Donald Greig

'Sing to the mike': authenticity and performance in early music recording

There is nothing new about asking a performer about his or her experience of a particular recording or concert. This, of course, is the stuff of the Guardian Friday review, the Gramophone or BBC music magazine. Here the reader meets the artist and gets a privileged glimpse backstage. The main reason for this - from the perspective of the performer and record company at least who may even demand that the performer attends such interviews –is purely commercial. Access to the performer adds a level of interest to the recording which, it is hoped and presumed, will convince the reader to go out and buy the disk in question. As such the performer's discourse becomes an extension of the recording itself, both a qualification and a mark of authenticity, a privileged view which offers the listener the possibility of an alternative perspective on the recording, distinct from the strictly spatial positioning offered to the listener by the producer. The producer places the listener firmly in the centre of the stereo spread: The view offered by the performers discourse is a mythical place alongside the performer, within the recording space itself.

Such commentaries, aside from adding the frisson of excitement of being behind the scenes, fulfil two further functions: they promote a certain mythology of the recording but also offer genuine insights into the recording process. But how genuine are they? To what extent does this process of mythologizing actually convince? And is the performer him or herself convinced by such stories? In most cases I would suggest that commentaries by performers in the context I have cited – newspaper and radio interviews, biographies, and so on – are pretty unreliable. Yet the performer's voice is increasingly being sought within academia, specifically within the space of the performance studies. Indeed this conference is a fine example of that approach.

This isn't the place for a history of the musicology of performance, nor can I provide it, but over the past twenty five years or so with the development of performance studies, there has been a marked increase in the contribution of performers to academic debate. Nowhere is this more true than in the field of early music where performance practice studies has created a space for the close interaction of musicologists and performers and a productive blurring of easy boundaries.

This was noted by Joseph Kerman in his book, *Musicology* in 1985[1]. A theme that emerges there, and which continues through much later writing on the subject, is a distinction between the language of performers and the language of musicology. Without going into this in any real detail it is worth underlining that such distinctions often refer to the spoken language of the performer and contrast it with the written language of the

[1] Joseph Kerman *Musicology, (*London, 1985)

academic[2]. This is already apparent in journalism where the spoken interview is the preferred presentation of the performer's discourse. I would argue that any real divisions between musicologists and performers are more a question of methodology than of communication and that the concern is, and must be, that such methodological differences do not inhibit communication between the two communities. This is hinted at by Jonathan Dunsby in his book *Shared Concerns:*

> "[I] am convinced that there is a middle ground of shared concerns, where performers will forgive footnotes they are never going to follow up in a library, where researchers will forgive timely restatement of what they know, and where the lay reader will indulge that curiosity which led to this opening being read in the first place."[3]

The search here is for a middle ground – some might say the middle of the road – the slightly touchy-feely notion of shared concerns (the title of Dunsby's book) that counter some of the stereotypes of the two fields and also offer a reasonable counter-balance to the sometimes more volatile clashes between the two communities where performers take offence at musicological analysis or musicologists bristle at perceived sleights on their performance skills.

Nicholas Cook has dealt more directly with the performer's discourse in several articles which address the debate from the perspective of the still-developing musicology of performance and argues for a musicology which is more aware of the social context of performance[4]. The same themes emerge: language, methodology, democracy:

> "much as I applaud the efforts that have been made in the last decade or two to develop a musicology of performance, we are vulnerable to the claim that the voices of performers have not really been heard, that theorists have as it were taken it upon themselves to speak for performers in a kind of ventriloquism."[5]

Nicholas Cook's argument is for ethnographic accounts within performance studies. He continues:

