

# Virtual reality or: The sound engineer as alchemist? : on recording industry

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel**

Band (Jahr): **27 (2003)**

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869075>

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## VIRTUAL REALITY OR: THE SOUND ENGINEER AS ALCHEMIST?

On recording industry

by ANTHONY ROOLEY

All of the following was written in May 1998, for a special conference on *Early Music and the Recording Industry*, held at the Jerusalem Music Centre in Israel. Much has changed in the intervening six years – not least the bleak observation that deteriorating circumstances make it that for the foreseeable future Jerusalem is a most unlikely venue for creative gatherings and deliberations of this kind. A lamentable fact that strife, greed force, brutality, inhumanity, gross belligerence does not generate time for consideration of the Arts and their refinement. I regret profoundly this miserable truth, and feel intensely for my liberal Jewish and Arabic friends caught in this dilemma.

I am not a prophet, yet much of what I wrote then has been fulfilled in fact. I am not proud of this, for the worst fears have been proven to materialize. Large private collections of CDs (and still, indeed, old 12" black discs) gather dust in musical households around the world. Still we have not the leisure to listen to but a small proportion of our collection, and still the number of „free“ recordings increase, attached not only to magazines, but as part of an attractive deal package for all kinds of promotions. The real business of recording exquisite unknown repertoire is severely hindered by an industry trapped in the past and fearful of the future. Archival recording *for its own sake* is still virtually unexplored, for the delusion of marketing and of profit seems self-perpetuating. Since 1998 I have been involved in perhaps 10 or so recording projects, all of which I am delighted to have been involved with artistically, but each of which has been an absolute nightmare in terms of raising adequate funding, and as for paid rehearsal – that is a thing of the past. No, the financial strain is largely being absorbed by the music industry's „soft-ware“ – the musicians! And in the long term this cannot be good – for exploration, for maintaining standards, for self-esteem, and for encouraging a future generation of musicians. But it is hidden from view for most of the musically alert and concerned world. I sincerely hope these words contained here (1998 and 2004) contain some wind of change, before they become an unwonted epitaph for a music industry hell-bent on self-destruction. The industry can go – few laments for self-generated short-term greed, but it is the art of fine performance, research, and the attunement to elevated Orphic Frenzy which will be severely damaged with it. Already in England recent changes in music education has caused the loss of an entire generation to the civilizing power of great music and music performance. I do not wish to see an inexorable slide into a „dark ages“ – for art and culture is still the benchmark for civilization, and civilization is still what separates Man from the rest of creation. Perhaps I plead in vain? Perhaps the electronic highway of broadband technology offers a panacea for all these ills, and we need not fear ...?! (Basel 2004).



In 1969, when I started the *Consort of Musicke*, I fervently declared that my ensemble would never, but NEVER, make a record, believing as I did with evangelical zeal in the one and only true efficacy of live performance. I was an acolyte of the High Priest of Performance, Orpheus, and I was dedicated to the profound mysteries of his teachings. Now, 30 years and 120 CDs later, do I regret those words?

Having made a modest living by working on both sides of the microphone, having written many scripts for radio and more recently facilitated young artists in the making of their first recording, do I recant and restate my position? Have I compromised my philosophy? Has my zeal turned to milk and water? I offer here some thoughts about the values of „recording live performance“.

I reproduce here an artist's pen and wash drawing made at a recording session which took place on December 16th, 1907 and published 5 days later, on December 21st in *The Illustrated London News*. The drawing was done by Samuel Begg; the recording engineer (the „alchemist“ of that moment) was Mr William Gaisberg. An orchestra of 25 players was conducted by Mr Percy Pitt, accompanying the star of the moment, Madame Luisa Tetrazzini. She sang for two hours and „successful recordings were taken“ of four of her standard showpieces, with which she had seduced the Western world since 1890. Her London debut at Covent Garden had occurred just a month before this recording session, on 2nd November, when she had sung one of her most characteristic roles – Violetta. To my knowledge, this drawing is the earliest graphic depiction of a recording session in progress for which the recording taken in that moment also survives! An artist with pen and wash would have been preferred to a photographer because of the noisy, intrusive whirring and clicking of the large, solid plate-cameras which, together with the photographer's need for special lighting and „freezing“ for the slow shutter speed, would have totally destroyed the delicate requirements of sound recording.

