

Michael Haas

The recording producer as musicological filter

First of all, let's get our definitions clear. In today's environment, we are dealing principally in the context of this symposium with the studio producer. The executive producer is altogether a different beast, though the combined job existed during the age of Walter Legge, John Culshaw and continued even up to my time. In other words the person who followed the artist into the studio was also central to their engagement to the label, repertoire planning and developments through the length of a recording contract. This combined job would now seem to belong to an earlier age.

There can be no dispute that today's musicologists have much to contemplate, with Legge's signings to EMI of Callas, Schwarzkopf, Karajan, Klemperer and de los Angeles, or John Culshaw's Ring recording with Solti and Decca's own host of signings: Tebaldi, Sutherland, Ashkenazy, Solti and Pavarotti. A studio producer is often the only person who has a clear idea of the genuine capabilities of the artist. The executive producer who remains in his or her office is, in my experience, disadvantaged by being placed in a relationship with an artist which demands that he or she view them as the marketing people wish to present them. It is the classic situation of being made to believe your own PR. It does not provide the executive producer with the first hand experience necessary in bringing together an artist's aspirations with what is genuinely possible and even desirable for the maintenance of a positive relationship between artist and label.

My observation has always been that every intelligent artist wishes to rise to unfamiliar challenges, meaning that they often try to take on projects that satisfy their own musical and intellectual ambitions, while not providing an organic development from what they do best at that particular point of time in their relationship with the label and their public. To give a hypothetical example: a harpsichordist may indicate that she wishes to follow her recordings of the Swedish Baroque, regarded by public and press alike as groundbreaking, with a recording of say, the complete piano works of Liszt. The executive producer does not have the benefit of having worked with the keyboard player in the studio and can only take it on trust that the artist feels this progression to be the best in their recording development. The artist, on the other hand, though flattered at the reputation of being the number one interpreter of Swedish harpsichord music, feels that she needs to establish her credentials in something she sees as being more challenging and open to general competition. If the executive producer has a weapon at all, (and to be truthful, this weapon has become more powerful in recent years), it is that the marketing department would not be able to sell the performer in a recording of Liszt. Unfortunately, if the artist has commercial muscle, the executive producer has little to fall back on and either has to count the

departure as a necessary evil in order to get more of what the artist does best at a later date, or lose credibility as they try to keep it from happening at all, usually on the orders of someone so high up that they have no contact with the people or issues involved. Today's executive producer is in the thankless position of having all of the corporate responsibility while lacking the musical authority which would come with studio work.

Let's take a real life example. I remember a phone call from a producer at Deutsche Grammophon wondering how to deal with John Elliot Gardener's desire to record Kurt Weill. As we know, the recording of *7 Deadly Sins* took place. But rhetorically, I wonder if it wasn't because of too many such excursions that when it came to the proposal to record the complete Bach Cantatas, obviously repertoire that is more identified with Gardener, the label dropped him. DGG has almost always worked on the basis of executive and studio producers being two different people. At Decca and Sony, I carried out the function of executive and studio producer with artists as diverse as Matthias Goerne, Andras Schiff and Ute Lemper while carrying forward the repertoire planning for a number of other more established artists such as Solti and Abbado with whom I also continued to work in the studio.

Ultimately, the *wedding of repertoire to artist is the primary function of the executive producer and in my opinion, this can not easily be divorced from work in the studio.*

Another type of project with musicological implications would be Decca's recording series of music banned by the Third Reich called 'Entartete Musik'. This was a repertoire driven project that I initiated and though it provided performers like Jane Eaglen, Rene Pape and Matthias Goerne with their first visits to a recording studio, musicologists will be more interested in the reception of this repertoire throughout the 80s and 90s. This was the first time that a major label had recorded large works banned by the Third Reich to be marketed as 'degenerate'. I recall how the decision was controversial and how we were attacked, viciously in many cases by the German press. The reasons were on the face of things quite justifiable: How dare we use a Nazi word such as *entartet* as a marketing tool. Examining the reception of this repertoire it is important to understand that underneath the attacks was the belief that Germany did not need another Holocaust story. The Germans had hoped that the worst excesses of the Third Reich had been brought to light and for most; the field was already over-discussed and over-excavated. This series seemed to many German critics as being a made-up-story. Certainly, most would have wished this to have been the case.

