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LSO Live: reassembling classical music

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In his book Reassembling the social, Bruno Latour (2005) argued that the social, as defined by sociologists, had become so laden with assumptions, that it had become an empty concept. 'The social seems to be diluted everywhere and yet nowhere in particular' (2), he claimed. The social is commonly used to refer to a 'stabilised state of affairs' or a 'bundle of ties that, later, may be mobilised for some other phenomenon' (1). To further quote Latour: in the 'default position of our mental software […] there exists a social “context” in which non-social activities take place; it is a specific domain of reality; it can be used as a specific type of causality to account for the residual aspects that other domains cannot completely deal with' (4). Finally, it is used as something behind the activities of economics, linguistics, law, management or the arts, something that binds them together and to which they can all relate.

Latour proposed, instead, to reassemble the social by tracing the associations between actors and actions of all types, human and non-human. He insisted in seeing the social as a trail of associations; as that which is glued together by economics, linguistics, law, management and the arts. In his words, 'social is not a place, a thing, a domain, or a kind of stuff, but a provisional movement of new associations' (238). He recommended suspicion of anyone speaking of a 'system', a 'global feature', a 'world economy', an 'organisation', and instead to always ask: '“In which building? In which bureau? Through which corridor is it accessible? What colleagues has it been read to? How has it been compiled?”' (184). He further suggested that 'it is not the sociologist's job to decide in the actor's stead what groups are making up the world and which agencies are making them act. Her job is to build the artificial experiment -a report, a story, a narrative, an account- where this diversity might be deployed to the full' (184).

It is with this framework that I approach classical music, which, it could be argued, is as ill-defined as the social. To attempt to define classical music, I seek to trace some of the structuring templates available to it. As Latour

explained, structuring templates circulate through the associations materialised by intellectual technologies and techniques of all kinds. Their existence reveals indirect agencies from other places and other times, and are fully traceable through these associations (196). Examples of structuring templates of classical music are music schools, concert halls, copyright laws, the grammar of musical notation and audio equipment, to name a few. Each of these templates reveals the ways people have thought of classical music and, as a result, have enabled frameworks to situate actions in significant ways. Associations are ultimately rendered through technologies like the practices of composition and performance, behavioural codes in concert halls, recording techniques and practices, rights management models and so on. It is worth stressing that these technologies are not determined by structuring templates; they rather allow the technologies to proceed in ways that define their meaning and reinforce it. But what are these ways? What is the network of associations that allows us to describe classical music?

I have chosen one structuring template to discuss it here with you today: live recordings. To answer the questions of the building, corridor, or studio where my report of classical music takes place, I have restricted myself to my fieldwork experience with the London Symphony Orchestra. This took place during their 2007/2008 season, when the orchestra was recording all Mahler symphonies under its label LSO Live. In discussing live recordings as conceptualised by LSO Live, I will focus on the narrative around production. My interest lies particularly in tracing the values of classical music as perceived and deployed by LSO Live through the practices surrounding its live recordings.

Allow me briefly to place LSO Live into the picture. When I first approached the LSO, LSO Live had been enjoying unremitting success since its launch in 1999. By 2007, it had been in the charts of the British Phonographic Industry's best-selling classical record companies for six years. Almost half of the sales are of Universal and 80% are of the top four record companies (Universal, EMI, HNH, well known for their Naxos labels, and Sony BMG, which merged in 2003). Thus, LSO Live entered to compete with the remaining companies, including Demon, Warner Music, Hyperion, Green Umbrella, Union Square Music, Harmonia Mundi and Chandos. Apart from the last two labels and HNH, all others have profited to varying degrees from re-issues, compilation and crossover techniques. HNH is widely known for recording core repertoire with budget musicians. LSO Live created its own market niche by uniquely combining new world-class performances of core classical repertoire at budget prices. In addition, it is unprecedented in that it records only one orchestra, the LSO.

