

LIVE IN THE STUDIO, DEAD IN THE CONCERT HALL

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The recent decades since 1980 in the recording world have seen a considerable shift in the attitude and practice of making live CD recordings. A seeming dissatisfaction with the outcome of studio recordings, and a desire to catch performances on-the-wing with live audiences is a trend currently being pursued and encouraged by performers and critics alike. But is this move driven by a desire for a more so-called 'faithful' recording of a work, for the intangible influence that a live audience can give to a performance, or is it a money-saving device on the part of recording companies?

This paper interrogates current practices in the making of recordings in the classical music industry, both studio and live, including contributions from artists with experience in recording in both environments. It is the intention of this paper to investigate how the act of recording in different environments and situations affects the approach to the producer's role and the performance outcomes.

Given that I'm explicitly and deliberately drawing upon my own practice, I'll start by introducing myself and the world from which I came before joining the Royal College of Music. I was first employed in the recording industry as a tape editor at Abbey Road Studios in 1988. At that time the studios had 4 full time tape editors and 4 full time classical engineers. Abbey Road Studios prided itself on its desire to employ musicians in these technical positions. Their mantra was that you could teach a musician to edit, but never an editor to be musical.

One story that I heard during my time at Abbey Road influenced much of my thinking about recording. Adrian Boult was recording in studio 1, and, during a playback, his producer, Christopher Bishop remarked that the flutes were too loud at a particular point, and that they could fix this in the control room with the faders. Indignant, Adrian Boult said that it was his job to fix this in the studio, not artificially in the mix. Many years later, so it is said, the conductor Kent Nagano was confronted with a similar situation. The producer asked whether the conductor might ask the flutes to play a little quieter, to which the response was "I could do it artificially out there, but couldn't you fix it in here?" This begs the questions: What is artificial, and what is real? And, what exactly are we trying to capture when we record?

The history of recording has seen, particularly since the late seventies, a notable shift in the expectations of musicians, critics and audiences of their recordings, and the industry has struggled to keep up with the shifting philosophies and demands. If I were to paraphrase the arguments of the commentator Norman Lebrecht about the death of the classical recording industry (over which he has made a good living for a decently long time, considering the prognosis he gave the patient) I would say that the greed of executives in the industry have bled the business dry. And, I'm afraid Lebrecht has completely missed the point! There are two reasons for the recent dramatic changes to the recording industry. Firstly public taste, led by changing priorities in education, has moved away from classical music and into a far wider range of musical entertainment. Secondly, and this is an area I will be developing further today, is that the advance of technology has shifted the balance away from the large corporations, empowering the original owners of performances – such as musicians and arts organisations.

Let's now look very briefly at the history, with my own experiences at EMI and beyond. At the beginning of the 20th century, recording saw a desire to control the mechanics of recording to ensure the best possible transmission within the technical limitations. If such control included rescoring works for unlikely combinations to allow an acoustic recording to be made, as seen in this well-known picture

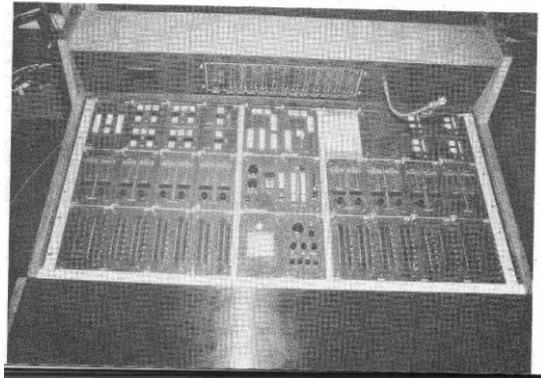


or the building of a soundproof orchestral studio such as Abbey Road Studio 1 in 1931 then these were necessary developments. Record companies became successful because they combined control over the artists with control over the recording process. EMI had its own development team, as did Decca in London, Deutsche Grammophon in Hannover and RCA in the US. The equipment they used to capture the recordings was equipment they designed and built themselves.



Hank Marvin, Cliff Richard, Bruce Welch and engineer, Peter Vince, gather round Abbey Road's first eight-track mixing console just after its introduction in 1966.

Below and above right EMI's prototype eight-track digital mixing console; the three racks house the computer equipment needed to operate the desk.



