Geoff Hannan

WestFocus seminar report:
Creative production for classical music

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The underlying assumption of this study day was that the recording of classical music – music for the concert hall – is perhaps not as creative or inventive as it could be when compared with the techniques and standards of recording production found in film or pop. The notion of using sound recording technology to reproduce an idealised live listening experience was challenged by several speakers, who played examples of unusual foregrounding of sound engineering techniques which raised questions about where musical content and creativity are or should be located, and where the composer stops and the producer starts.

Mark Irwin (London College of Music, Thames Valley University) focussed on Joe Meek, the visionary independent record producer best known for his hit single *Telstar* (1962) by the Tornedos, and posed the inevitable question: 'What exactly is a producer?' It is clear that Meek took final creative responsibility for the 300 or so records he produced, despite or maybe because of the fact that musicians appeared to have little understanding of what he was trying to accomplish. (Meek was not a musician in any conventional sense and found it difficult to explain his ideas and aims to musicians.) He was especially interested in achieving a certain sound-scape in his records – 'the sound is as important as the song' – relying on the novel use of multi-tracking, electronica, elements of *musique concrète*, and recording musicians in separate rooms in his makeshift studio in Holloway Road. Despite the fact that the industry disparaged Meek he soon became viewed as the record producer *par excellence* because of his pioneering attitude towards the definition and possibilities of recorded sound.

Steve Savage (San Francisco State University / Royal Holloway, University of London) moved the discussion along with a speculatively re-mixed passage from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, made possible by borrowing the twenty-four track recording – the 'rushes', so to speak – recently made of the piece by the San Francisco Symphony. Using ProTools he demonstrated a possible realisation or interpretation (rather than faithful reproduction) of Stravinsky's music through various signal-processing devices such as compression, EQ, delay effects, cropping, reverb, panning and so on. The result was an acoustic environment which would be impossible to experience live, and which Steve, following Baudrillard, characterised as 'hyperreal'. The assumption that the listener occupies a single geographic location was interestingly eschewed in favour of a kind of continual perspectival shift caused by Steve's treatment of the various tracks: one moment you are hovering right next to a single wind instrument, the next swooping high above the whole orchestra. Steve was keen to justify his track-mixing decisions on the basis of heightening certain qualities already present in Stravinsky's orchestration, such as the heralding effect of some of the writing for timpani. One obvious question was to do with the extent to which this kind of mixing amounts to anything more substantial than 'ear-candy'; and whether such mixing techniques could be incorporated aesthetically or fundamentally into present-day compositional endeavour.

Brian Lock (Royal Holloway, University of London) gave examples from his own work for film, and that of others including Thomas Newman, Zbigniew Preisner and Hans Zimmer, which showed how compositional endeavour has incorporated such techniques normally the preserve of the producer. Brian gave two examples of his own music for *The Land Girls* (1997, dir. David Leland) and *The Gambler* (1997, dir. Károly Makk). In the first example he showed how separation of the acoustic instruments at the recording stage enabled an orchestrational blend at the mixing stage impossible to achieve live, in this case the balance between acoustic guitar and orchestra; and, in the second, he demonstrated how recording each string part separately and then treating each one with various effects at the overdubbing stage resulted in the necessary acoustic tension required by the director to communicate the emotional state of the principal character. Crucial here is the fact that the processing of the sound at the mixing stage was taken into account at the composing stage (although in practice the distinction between these stages might be a little blurred). Brian went on to describe how working with the sound itself rather than with representations of sound on paper results in a different kind of content, one based less on the manipulation of complex note-patterns and more on the qualities of the 'sound envelope'. This might be the reason why the possibilities of digital music processing as a compositional element have largely gone unrecognised by those schooled in classical music orthodoxy. He mentioned that 'the requirement for pieces of classical music to be played live is a serious inhibitor to composers introducing advanced production techniques'.

Charles Wiffen (Bath Spa University) discussed the use of overdubbing by various recording artists such as Glenn Gould and the Emerson Quartet, and how this technique alters the musical objectives of the performers and shifts the performance from the public to the private domain. Thus the definitive musical experience lies for the listener in the recording rather than in the live performance. The idea that a recording is the next best thing to a live performance is here invalidated, and it is no surprise that interest in this recording technique came into being at roughly the same time as high-fidelity stereo systems became available to home-users. The 'platform heroism' – stamina, risk – of live performance was rejected especially by Gould in favour of voicing, attention to detail and articulation – contrapuntal considerations – all qualities which the process of overdubbing by its very nature adeptly emphasises. Predictably, the music Gould recorded possesses these attributes to a heightened degree, such as Bach's Goldberg Variations. Charles discussed the issues faced by the Emersons in their decision to record Mendelssohn's Octet by themselves: these included problems of co-ordination, and a re-thinking of how to achieve the sense of dialogue inherent in chamber music when tracks are created for the most part in succession rather than simultaneously. The Emersons argued that their interpretation of the Mendelssohn was valid on the grounds that a deep understanding of the music was necessary to determine the best or most appropriate overdubbing solutions. Charles also focussed on clarinettist Roger Heaton whose use of overdubbing militates against live performance and capitalises on the compositional concerns of the selected music, in this case minimalist music whose qualities largely consist of motoric contrapuntal writing and are therefore particularly suited to overdubbing techniques.

Kathryn Beresford (Institute of Sound Recording, University of Surrey) rounded off the presentations with a discussion of results of preliminary experiments with surround sound. Her purpose was to ascertain the extent to which music-only surround sound recordings might possess commercial viability. She made recordings

of singers and instrumentalists in various positions ranging from the traditional to the unusual around conventional mic arrays, and brought in a group of ‘trained’ and ‘naïve’ listeners to assess the result on the basis of eight different attributes – purchasability, listening comfort, tradition, interest, sound envelopment, naturalness, instrument locatedness, timbral balance – which they were instructed to rate according to a 9-point Likert scale. The results provided quantitative data for analysis which revealed a discrepancy between why ‘naïve’ and ‘trained’ listeners would purchase such recordings, and a general tendency for ‘naïve’ listeners to respond more enthusiastically to the experience of surroundedness than trained listeners whose appreciation of the recordings appeared to be more located in the traditional. Kathryn pointed out that music-only surround sound is at the mercy of those who have purchased surround sound equipment primarily for the purpose of enjoying a home cinema experience.

Nick Cook (Royal Holloway, University of London) introduced the speakers and topics and after the presentations chaired a discussion in which several other speakers were invited to respond to or sum up the points of the day. Keith Negus asked what it means to produce creatively, pointing out that such intervention could be either concealed or foregrounded (such as in early recordings with exaggeratedly wide stereo effects) and that performative realism could be viewed as more or less redundant. Jenny Doctor encouraged us not to make a false distinction between a ‘performance’ and a ‘recording’ and extolled the virtues of creating alternative sound-worlds. David Patmore spoke of technological prophets and wondered why technological advancement in music recording continues to be excoriated by critics and ‘informed’ members of the public. The remaining discussion centred on the infrastructure of music and technology, the functions of recording, the relationship between music and its mechanisms of delivery and technology rising to meet popular demand.