However, the element of interest for future historians will no doubt be the fact that musicians and musicologists in the early 90s cringed at the view that Nazis had banned works, in their opinion, as toe-curlingly kitch as Korngold's *Das Wunder der Heliane* or as whimsically light-weight as Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf*. This was not helping the cultural de-

nazification process in Germany which until then had held to the strict recommendations of Theodor Adorno:

music should not be allowed to seduce a manipulative and intellectually light weight bourgeois public into further childlike stupidity. Rather, music should challenge them and facilitate their own objective aesthetic decisions, decisions which were separated from such small minded adornments as 'emotions' or 'expression'.

Clearly the operas by Korngold and Krenek were not helping this cause and more than a few had even suggested that their banning was the only culturally positive action the Nazis took. One scholar I work with even went so far recently as to compare Nazi and Adorno comments on the composer Franz Schreker. He found that they essentially differed by only by a single synonym.

I mention this because Decca's series both preceded and ran parallel with other efforts trying to bring objectivity to assessing exactly what had been lost in those horrible years. All of the efforts taken together, and certainly with The Decca Record Company spending the most money and presenting the highest profile, did result in a change of programming and thinking that we are beginning to experience today. I feel certain that recent performances of Schreker and Korngold, at the Salzburg Festival and Braunfels in opera houses in Vienna and Germany would simply not have been possible without the recording series which effectively created a new genre. In this new genre, one circumnavigates the many aesthetic questions of style, content and taste. It is possible to present works by Schönberg together with Paul Abraham's *Flower of Hawaii*. For better or worse, the music, whether high or low brow is referred to by all as "Entartet" in German circles or in English, as music 'banned by the Nazis'.

Of course, the development of any unfamiliar area of repertoire will be due somewhere to an executive producer who took the initiative either by him or herself or together with artists and followed up with the necessary research before going into a studio. It is worth remembering that the executive and studio producer Peter Wadland was a founder of the Academy of Ancient Music *together* with Christopher Hogwood. The profile of Hogwood, this ensemble and their combined role with the label, *L'Oiseau-Lyre* together with other Wadland signings, such as Emma Kirkby and Anthony Rooley, Philip Pickett and Catherine Bott, has left us with an early music movement in the UK that today can be studied for both its contributions to repertoire excavation, performance practice AND, public reception.

However, let's take on the ethics and morality of the studio producer and hopefully shed light on countless dilemmas which confront the day-to-day existence of those with their fingers on the faders.

One overriding irrefutable certainty must inevitably influence the way we operate in the studio. It is the objective of presenting a work of music **performed** as flawlessly as possible by the recording artists. This

certainty thus begs further questions and observations: What does 'flawless' mean? What is the interpretive licence of the performer? Are the technical limitations of a musician, justifiable reasons for restricting his or her view of a work? To what extent is the end-result of the studio different from the end-result of a concert performance?

Certain moral absolutes have been accepted over time: one for example, does not cut out all of the breaths of a singer. This would be misrepresentative regardless of the undeniable musical benefits of recording long phrases without breathing breaks. In my experience, no singer, even the most deranged prima-donna, has ever asked me to remove all signs of having to breathe. On the other hand, the balance between instrumentalist and orchestra in any given concerto recording has nothing in common with what one hears in a concert hall. (And most especially not, if dealing with original instruments!) And I have never heard a soloist or conductor comment that it should be otherwise. Nobody seems to mind or dispute the obvious misrepresentation.

Why is it acceptable to yank up the presence of soloists in concertos, or indeed singers in opera, but not acceptable to remove breaths? If pitch shift is now standard practice in a modern studio recording, why would it be considered immoral to use it in historic recordings? **** Let's have a quick look at the musicological implications of re-mastering historic recordings. Those of you involved with audio-restoration are capable of time travel and can influence events of the past: In my own experience for example, the one wrong horn entrance that ruined the world premiere of Mahler's 10th symphony, resulting in the recording not being allowed for broadcast, by Alma Mahler in the 60s, is today easily fixed. Going further back in time, the movie star gorgeous diva, Maria Schreker singing a scene from her husband Franz Schreker's opera *Der Ferne Klang*, indeed conducted on the recording by him in the mid-20s, is pitch shifted in the opening. This keeps us from being jarred by her flat entrance and creates the magic that surely all must have been felt in the theatre at the time when she was identified as his greatest interpreter. If it's fair to remove the warts from contemporary performances, why isn't it fair to do so, on historic ones?