This was both outside the scope, generally, of small outfits
 When I spoke recently with Jay David Saks, classical producer in the US for RCA for 30 years, and the man behind the sound for the Met Opera Live Broadcasts for the same period, and asked him why they didn't do many live recordings in the 60s and 70s his answer was unequivocal. "Because the equipment kept breaking down" [conversation, New York, March 2011]. "Not a session would pass without us having to stop or hold the conductor because of some unexplained buzz or hum, or a technical problem". All equipment had its limitations. In the multi-award winning recording with Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic of Mahler 10 in 1999, we had to ask the conductor for an extra long pause between third and fourth movements as the highly expensive and bulky digital tape machine, the Sony 3348,



Sony 3348 had a reel length of 55 minutes – too short for the whole symphony, and we needed a tape change, done with all the precision of a Formula 1 tyre change. There's no doubt that the audience imagined something quite different, as the conductor stood down from the podium and mopped his brow with a serious and pensive look.

The first computer based digital editing system that was sophisticated enough for precise classical audio editing was the Sonic Solutions, designed originally to remove clicks and hiss noise from recordings. The first system bought by Abbey Road cost in the region of £70k. Only because of the extraordinary sales that were being generated by the classical CD boom were such investments possible.

Something else, too, was happening here. Major record companies were no longer able to handle all their recordings on their own. Abbey Road had long since abandoned the policy of only recording EMI acts. In the difficult years for classical recording at the end of the 70s, when serious plans were in place to carve up studio 1 and turn into a number of pop studios, both the recording of film scores and also recordings by rival record companies became the norm. This fluidity led to the establishment of freelance recording companies able to take up the slack, with quality recording equipment available off the shelf. Nowadays, in the classical world, there is open competition across all recording companies and all sound engineering firms. When I was running the A&R department of EMI Classics, we based our recording decisions on the artists' requirements, and dictated by absolute budget costs. If that meant that we had to use a German team to record in the Philharmonie in Berlin, then that was the decision we took.

All this is to take us to the point where we are currently. The technology to make audiophile recordings, at higher than CD quality, to edit and master them, is available to any one. In the last few months I have made three recordings, and each of them were made on computers you and I can buy in the high street, recorded on to hard drives, also from the high street, of such capacity that we never need to stop for a tape change, and with high end software that costs not much more than the computer. [Slide 7] With this shift, we have leapfrogged all the problems that Jay Saks and his colleagues encountered, and the really important point is that recording live or in the studio have become interchangeable. The technology is no longer the limiting factor.

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I'd now like explicitly to move to Part 2 of my paper. Here I'll be asking, as regards Live vs studio recording, how do we recording practitioners make these decisions?

Before we tackle the question of whether live recordings are inherently different from studio recordings, it is necessary to consider some real life examples of current recording practices. We will find that the exceptional technology now available allows the recording practitioners to ever increasingly blur the edges, and indeed to have their cake and eat it.

The first recording I want to demonstrate is of Schoenberg's Gurrelieder, made in 2001 in Berlin, in live concerts, with Sir Simon Rattle and the Berliner Philharmoniker.

Listen first to the rough mix from the recording session

EXTRACT 1

Now have a listen to the final master CD, as released some months later

EXTRACT 2

When I played this recently to some students (and I have to say that our students at the RCM are a particularly brilliant and erudite bunch) and asked them to discuss the differences, they pointed to questions of colour, tempo, the recording mix. I was surprised that I then had to ask whether they noticed that in fact it was a different soprano!

The story behind the Gurrelieder recordings was as follows. The recordings were due to be made live – 3 concerts with a retake session. This format, we discovered, gave us the greatest flexibility to allow us to capture music on-the-wing, so to speak, but also to work forensically where we needed to. There are always points in a performance which need attention focused on them. For example, where the orchestra don't quite move musically together, where phrases and chords would benefit from a closer look at tuning, where audiences always tend to cough. What a recording team strives for is "something that bears repeated listening". A recording of a concert is not a concert. It is a recording. Repeated hearing gives us the ability to focus on different details of the music. We have the ability to anticipate – our previous knowledge of this particular performance allows us to garner deeper information, just as looking at a picture repeatedly reveals different aspects of the same image. We are dealing with the aural representation of a musical score that has been removed from the temporal, single-listening boundaries of a concert.

