

# The studio experience: Control and collaboration

**Amy Blier-Carruthers**

Royal College of Music, London, UK

Classical musicians have traditionally not been trained for the recording studio to the same extent as for the concert platform. This paper presents how we at the Royal College of Music aim to provide students with a conceptual understanding and practical experience of recording.

*Keywords:* recording; production; control; collaboration; role play

Classical musicians have traditionally not been trained for the recording studio to the same extent as for the concert platform. In this age of technological saturation this is a strange situation. They get little training in dramatic stage presence, but nowhere do they feel so exposed as in the recording studio. The musician's performance goes through the prism of the production team and recording process, but they have never been taught how to manage this experience successfully. Either because of the inherent qualities of the product and process themselves, or because of this lack of preparation during their training, many musicians approach the recording studio with fear and dislike. This is surprising enough when thought of in relation to professional musicians, but perhaps even more so when we realize that even the technologically-savvy conservatoire students of today describe recording using words such as: "perfection, permanent, clean, clinical, not natural, no audience, exposing flaws, daunting."

At the Royal College of Music (RCM) we run a postgraduate course called *Studio Experience*, in which we aim to give students practical experience of the recording studio, as well as opening up for debate ideas about what a recording is in comparison to a live performance, what the problems are, and what recording can help musicians to achieve. In this way we hope to make them more aware as performers. A central element of this course is that the students are given the experience of being a producer—of producing a recording session for their peers, and then of choosing the edits for their own

recording. This act of changing places with the producer gives them a rare chance to experience the challenges of recording from the other side of the control room glass. By going through this process we hope to give them experience of how they can keep control of the recording situation while also working collaboratively with their production team.

From Benjamin (1936) to Gould (cited in Page 1987) to Auslander (1999), musicians and listeners have been aware that live and recorded performance modes are different. My research (Blier-Carruthers 2010, 2013), however, reveals that many professional musicians today express a fear of the process and a dislike of the product of recording. Day (2000), Katz (2004), and Philip (2004) describe many examples of early recorded performers approaching recording with trepidation and anxiety, but it is striking that even after over a century of commercial classical recordings, many of the same issues are still in evidence today—a sense of loss of control, distrust of the technology, discomfort with the power wielded by the producer, and disillusionment with the editing process. There is a widely shared belief that a concert is about expression whereas a recording is about perfection (Blier-Carruthers 2010). Gould is one of the few classical musicians to have abandoned the concert platform and opted solely to perform in the recording studio (cited in Page 1987). He saw that it gave him creative control of the final version of the music, but he made sure to be involved at every stage of the process, a luxury not usually granted to classical musicians. Producer Stephen Johns has also spoken about the studio as a creative environment, saying that it is equally possible to be alive in the studio and dead in the concert hall—it depends on how you approach the situation and what you are trying to achieve (Johns 2011). Also relevant to this topic is the research conducted into this *Studio Experience* course by Aguilar (2011). I will describe our course as a model of how this kind of teaching can be done, as this kind of training for performers is rare, and suggest how it is useful to students. I will show that by changing hats, the performer's enhanced knowledge of the producer's role can enlighten and empower the performer and allow the studio to become a collaborative and creative space.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

### Course design

The course was created with the performer/producer element by Timothy Salter in 2000; he explains that “having their playing scrutinized under the ears of a sound engineer and producer within a three-hour session was in itself a new and intense experience for most students; themselves acting as a

producer was even more revelatory for them” (personal correspondence). Since 2011, I have taught the course with my colleagues: sound engineer Ben Connellan (Chandos and Hyperion labels, among others) and producer Stephen Johns (Artistic Director at the RCM, formerly Vice-President, Artists and Repertoire, at EMI Classics). We developed a series of lectures to add critical, aesthetic, and self-reflexive aspects to contextualize the studio sessions. Also participating are our final-year postgraduate students, with little or no experience of recording, but about to go into the world of freelancing and auditioning. The course itself is the experimental set-up, and provides the research material through lectures, mock-up session, and recording sessions. These provide evidence through the lecture content, field-notes I take of my observations, the session takes and editing scores, and the reflective commentaries which the students write.

### **Course delivery**

The students are taken through a programme of introduction to, practice in, and reflection on various elements of the recording process. There are lectures on aesthetics of recording (and points of tension and opportunities), being a producer and editor, and the recording process itself. We then stage a mock-up session to observe recording in action. The students then pair up to do two three-hour sessions where each takes the role of performer and producer, respectively. In the industry, the producer makes the edit plan, but we think it is important for the performer to gain experience in choosing his own edits. It is a painstaking and often painful process to have to listen to oneself in such detail, but extremely useful. One is confronted by one’s performance, “warts and all,” and has to decide where one stands on questions of long takes versus short takes, whether editing is cheating or a positive force, and how to achieve a good arch in the recorded performance. We then have a final lecture to discuss thoughts and outcomes. At each stage the students write a reflective commentary about their developing thoughts and opinions; we provide a template with questions to prompt their thinking.