Many things have added to LSO Live's success: firstly, the LSO is undoubtedly a world-class orchestra. It was voted fourth in the Gramophone Magazine world's leading critics rank of international orchestras in December last year. Secondly, former Managing Director Clive Gillinson had the foresight to appoint Chaz Jenkins to lead the label. He had gained production experience mainly in the pop sector. With almost no budget, Jenkins' strategy was centred around recording live. According to Jenkins, recording the concerts, which were already financially provided for, was the obvious solution for the lack of budget he faced. This allowed him to transform musicians' compensation for their rights in recording -they share profits instead of receiving upfront recording fees. And ultimately, this allowed him to sell the CDs for budget prices. In addition, he heavily invested in the idea of downloading when it was still in its initial stages. His strategy led to a fresh business model, free of corporate traps, yet with the orchestra's lifetime recording experience and its contacts in the business of recording.

From this account, recording live was a financial decision, not an aesthetic one. I would suggest that recording live has other financial advantages. According to Philip Auslander (1999), listening to live recordings summons the desire for the live performance. In other words, live concerts have the potential of authenticating the orchestra's musicianship brought to the audience via recordings. Or as he put it, 'the concert answers the question raised implicitely by the recording' (83). In financial terms, this is important for LSO Live, as it needs to create a market for concerts in order to stay alive. Not only do LSO Live's recordings represent visiting cards for the orchestra, but they also serve as a kind of taster of their concert abilities.

Live recordings are also easily adaptable to the needs of the brand's dynamic and innovative image. Its catalogue reads:

LSO Live captures the energy and excitement of live performances, coupled with the highest production standards. […] Each recording is made live and usually edited from several performances to remove any unwanted interruptions from the audience. Live recording used to involve making compromises but today the best recording technology can be used in the concert hall to retain all the energy and emotion that is unique to a live performance.

I like this copy because it marries some common assumptions that are generally not tolerated together. On the one hand, we have the emotion and excitement of live performance, on the other, editing techniques to glue together several performances. Of interest are also assumptions about recording technology and its recent development. To focus briefly on this last point, as Jonathan Sterne (2003) has observed, 'narratives of technological change and the transformation of technical specifications are folded back into an aesthetic and technological telos: the latest technological innovation equals the “best-sounding” or “perfect” sound reproduction' (222). The progress narrative is ultimately untenable. He argued that such a position would imply that technology is continuously striving for the same values. But, he continued, practices and technologies of sound reproduction are time and place specific.

Recording technology has indeed become cheaper, smaller and easier to use over the years: it has become more accessible. And for live recordings this has the direct implication that more expert equipment can be used on stage and transported more easily to different locations. In other words, it means that less financial and practical compromises have to be made. However, regarding only the dimensions of intimacy and directness of sound, if we observe debates about analogue and digital, or just listen to 70s' productions, it is difficult to argue that nowadays sound production involves making fewer compromises.

Regarding editing, in classical circles it clashes with the idea of live. Throughout my research, whenever I talked to aficionados about my project, I always sensed surprise when I remarked that LSO Live's recordings where produced from different performances. 'Do they really edit?', was a common reply. Live recordings are expected to be recordings of one single live performance. The idea of editing is believed to interrupt not only the virtual emotion, but the stability, that sense of possession, spontaneity and focus expected of live performances. That this is also a professional concern, is reflected by the orchestra's call for a meeting as to how to approach editing. Opinions were divided, and still are, although the LSO eventually agreed to edit out clappings and other audience noises, resulting in around 80% of one single performance plus 20% of patching. I heard this line several

times, along with all types of comments revealing different ways of coming to terms with their decision: 'Coughing is not part of the performance, a door slamming, something falling... These things are not at the same place every night, so you can choose: it's a practical decision. I think that editing these things out gives rise to a better musical experience.' Or, 'I generally don't care about audience noise, you know, it's part of the performance, unless, of course, there's something really distracting.' After all it is a matter of drawing the line, as a musician pointed out to me: 'Once you start editing, where do you stop?'