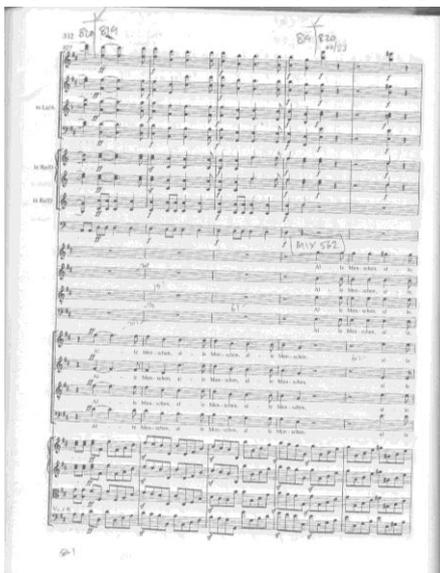
Our concerts in Berlin took place around September 17, 2001 . The soprano chosen for the concerts and recording was stuck in New York – no planes were flying in the week after 9/11. At remarkably short notice, a replacement was found for the concerts. But the project was also for a recording with its own life to come. Armed with the experience of performing the works in concert, the orchestra laid down the orchestral parts in a session following the final concert – long sweeping takes of complete songs. In a studio in London in the following months, our new soprano, along with the conductor and a video of the conductor made at the orchestral sessions, sang the glorious songs of Gurrelieder, and a record was born.

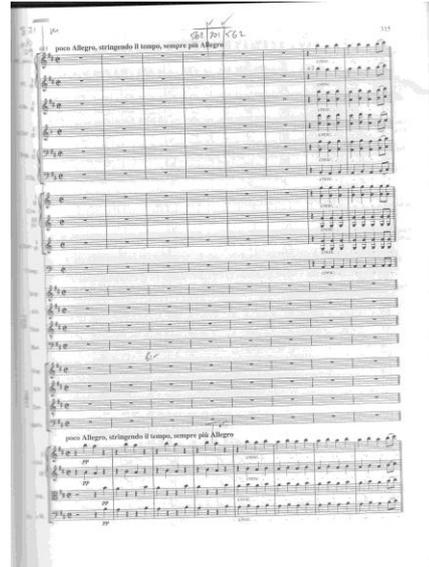
Is this fakery? Well – none of us felt this at the time or since. Since recordings allow the listener to escape time, why shouldn't the recording process do the same? Is the recording a fair and good representation of the wishes of the composer, expressed through the media of conductor, orchestra and soloist? Certainly the reviews thought so, and the CD won that year's Gramophone award in the choral category. One can read the following line from the review in a different light when armed with the information

QUOTE Karita Mattila, too, gains from this more intimate approach, floating over exquisite orchestral textures in her first song and touching the second very lightly, though in the fourth she can manage both a splendid opening out and an ethereal close.

So to a second example, this time in Vienna. Beethoven 9th Symphony. Vienna Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Chorus, soloists Barbara Bonney, Birgit Remmert, Kurt Streit and Thomas Hampson, made in the famous Grosser Saal of the Musikverein[Slide 9] I'm going to play you the final soloists section – the quartet that soars with the soprano as the orchestra fall away. And here's the editing master score that goes with it:

EXTRACT Beethoven 9 last movement





What's the problem, you may ask (at least I hope so). Well, half of the tenor line was recorded here:



In this case we had two concerts and a retake session. The concerts were two days apart, and the rest day was the first rest day for musicians and recording team for some time. As I came out of the Vienna underground station and was walking to their famous zoo, I got a call from the tenor. "I think I've got a cold coming on, but I should be ok". Well, the cold developed, and he did sing the second concert, but noticeably under the weather. By the time of the retake session, and with only 2 concerts in the can, we still had parts of the symphony we felt needed further work for capture and presentation on a CD. So we recorded without the tenor. As it happens, the balcony in the Musikverein, where the soloists were standing, is about the same height as the balcony in Studio 1. We rigged the same microphone array in the studio, fed the edited master to the tenor via headphones, and re-recorded his part, with the tenor in good and full voice. Skilful mixing and editing should mean that the dovetailing from Vienna to London is inaudible.

Just to explain the markings, the double line is a re-edit, and the OD markings are the takes from the overdub. Here's that section once again.

AUDIO AND SLIDES Beethoven 9

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So having shown briefly where the boundaries are now blurred by the technology, we need to consider why we might record live in the concert hall – that is, what we are trying to achieve by so doing? Does the concert hall necessarily facilitate a better representation of the composer's intentions than those achieved in the studio?

Let's put one fallacy to rest straight away – that record companies record live because it's cheaper. The cost of a recording is dependent on ownership. If the LSO record for their LSO Live label, each member receives a small royalty on sales. This is because, as, technically, a partnership, they each have an interest in the recording and they own it together. If a record company would like to record the LSO – live or in the studio – it doesn't matter – they have to pay the LSO, and there are commercial rates agreed by the industry and the unions who represent the players.

