

The Performer's Place in the Process and Product of Recording¹

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It is obvious that a recording is not simply a live performance captured. From Walter Benjamin² to Glenn Gould³ to Philip Auslander,⁴ musicians and listeners have been aware that the two performance modes are different. However, in today's climate of ubiquitous recorded music, consumers seldom question what impact the different situations have on the resulting performances, nor do they consider the effect the process and product of recording have on the musicians who create them.⁵ When I asked classical orchestral musicians about their feelings about live concerts and recordings, I was surprised to find how stark were their comparisons, and that there was a considerable amount of tension in their feelings about recording. Many musicians working today express a fear of the process and a dislike of the product of recording. For them the recording process is far from the collective musical experience of the concert hall that gave the profession its allure in the first place. One might think that this attitude was perhaps limited to an older generation of professional musicians who might be less comfortable with the technology, but even today's cohort of technologically savvy conservatoire students share this feeling. When a group of current postgraduate performers taking the Studio Experience course that I teach at the Royal College of Music were asked, 'What is the first word that comes to mind when you think about

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² Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in (ed.) Arendt, Hannah, *Illuminations* (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1982), 219-53.

³ Gould, Glenn, in Page, Tim (ed.), *The Glenn Gould Reader* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

⁴ Auslander, Philip, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵ I have explored these issues in my thesis: Blier-Carruthers, Amy, 'Live Performance - Studio Recording: An Ethnographic and Analytical Study of Sir Charles Mackerras', (PhD diss., King's College, University of London, 2010).

recording?', they replied: 'Perfection; permanent; clean, tidy; exposing flaws; no audience; microphones; not natural, no visual [dimension], clinical, tiring'. The tutors then interjected, suggesting that they might want to think of some of the positive aspects offered by the recording process, and the students continued with 'commercial opportunity; pressure not to [do] too many takes; trying to fix things; self-criticism; time limits; experimental; part of your history; exciting, imaginative, no audience; performer becomes audience, too; intimacy; hearing yourself differently; daunting, expectation of perfection'. So we can see that the tone of their responses didn't lift very much, even when given this encouragement.⁶ There is a spectrum of concepts here, but the negative feelings seem to be predominant. And these students of today are not alone: this seems to have been the prevailing feeling since the advent of classical recording.

Tim Day,⁷ Mark Katz⁸ and Robert Philip⁹ describe many examples of early recorded performers approaching the recording horn with trepidation and anxiety. But what is striking is that even after over a century of commercial classical recordings, many of the same issues are still in evidence today – distrust of the technology, dislike of the process, doubts about whether you like what is captured, disillusionment with the editing process, the thought of your performance going somewhere where you are no longer in control of it, the thought of a disembodied performance existing at all. By going to a recording studio today and asking performers what they think about recording, it has been my aim to give them a voice and get a chance to consider which parts of the recording process contribute to this fear and dislike. One performer I spoke with said that I would be doing musicians a favour by demystifying this; by showing that the recording situation as it currently stands is, in his opinion, highly unsatisfactory. Basically, even the biggest and best orchestras are in a way victims of the *status quo*: they are not getting the time and money and support necessary to give them the opportunity to get something that they are really happy with down on record.¹⁰ This is of course not to disparage producers,

⁶ Studio Experience postgraduate course, offered at the Royal College of Music and taught by Amy Blier-Carruthers, Stephen Johns, and Ben Connellan. I would like to thank my students on the Studio Experience course 2011-12 for their input and insights, and for their permission to use these quotes.

⁷ Day, Timothy, *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸ Katz, Mark, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁹ Philip, Robert, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Philip, Robert, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ In my research into the live and recorded performances of the conductor Sir Charles Mackerras I have sought to identify and describe the differences in the two performing situations. I could have limited myself to analysing the practical differences in the details of the live and recorded performances, but I considered it important to add the contextual and ethnographical angle to what would otherwise have been

engineers and record companies; they are a vital part of the story and will also be represented here, but it will become clear that each set of people involved in the recording process has different points of view, but it is the performers' opinions that I have placed in the foreground in this iteration of my research, as they are least often heard. I hope that by discussing this subject, from several points of view, we might begin to reassess the situation, and find some ways of enabling the recording studio to more often be a place for expression and creativity. Why are recordings a source of fear and dislike for performers? Because they don't feel they have control or ownership of their recordings. They don't feel sure of where they stand.

What is the performer's place in the process and product of recording?