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[2] "The arcane sign-gesture-and-grunt system by which professionals communicate about interpretation at rehearsals is even less reducible to words or writing. It is not that there is any lack of thought about performance on the part of musicians in the central tradition, then. There is a great deal, but it is not thought of a kind that is readily articulated in words." (Kerman, 1985 p.196) See also Richard Taruskin, "The Musicologist and the Performer", in *Musicology in the 1980s* ed.D.Kern Holoman and Claude V. Palisca New York, 1982 reprinted in *Text and Act*, Oxford, 1995, Jonathan Dunsby, , *Performing Music: Shared Concerns,* Oxford 1995 and Peter Williams, , "Performance Practice Studies: Some Current Approaches to the Early Music Phenomenon"*, Companion to Contemporary Music thought* ed. J. Paynter *et al*. (London, 1992)

[3] Dunsby, op cit. p.2

[4] See 'Music as Performance'. In *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (London: Routledge, 2003), 204-14 , 'Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis'. In *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239-61, 'Music Minus One: Rock, Theory, and Performance'. *New Formations*, 27 (1995-96), 23-41 ,'Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance'. *Music Theory Online*, 7/2 (April 2001), and most notably 'Prompting Performance: Text, Script, and Analysis in Bryn Harrison's être-temps'. *Music Theory Online* 11/1 (March 2005) (with Eric Clarke, Bryn Harrison, and Philip Thomas)

[5] [5] 'Prompting Performance: Text, Script, and Analysis in Bryn Harrison's être-temps'. *Music Theory Online* 11/1 (March 2005) (with Eric Clarke, Bryn Harrison, and Philip Thomas)

> "approaches to performance analysis that focus exclusively on recordings--on the acoustic outputs of performance--risk misreading or simply not grasping the social meaning inherent in the act of performance"[6]

The performer's discourse, he argues, thus provides an understanding through experience of the process of production of performance and meaning and, at the risk of seeming like a ventiloquists' dummy, it is pretty much the way I see it too. I believe that performers can offer much within the academic sphere and particularly as a balance to the empirical approach of studying recordings, but not simply for that reasons offered earlier. At its simplest the performer's observation that a particular recording consisted of a ludicrous amount of takes that were then stitched together by the producer like a 1,000 piece jigsaw may be a valuable corrective to the otherwise mistaken belief that the recording is the finest example of accuracy ever offered by an ensemble. Yet I am not convinced that the performer can ever entirely be free of economic and social determinants upon their own discourse. In short, the performer's discourse is rarely innocent.

My purpose is here then is certainly not so much to engage with the debate so elegantly presented by Nicholas Cook, but really just to qualify the value of the performer's discourse, a suitable act of self-interrogation which is, of course itself a fairly standard part of academic rhetoric. I have, after all, been asked as a performer to speak in an academic context and it is unlikely that anyone is going to ask me after I've delivered my paper why I was asked to talk, so I'll have to do that myself. I mention that as a gentle reminder that divisions can exist through social conventions of politeness as much as through perceived antagonisms and it is in that context that any performer/musicologist debate should be conducted.

Immediately, though, we are in the realm of the ego and narcissism, historically never far away from stereotypes of performers, and it's perhaps appropriate that I should acknowledge that here and now. An anecdote about an anecdote will illustrate. I gave a paper some time back where I began with an anecdote. It was true and accurate – as far as anecdotes go – but involved me asking a fellow performer if they were able to play all the notes that Boulez had written in the score. His answer was interesting for many reasons (for the record he said that he couldn't, but that one day someone would), but I mention it here because I wonder how he would have replied had the questioner been a critic, a musicologist or, as is often the case, both. I suspect he would have been gracious, but perhaps more guarded. A tabloid headline of "They can't even play the right notes" may have played at the back of his mind. I doubt, though, whether he would have been as happy to discuss it with that particular audience as he was with me over a beer in the bar afterwards.

