A Syllabus for the Studio:
Your First Recording Session

You’ve been performing live for years, but this is your first real recording session. What to expect?

Making a recording gives you a chance to restudy music and figure out the features that make up your ideal performance (as you perceive it today). But a recording is as different from a live performance as film acting is from stage acting. Playing live, you must reach the listener in the last row. In a recording session, “the person in the last row” is only six feet away. The microphone can give even the smallest gesture a new prominence.

If you haven’t already met your producer, make contact before the session. Ideally, he or she will have heard you in live performance, playing the music to be recorded. Lacking that, have the producer listen to a recording of a performance or rehearsal. Discuss musical intent, the recording venue, and whatever prejudices you have about sound. Find out how he or she runs a session. And ask questions—in this situation, there’s no such thing as a stupid question.

Here are some elements to consider as you prepare the music for your session:

Dynamic range and color
The microphone is now “your audience.” Since it’s so near, you’ll be able to achieve a powerful fortissimo without playing your instrument until it bleeds. Small differences in color can now produce big effects. You’ll be able to achieve a lot of presence playing softly: a soft, intimate sound can still be full and rich.

Tempo
In performance, music can find its own spur-of-the-moment tempo. But in recording, the producer will want to be able to edit between different takes. That’s why the starting temps should be worked out beforehand. Afterward, the tempo will fluctuate, but if each take starts at the same tempo, those fluctuations will stay within certain limits and allow for a smooth edit. Establish the tempo by working with a metronome or TempoWatch. Many jazz records are made today using a click track, which allows you to take the intro from Take 1; the verse from Take 3 and the coda from Take 4, and make sure that they all reflect the same basic tempo.
Risks

The ability to take risks makes the recording process exciting. Where would you like to try something that you’ve never dared risk in performance? If you mess up, there is always another take—so there’s only one thing you have to worry about: making sure you do it right. The producer and engineer will be looking for something that you can’t imagine. While listening back, you might want to ask yourself: “Does it sound real?” Sometimes you might think you’ve done a really good job, only to hear the record on one earphone and find that it’s completely washed out on the other.

To avoid being too timid in the studio, you need to think about what you’re recording. If you have a recording project that calls for a live sound, you need to think about what you want your performances to sound like. Sometimes you might think you’ve done a really good job, only to hear the record on one earphone and find that it’s completely washed out on the other.

If you need a break, take one. I tell people to go easy on coffee—caffeine and adrenaline make you feel more alert than you are. Sometimes you might think you’ve done a really good job, only to hear the record on one earphone and find that it’s completely washed out on the other.

When you go into a recording session, the adrenaline is flowing, wreaking havoc on your memory, and the tempos were wavering, more likely than not, you’re going to forget something. You’ll probably be falling asleep at 8:00 a.m. after many, many hours of tired activity. It is as much a mental tiredness as it is a physical one. Don’t plan anything of importance following a recording session.

You’ve completed the sessions. Now comes the time for editing. Armed with a score or the charts, and using notes about your preference, the producer will comparison-shop and put together the best versions. You will have a chance to make changes. Deliver specific notes to the engineer so that you can avoid problems in the playback. You should be more focused on the performance itself. It is as much a studio experience as it is a musical performance. Be sure that you’re satisfied with what you hear. This is what the finished product will sound like. Here’s what to listen for:

Presence vs. Loudness

“Presence” refers to the apparent closeness of a given instrument. Loudness (“amplitude” for microphone—es) is a function of the mix: the relative levels of the mics set at a given time. Sometimes you might think you’ve done a really good job, only to hear the record on one earphone and find that it’s completely washed out on the other.

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Once your master recording is complete, you’ll have developed new insights into your music-making perceptions: you can now bring to live performance. You’ll wish you could do it again. In the meantime, open a bottle of champagne, celebrate—then tell the world about your new CD.

For more than three decades Judith Sherman has worked as producer and recording engineer with performers ranging from Rudolf Serkin to Ringo Starr. She has twice won Grammy Awards as Classical Producer of the Year.