What is the performer's place in the process and product of recording? This may seem a strange question to ask, as the most obvious answer would seem to be: her place is centre-stage, in front of the microphones (as she would be in front of the audience in a concert), being recorded, with her name in bold across the CD cover. She is the performer, and the recording captures and immortalizes her performance. But the situation is rather more complicated than that. There are many different kinds of people involved in the making of a recording, most notably the producer and production team, and performers often do not have the control that one might assume they do, either throughout the process or over the final product.

In order to understand the place in which performers often find themselves in the recording process, imagine an hour-glass lying on its side, the wide sections at each end and a thin funnel in the centre. At both ends of this hour-glass would be the performers and the composition – it is the Philharmonia's Beethoven Symphony No. 5 that is to be recorded, and it is those same names that will appear on the CD cover. The producers

a purely analytical endeavour. If you want to understand the *why* as well as the *what*, it is necessary to ask the people themselves. In the words of Indiana Jones: 'if you want to be an archaeologist, you gotta get out of the library.' (*Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Paramount and Lucasfilm: 2008), Steven Spielberg (dir.)). The anthropological study of classical music-making is by no means a new area, but it is, however, still establishing itself, and for help with fieldwork observation and interview techniques I found the work of several ethnomusicologists invaluable: Bruno Nettl, Henry Kingsbury, Jonathan Stock, Stephen Cottrell, and Stephanie Pitts, amongst others. Nettl, Bruno, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Kingsbury, Henry, *Music, Talent & Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). Stock, Jonathan, 'Documenting the Musical Event: Observation, Participation, Representation' in Clarke, Eric and Cook, Nicholas (eds.), *Empirical Musicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15-34. Cottrell, Stephen, *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004). Pitts, Stephanie E., 'What Makes an Audience? Investigating the Roles and Experiences of Listeners at a Chamber Music Festival', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 86, No. 2, (2005).

and engineers are the invisible prism through which the performance of this composition must pass, but their names will be in small print on the inside back page of the sleeve-notes. However, in the studio the producer is seen as all-powerful, to the extent that the performers often feel that he takes away their control of the situation, yet to the outside world he is almost invisible. This creates a complex and confusing situation for performers in terms of identity, agency, and control.

This loss of control is difficult for performers, as they have to make the transition from the stage to the studio, and often carry the live aesthetic with them into the recording session. Glenn Gould is one of the few people who have suggested a separate aesthetic for recording, even arguing for the primacy of recording over live music-making, but for some reason this attitude has not percolated through to large parts of the classical music profession.¹¹ Gould used the studio situation to gain artistic control. He was the performer, executive producer and editing director. He had control over the process and product in a way that many classical musicians - especially orchestral performers – often do not.

The Fieldwork

The material that I will discuss here was gathered as part of my ethnographic and analytical research into the performances of the conductor Sir Charles Mackerras, and his work with mainly London-based orchestras and opera-houses (such as the Philharmonia, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the Royal Opera House), as well as some of the producers and engineers responsible for his most recent recordings. Unfortunately, I don't have space here to give you many of their specific quotes, but I'm going to discuss the main issues which arise from my interviews with them.

Classical musicians working today are of course completely professional; they make recordings of the highest standard, but some of their personal feelings are somewhat at odds with their professional stance. They feel that although recordings can be rewarding and an extra source of income, they often don't love making them, they don't often listen to them, and they don't think they are really representative of their playing. The elements that they feel negatively about in a recording session are the lack of an audience and sense of occasion, the lack of control of the situation, the different recorded balance, the

¹¹ Crafting a performance in the recording studio has been the norm for many rock and pop musicians since the 1960s. Cox, Christoph and Warner, Daniel, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, (London: Continuum, 2004), 5.

question of whether the results are representative, the effects of editing and the expectation of perfection; this last issue has in their opinion created a prioritization of perfection over musical expression. The results of repeated takes and editing have trained the public to expect perfection and finesse, something that many musicians feel is somewhat at odds with the expression and excitement they aim for in a live concert.

The points I am going to focus on today are the tensions that are created by the expectation of perfection and the fact that live and recorded music (at least in the classical music world) have not achieved emancipation from one another.