What I wish to highlight is that editing is an issue at all. A sense of possession, spontaneity and focus seem to be expected of live classical performances and rendered on live recordings. Nicholas Cook (1998) has identified classical music's convention of memorising entire scores, which stems from the romanticist period. This convention, he explained, developed in tandem with the idea that solo performance should appear to be spontaneous, that it should give rise to the impression of being in some sense possessed by the music. And this, he argued, 'links with the idea of music giving access to the world beyond or making audible the voice of Nature. […] Music provided an alternative route to spiritual consolation. Indeed, [commentators] sometimes talked of “art-religion” or “the religion of art”' (36-37). Cook further associated these ideas with those of authenticity, through the ethical qualities that are expected from true musicianship, like purity, personal sincerity and being true to oneself. It is not surprising then, that editing is considered as something of a rupture of the values of possession and purity of classical music. Thus, while appealing to authenticity, it is almost touching, that LSO Live has publicised their true intentions, i.e. that they do edit. So the message is, yes, LSO Live edits, but with careful consideration of the emotion and excitement transmitted in live performance.

And of course, the 80/20 percentages, are far from true. Editing may involve a great amount of moving, shifting places and thus, of interrupting the flow of performance in many different ways. Please do not mistake the following account for a judgement of a less careful consideration of the music by LSO Live. After all, it is the combined work of the participants to bring the musical experience to its best, whatever that should mean. I simply wish to point out to what extent such consideration can go. When LSO Live writes 'several performances', that doesn't necessarily mean 'several concerts'. Indeed, at least during the Mahler series, more often than not, there was only one concert available for recording. Recording sessions would thus extend to rehearsals and sometimes to additionally scheduled patch sessions. Because this was not considered as ideal by the musicians and recording team, the recording team ventured to follow the LSO on a tour to Paris and record them in the Salle Pleyel as well as in the Barbican. When I asked the producer if the acoustics of the two halls were compatible, he replied:

'Oh yes, we will have to manipulate the recordings a bit, but they are close enough to edit them together.'

'So, was it a good concert?', I asked.

'Well, you know, it was that concert after Dijon...'

'Oh, yes, I heard!'

'The instruments didn't arrive because of the strike, so the people there had to put the instruments together...'

'I heard they borrowed violins from music schools?'

'Yes, and the double-basses had to be brought from Paris.'

'But in Paris you had the instruments back again, right?'

'Oh yes, but the musicians had to tune those unfamiliar instruments and then, on the following day, tune back again to their own. It was a difficult concert.'

As this example shows, editing is linked to varying degrees and techniques of sound manipulation. What I found surprising in the recording team's discourse, is that there is a continuous attempt to disguise it. Let me introduce another short account of my fieldwork. In the control room, I often saw the producer pointing at the mixing desk: 'the celesta is next!', 'watch out for the flute' or simply, 'the trumpets!'. The engineer explained to me: 'What we do is that we mix live, moving the channels a bit, but only a bit', he stressed, 'depending on who is next, or when some instruments are less audible than others. In this symphony, the harps, for instance. Or the mandolin or the guitar. We help them a bit. Also with effects. Here we have the [off-stage] cowbells, for instance. We try and do a little bit of an effect there too'. When the turn for the cow-bells came, the producer mumbled: 'That sounds like 20 cows coming in!' The head engineer turned to the one sitting at the mixing desk: 'Please spike it down a bit'. 'Quite a bit?', he replied, 'Yeah, and put on a bit of reverb'.

I don't know how many 'bits' of sound manipulation you counted there, but to me their talk about it seemed quite apologetic. This ties up with the listening experience of classical music recordings in general: the sense of absolute stability. In pop and rock recordings part of the enjoyment is to listen to the sound moving from one source to the other, settling down somewhere in between, blurring for an instant before disappearing and reappearing elsewhere slightly distorted, etc., In classical music, however, the only obvious movement heard is that which happens in the concert hall anyway, between instruments. To some extent, recording engineers try to make up for the lack of visual clues, slightly stressing individual instruments during their short performances. But the extent to which this happens is always circumscribed by the idea of sonic stability.