The modern studio producer as opposed to those in audio-restoration is essentially a musical portrait painter, and as in the renaissance, few patrons are willing to have warts painted in, unless there is a very good reason for doing so. (Andras Schiff's comment on leaving a wrong inversion of an arpeggio in his recording of the Trout Quintet: "It will make Zoltan Kocsis's day when he hears it!") And what about the following dilemma? (Play Gál second symphony) Here, there was no recording available of this work at all. I needed it as a crucial part of an audio guide in an exhibition I was mounting on the composer Hans Gál. What we just heard was totally reconstructed on a computer.

But let's leave these questions and get down to basics: we record music *and* by necessity, we *also* record performances. This is already the first dilemma. We cannot escape from the fact that we record: Performances-of-music. In a concert, we hear interpretation and work, performer and the performed in a satisfactory *gesamtwerk*. (Or at least, this is the expectation) This is the perception which makes us, as a listening public see artists not as transmitters of someone else's creativity, much as we would see a television set for example, but as the incarnation, or bearer of the creative spirit itself. This is the nature of interpretive art.

The recording practice has changed this however by driving a wedge between the Siamese twins of the performer and the performed. With this wedge in place, we create a new hierarchy:

The Performer serves the composer and the producer serves the performer. Or rather, to be more precise: The performer serves the composer and the producer serves the performer's *service* to the composer. This means that the Siamese twins have in the studio become Siamese triplets, with the producer being joined at the hips with both performer and the performed.

What are the perimeters of this symbiotic relationship and at which point has the public stopped, (albeit unwittingly) listening to the performer and started listening to the producer's work?

Before this can be answered, let's look at the most basic element of music itself: its ability to relate a *narrative*. In western music, thanks to our diatonic system which we in this part of the globe have grown up with, we have generally all of the necessary information to understand when we are in the beginning, the middle or the end of a work. In a more complex, less immediately lucid contemporary piece, we can still start off with a time code of zero and end up further down the line. That music has its own narrative continuum is quite simply beyond dispute. The similarities of music to a form of spoken language abound. So it is a not unnatural phenomenon to add a spoken narrative to the musical one we already have. Songs, musical theatre such as opera, Lied, chanson, liturgical chant, or art-song impose another spoken narrative on-top of the musical one we already have in progress. This can be quite tricky since both narratives need different amounts of time to express their intentions. It's like trying to act under water. Or, consider the simultaneous translator from German into English who has to take a deep breath and wait until the verb at the end of the phrase, before carrying on. Spoken language on top of musical language moves at a different speed. Both interpreter and producer need to address this point for a recording. Less conflicting, but equally intriguing are the parallel narratives of orchestra and soloist in concertos. Though the musical narrative can at least move at the same speed, the timbre and weight of the two protagonists create a sometimes gross inequality. This inequality is usually central to the nature of the concerto and influences the narrative of the work.

Recording changes these fundamental narratives in another way as well. Few homes have rooms that are shaped and conditioned like the standard concert hall, meaning that the reception of music's narrative must be somehow compressed to fit the environment of the listener. On the one hand, we can assume he or she will be listening on the same grade of equipment in the same funny shaped rooms that we have in the studio. But how helpful is that, if most people shove the recording through another stage of compression and listen to it over a lap-top or a mobile phone? One of the certainties of recording is that we have limitations on how much level we can slam onto a medium. However, we have seemingly no limitations on absence of level. Just this fact alone should cause serious pause for thought regarding the construction of crescendos and diminuendos. As musicians are only human, they have a natural instinct to slow down for diminuendos and speed up for crescendos. These tempo fluctuations will inevitably change the nature of the unfolding musical narration.

The producer must transmit music onto a medium that can be heard anywhere in any context. To follow music's narrative under these non-concert-hall circumstances means that a section of the brain is able to engage with the work while simultaneously doing other things: washing dishes, ironing shirts, reading a magazine or even answering e-mails. Alternatively, sitting in a concert, one is aware of audiences who while listening to performances, are concentrating on e-mails to answer, magazine articles to read and things to say at tomorrow's meetings. How and where we listen to music has changed, meaning how we follow music's narration has also changed.

So to recap: we have the fundamentals of recording musical narratives – sometimes together with a sung text and also quite often, together with other instruments. Each of these combinations creates different narrative dynamics between the various elements. This at least covers the material we commit onto a recording medium. We now have to accept that listeners have moved their musical perception to a less conscious part of their brains. Recording has so changed our listening habits that even concert life can never be the same.