The Expectation of Perfection (or the effects of editing)

This issues of the expectation of perfection and the effects of editing were raised by all the musicians: that recording has influenced the public's expectations to such an extent that perfection of execution is now seen as not just the ideal but the norm. It seems that bit by bit audiences and musicians have come to expect increasingly technically accurate performances, unthinkingly, even in the concert hall,¹² a perfection which musicians are at constant pains to deliver. We could invoke Auslander's argument here that although live performances hold a higher cultural valence than recordings, ironically live performance now seeks to emulate its mediatised other.¹³

The twin issues of perfection, and by inference mistakes, also come up repeatedly in discussions of studio recording in the academic literature, but I wonder if they are really as much of an issue in modern recordings as they used to be, or as they are made out to have been by modern commentators. Recordings in the age before editing became possible have immortalized the occasional mistakes of a few great performers, but perhaps we have misconstrued this in the context of our time; we perceive that earlier

¹² Robert Philip writes about the increasing expectation of perfection and its effect on musicians: 'The fact that musicians and audiences experienced a performance only once [...] meant that mistakes and roughnesses were soon forgotten. In principle the same might be expected to apply in concert performance even today. But, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, musicians and audiences have become so used to hearing perfect performances created by editing that the general standards in the concert hall are also much higher than they used to be.' Philip *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (2004), 12-13. 'Musicians who first heard their own recordings in the early years of the twentieth century were often taken aback by what they heard, suddenly being made aware of inaccuracies and mannerisms they had not suspected [...] The most obvious effect of getting used to hearing ones' own recordings, as professional musicians do today, is to become highly self-critical about details. Any tiny blemish or inaccuracy takes on hideously exaggerated proportions. Making a recording becomes a process of detailed self-examination which would have been impossible a century ago. Seeking after precision and clarity becomes a habit, so that, in the concert hall too, musicians aim for technical perfection – often, it seems, above everything else [...] This self-consciousness can be helpful or destructive, but now the genie is out of the bottle it cannot be put back.' Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (2004), 25.

¹³ Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), 2-3.

musicians played less perfectly because of the faultlessness of our own recordings (perhaps forgetting that our recordings are edited to achieve this). It also may be that perhaps they did not worry so much about mistakes. Today, the standard of professional singing and playing is so high that even in live performances audible mistakes are rare, and from the evidence of my research, much less common even than we might expect. Even Mackerras himself felt that the standard of orchestral performance had improved vastly since he started conducting. He said: ‘The orchestras play really so well, and play so mistake-free nowadays.’¹⁴ This is not to say that players don’t struggle to get things right – they do, every day of their lives – but they do such a good job that a typical audience member won’t hear very many major mistakes in any given live performance.¹⁵

Are you starting to perceive a contradiction of sorts? I am. If we play so perfectly these days, why are we worrying about perfection? The problem here is that we’re confusing different types of perfection. There are in fact at least two different types in question. There is the live standard of perfection, which is the professional’s best attempt at accuracy in the moment, and then there is the recording standard of perfection, which seeks not only to eliminate any textual and technical ‘mistakes’, but also any blemishes and tiny imperfections which are seen as detrimental to the sound of the recorded performance (whether it be untidy ensemble, split notes, shuffling feet, airplanes flying overhead, or the extraneous but unavoidable sound of a violin bow making contact with the strings).¹⁶ But musicians resent that the perfection of the recording studio has crept into the expectations for the concert hall. It takes away their freedom to eschew technical perfection for the sake of achieving a musically expressive moment. And in the studio, the perfection of sound and technique expected is simply not musically rewarding enough for them most of the time, hence their dissatisfaction. So no matter that standards have improved, musicians are still feeling very pressured by this expectation of the recording type of perfection.

Here are some musicians’ comments about recorded perfection:

In the words of Bill Lang: ‘I love a concert performance, many times you get touches of magic there. But recording can knock any beauty out of music-making. Players [...]

¹⁴ Personal communication: Interview (2) with Sir Charles Mackerras, December 14, 2006.

¹⁵ According to two relatively new members of Manchester’s *Hallé* orchestra, their main concern and worry when practising is to play as well as possible, with as few mistakes – *none*, if possible. Of course the musicality is important, but your colleagues (or your conductor or audience) will hear your mistakes more than they will hear the levels of more or less musical expression.

¹⁶ There is also perhaps a third type which sits in between these, which is the audience’s perception of mistakes. They will hardly ever hear any, even if the musicians know that they have made some. But the critics may pick up on them, and relay this back in their reviews, which perhaps puts another kind of pressure on musicians.

don't go for it, they get careful. Note-getting, not music-making. This is where recording can destroy music. I'd rather hear a recording of an actual concert, warts and all.¹⁷

The trumpeter Alistair Mackie says: 'Perfection is never seen as the most important part of a concert – in a concert it's expression [...] As an orchestral player at 7:30 you just have to sit down and do it';¹⁸ in a concert, 'you sacrifice perfection for the event'.¹⁹ They feel that the 'level of perfection' and the 'expectations of accuracy' 'have been created by the record industry',²⁰ and that 'it's a pity that recording techniques have led people to expect perfection live.'²¹ Alfred Brendel goes so far as to call some modern listeners 'wrong-note fiends' in discussing the early recordings by people such as Cortot or Schnabel, and feels that 'a few missed notes are not only irrelevant but almost add to the excitement of the impact.'²²