There are several good reasons for such hesitation –pride and self-belief amongst them – but professional reputation is the single most important factor in getting work and unless salaried it is professional suicide to begin publicly to raise issues of one's ability. This is a pretty simple and obvious

[6] ibid

point, though by no means uncommon. Questions asked of performers often go to issues of technique and bring with them appropriate false modesty. Such commentaries are easy to spot and the lines are easy enough to read between. But I think that the instrumentalist may well have answered the question differently if it arose in the context of a recording rather than in a concert setting. Indeed, I think there is an important distinction to be drawn between performer's accounts of recordings and those of concert performance and rehearsals. The very act of recording creates, in effect, a third text which can itself be used as a commentary upon the commentary offered by the performer. The recorded performance then becomes involved in a more complex process of verification. In the case of a recording there is the possibility of a reverse process of verification which argues against such simple historical constructions: Not only is the recording set against any spoken commentary, but the spoken commentary can also be set against the recording. A performance which is not recorded is done-and-dusted and as such unrecoverable and the experience of that performance and thus the history of that performance then entails a negotiation between listener and performer, a sort of agreed recognition of what took place – in short, an agreed history of an event rather than the more threatening counter-evidence that may be offered by a recording. It is for that reason that History is rarely made in the recording studio but made more often during a live performance in front of people. This History is itself a construct, an agreement between those who were there, both audience and performers.

In the case of the instrumentalist an admission of inadequate technique when set against recorded verification is a far more dangerous course of action. If challenged by an audience member on his accuracy in a concert he could shrug it off. "Yes, I got it all right" he could say, and his professional standing would carry the day. This essential difference between performers' attitudes to recordings and to performances then leads to a central paradox: that performers are less inclined to talk about recordings than performances. In the case of a singer one can refine that slightly and produce something that has the ring of a maxim: **recordings of a musician's musical voice often entail the silencing of their spoken discourse**.

Thus musicology should perhaps not be so self-critical in not heeding the voice the performer: In many ways that has simply because the performer has chosen to remain silent. There are other reasons for this, though, most notably an ideology of accuracy that pervades much recording. When the 'definitive recording' is sought it is not just a recording of a great performance that is sought, but one that demonstrates perfection in issues of ensemble and tuning, inevitably aided by invisible editing. The performer's voice is a threat to such an ideology in that it reveals the process of production – the work behind the image of perfection.

With some of those qualifications in mind what I now offer is something of my own experience, though the limits of that experience will inevitably restrict its applicability to other fields of musical study. Of necessity I will have to deal in certain generalisations. So when I say that my main experience is of singing with British early music groups such as The Tallis Scholars, Gothic Voices, The Orlando Consort, The Gabrieli Consort, etc,

and so on, but that I will not describe specific recordings or groups if only because a particular example will tend to find a counter-example elsewhere or because in so doing I immediately reduce any observations to the level of musical gossip. The other major part of my work is in the world of light music - singing backstage on musicals, film sessions, backing vocals for pop music, musicals, etc. Basically, anything which needs small choirs.

I have immediately confronted one of the problems inherent in the performer's discourse: that such discourse inevitably refracts many different experiences and attempts to refine them into a fundamental truth. The problem is not just that each recording is different, but that each performer's experience of each recording is different. Take singing a fifteenth century mass, for example. The tenor who sings the *cantus firmus* line (the Gumby part as it is known[7]) has a totally different experience to the other middle parts or to that of the bass singer or the top line. Their contribution is vital though often deemed rather simple whereas, in actuality, singing the *cantus firmus* line (in my experience) puts one very much in the driving seat in terms of influencing the group's interpretation. But I know several singers for whom singing the *cantus firmus* line is a chore of the worst kind. Likewise, the role of bass singers in film sessions, in particular, is often limited to providing some kind of vocal colour. Thus many basses will sit on a bottom C for bars on end, quite contentedly. The other key demand of the bass line in many film scores is the interval of the augmented fourth. Other than that, the basses have little of interest to do and fulfil the stereotype of the light bulb joke wherein no basses would change the light bulb, they'd just sit there in the dark. Sopranos, however, in the same session will often have technically demanding passages to perform, often very high in the range and thoughtfully marked *piano* by the composer.

So much, then, for the direct experience of the performer of specific recordings. The point is simple but essential: each performer is different and the demands the music places on the performer are different. In turn each performer responds to the music differently, whatever the seeming coherence of the final product.