There is a delightful amount of information in this illustration; but for now, it is the journalist's contribution which most interests me. The editor's heading – „Leaving her voice behind her“ – sums up the euphoric atmosphere: and the triumphant last sentence of the copy – „Within a month's time Madame Tetrazzini's voice will be available in every drawing room“ – carries a fervent affirmation of the potential of the new technology. Lacking prophetic sight, the writer could not know that 90 years later, there are at least 2 commercial CDs available incorporating this very session, including her party piece, „The Bell song“ from *Lakme* by Delibes. The miracles of technology can still bring to „life“ sounds which were uttered on the 16th December 1907.

Whatever else is said, one has to marvel at that achievement. In her lifetime, Tetrazzini's recordings reached so many more people than had a chance to hear her live; and of course since her death in 1940 her art continues to reach future generations. Whatever the medium of carriage, be it wax cylinder, shellac disc, vinyl, magnetic tape, squeaky-clean digital CD, and others being perfected at this moment (not to mention future carriers, as yet undreamed of), unborn generations have an astonishingly rich heritage to explore.





Fig.1: Luisa Tetrazzini at a recording session on December 16th, 1907, in London.



But can we cope with this richness, the cleverness that has developed the technology, the sheer volume of production all around us? Think of your own CD collection at home. Ignore the groaning shelves of black discs you are hoarding in a dark dusty corner, hanging on to what you can't bear to let go (even though it's a while since you set your turn-table a-turning, perhaps). Ignore, too, the mass of poorly annotated tapes – I mean the lowly cassette tape!) – some of which are legal copies, but most of which are not quite on the right side of the law. These are probably jumbled in a rarely opened drawer, gathering near-fatal dust! But, somehow, old tapes are a difficult thing to throw away, as though there's a sub-conscious belief in an intrinsic worth of this concatenation of perspex and magnetic tape. We hold on; we hoard.

Now some of you are certain to protest. There may be a handful of readers whose collection is immaculately archived and treasured, and who can, during the course of after-dinner conversation, find within moments any recording which takes centre-stage, and highlights the discussion with example. But if we're honest, such organisation is rare. And even such a collection has its gaps, of course. Recording collectors are kept going by the fact that the collection can never be complete, and with the spate of present re-releases of back catalogue, the most diligent collector is slipping further and further behind.

One enthusiast I visited recently – who has always enjoyed quoting at me not only catalogue numbers of my own discs, but track numbers and titles too – had to admit things were getting out of hand. His shelved collection was utterly well ordered. Videos and black discs lived in the visitor's bedroom (where I was sleeping the night), cassette tapes inhabited the corridor to the bathroom, whilst CDs adorned the living room, better described as the „entertainment centre“. Everything was immaculate, dust-free, but for a rather large pile or heap of CDs grovelling on the floor, around the feet of his very fine music centre. More CDs gathered around the bases of his Wharfedale speakers. With this show of chaos I felt at home, for it reminded me more of the state of my own collection. As he noticed me smiling with recognition at this untidy jumble, but not realising it was a smile of sympathy, he rather apologetically explained that „the ones on the floor were those he hadn't yet had time to listen to“. There were almost 100 CDs littering the floor, yet he was still keeping up with the scene and buying regularly (and, he confidentially explained, he hid his new purchases in the carrier bags of weekly food shopping, so that his wife didn't know how much he was spending on CDs!). I have to tell you that next morning at breakfast, whilst our collector was out of the room checking a reference number, his wife whispered that her husband had bought nine CDs last weekend, and that he was in the habit of hiding them under the vegetables! She laughed; it was not a serious deceit, perhaps more of a marital game – but she knew he would never have time to listen to everything he gathered.

The „collecting instinct“ has always been with us, and is mostly a male activity (though perhaps women are a bit more subtle about it). Lucy, Countess of Bedford, collected Roman medallions and coins. Queen Elizabeth I collected courtiers and suitors; Charles I collected Italian masters – Raphael,



Titian and the like; whilst Charles II (aside from collecting mistresses and illegitimate off-spring) loved to collect exquisitely mad scientific equipment in wood, brass, ivory.

But these were all nobility, who had the wealth and power to indulge in these whims. Now everyone can develop the collecting instinct – and it is this which to a large extent has fired the record industry. Back in 1983, when the newly developed technology of „direct metal mastering“ was the rage, the newcomer – digital compact disc – was in its infancy. There was strong initial resistance: I remember, for example, Ted Perry, the founder and inspiration of Hyperion, swearing that he couldn't be bothered with these fiddly little Japanese inventions: „Give me a proper disc, something big enough to see and handle“ he scoffed to me. A year later (later than most of his competitors, but in the nick of time), he succumbed to the all-powerful Lilliputian world of CD and totally ceased production of the black disc.