The idea of stability, I would argue, is linked to classical music's idea of the artwork. As Lydia Goehr (1989) and Georgina Born (2005), among others, have suggested, the idea of the artwork is at the centre of classical music's scholarly ideology. While this is a wide-ranging concept in itself, it provides an entrance to classical music's listening practices. The idea of the artwork leads also directly to pursuing the composer's intention. That intention is traditionally related to the music's narrative, its structure and organicity, as Kerman (1980) and others

have pointed out. It is therefore important that the artwork is rendered in the recording without distractions. This too may explain the need for possession described by Cook, where the performer is just a medium to give life to the music. And as the pianist Alfred Brendel (2007) has observed, the performer needs to be self-effacing in order to render the composer's intention, and I would add, so need the engineers, or any middle-people, for that matter.

Other middle-people in live recordings include the audience. The audience interests me not only because of their silence, but mainly because of what that silence entails in the first place. Here I would like to focus on the possibility of concert recordings competing with studio recordings at all. To start with, due to the size of symphonic orchestras, it is common that classical 'studio' recordings take place in concert halls. However, concert halls are ideally designed to sound at their best when they are fully occupied. So, in theory at least, a concert offers the ideal circumstances under which to record, provided the audience is silent. And, as it happens, the audience in classical music is silent. While classical music concerts offer arguably the ideal recording situation, what I would like to draw attention to here, is that, at the same time, live recordings have imprinted in themselves a whole behavioural code associated to the music they display. The silent, contemplative behavioural code of classical music itself endorses the importance of the artwork and the composer's intention referred to before. The additional removal of audience noise in live recordings further re-enforces this.

Tied to this behaviour is the idea of the 'best seat in the concert hall'. 'The best seat in the concert hall' is only a virtual idea of what really happens in terms of microphone placement. But its sonic effect, often pursued in recordings, summarises the desire for an ideal place from which the listener can have an undisturbed, virtual view, of the orchestra's performance. For the record listener, this idealised reproduction means, to borrow Cook's words, 'to be in direct communion with the composer himself' (referring here to Beethoven, 24). The hierarchy displayed here is clear: while the artwork reigns over classical music, the composer is the person who offers it to the world. While the performer merely transmits it, the recordist produces a record of it, so that listeners can sit comfortably in their chaise longues experiencing from the distance what the performance may have been.

To summarise, thus far I have picked on a portion of LSO Live catalogue's copy to illustrate how LSO Live chooses to represent itself, exposing the ideas associated with editing and with the emotion and excitement of live performance. We have seen that the recording process doesn't just register the spontaneity of only one single performance. Instead, it strives to reproduce the values of musicianship's authenticity and of the music's stability through the recreation of a single performance. This recreation involves not only artful microphone placement and sound manipulation, but also the audience's behavioural codes associated to classical music. Finally, I have explained how these practices themselves entail a clearly defined hierarchical structure.

Following Latour's methodology, my observations of LSO Live's narratives and practices included that of organisational staff, aficionados, musicians, the recording team and the audience. I have added information about LSO Live's place within the British Phonographic Industry. I have also sought to link scholarly reflection on the values of classical music. My report is complete, as far as my conference slot allows me to report. It is a report as expected by Latour, 'constantly

revealing the fragility of its connections and its lack of control on what is left between its networks' (188). However, it reports also on the pervasiveness of the values in reaching connections and on the extent to which they do so. As has been suggested, the current values of classical music, as defined here, stem, if not from the romanticist period, then at least from the first decades of the twentieth century. The values are therefore not new, but have been shaped along with the practices associated to them. But often they are more pervasive than the practices themselves. For instance, the LSO did not start recording live for aesthetic reasons. It did so, mainly because the financial circumstances of the time forced the orchestra to do so. Similarly, despite of the wide range of sound manipulation techniques and the variation in stylistic creativity, LSO Live uses only that portion which works towards disguising it. It is interesting that under these circumstances, and for marketing purposes, LSO Live has adapted its discourse to provide for these values.

It is with this in mind that I would like to stress that live recordings, like any other structuring template, do not themselves determine classical music's values. Instead, they make the cultivation of those values possible. They make it possible to bring these values to life, to define, and eventually to redefine them.

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