There are, though, certain consistent features that go to the heart of the self-employment itself. One of these is a protective mechanism which means that performers do not admit technical difficulties even amongst themselves. The only people who are likely to hear of such a situation is the teacher or closest friend. Performers often know if a colleague is experiencing technical problems but it is one of the unspoken rules that one does not confront anyone over it. Once one has admitted to a temporary weakness the immediate and real fear is, simply, that you will not be booked again for another job until the problem is resolved. But there is a *Catch 22* which means that you cannot prove you are over it unless you are working again; and you can only work again once the problem is solved.

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[7] I have always assumed that this refers to the 'Gumby' characters in Monty Python, slow-witted men with trousers rolled up and wearing knotted handkerchiefs on their head. The inference is that any idiot can sing a *cantus firmus* line.

But performers are certainly happy to talk about their self-employed status, to explain that they are pretty much all paid on a session basis which includes a buy-out, and that royalties are rarely offered. It strikes me that study of this area – the realm of economics rather than aesthetics – is far less threatening to the performer and may well elicit genuine responses. And this information can also inform study of recordings in providing a real social context to analytic study. The final section of my paper is, then, a comparison, then, between the worlds of early music and the lighter 'pop' side of recording.

If there is a stereotype of the British early music singer then it is this: University-educated, middle class, white. Early Music groups are not fixed personnel and thus tend to have a fairly stable inner core and then, on the fringe, a series of regular 'deputies' who have sung with the group on a few occasions, and sing with other groups. The larger groups are distinct from the smaller in so far as they have their own conductor or musical director. The smaller groups all tend to function as collectives with ostensibly an equal musical input.

In the case of all early music groups the input of the performer is sought and encouraged. Most people have some working knowledge of the original notation and specific issues that arise from that and have enough experience to change underlay and suggest solutions – "low level problem solving" as Kerman puts it[8] - and in truth it is not so different from the distraction offered by crosswords or Sudoku, a common popular pastime amongst such singers, even during recordings. The essentially democratic nature of polyphony – where all parts have equal value – tends to engender a collective approach in which responsibility rests with each individual and each individual line. It is very rare that a director tells one how to shape a line, say, and many musical ideas and interpretations are offered from within the group. Knowledge of ficta is not essential, but those who are so inclined will often grapple with a specific issue and offer suggestions. This is generally encouraged. Unless time is running out. At that point the performer who puts their hand up and questions the ficta in bar 27 is in serious danger of never being booked again. The issue of time remains crucial, perhaps the 'prime directive' (to borrow from *Star Trek*). Recordings for the larger groups –as distinct from the smaller groups where equality ensures flexibility in relation to time - are structured according to the time-honoured Equity/BPI guidelines for recordings[9]. That means three-hour sessions which include a fifteen minute break. And there are also further rules about the amount of music that can be recorded in that time and restrictions on overdubbing.

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[8] Kerman, op cit

[9] The traditional singer's Union is British Actors Equity rather than the Musician's Union. This is because singers work in all the different performance mediums (Stage, TV, Radio, Film, Variety, etc.) and are often 'featured' artists (i.e. 'in vision'). Equity is organised into related departments, each with separate expert advisors and negotiators, as opposed to the Musicians Union which tends to start from the position that they are representing musicians only (rather than actors-who-sing or.singers-who-dance). In reality, a 'session' singer has more in common with a 'session' musician than an actor (i.e. both turn up at the studio without a contract in order to sight-read music which is then recorded), yet will rarely sign a Musician's Union contract (though s/he may belong to both Unions).

Such union regulations are perhaps even more relevant in the more commercial world of film sessions and lighter music in general. And here the contribution of the performer and the space for commentary is considerably diminished in comparison with that of the early music performer. Aside from the odd question about the copy ("for example "Should the bass D natural be a flat? I'm hearing a flat in the orchestra at that point?") the singer's role is to keep one's mouth closed at all times other than when recording. When the red light is on ones role is to sing the notes accurately and blend with the other voices: anonymity is the preferred state.