Consider for a moment the arrival of the CD fifteen years ago, the world-wide spread of its use, and the overwhelming volume of production in that short time. Perhaps most of us here, if we are honest, have more units at home than we'll ever have time to listen to. We certainly know that any large retail outlet carries more product of interest to us than we could ever purchase, or even find time to inspect. When CD factories first opened for production there were some lovely PR photos of white-coated workers wearing surgical gloves and face-masks in totally dust-free surroundings. The CD was heralded as the summation of years of careful aseptic research and production (which of course it was). But those factories, which have mushroomed across the world (especially where labour is cheap), are designed to produce hundreds of thousands of CDs each week. The unit-price has come down from an initial £2.50 per piece 10 years ago, to under 50p per unit today. The quality (in most cases) is such that each CD can be used as a master! The factories are still increasing in numbers, producing faster, to a higher level of perfection, and the CDs are being distributed in greater numbers.

But just a minute! We collectors are just beginning to realise we can't listen to everything we've already got. Here is one intrinsic problem – a dilemma over consumption (and we've not even raised the issue over diet and taste, and others' attempt to manipulate these things).

Related to over-production, and related in several direct ways, is the advent of the budget-priced CD. When CDs first came onto the market, they were priced slightly higher than top-quality black discs at around £10 – £12, with some companies going for up to £15. Now that is a lot to pay; but initial production costs were high and a CD could carry up to 50% more listening time. And new recordings are expensive to make, with artists' costs, studio and editing costs, before production and marketing costs. When the £15 is analysed, we see that not an excessive amount of profit was sticking to the parent company. It was OK, but the public had a perception that they were being taken to the cleaners. For the musicians, the recording artists, it was an adequate situation, pretty much as before financially, but twice as much music had to be recorded in the same time, and for the same fee as in the era of black disc recording.



All this changed overnight with the marketing shock of Naxos – a quality product for under £5. Across the world now, in almost every major retail outlet, a wall of serried ranks of white CDs, covering an eclectic range of classical music, greets the bemused audiophile. The introduction of this label was hailed as the public's pleasure – the purse was not so pained, and the fat-cat greedy giants had to respond by creating their own budget labels, namely „Baroque Esprit“ and such like. Polygram's Decca has gone further down the line with their „Double Decca“ – two for the price of one (at a mid-pricing level) of established artists and repertoire from their extensive back-catalogue.

Here, of course, is the rub. Naxos began with masters they had acquired for very little up-front expenditure. Then, to fill in the gaps to create a plausible encyclopaedic catalogue of repertoire, for 2 or 3 years, they were very active in the studio, mostly with emphasis on repertoire rather than artists – though the musicians were always of a good level of craftsmanship. But the harsh truth is that at £5 per unit, there was simply not enough profit to invest in new recording projects. After a few rosy years, Naxos cancelled virtually all new recordings. Plans were shelved indefinitely.

Meanwhile, the overloaded retail industry has become more and more sluggish – rather like the Nile Delta, bringing an increasing load of silt with each new inundation. The industry is polarising – seeking quick return on the equivalent of the „Three Tenors“ phenomenon – as though an act like that could have equivalents! Nevertheless, there have been gross attempts – „The Six Sopranos“ – perish the thought – and with a welcome touch of youthful irony „The Counter Attack – the Three Counter-tenors“! Part of the same „delta-like“ spread is the bizarre wave of „gregoriana“ bringing the „spiritual and sublime“ into the hectic pursuit of marketing winners. The flood of pseudo-spiritual titles, mostly back-catalogue compilations such as „Tranquillity“, „Serenity“ and so on, has nothing to do with New Age „meditational“ music, or a genuine quest for serenity, but everything to do with heavy pressure of direct accounting and immediate cash-flow.

Recently a recording came my way sung by that wonderful new discovery of the 90s, the German counter-tenor Andreas Scholl. He's a brilliant young man, whose vocal talents are but part of his gifted nature. I had the great honour and pleasure of being one of his tutors for a short while, but such a talent hardly needs teaching, more gentle encouragement. It was the Largo from Vivaldi's „Stabat Mater“ with the Ensemble 415, directed from the violin by Chiara Banchini. Wonderful music, exquisitely performed, beautifully recorded – representing the apogee of the early music movement. „Sweet sounds that cannot die“ as the journalist wrote in *The Illustrated London News* in 1907! I fear, though, that there is a very large „BUT ...“ attached to this recording, for it sets in motion a whole host of unexpected problems.