It's not just the musicians that feel this; it is undeniable that these days, imperfections are not an option in recordings, as explained by the producer John Rushby-Smith: 'The live concert is intended to give immediate satisfaction. Blemishes are heard once and are generally forgotten by the time the final bars have sounded. Recordings are heard repeatedly and the smallest flaw is multiplied by the number of times the recording is played, so the quest must be for a level of perfection rarely attainable in live performance.'²³

Although musicians would like things to be different, this preference for sacrificing perfection for the energy of a live event does not extend so far as a willingness to release completely unedited lifelike recordings. The trumpeter admits that although he loves the expression of the live concert best, he 'couldn't live with releasing a recording with mistakes' (for instance an unedited live performance).

Also, producers and editors speak of the fact that it is not unusual for musicians to start to get picky and ask for retakes or send long lists of edits even when the producer would have done less.²⁴ So although the move towards higher levels of recorded

¹⁷ Bill Lang in Previn, André (ed.), *Orchestra*, (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1979), 187-8.

¹⁸ Pers. comm.: Interview with Alistair Mackie, trumpet and chairman, Philharmonia Orchestra, Thursday December 13, 2007.

¹⁹ Pers. comm.: interview with James Clark, violin and concert-master, Philharmonia Orchestra, December 20, 2007.

²⁰ Pers. comm.: Mackie (2007).

²¹ Pers. comm.: Clark (2007).

²² Brendel, Alfred, 'A Case for Live Recordings', *On Music: His Collected Essays*, (London: JR Books, 2007), 347.

²³ Rushby-Smith, John, 'Recording the Orchestra' in Lawson, Colin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 177-8.

²⁴ Pers. comm.: informal discussion with Stephen Johns, independent record producer (formerly for EMI Classics), and Ben Connellan, independent recording engineer, October 2011.

perfection might be a result of the recording process, this is not necessarily attributable solely to individual producers' whims and preferences.

Let us consider this conflict that is presented by the recording situation. People on the production side of the fence have a completely different conception about what it is possible to achieve in a recording. They think that a recording is liberating for musicians (as ideally it should or could be), that recording and editing provide a safety net that allows experimentation and risk-taking that wouldn't be possible in a live performance. The sound engineer Stokes's opinion is that 'in a recording, things *can* be corrected, so [the musicians] *can* take risks – I'm not suggesting that they're going to do something like up the tempo or let the soloist do outrageous things in the cadenza – but they can try things out, so you can build up a really exciting performance'.²⁵ Rushby-Smith writes: 'The possibility of retakes enables artists to take risks they would never dare take on the concert platform, often with breathtaking results'²⁶

But musicians feel very differently about this situation. Mistakes take time, and time is money (and there is not much money), and so there is incredible pressure to get it right as quickly as possible. We might also add to this the fact that, as the performance is being recorded for posterity, musicians feel bound to make sure they don't do something they may regret later, or that might pall upon repeated hearing. Our trumpeter describes a situation where there is always the worry that in the final edit, the producer may have reasons to choose a take that you're not happy with, and so you would want to leave him with the smallest number of non-ideal takes to choose from. It is then hardly surprising that this situation is not conducive to experimentation, partly due to practicality, and partly to psychology. When I explained this musician's point of view to one production team member, he said he had not thought about it quite like this before, that people on the production team 'side of the fence feel that there is more freedom in recording'.²⁷ This is a significant and surprising difference in point of view, and may account for a large part of the tension present in the recording situation.

If during the time that the production team members are seeing the great opportunities provided by repeated takes, the musicians are labouring under a feeling of great pressure to get things right, at the same time as feeling that they have no control

²⁵ Pers. comm.: interview with Jonathan Stokes, sound engineer, Classic Sound, August 18, 2009.

²⁶ Rushby-Smith, 'Recording the Orchestra' (2003), 178.

²⁷ Although of course not infinite freedom – you cannot retake and edit forever. He says that even if you can retake something, that two-bar bit may not work when it's dropped in, it might feel 'like hitting a brick wall', like it has become 'stagnant for two bars'.

over the situation, there will of course be problems, misunderstanding, and dissatisfaction.

Towards an emancipation?

