

The first surprise in listening in on old CDs was about hardware. Like so many I had unconsciously taken the digital world for something fixed. There were good turntables and less good ones but I believed CD players and digital reproduction to be something absolute, or the differences from one to another player not so much in the sound. This was nonsense, of course, albeit a common basic idea of the digital, and I never cared to check. I vividly remember how my first doubts in the new medium had arisen when I had compared DGGs early Fricsay CD reissues with my 1950's LPs. In 2015 however, the same CD, now nearly thirty years old, fared much better in a new comparison with the LP. What had changed this time was the CD player, which was not even a very good one but modern. When then I reconnected my very first CD Player, a small Philips CD 160 from 1986, to my stereo to make sure, I now realized how bad this player was compared to average players today. This meant, CDs, too, like LPs, contain way more information than early players were able to deliver. I had judged the Fricsay CD just as if I had judged the Fricsay LP on a Mister Hit.

Someone ready to read my listed comments on individual CD issues will like to know whether our scales communicate. With so many records ready for direct comparison I stuck to a simple way to judge a CD or a transfer: do I like it? Does it make for pleasant listening? Or, just as with funny LPs: if it *is* weird at the start, will I adapt within a minute and find pleasure? Or, again, just as if it was a very questionable LP that you want to listen to anyway for the sake of the performance: can I bear it? -Yes -, I think we are at the bottom of my scale now.

So this is what I have found out about what I seem to like from the start with a recording or a transfer:

I like recordings to convey a sense of a musically animated space, some depth and stage without "wandering" of instruments, and all this in a way a good mono recording provides.

The first thing I check on an orchestral CD (after the impression of space it makes) is the sound of the violin section. It can be bad on an LP, too, but on a CD it annoys way earlier. (Funny, it is only the violin section, violas and celli are much less of a problem and string quartet or violin solos are easy too, on a good CD). I admit I am rarely really happy with it. But the implausibility of the violin section varies a lot and many CDs manage to keep me listening.

After that I want to know whether the CD (if it is a new recording, not a transfer) fully uses its potential. Do I like the dynamics, will loud stretches stay open, not start to sound constricted? Will I get the full detail without the recording getting blurry in fear of its own dynamic level? (Here a fine CD has its virtues.)

This would be the place for a general remark about judging CDs. Compared to LPs - and especially when you mainly listen to LPs - you do have to put up the volume of a playing CD to judge it fairly. They open up somewhat later than an LP. I have seen superlative, exemplary CDs, like many of DGG's 4D series, reviewed as especially dull and lacking in dynamics as well as stage - which they are only if played too softly. Do push up the volume just a bit and you will see. This is true for most CDs, you cannot judge them fairly on too low listening levels. But wait: anything played louder is more impressive. Check whether the higher volume has an effect on the sound stage as well. A less fine record or CD will just stay the same flat thing, only louder, a good one will open up.

I do like a feel of the occasion, of a concert or even a studio session, that took place at a certain place and time back then. It is not a must but I always prefer it to the feel of something synthesized, just as with LP recording. When I judge a transfer, I ask whether on this trip back it is helpful or not. It might turn out to be a strange, cut-off experience if all original noise, crackling, tape hiss etc is erased, even if central information stayed untouched. I like Glenn Gould's singing and the idea to cut it out is bewildering to me. I like straightforward transfers. As long as the engineer does not want to "better" things and does not use heavy filtering or other means of improvement too perceptibly, even early transfers can be very listenable. A good digital transfer is easy in the first place, nothing you need to study for. Interventionist, heavily manipulated transfers pay dearly

with entering the realms of the undead, as ghosts of ghosts. It makes me wonder why they are so common and economically successful.

And then, preparing the files and listening in on more CDs than in the last 20 years, every now and then I heard some exemplary good ones. Some engineers, for some labels, have made recordings and CDs of quite some beauty. Using the full potential and avoiding some of just those very shortcomings that I had come to regard as inevitable. These CDs have a warm string sound, incredible body and stage, and vivid dynamics. There is something to the format, and it is achieved at times. It's much less of a general debate of formats now, the old narrative of an LP/CD opposition loses its grip, and soon CDs are just as passé as LP in 1985. And just as back then I would say: do not throw them away.