Recently I was recording in Berlin with a group led by Trevor Pinnock, whose reputation as a performer was no doubt assisted by his long-standing contract with DG Archiv. These were studio sessions, made following some earlier concerts. When I talked with Trevor about the business of making recordings, he said that there was no doubt that a live audience led a performer a particular way. That instant feedback led to an interplay and experimentation that was different in the recording environment. A performer was much more dependent on themselves, and their production team, in the studio. However, in conversations later that same week with members of the Berlin Philharmonic, who now have their state of the art Digital Concert Hall, with live streaming of concerts, they revealed that the knowledge that their performance was being broadcast and archived on a particular evening could lead to a particular cautiousness – a desire not to take certain risks.

At this point we need to consider the question: what is a “faithful recording”? What set of circumstances allow a musician to have the freedom to express themselves completely in a work? And it differs from musician to musician, from work to work. Invariably at the end of a recording session, musicians will say to me “I wish I could start all over again, I've learnt so much about this piece in the sessions”. A regular technique that I and others use is to complete the recording session, often

where the work has been broken down into ever smaller chunks, by taking a pause, and then performing the movement (sometimes the complete work) in one complete take. I can reveal to you that this final take is not necessarily the one that forms the basis of the final master – there's often a looseness that doesn't match the intensity of the earlier work, and thus doesn't carry as well, but it is an important moment for the performer, a summation of the experience.

One also has to be aware of the differences between audiences stuck immobile in a concert hall, hardly daring to breathe, and at home in a relaxed atmosphere, with only the ears to give information. Consider this review from the Gramophone of the late Klaus Tennstedt's Mahler 5 - a concert I remember attending, and experiencing one of the greatest concert experiences of my life.

Gramophone review of Tennstedt Mahler 5 from December 1989

In the concert hall one hung on to every bittersweet note of his lovingly prolonged Adagietto. Tensions in the hall (Tennstedt knows just how to make them work for him) somehow carried the line forward. But listening at home in more dispassionate circumstances, the combination of tempo and halting rubato, the obsessive teasing of every new cadence, becomes very difficult indeed to swallow.

But why should the relationship of a recording to concert be any different from the relationship between a play and a film? Musicians can be inspired in many situations, and equally uninspired in others. Put them in the studio with a fired up conductor and the results can be electric. A recording team can sit back and enjoy. The safety net of the studio can allow performers to take risks, and the skill of the engineers can capture and present these to an audience who have only the single sense of hearing to appreciate the performance. An orchestra, or any other performer, on stage can just as easily have an off day, or a poor start, or simply feel unmotivated. The audience at the time can become involved, or be unreactive – any recorded result will reflect exactly this moment. We've all had photographs of our bad days...

At the end of it, live is what burns through a recording no matter where or how it is made. The greatest editor in the world cannot make a great performance from poor material. If the aim was to collect enough recorded information to piece together an aural version of the score, then the job may have been done, but this is, I believe, to do the whole process a disservice. Critics who bemoan a wrong note, or a poor bit of ensemble on a recording, and in the same breath decry a lack of spontaneity, reveal a paucity of information and thought about what is trying to be achieved.

At the end of it all, we producers are dealing in a sort of magic. We are presenting a performance in a medium not originally envisaged (at least until well into the 20th century) by the composer. We are giving the impression of a personalised performance for a single listener at a time of their choosing. We are presenting an ideal performance, free from the boundaries of error, so that the concentration is on the musicians' best possible presentation of the score at that time with their current ability and understanding. And we are allowing the listener to repeat this listening experience at will, to delve in ever deeper layers into the performance in a way that is impossible in the concert hall.

How this recording is realised in the first place is, eventually, immaterial. If our musician is more inspired in the concert hall, then we should record there. If a studio gives them the freedom to experiment in a way that they feel better inspired, then that is where we should be. Speaking with Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, I asked him whether he would have preferred never to have recorded in the studio, as he was considering making his next recordings live. He thought for some time, and said that in fact the studio experience, the intensity, the focus, forensic analysis – all of these things had been crucial in his deepening development as a performer. We can just as easily be live in studio as we can be dead in a concert hall. As long as we are clear that a recording is simply that. A record of an event. A miracle of time shifting. And an opportunity to be personally acquainted at our leisure with the great musicians and interpreters of our time.