

Joyce Hatto: Notes on a scandal

Turning her back on the classical music world she despised, the pianist Joyce Hatto released a vast body of work. Trouble is, it seems she didn't play all of it. Jessica Duchen reports

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On 16 February, the Hungarian pianist László Simon woke up to find that he was world-famous. The classical music industry had just been struck by possibly the biggest scandal ever to rock its genteel foundations, an affair that has quickly been dubbed "Hattogate". Proof had emerged that certain recordings purporting to be by the British pianist Joyce Hatto, who died last year, had been plagiarised from other CDs, including Simon's recording of Liszt's Transcendental Etudes on the BIS label.

Gramophone magazine broke the story on its website on 15 February. Cries of forgery, plagiarism and fraud emanated from every corner of the internet. Simon was as astonished by the revelation as anybody. He told me that he regarded the Liszt as his best recording. "I don't mind giving people money to steal," he said, "but not my art."

At the time of writing, 17 of Hatto's CDs have been identified as the work of other musicians, at least informally; more may follow. The music world has been in shell shock at the sheer chutzpah of it. The trouble is that some of the world's best-respected piano-specialist critics had transformed the previously little-known Hatto into a cult figure. An obituary by the critic Jeremy Nicholas declared her "one of the greatest pianists Britain has ever produced".

Hatto was born in 1928, and studied privately after a tutor at the Royal Academy of Music apparently told her that she'd be better off learning to cook a good roast dinner. Defiant, spirited and strongly critical of British musical life, she built a good career, touring Poland and Russia in the 1950s and recording Bax's Symphonic Variations for EMI in 1970. In 1956 she married the artist and repertoire manager of Saga Records, William Barrington-Coupe, who later founded his own label, Concert Artist Recordings. The couple settled near Royston, Hertfordshire; in nearby Cambridge, Concert Artist had its own recording studio. Tragedy struck when Hatto fell ill and a critic who didn't know this wrote harshly about her appearance on stage; she subsequently decided to retire from concert life. But in the studio, Hatto could record anything she liked.

Hatto's CDs on her husband's label number about 100 and include some of the most difficult piano works in the repertoire: for example, the Liszt Transcendental

Etudes, Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus*, Ravel's entire oeuvre for piano, and the complete Chopin Etudes arranged by Leopold Godowsky; there were also concertos by Rachmaninov, Brahms and Saint-Saëns. The discography exceeded those of such artists as Sviatoslav Richter and Vladimir Ashkenazy in quantity. As for quality, critics were in ecstasies. "Even in the most daunting repertoire, her poise in the face of one pianistic storm after another is a source of astonishment. Her warmth, affection, ease and humanity strike you at every turn," said Bryce Morrison, reviewing the Liszt in Gramophone, unaware that he was actually talking about László Simon (except for two tracks, which were played by Minoru Nojima).

Cynical rumblings, however, began in recorded-music internet chatrooms - environments dominated by obsessive CD addicts with razor-sharp ears and virulent opinions. Amid the habitual fisticuffs, one commentator begged a vital question: comparing Hatto's Mozart and Prokofiev CDs, he remarked that he simply couldn't believe it was the same pianist. Others mused whether an elderly, ailing woman could have had the strength to record so much technically challenging music so well in such a short space of time. Eventually, Jeremy Nicholas, one of Hatto's biggest advocates, sent out an open challenge via Gramophone: anyone with evidence to support their suspicions should come forward and prove it. Nobody did.

At least, not until another Gramophone critic, Jed Distler, popped Hatto's CD of the Transcendental Etudes into his computer earlier this month. The Gracenotes database that interfaces with iTunes identified the disc as Simon's. Admittedly the database isn't entirely reliable; still, track timings must match closely for a CD to be identified. Distler was suspicious; the number and quality of the Hatto discs had struck him as "too good to be true". He alerted Gramophone's editor, James Inverne, who called the recording engineer Andrew Rose, of the company Pristine Classical. Rose compared the wavelengths of three tracks of the Hatto CD with the same three pieces on Simon's recording. They proved identical.