It was one thing for Naxos to initiate the budget-label CD, but quite another when one of the monthly music magazines – I think it was „Classic CD“ – in order to make a splash as a new entrant in the field, offered a FREE CD taped to the cover of their magazine. At first the punters were delirious – a free CD



for the cover price of a music magazine – under £5. The customer had never been treated to such goodies. And, of course, every other magazine in this field had to find a way of following suit in order to compete. „Gramophone“, the darling of the industry, offered up-market compilations, with help from its wealthier advertisers; „BBC Music Magazine“ had access to a musical archive of extraordinary richness; and „Classic FM“, believed to have the Midas touch with all things classical, found ways of competing. That makes no fewer than 4 monthly magazines offering free CDs. (There may be more; its a trend that's growing!)

The earliest compilations were pretty poor stuff: old-fashioned, wooden performances from tapes picked up as job-lots. But the sophistication now, after only 2 years of the free CD, is shown by the all-Vivaldi compilation provided by Harmonia Mundi for „Classic FM“ in May 98 and sponsored by Olivio, a spread which is a butter substitute made from olive oil. The connection with Vivaldi's „Stabat Mater“ is that they are both Italian products!

Now, who benefits from this? Anyone who finds time to listen to it benefits for sure! And presumably „Classic FM“ believe they will, as, clearly Olivio expect to. Harmonia Mundi were obviously compliant and probably had their palms crossed, but things may not, in the end, work out to their advantage. I surmise that their hope is that listeners hearing this beautiful selection will rush out to buy the half-dozen discs represented. But do we, the punters, actually do that? One or two perhaps. The rest? Not really. Surveys are showing that compilations don't lead, in the main, to exploration of the full catalogue. It is almost certain that the artists will not benefit in any financial way from this issue (though they may feel it an adequate remuneration to be associated with a quality spread!).

Here we have the very leading edge of recorded music performance given away free. Pearl before swine? Perhaps, but certainly we have to ask the question „What value has our product, our artistry, when it is given away free with a magazine?“ There are some fickle souls who, having deserted full-price product in order to buy exclusively from the Naxos catalogue, have now deserted Naxos to collect free CDs from magazine covers; four a month – just about time to listen to them all – once, then file them away. And their quality is improving all the time.

So, did Madame Tetrassini „leave her voice behind her“ in order for it to be filed away on thousands of collectors' shelves? Or has Andreas Scholl just given of his youthful best in order to accompany the spreading on bread of an olive oil based confection?

Are we not at a point of a major paradigm shift; with a sluggish industry, superlative quality engineering, exquisite artistry, vastly unexplored repertoire, and a multitude of personal collections that no one has time to listen to? We have, in addition, the leaders of the industry who have lost their way with a crisis of confidence and direction (and with heavy-breathing accountants behind them demanding near-instant returns); we have the much-exposed over-recording of the top 50 classical greats (over 100 Vivaldi „Seasons“; almost 50 Beethoven „Symphonies“, now 3 „complete“ Bach „Cantatas“ etc etc). We



have also the decline in profit which is essential to be ploughed back in the form of investment in new recordings – meaning new artists, or new hitherto unrecorded repertoire of which there is more yet than there was unexplored Africa lying at Livingstone's feet 130 years ago ...

Lorenzo „The Magnificent“, the young Medici Prince, was both Patron and Artist. His education and intellect and financial security allowed him to be on both sides of the curtain. However, today, we have moved to a situation where, increasingly frequently, the artist with a fervent desire to express is forced to become his own patron.

Keeping only to music, musicians and recordings, I have witnessed an extraordinary transformation over the last 30 years. In 1970, I was invited to record for Decca's newly acquired specialist label „L'Oiseau Lyre“, which was about to be given a new lease of life. I was offered a flat fee to record, sufficient to pay for rehearsal as well as recording time for myself and my ensemble, plus a fairly generous royalty based on a standard retail unit-price.

This year I've just concluded a contract with an independent company which offers only a small advance on a modest royalty, which represents only one third of the minimum costs for creating a master tape. Where the other two thirds will come from, I do not yet know. The artists will be the last to be paid. I, as researcher, director, producer (and sometime lutenist) will see nothing. I am forced into the role of Chief Patron.