The tension around recordings, I would like to suggest, is also due to another factor: the fact that in classical music, the recording has not achieved an emancipation from the aesthetic of the live performance in the way that film has successfully diverged from theatre. The two performance modes should be allowed to be seen as independent of each other and judged on their own terms. There are several solutions to this problem, including: reconsidering the ontologies of live and recorded formats, arguing for their emancipation (their freeing from the constrictive bonds of comparison), teaching musicians now training in conservatoires about how to make the transition from stage to studio successfully (to work on their studio art as well as their performance art), making producers and engineers more aware of the challenges and justifiable fears that musicians face when standing in front of the microphone, further exploring the possibilities of the classical recording aesthetic, and opening critics' and listeners' ears to the new creative possibilities that musicians and producers would explore if only they were given the artistic and commercial freedom to try.

We should take note at this point of a statement made by Tony Pay of the LSO, that 'the making of records is important, more important than present practice seems to allow.'²⁸ I think that what he means by this is that things are done too quickly to be good enough to be preserved for posterity. This resonates strongly with the conclusions we will come to here. It seems as though because of limitations on time and money, musicians are expected to deliver the goods in a one-off live fashion, whilst also being expected to jump through the hoops of the recorded aesthetic. Present classical recording practice doesn't allow the time for recording to truly become a distinct medium.

What can we learn from Theatre and Film?

Perhaps the cause of people's negative attitudes to recordings is that they are often directly compared to live performance; one is comparatively judged against the criteria of the other. Why is it that classical music has never outgrown these early difficulties? People no longer compare films to theatre productions, or bemoan the fact that the film

²⁸ Tony Pay in Previn, *Orchestra* (1979), 191.

is not a good approximation of its live counterpart, but music recordings are still seen in comparison to (and judged against the criteria of) concert performances, and I feel that our reactions to them are thereby skewed by this lack of clear thinking.

The analogy of a theatre play and a live music performance versus a film and a recording is a suitable one, but there are some points at which the comparison is not exact. These might be the very points which have made it difficult for recording to make the transition from the concert aesthetic. The points of tension (or non-parity) are: the texts which form the starting point, the performers involved, and the transparency of the end product, or - put differently - what the end product reveals to us or purports to be.

Figure 1: Theatre and Film vs Live Music and Recorded Music

	Text	People	Process	Multiple takes	Editing
Theatre	Play/Script	Stage actors	Live – beginning to end	One take	None
Film	Screenplay	Film actors	In sections, not in order	Multiple takes	Part of storytelling – visible, obvious
Live	Score	Same musicians	Live – beginning to end	One take	None
Recorded			In sections, back and forth, not in order	Multiple takes	Invisible, trying to present the illusion of a start-to-finish performance

(Note: Where there is not a line through the box, full emancipation has not occurred and therein lie the points of tension.)

We can see from the table here that those parts of the processes shown in the centre of the table are similar for both sets of comparisons: for the live mode (concert and theatre) the performance happens from beginning to end, and occurs essentially as one take or is played once through in front of an audience. In the mediatized mode²⁹ (film and recording) the work is recorded or filmed in sections, as multiple takes, and not usually in the order composed or written.

It is at the extremes of the processes that the practices diverge. Film and theatre have distinct texts, in one case the script of the play and in the other the screenplay which has

²⁹ The term ‘mediatized’ is taken from Auslander. Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized culture* (1999).

been reconceptualised to work within the cinematic aesthetic. In music, the starting point for both live and recorded performances is the composer's score. Another instance in which film and theatre are separated but live and recorded classical music are not, is in relation to the performers. In the world of drama there are usually two different sets of actors working in either field.³⁰ Film and theatre are separate disciplines that require different talents and temperaments.³¹ This is not a luxury afforded to classical musicians; the musicians who give the concerts are generally the same ones who go into the studio to record, and they are expected to hop from one mode to the other at the switch of a red light. Film actors of course do cross over to work in the theatre, and vice versa, but from the outset the expectations are obvious in each case. In the classical concert/recording fields, the players have a pre-existing concept or memory of the live performance which precedes the recording, so there is more of a sense of difference or comparison to be felt.³² A film actor will not have a prior experience of performing the screenplay live (except for instance in the rare occasion of a movie of a Shakespeare play), therefore the potential for a sense of what Jonathan Sterne calls 'loss'³³ is much higher for classical musicians. The fact that the same performers are trying to shoe-horn a pre-existing performance of a musical text through a completely different process might be one of the main elements that creates the tension and discomfort that many musicians feel when making recordings.

The later sections of the processes show more points of tension. The public's reaction to multiple takes and editing is much more accepting in film than in music. If a classical musician admits to a splice every few bars (or even every few notes!), many would be up in arms saying that this was cheating (the implication being that multiple

³⁰ I am grateful to Lindsay Wright, an undergraduate student on my course *Music in Performance* (King's College London, 2008-09), for suggesting this idea.