Rose also tackled some of Hatto's Chopin-Godowsky transcriptions, noticing that the sound quality was slightly awry. He discovered that most tracks appeared to have been taken from the Italian pianist Carlo Grante's recording, but had been electronically manipulated, "stretching" the time by just over 15 per cent, even altering the position from which the piano seemed to have been recorded.

Identifications flooded in. It was alleged that Hatto's Ravel was a recording by Roger Muraro; her much-lauded Messiaen was the little-known Paul Kim's; and, incredibly, her Rachmaninov Concertos were by the celebrated Russian pianist Yefim Bronfman on Sony Classical conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen. Brahms's Piano Concerto No 2 is thought to be Ashkenazy with the Vienna Philharmonic under Bernard Haitink. Hattogate addicts are still trying to verify the existence of the conductor Rene Kohler, to whom Hatto's concerto recordings are credited, and the apparently fictional "National Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra". Meanwhile, Barrington-Coupe has insisted that the Hatto recordings were genuine, writing to a Gramophone critic refuting all wrongdoing.

So was Hatto strong enough to have made those recordings herself? Dr Lol Berman, a consultant radiologist at Addenbrooke's Hospital, in Cambridge, was involved in Hatto's cancer treatment and saw her every six weeks for the last eight years of her life. Remarkably, he told me, she had been diagnosed with advanced, inoperable ovarian cancer but survived for 14 years. To thicken the plot, all previous articles have said that Hatto first suffered cancer in the early 1970s, resulting in her withdrawal from the concert platform and accounting for her absence from concert and recording life in the 1980s; Berman stated, however, that she was first treated only 15 years ago and had had no previous history of the disease.

Berman describes her nevertheless as "absolutely remarkable. She had incredible strength and stamina and was always perfectly turned out - she looked stunning. She attributed this to a succession of Japanese herbs. I think she would indeed have had the strength to play all those pieces." He noted, though, that the lively, talkative Hatto had "chips" on her shoulder. "She thought and implied that there are darlings of the month in any form of art," he says. "She was aware that some people's faces fit, that some people cultivate a certain flamboyance... I used to hear 15 or 20 minutes of this every six weeks."

If anybody wanted to take high-profile revenge on the music industry, there could be no better way to do it. The experts who lionised Hatto had been booby-trapped. Why target them? Because British critics are notorious for neglecting British female musicians? If Hatto had a "chip" about who makes it in music and who doesn't, it wasn't without good reason. In one interview last week, Barrington-Coupe made the telling comment that if he had put "some Russian name" on Hatto's CDs, "we would have sold 10 times as many". Some critics had reviewed both a Hatto CD and the original performer's and offered different opinions, unaware that they were actually hearing the same recording. Does it affect the way someone perceives a performance if the pianist is a healthy, respected but lowish-profile middle-aged man, or a dying, unjustly neglected British heroine? Maybe it shouldn't, but the extent to which it does has never been clearer.

The exposé shows up critics as prejudiced and gullible, and record companies as pushing sensationalism and sexy youngsters at the expense of real artistry. There's nothing new in that per se - but alleged fraud on such a scale blazes the matter from the rooftops in a whole new way. For the limping record industry, the loss could unravel the last shreds of consumer confidence.

Nevertheless, there's one more possible explanation for the debacle, and it is not farce, but tragedy. I phoned Robert von Bahr, the director of BIS Records, to ask whether he's likely to drag Barrington-Coupe to the courtroom. "I've given the matter a lot of thought," said von Bahr, "and I think it will turn out to have been a desperate attempt to build a shrine to a dying wife.

"If this is indeed the case, I don't think I will be pressing charges. Concert Artist is a tiny label with very limited distribution, and in some ways quite amateurish; this exercise was never a matter of making money. But it is likely now that William Barrington-Coupe will be ruined, one way or another, and that his beloved wife's

name will be forever associated with this incident. That in itself is punishment enough."