged trickery; a newer technology uncovered it.

When a reader of the British classical music magazine Gramophone loaded a Hatto disc onto his computer, the database correctly identified it as a performance of a Franz Liszt piano composition -- but marked it as a CD recorded by another pianist, Laszlo Simon. The technology behind the CD database, operated by Gracenote, a California company, indexes data on about 4 million CDs. The lengths of tracks on Hatto's and Simon's albums were identical, causing the database to make what appeared to be a mistake.

Or was it a mistake? The reader contacted a Gramophone critic, who played the Simon recording on iTunes, compared it to the Hatto recording and found that the two CDs sounded the same. The magazine passed the matter to independent sound engineers, who have concluded that the two versions were, in fact, the same performance. Since then, engineers have found at least a dozen examples of other performances that appear to have been pilfered and issued under Hatto's name.

Gramophone revealed its findings on its Web site last Thursday in what it said was an abbreviated form of a story to be published in the magazine's April issue.

Hatto's recordings were published by her husband, William Barrington-Coupe, on a small British label called Concert Artist. The label has released more than 100 albums under Hatto's name.

Barrington-Coupe yesterday denied any wrongdoing.

"Sound waves don't prove anything," he said. "If the sound waves are giving that impression, I'm at a loss."

Barrington-Coupe said that the findings published on the Web, have started a "culture of fear" among critics in London who are afraid to stand up and defend the Hatto recordings now in dispute. "They're being told that something is a scientific fact, and they're no longer believing their ears," he said.

Hatto died last year at the age of 77 after a long battle with cancer. Although she was largely unknown for most of her career, she won a few champions among critics toward the end of her life. A reviewer for the Boston Globe, for example, called her "the greatest living pianist that almost no one has ever
heard of."

Her illness forced her to give up performing in public decades before she died.

One sound engineer consulted for the British magazine's piece found a Hatto recording that he believes is a performance originally attributed to Japanese pianist Minoru Nojima.

"No pianist who's ever lived could replicate a performance to anything like the degree of accuracy heard here; it's simply not humanly possible," Andrew Rose, the engineer, wrote in a recent posting on his Web site, where he has put up clips of the music and side-by-side images of the recordings' sound waves (http://www.pristineclassical.com).

Rose, who works for the audio restoration firm Pristine Audio, wrote that the recordings are alike down to a measurement of "1/44,100th of a second."

He concluded that some of the Hatto recordings he looked at had been tampered with in an apparent move to evade detection. He found, for example, that one track had been slowed down by more than 15 percent; when the effect was reversed, Rose concluded that the track had originally been published on a recording attributed to pianist Carlo Grante. "We have yet to investigate a Hatto recording that has not proved to be a hoax," he wrote.

Tom Huizenga, a music producer at National Public Radio who also reviews classical music performances for The Washington Post, said "it would be hard to dispute" the findings of the sound engineers in this case. Different performers play pieces with their own unique rhythms, he said, and different pianos recorded in different environments would also produce different sound waves -- rather than the identical ones found by the engineers in this case.

"Looks like this guy" -- Hatto's husband -- "is busted big time," he said.

The editor of Gramophone, James Inverne, said yesterday that he did not have a theory as to how other artists' performances ended up under Hatto's name but that there was no doubt in his mind that the recordings were pilfered. He called the story "sad" and "ironic."

"You may use technology to try and hoodwink people," he said, "but you never know when it's going to come back and bite you."

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