



Recording performance advice sheet: Why film performance?

Every day there are hundreds of performances up and down the UK ranging from school choirs and street festivals to West End musicals and vast rock concerts. Until recently most of these different productions usually had one characteristic in common – nothing usually survived apart from the programme, perhaps a newspaper review, maybe some photographs and a host of memories.

Performance is what is known in the museum world as **intangible heritage**. You cannot preserve the original thing – performance is ephemeral. It is gone as soon as the action takes place. You can only preserve evidence that a production took place. One of the best ways of creating a record of a production is by filming it. However, it is important to remember it is still only a film record of something else. The original has disappeared for ever. It is this fugitive character of performance which makes recording it so fascinating. Although film can never reproduce the unique experience of live performance, a well made, detailed, objective film record will be invaluable for future practitioners, researchers and historians.

The BBC has always recorded performance but, until the 1970s, tape was often wiped and reused because it was so expensive. For example only four programmes from the music show *Top of the Pops* survive from the 1960s. Recording by other organisations has been patchy. Dance companies often film their work because it is difficult to record choreography accurately. Short clips of the Notting Hill Carnival has been filmed by news teams over the years because of its high public profile. However, detailed recording of the performers is much more limited.

In 1992 the Victoria and Albert Museum established the National Video Archive of Performance (NVAP) http://www.vam.ac.uk/tco/video_project/index.html as a central record, although its focus to date has been on professional drama in London.

The development of cheap video cameras and more recently camera phones has transformed the technology of recording. However, the quality of most recordings is poor. These will provide evidence for future historians similar to photographic snaps – numerous, insightful but fragmentary. As yet, there is no systematic, high quality filming of performance across the UK. Given this, committed individuals, however limited their resources, can make a significant contribution to preserving the UK's cultural heritage.