Joe Feria has served as engineer on hundreds of recordings, with artists ranging from Betty Carter and B.B. King to Pat Metheny and Keith Richards. He recently worked on John Abercrombie’s Battle Studies, which won a 2010 Grammy as Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical.
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ou shouldn’t just be musically prepared; you also have to be ready physically and mentally. Recording is one of the most tiring activities a musician is likely to encounter—a hybrid of a track meet and a doctoral exam. In no other situation will you have to play with such intense concentration for six or seven hours a day. Eating and sleeping well are truly necessary; physical exercise, if it’s part of your routine, is advisable. Expect to be exhausted after each session, and for a day or two thereafter. You’ll probably be falling asleep at 8:00 p.m. and opening doors with your face for a while. Don’t plan anything of importance following a recording session.

The room in which you play will significantly affect both the sound of the record and the performance itself. It is as much a resonating entity as the instruments themselves. Ideally, it won’t be a recording studio. In a dead room, like most studios, you’ll tend to push and overplay in an attempt to get some response from the hall. The space should be reverberant but not echoes. Reverberation is the “tail” on the sound, and the performance seems to be behind the other instruments. The echo has a loud re-attack. In general, reverberation is the “tail” on the sound, and a realistic balance.

In a dead room, like most studios, you’ll tend to push and overplay in an attempt to get some response from the hall. The space should be reverberant but not echoes. Reverberation is the “tail” on the sound, and the performance seems to be behind the other instruments. The producer and engineer will be looking for “imagination” (in engineer-ese) is a function of the mix. The relative levels of the micros set the recording control. When you say “low enough,” the cellists will say “really means that it sounds too far away, or just too soft? The former means a mix has to be moved; the latter can be fixed with using a fader. The engine can add presence to an individual player by tweaking the frequencies, but this runs the risk of screwing up the sound of another instrument. It’s better to get the mic placement exactly right.

Imaging
The recorded sound will present a visual image of the musicians’ placement. Is the group arranged in a curve? Do you seem to be sitting in each other’s laps? Does the piano seem to be behind the other instruments, or in front of them?

Balance
This is something you work to achieve in live performance. But can you hear all the parts on the playback?

Blend
Some ensembles want to sound like one big player. The others aim to have the individual instruments. The production team will help you achieve your objective—mainly, that “it’s a lovely sound, but nothing you’d ever hear live. Generally, the closer a record veers toward RB&B and pop, the more likely it will include these kinds of production effects. The first thirty to sixty minutes of any session will be spent “getting the sound.” The producer and engineer will be looking not just for a beautiful sound, but for something different—imagination. While getting things set up and getting your cars accustomed to the space, the producer and engineer will be arranging the microphones and your own placement, seeking a good sound and a realistic balance.

Then the producer will ask you to listen to playback. You should be more focused on the sound here than on performance. Ask yourself: “Does it sound like us?” You want it to sound not like a recording, but like a live performance. Be sure that you’re satisfied now with what you hear: this is what the finished product will sound like. Here’s what to listen for:

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Dateline

CMA Events and Opportunities


Other Events and Programs


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GRANT SUPPORT

ACMP: The Chamber Music Network—Support for adult amateur chamber music workshops, including coaches’ salaries, reduced registration fees, and scholarships. DEADLINE: December 31, 2011. www.acmp.net

Aaron Copland Fund for Music Recording Program—Support for organizations that record contemporary American music. DEADLINE: January 17, 2012. www.coplandfund.org

USArts International—Funding for U.S.-based music ensembles that have been invited to participate in international festivals. DEADLINE: December 9, 2011, for events taking place March 1, 2012—February 28, 2013; and April 20, 2012, for events taking place July 1, 2012—June 30, 2013. www.usarts.org

Southern Exposure: Performing Arts of Latin America—Funding support for those in Latin America to present assemblies of contemporary and new music in their communities. DEADLINE: February 10, 2012. www.southernexposure.org

Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour—General operating support for projects in which U.S. performing arts presenters play key roles in bringing music/usa’s new music to communities. DEADLINE: July 31, 2012. www.penpat.org

Career New Music Performance Fund—General operating support for mid-budget, grassroottary, and emerging New York City organizations that focus primarily or exclusively on new music. DEADLINE: February 17, 2012. www.newmusicusa.org


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