And yet we are doing well! The record company wants our name in their catalogue – they perceive we are likely to sell a reasonable number of discs. There is a long queue of young artists begging or even paying the record company to take their first CD. They cannot build a viable career as performers without a CD, yet they can hardly get a company to take their product – at any price. They are certainly being required to underwrite all initiation costs themselves. Today the artist is the chief patron!

With each major change in the record industry there has been a major shift in technological possibilities. So far, perhaps, the greatest change came from recordings of 3.5 minutes length, to the possibility of recordings 45 minutes in duration. For the first time the short comings of technology didn't get in the way of what went on record. This was important on many levels. The shift to CD was important for other reasons; for the first time, there was a carrier that didn't decay (so we were falsely told – though we are assured that initial teething problems have now been solved). The increased playing time was not so important (even an embarrassment in some instances).

Now I think we are at the threshold of changes of which no one can quite see the consequences, and which, for the first time since it began, changes the entire premise of the record industry. It is, to a large extent, the unconscious awareness of what is about to happen that is causing so much uncertainty, prevarication and hesitation to invest in anything but the most obvious „winners“. I'm talking, of course, about the possibility of storing all recorded sound on a single, central memory bank which can be accessed by anyone who has paid the subscription. There is no longer the need for the individual physical unit of recorded repertoire.



The industry has been entirely structured on selling by piece, right from the first wax discs, as though each one was unique. Now they are superfluous, and the CD quite as much as the cylinder of 1900. In 100 years the industry has outmoded itself – it is, essentially, a useless leviathan, a diplodocus of pathetically inflated proportions. It has, into the bargain, inflated its own worth as an artistic entity. In many parts of the world recorded sound has been life-enhancing, for those who could never get to hear the real thing live. As I have travelled in out-of-the-way backwoods America, performing our esoteric repertoire, I have constantly been amazed at the number of people coming up after a performance saying, „I’ve only heard you guys on disc before.“ And I think „Well that’s great, they’ve been able to get hold of discs way out here!“ but the remote enthusiast usually continues: „But hearing you live is a totally different experience to the CD!“ And he means totally – you can tell he’s talking another dimension here. He means that in the last 2 hours Orpheus has walked into his life and woken him up in another time-space!

This kind of encounter is not occasional – it’s a daily occurrence when on tour, be it America, Australia, Japan, Israel. No matter how clever the technology, despite what that writer wrote in *The Illustrated London News* in 1907, these sounds do not, cannot, live in the way real sounds – in real time in a real acoustic, with real people – manage to purvey an ineffable spirit of moment, something transcendent beyond normal experience. This is where initiation into Orphic mysteries begins ...

By this I do not mean that recorded sound experiences cannot carry, at times, an Orphic dimension. Some of my own personal moments of revelation have come from recordings. But at best it can only be a shadow, a reflection, a ghostly memory, a virtual, rather than actual reality. The recording industry has been built on a grand illusion, which is now vaporising with twin pressures of not enough leisure-hours to listen to all that one desires, and the fact that, ultimately, recorded sound is only a simulation of a once-real moment.

This does not mean that I don’t believe there is a future for recorded music. I feel the absolute reverse is true. With the big deception exposed for what it is – a mere shadow, a play of light – we can now really begin the task of using this remarkable array of technology – a monument to man’s ingenuity – for what it is truly fitted for: the grand, monumental task of archiving, codifying, referencing.

So much music of real worth and deep craftsmanship remains unrecorded. Why? Because it is deemed to be „not commercial“! In 1980 there was a radio relay of some very obscure music which happened to touch the Orpheus in Ted Perry. The next day he asked the artists if he could make a record of it. It’s been by far and away the most successful record in his more than 800 title catalogue. And this year we celebrate the birthday of the composer – she is 900 years old – Hildegard of Bingen. This was a lucky accident waiting to happen, and there are many, many more.

Take, for example, Henry Purcell. This composer needs no apology today, yet I remember distinctly hearing the director of „The Purcell Consort of Voices“, Grayston Burgess saying in 1968 – „Oh no! you can’t make a record of Henry



Purcell alone; he doesn't sell!" Now, of course, he is good business. But what of his younger brother Daniel Purcell? His music is individual, prolific, and very, very fine. So much so, I would say, that if Henry had never lived, Daniel would today have been quite famous!

One could continue with innumerable examples of ignored repertoire, but the rest is for your imagination! (Jerusalem 1998).