The musician arrives in the studio with a work to perform and it is the producer, who then assures that the *recorded* performance maintains the appropriate narrative tension for the listener. This musical narrative is to be followed by people NOT sitting in concert halls, but listening passively, usually engaged in other activities. Understood thus, the work of the producer becomes clearer. Yet, it is understanding this change of the listener's perception, that begins to illuminate the question of when are we encountering the work of the performer and when we are encountering the work of the producer.

But what if the performer, like Glenn Gould, has a performance in mind that is only possible in a studio? What if someone hears in their inner-ear

a tempo that is virtually unplayable on a modern piano, or a phrase which is un-singable by a human-being with only 2 lungs? Or the pianist who wishes to have a dynamic that is so soft that it could never be remotely possible in a concert? What is the logical outcome of instrumentalists who create a mechanical perfection that is unobtainable in a concert hall? Is this an abuse or a USE of the studio as a musical tool? Both the pianists Ivo Pogorelich and Andrei Gavrilov, according to their various producers, were notorious for recording only short one or two bar passages at a time, stopping and starting again seamlessly from where they left off. The final edits produced performances that were mechanically beyond remarkable – in fact, they were downright miraculous. Every note was perfectly articulated, every up-beat tempo impossibly fast paced, no note out of place and certainly no clangers. Dynamics were inhumanely consistent and the articulation at even PPP was crisp and sharp. But, couldn't a person pushing down piano keys with an umbrella, recorded one at a time, and placed in a databank, not have resulted in the same performance, given the correct computer programme? The Gál excerpt played earlier gives pause for thought.

I remember reading an article from 1927 in a copy of *Melos*, Schott, the music publisher's in-house magazine. It was comparing different contemporary composers of works for the piano. The writer goes on to suggest that the piano was the perfect instrument for the modern age, (obviously, the 20s felt 'modern' to the people living in them at the time!) Because it "produced music by means of a mechanism, it was able to bypass such human foibles as expression". He goes on to say that it would be even better should the piano have rubber hammers rather than felt ones, so that it was possible to become even more objective. In this context, while admitting to their attractions, he virtually dismisses the piano works of Prokofieff, Hindemith and Stravinsky. He then comes to the conclusion that the Austrian composer, today nearly totally forgotten, Ernst Toch is, in his view, the greatest composer for the instrument, since all of his works suggest a degree of mechanisation that could imaginably be carried out without human beings at all.

What we see in retrospect, is the juxtaposition of humans trying to become more like machines while developing machines that are more like humans. This is an evolution that has set the aesthetic terms of how we performed and recorded – and continue to record and perform! The fascination with human's possessing mechanical perfection started at the beginning of the 20th century. The recording studio took these aesthetic criteria to an inevitable apotheosis of technical perfection.

One confronts a number of interesting factors when listening to performances of the same work recorded from about 1900 onwards. While compiling an audio guide for an exhibition on Gustav Mahler, (which opens in Vienna day after tomorrow!), I put together various examples of the singers he engaged for the imperial opera. These are some of the earliest recordings available from the first decade of the 20th century and they seem, listening to them today, to be striving for quite different ends.

Perhaps most disarming is their disregard for mechanical perfection and an insistence on underlining the very humanity of their singing. Portamenti melt from note to note and every breath is used for the most expressive purpose possible. Texts are forward in the mouth, easily understood and the voice itself is higher up creating a croonier, altogether more human sound. Listen to Godowsky or Rachmaninoff playing any work of standard repertoire, say a Chopin Scherzo, and compare it the 7 or 8 recordings made with different artists at 10 year intervals. The difference is obvious to even the most insensitive.

As Robert Philip remarked in his book, recording in the age of performance, (and I paraphrase), "The practice of using original Baroque instruments during the 80s and 90s told us as more about performance practices in the 80s and 90s than they did about performance practices in the age of Bach and Vivaldi."

I would like to suggest that the next trend in recording, and the development of technology, will be the re-humanising of music making. Of course I can't know. There is something creepy about using technology to sound 'more' human. One thing is for sure: the goal of mechanical perfection tells us more about our relationship with music, the public and musicians, than about music. Our perception of music and performance and the role of the producer in transmitting these to recording will be elements that not only future musicologists will puzzle on, but no doubt, sociologists as well.