³¹ Haas suggests that it also has to do with the texts being used. 'When theatre moved into the studio, it created the new genres of film and television. So separate have the genres become, that there is now no debate of the advantages of live theatre over film and television, or vice versa. In the transition from concert hall to studio, the nature of the musical narrative would seem not to change to the same extent as that of the theatrical narrative, if only because stage plays that transfer to the screen are rewritten to accommodate the move.' Haas, Michael, 'Studio Conducting', in Bowen, José Antonio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 28. For a more thorough look at film and theatre see Sontag, Susan, 'Film and Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No.1 (Autumn, 1966), 24-37.

³² It could be seen as similar to what Georgina Born describes as some people's feelings about the loss of authenticity when moving from analogue recording to digital. With analogue, there is some fragile connection to a prior musical event. Born, Georgina, 'Afterword – Recording: From reproduction to representation to remediation', in Cook, Nicholas; Clarke, Eric; Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel; and Rink, John (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 291 (full chapter reference pp. 286-304).

³³ *Ibid.*, 290. See Sterne, Jonathan, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

takes and editing are used simply to eradicate mistakes in execution). In film, however, as the producer Andrew Keener tells Robert Philip: '[...] nobody berates Meryl Streep for wanting to do twenty takes of a single twenty-second shot. Each time she will bring another nuance, another eyebrow raise, another eyelid-flash to a different part of the take.'"³⁴ Keener sees that his job is not simply to put up a microphone and try to capture a live performance, but to create something; he agrees with Walter Legge who used to say that "one of the roles of the producer is to collect all the jewels. I firmly believe this. It's one of the reasons for making a record"³⁵.

However, what Keener misses is the fact that film is more obviously a different product from its theatrical counterpart than recorded music is from a live concert. Film doesn't claim to be a beginning-to-end performance – we can see that it is not (editing and angle changes, non-teleological storytelling), whereas a classical music recording still presents a semblance of a beginning-to-end performance. It aims to give a 'best seat in the house' experience, an image of a live performance, whilst obscuring all the work and artifice that occurs in order to achieve that end. There is a sense in which this may seem dishonest or at least a pale shadow of the live experience. However, a good producer would say that multiple takes in a classical recording happen for exactly the same reasons as Meryl Streep's: to capture the best expressive moments. It is a problem of perception. Many listeners have the ideal of the live performance in mind and so think that any attempt to doctor this through editing is ethically wrong, thereby missing the fact that editing can take place for valid artistic reasons. However, we know, and performers feel this keenly, that it is also done in order to get rid of mistakes and blemishes, to achieve the perfection that is expected on recordings. Movies are usually big-budget enterprises, filmed over weeks and months, whereas a classical recording project has a relatively limited budget and is done over a few days (or a week if it's an opera and you are lucky enough to secure the funding for such a big project). So, given enough time and money, multiple takes and editing are undertaken for artistic reasons, but when time and money are limited, then the purposes of retakes and editing are also limited, to 'note-getting' and blemish-covering.

³⁴ Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (2004), 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

Let a Recording be a Recording

Having looked at the various situations that musicians have to deal with and their general opinions about them, I would like to suggest that we stop comparing one against the other – that we allow performances and recordings to be emancipated from each other – that we let a recording be a recording, and work on how that process can evolve for the benefit of the musicians, the production team, and the listener. I would like us, as listeners, to be able to examine our expectations and see whether we might start to open our ears to different things. There are ways in which a recording can be more successful than a live performance, where a recording can help us hear and experience things which we often can't in a live context; they render audible passages which would normally be obscured in live performance, such as opera libretti inner lines (which clarify the theatrical action), quiet accompanied solo passages, finer details of orchestration, or complex soloistic passagework. Repeated takes and selecting edits, as well as the luxury of sitting back and listening again, allow musicians to choose the best musical moments, to experiment in the studio and strive for a performance that best reflects their thoughts at the time. It can be a creative tool. But aside from the obvious benefits of the current recording medium, there are other options which I would like to propose that we explore.

The main point to consider is that all the stakeholders in the recording (performers, production team, critics and listeners) need to go through a process of reconsideration and exploration - a reassessment of their place and purpose in the recording situation. If all parties could gain a better knowledge of the challenges that the others face, they might develop a deeper understanding of the whole process which would improve their experience of it. The problem is simply that we all approach the situation from our own point of view, with our own assumptions and beliefs, not realising how different everyone else's perspective is.