### **Course aims and benefits**

The aims and benefits of the course can be shown through the following quotes by my colleagues:

Making your first recording can be a daunting prospect. *Studio Experience* gives students a view of the process which hopefully removes some of the negative preconceived ideas of recording and editing which many

musicians seem to hold. Although they may look upon recording as an unnatural and unmusical process the course aims to show that it can be the complete opposite. With the aid and encouragement of a team of supporters (producer, engineer, and editor) a musician can try out ideas which they may not have dared in the concert hall (Ben Connellan).

It is remarkable that musicians so often have a completely unrealistic view of how recordings are made, and even why they are made. *Studio Experience* endeavors to ask students to confront their prejudices about recordings, to become comfortable with techniques that will enable them to succeed in the studio environment, and to have the knowledge to take control in a studio environment that will allow them to perform at their peak—no less than they would expect to perform in public. All musicians who have grasped the combination of freedom, concentration, and self-examination that recording provides have, in my experience, found a deepening of their abilities to perform and communicate (Stephen Johns).

When we teach the course, there are several significant characteristics of a good recording session (for performer and producer). Their performance and preparation: a well prepared performer, who would be able to play their varied and interesting repertoire live, performs well with the other musicians involved, and the producer is knowledgeable and ready to lead the performer through the process. Their communication and collaboration: they are communicating well with each other, and sharing control. They have an ear for the sound and details of performance and are able to successfully discuss their thoughts about these. Their ability to adapt: the performer is able to listen to a playback and adjust to get his desired result. He is trying out the producer's musical or technical suggestions. The producer can also adapt her working style or manner. They engage with opportunities afforded by recording: both are listening for the overall musical impression of the performance and also the small details. Both are embracing the chance to work in both long and short takes, to go for the feeling of a full arch (or trajectory), as well as dropping in to work on smaller sections or very small patches when necessary. The feeling of positivity and forward movement, of something unique achieved: it has gone well when you all get the sense that you have worked until you have achieved an ideal version, at least for today/now, both musically and technically. Both feel that they have the takes they need to edit together a great recording and that this great outcome was only made possible by their team-work, combined input, and creative collaboration. In the

final edited recording we are looking for musical creativity, fluency, control, awareness, conception of sound, choice of takes and placing of edits, and an awareness of how the performance comes across through the recorded medium. We give detailed feedback on all the assessed elements so that they can improve their studio technique. However, this is not simply a “how-to” apprenticeship. I believe that by teaching the practices and ideologies of recording one can not only prepare students for their careers as recording artists but make them more conscious and enquiring musicians. I want them to purposely question if the current situation is satisfactory or if they can see new ways forward.

### IMPLICATIONS

Looking at the students' concept of recording before and after taking this course will help to show the impact of the learning environment we have created. When asked, in the first lecture, “what is the first word that comes to mind when you think about 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; 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.” We can see that the tone of their responses did not lift very much, even when given this encouragement. This cohort emerged from 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; 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.”

This *Studio Experience* course is an experimental model of how performers can be prepared for their relationship with recording. This is especially interesting at a time when the recording industry as we know it (both capture and dissemination) is in a period of abrupt change. Only by engaging with the past and present of recording practices and aesthetics can we hope to forge a path for the future. By directing the students' awareness to the different roles that exist in the recording process, we achieve several types of collaborative

space: the physical space of the studio with the performer and production team working collaboratively; the aesthetic space given to the students to consider the ontologies of live performance and recording and the implications for their performing lives; and the psychological space created in their heads, where in an internal collaborative dialogue they can now be both performer and producer when working in the studio.

### Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Stephen Johns (especially for his contribution to the presentation of this paper at ISPS 2013), Ben Connellan, Timothy Salter, Annabel Connellan, Amanda Glauert, Ananay Aguilar, and the *Studio Experience* students from 2011/12 and 12/13.

### Address for correspondence

Amy Blier-Carruthers, Royal College of Music, Prince Consort Road, London SW7 2BS, UK; *Email*: amy.blier-carruthers@rcm.ac.uk

### References

- Aguilar A. (2011). *Recording Classical Music: LSO Live and the Transforming Record Industry*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London.
- Auslander P. (1999). *Liveness*. London: Routledge.
- Benjamin W. (1982). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (1936). In H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 219-253). Bungay, Suffolk, UK: Fontana/Collins.
- Blier-Carruthers A. (2010). *Live Performance—Studio Recording: An Ethnographic and Analytical Study of Sir Charles Mackerras*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College, University of London.
- Blier-Carruthers A. (2013). The performer's place in the process and product of recording. Paper presented at the *Performance Studies Network International Conference 2*, Cambridge, UK.
- Day T. (2000) *A Century of Recorded Music*. New Haven, Connecticut, USA: Yale University Press.
- Johns S. (2011). Recording: Live in the concert hall or dead in the studio? Paper presented at the *Performance Studies Network International Conference 1*, Cambridge, UK.
- Katz M. (2004) *Capturing Sound*. Berkeley, California, USA: University of California Press.
- Page T. (1987). *The Glenn Gould Reader*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Philip R. (2004). *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*. New Haven, Connecticut, USA: Yale University Press.