These basic differences between the world of early music and the lighter pop session world coincide with other more basic economic structures. In the case of the early music group one is likely to be booked for the job a long time in advance (anywhere between three months and a year) and booked by an agent for the group or the group's administrator. In the case of small groups it is simply a phone call from one of the other singers. In the world of pop sessions the work is short notice (anywhere between a day and a month) and one is booked by a 'fixer' the shadowy figure that Eric Morecambe referred to in the Andy Preview sketch as the one with the Gold Lamé jacket. There is no coherent group in the case of the pop session although one certainly sees the same faces. Such performers may also be early music singers, but the profile of most is very different. They are more likely to come from musical theatre, probably have gone to music college or drama school - and thus less likely to be University educated - and although many are very good sight readers, they are not as certain as their early music counterparts. The other essential aspect about such groups is that they very rarely perform in concert, a further constraint to the idea of a coherent group and one which tends to suit the 'fixer' who can, in the worst cases, can fall back on an immediate sense of 'divide and rule'.

In both cases recordings take place very much *in camera*, that is, in secret. As I suggested in my abstract, this is because the root of the recording process is the elimination of mistakes and the closed doors mark a space that lies somewhere between a rehearsal space and a performance space. The former is the place to make errors: the latter the place to avoid them. The final result of the recording process is, of course, a pristine rendition of a score and nowhere is the process of realisation more apparent and overt than in British early music recordings of the past twenty years. A series of assumptions and ideologies have informed this tendency, but the root of it lies in process which seeks to mask the process of production, a situation whose obvious corollary is the invisibility of the performer and the advancement of the score or edition. This ideology of an unmediated representation of the score limits the contribution of the performer to a shadowy role, not so much interpreter as conduit. This may, again, be a stereotype but I think it is recognisable and has been termed the English style in contrast to the more expressive Continental style of groups from France, Spain and Italy[10]. I think it is

[10] See Christopher Page 'The English *a cappella* Renaissance' in *Early Music* (August 1993) and my response, Donald Greig, 'Sight Readings: Notes on *a cappella* performance practice' in *Early Music* (February, 1995 pp.125-148)

also significant that the rise of such a sound style coincides with the digital revolution and the junking of vinyl whose scrape and crackle became as unfashionable as vibrato-dominated choral sounds around the same time in the early 1980s. Clean, pure sounds were favoured and the voice of the performer was rarely heard in the land. Indeed, I am still bound contractually not to share with anyone what happened on certain recordings without the express permission of the record company, a rather bizarre footnote to this discussion.

This ideology of authenticity is a particular instance, of course, but it many ways it amplifies the general conditions of recording and the particular role assigned to the performer's discourse. Academic research may well benefit from seeking out this voice but it is not an unproblematic approach as I have tried to indicate.

One further point remains and that is simply that the nature of recording is exceptionally concentrated, focused and thus extremely tiring. The presence of an audience reminds the performer constantly of the process of communication and in concert the performer is involved in a continuous process of self-monitoring and self-assessment on the level of communication at the time. In the recording the faces of the audience are removed, the conductor's expressions designed for the audience removed, and in place is the unseeing eye of a microphone and the rather vague instruction to sing towards it. Playbacks are limited to early run-throughs which are concerned with overall balance and the sound-picture and after that one rarely gets to hear what one has done until the record is released. The focus, then, is simply getting the music down on tape and that rather unreal process brings with it high levels of concentration and time-pressures which mean that one literally has no time to think about anything else. This means that any commentary made by the performer is retrospective as there is certainly no time to record one's feelings during the session.

That doesn't mean that the performer has nothing to offer, but just that any commentary needs to be questioned and contextualised. This is probably more true of accounts of recordings that happen in the past. Memories fade and, more often than not, any incident becomes re-written and elaborated over time in a process of group mythology. I have heard too many group anecdotes that have placed several people at the centre of an event and have elevated the teller to the role of catalyst when the teller was not actually there to believe many stories I hear about performances and recordings. But then again – and at the risk of repeating myself - you shouldn't really take any notice of what I say….