Let us consider performers first. They would benefit from coming to terms with the fact that recording is a completely different craft; this would help them to feel less alienated by the process. It would improve their experiences if they could embrace the sound-world (accepting that it won't be a live balance) and more willingly exploit the possibilities offered by recording (instead of seeing editing negatively as an ethical or moral issue). It would help if they could change their concept of the producer and process as an interfering prism to seeing them as part of the artistic process (and of course this would be made easier if the producer were also reconsidering the whole

situation). What would the result be, I wonder, if musicians were involved in the process of choosing edits in collaboration with the producer? What kind of recording would that result in? (I am working on a piece of research to explore this).

Perhaps the main and most obvious answer is to work towards instilling fuller studio recording skills in current musicians and thoroughly training students coming through the conservatoire system to be able to work as well and comfortably in the studio as they do on stage. This is already showing promising results at the Royal College of Music³⁶ and other conservatoires.³⁷ The aforementioned cohort at the RCM that began their Studio Experience course with descriptions such as ‘perfection; permanent; exposing flaws; not natural, clinical, tiring; self-criticism; daunting’ came out at the other end of the learning process saying that for them recording was now: ‘experimenting, trying different ways of doing something; time going fast, faster than you expect; concentration of the producer, [attention to] detail; stress, good stress; preparation [important]; relief, because you’ve already captured some good moments; pressure; detail; layers of detail; a lot more fun than expected; need forward planning and structure; good intensity, stressful and fun; not enough time; more creative than I was expecting; catalyst, crucible, transformational’. When it came to editing together their own session takes, they found it really hard to listen to themselves, difficult to choose their own edits, some didn’t think their edits would work but then found that their recording sounded great when edited together. When asked who they felt was in control during the session, there was agreement that ‘it changes all the time’, ‘it’s like a husband-and-wife relationship’.³⁸ But what is interesting and possibly most important about this set-up is the fact that they were producing each other, and so gained experience from both sides of the musician/production team fence. Most professional musicians working today have never had this experience of being producers. This is one of the many aspects that we think make this course so vitally

³⁶ This knowledge is based my experience of teaching the Studio Experience course already mentioned, and it has also been researched and written about by Aguilar, Ananay, ‘Recording classical music: LSO Live and the transforming record industry’, (PhD dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2011), Chapter 2.

³⁷ ‘At the Royal Academy of Music, postgraduate music students are regularly instructed – both through seminars and recording sessions – in the implications and practicalities of the studio. They reflect on how to reproduce the adrenaline of a live performance in the “controlled” environment of the studio, on the understanding that even without an audience, a recording is no less “live”. Their teacher, who is not only a performer but also a producer, asks: “Can a recording be a live performance?” and answers the question with “Yes. Treat every take as if it is. A recording constitutes many live performances, many inflections, messages, nuances, with the chance to do your best every time. This leads to a range of artistic possibilities quite different from the ‘spur of the moment’ events in the concert hall.” (Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, Postgraduate Seminar, Royal Academy of Music, November 15, 2005).

³⁸ Based on research undertaken whilst I was teaching this Studio Experience course at the Royal College of Music, London, 2011-12.

important. The more you know about the situation you're getting into the more you can equip yourself and the better chance you have to turn the studio into a space for experimentation and creativity.

The members of the production team also have to go through this reconsideration process. It would improve the situation significantly if they were to consider and understand that, despite their own perception of multiple takes as being liberating, many musicians feel differently and still fear or dislike the recording process. Producers could think more about what performers have to deal with when coming into the studio, and find ways of helping them overcome their fears, and moderate their perceived loss of control. Another aspect of studio work which producers need to examine is the value of recorded perfection. Is it absolutely necessary; is it the best and only way? What if instead of being a place to achieve perfection, the studio became a space for risk and experimentation, in the words of Georgina Born a 'crucible for creativity'?³⁹

One issue that certainly needs to be dealt with (more so than it already is even in the best of circumstances) is this illusion presented by the final recording, the pretence that it is a beginning-to-end seamless performance. Not only is the process of recording made invisible, but so is the work of the producer and engineers. Remember the image of the hour-glass on its side, with the performers and composition at each end, and the production team and recording process as an invisible prism in the middle, through which the performance must pass. It might perhaps help everyone to change their concept of what a recording is, and to judge it more realistically, if the producer's part in the process were celebrated instead of hidden. If producers and engineers shared their expertise with listeners instead of being made to keep it what they call a 'black art',⁴⁰ there would be more chance of everyone embracing recording as an art form in its own right. They could share their trade secrets via production notes accompanying the CD, they could make the process transparent, show what can be done with recording and why they do it. They could explain to us the artistry behind, and the benefit of, what they do. This would start to break down the feeling amongst listeners that they were being fooled and amongst performers that they were at the mercy of a powerful yet ultimately invisible producer.

