



On the Subject of Recording

by Carol Greenley, Con Brio Recordings

Good recording is hard

Don't waste your time and money on an inexperienced recording engineer. Recording schools teach students to record pop music because pop music makes up 95% of the recording business and there is a surplus of budding Justin Timberlakes and Rihannas out there. Find an engineer who knows how to record classical music.

I have received several reports of artists paying considerable money to a "big name" recording studio only to find that the engineer does not know anything about classical music. Have someone who knows your music come with you: in our studio, I act as producer/listener and follow the score making notes as the artist plays. An additional set of ears can be very useful.

There is nothing natural about a CD

Some artists feel that the best recordings have no artificial enhancement. Much of classical music was written before electricity was put to use, and the main effort is put into recording a natural, live performance sound. After the sound travels through miles of cables, is digitized, normalized, and finalized on a CD, the sound is only a good facsimile of the natural sound. When you put your favorite Kissin CD on your stereo, you are not hearing piano, you are hearing vibrating speaker cones. And in your earbuds, the vibrating cones are .001% the size of a piano. Imagine sitting in front of a screen behind which is a piano, or vocalist, or string quartet along with the best playback system in the world. You will never be fooled into thinking you are hearing the live performers when it is the stereo playing. However, the CD is an excellent substitute, and with digital technology, every nuance can be captured (along with every flaw). Don't back away from digital reverb. The great thing about it is that it can be removed. If you record in an overly reverberant hall, all of your clean technique will be mushy and the reverb can't be removed.

Editing is a life-saver, mastering is like makeup

Having a recording studio and classical music label has put me in touch with many professional musicians and I have many stories of top-tier soloists who depend heavily on digital editing to create the perfection that you hear on their CDs. The stories are second hand, so I can't write in the names of these artists - trust me, they are at the top of the industry. A typical big label CD has 300 to 400 edits; (I have edited extensively for several of my artists).

CAROL GREENLEY, OWNER

1961 ROSE LANE, PLEASANT HILL, CA 94523 • (925) 689-3444

CAROL@CONBRIORECORDINGS.COM • WWW.CONBRIORECORDINGS.COM

These artists will take a particularly devilish cadenza and record note-by-note so that the computer operator can make them play perfectly - and fast! A pick up group accompanying a very famous pianist recorded one concerto movement by playing each measure separately until the whole piece was perfect.

Mastering is further magic with sound enhancement and is done in the studio. A poor recording can be only improved, however, but a good recording can be polished smooth. Just as if you start with a poor negative or photo, no amount of Photoshop can save it. If you start with a good photo, a careful amount of Photoshop will make it better; as with make up, too much is a bad thing. Again, the experienced mastering engineer can do wonders.

Your CD works for you when you are off

A good CD plays the same every time whether you are ill, giving birth, or practicing other music. Give them to important people as you would give a business card. My label contract allows the artist to use his/her CD, copies or originals, in any way that helps to promote his career.

Reviews are permanent

I have several artists who had no reviews before recording their CD. Now they have wonderful reviews on their permanent resumé. I have no idea if their CBR CDs have anything to do with this, but several of them have won awards, financing, and job promotions after their CD was favorably reviewed in the prominent classical music magazines.

Why I reject CDs

I have received many CDs from first time artists. My usual reasons for rejecting them are intonation (including out-of-tune pianos), ensemble, an easy program that students could handle, wrong notes, under tempos, fluffing notes in difficult passages. A cellist sent me a double CD of the Bach solo suites. This is an enormous undertaking and represents a considerable expense. The entire set of 36 movements was full of little intonation problems; open octaves were out of tune, tempos were all the same, phrasing was all the same. A wonderful group sent me a CD of contemporary ensemble music; the engineer put the mics inside of the piano and everything the pianist played was harsh, brittle, and ugly. I always challenge the artist to improve their next project and many times that is what they do.

Do not invest in this

DigiPaks (the paper folders with the CD tray glued inside) are elegant looking, but expensive and not "green." They require more energy to create and are not recyclable. The only advantage I see is that they are lighter to send, but only if you don't have a booklet.

I have a group that has a beautifully designed CD booklet of 8 pages in two languages. The initial order was more expensive than usual, and now they are sold out and it is time to reorder. The 8-pager is forcing them to reorder a minimum of 500 CDs, and it is expensive. I always recommend the standard packaging of a 3-piece jewel box with a 4-page booklet. It has enough room for program notes and bio. Until you have the funding and following for more, this will be fine. Now that downloading is overtaking sales of hard copy CDs, the 5 x 5 booklet is becoming obsolete. You can put as much information as you want about yourself and your CD on your website.

Just play your best

If you are touring and receiving requests for a CD from your fans, it is time to record. Keep it simple and play your best at your recording sessions. Don't record with digital editing in mind - it will destroy the continuity and spontaneity in your performance. After all, you must play at the same tempo and dynamic level when patching in sections, so if that is what you are thinking about, your performance won't be as good.

CDs vs. Downloads

CDs are going away; downloading has surpassed CDs sales for several years. Good thing or bad thing? After all, streaming and downloading are very inexpensive and the cost of getting good recording has not come down to meet this trend. Think of this: you have no replication, no plastic, no shipping, no shipping damage, no product returns, no limit to the number of words in your program notes and bio.

For these reasons, I do not encourage my artists to replicate more than 500 hard copy CDs. A touring artist will sell CDs at his live concerts as long as people still have CD players. My artists are making more money with streams and downloads than with CDs. One artist logged over 7500 streams the first month his CD went on Naxos' Library site. This was over \$200 worth for no effort.

So what does a label do?

Other than the obvious (your CD has someone's logo on it reinforcing the fact that someone in the classical music industry believes in you), labels have accounts on internet sellers' sites. Amazon charges a yearly fee which, with a catalogue of CDs, does not amount to much of an expense. If you have one CD on Amazon, chances are good that the yearly fee will outstrip your sales. CD Baby offers a discount for a quantity of CDs submitted. Limelight, a licensing organization, also offers quantity discounts. Licensing, by the way, can be a convoluted process. I do all the research and paperwork for my artists.

How easy is it for an artist to compile bio, cover letter, data CD-R with photos (CMYK for print, RGB for online), and package it all up to send to review publications? Any packages going out of the US require the Post Office's Customs Declaration CN 22 form to be filled out. How about sending your CD to 125 classical music radio stations? Actually, there is nothing difficult about it - it just takes time away from your practicing, rehearsing, gig searches, and traveling.

If you would like to see Con Brio's CDs, you are welcome to visit our site: <http://www.conbriorecordings.com>