³⁹ Born, 'Afterword – Recording: from reproduction to representation to remediation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music* (2009), 296.

⁴⁰ Pers. comm.: interview with James Mallinson, independent record producer, January 19, 2007. However, this term, or ones similar, is widely applied by production team members.

Finally we need to consider the critics and listeners. As stated earlier, we have become so accustomed to hearing perfect recorded performances that we have come to expect the same in the concert hall. However, could it be possible that perfection isn't really as important as it has been allowed to become? Perhaps what we really want is better defined as musical 'mastery', and not literal perfection. As long as the public and the record critics (and musicians themselves) persist in thinking that a recording has to be perfect in a way that a live performance simply cannot be (and also project that expectation onto the live concert), and as long as there is so little money for recording projects that musicians feel enormous pressure to get it right the first time (potentially stifling the feeling of freedom and excitement), and the production team know there is no money to pay for relaxed studio time or really good (read: time-consuming) editing, then many musicians will continue to feel worried about and dissatisfied with their recordings.⁴¹

But if this is something that listeners might like to hear, then the conditions need to be created to make it possible. One of the reasons that musicians and producers are reluctant to release a recording that prioritizes expression over perfection is that mistakes are the easiest thing for a critic or listener to spot and comment on. If we remember Brendel's term 'wrong note fiends',⁴² we might recognize that the problem the perfection-centric producer faces is that a bad review means fewer record sales, so critics need to open their minds and ears to new aesthetic possibilities for recording, and loosen up about perfection for its own sake.

Conclusion

What needs to happen for the new concept of recording I am proposing (one which doesn't see perfection as the most important factor) to have a chance of being attempted? Perhaps if every group with a stake in the process – musicians, production team, record company, critics, listener – had some reason to believe that it might be an interesting experiment, it would be possible to convince people to try it out. This will most easily be achieved through opening the debate about the recording aesthetic and will require a willingness to let go of perfection in search of something more artistically interesting. Everyone involved in creating and consuming recordings needs to create a

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion of editing, see Blier-Carruthers, Amy, 'Live Performance - Studio Recording: An Ethnographic and Analytical Study of Sir Charles Mackerras', (PhD diss., King's College, University of London, 2010), 147-151.

⁴² Brendel, 'A Case for Live Recordings' (2007), 347.

space where there is freedom to experiment, to try other aesthetics and formats, to find other options that are more interesting and exciting for all concerned. If a new recording aesthetic were to be created that was successful, people might start going out to buy more recordings, and this would not only be good business for record companies, but would also translate into money and therefore more time in the studio to achieve something artistically satisfying.

Over the past century-and-a-half, concerns have been expressed about photography taking over from painting, or cinema from theatre, or recordings from concerts, but never have these prophecies been fulfilled. The reason for this seems to be that as each medium develops, it finds a place for itself, distinct and separate from its ancestor. Susan Sontag writes in *Film and Theatre*: 'If the painter's job had been no more than fabricating likenesses, the invention of the camera might indeed have made painting obsolete. But painting is hardly just "pictures", any more than cinema is just theatre for the masses, available in portable standard units.'⁴³ It is time that we learnt this lesson as it relates to classical recording and start embracing and exploring the differences instead of defending the barricades. It's time for the emancipation to occur.

The first major step we've taken here is to listen to the concerns that performers have about the recording process, to acknowledge that the confusion about their place in the process and product of recording creates tension, and we have then reconsidered our understanding of the ontologies of live performance and studio recording - to allow each medium to be what it is instead of being compared to its counterpart. As funding for the arts is being cut and the recording industry is undergoing its biggest metamorphosis in a generation, we have an opportunity here to think about how the concert and recording industries could use these shifts in the landscape to their advantage⁴⁴ – to move with or even seek to inspire these changes in taste that seem to be occurring. Perhaps the fact that the recording industry is no longer exactly as it was might provide the perfect opportunity for musicians and producers to work out new ways of conceptualizing, capturing and disseminating recorded music. This needs to be opened for debate, for a really successful, enriching and interesting future to be forged for classical music, in both its live and recorded forms.

⁴³ Sontag, 'Film and Theatre' (1966), 33.

⁴⁴ Kenyon, Nicholas, 'Arts cuts: Time to stage a revolution', *The Independent*, Wednesday 22 September, 2010 – <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/arts-cuts-time-to-stage-a-revolution-2085596.html#> - accessed on January 21, 2012.