



PROVIEW

Steven Epstein



THE (VERY) DIFFERENT WORLDS OF CLASSICAL AND JAZZ RECORDING



BY HOWARD MASSEY

Okay, trivia fans: Name this producer. He's the staff producer with the longest-running career at Sony (formerly Columbia) Records, and has won eight Grammys (out of a staggering 25 nominations). Answer: Steven Epstein.

Admittedly, the name might not be very familiar to those of you who are into rock, pop, rap, hip-hop, or electronica, but Epstein is an icon in the rarified field of classical and jazz recording, as evidenced by the fact that five of his Grammys (including the one he received just last year) are for Classical Producer of the Year.

The artists he has worked with during his career range from almost every internationally renowned symphonic orchestra to such groundbreaking artists as Wynton Marsalis, Yo-Yo Ma, Plácido Domingo, Isaac Stern, Midori, and Bobby McFerrin. Shortly after this interview was conducted, Epstein was off to Vienna to record Billy Joel's long-awaited album of classical compositions, due out this fall.

The New York-born Epstein vividly recalls wanting to be a classical record producer since childhood. As a high school student, he demonstrated that commitment by boldly writing to his future boss—Tom Frost, co-music director at CBS Masterworks—and, in recognition of that initiative, was offered a staff position as a music editor shortly after graduating from college. Today, 28 years later, he serves as Senior Executive Producer at Sony, still turning out some of the finest recordings you'll ever hear.

In this far-ranging interview, Epstein reveals the unique techniques he's developed and the philosophical approaches he takes to capturing the best performances of the finest classical and jazz musicians in the world.

PHOTOS BY DARIA AMATO

What do you see as the essential difference between the role of a classical or jazz producer and that of a more mainstream pop producer?

I would say the intent is the same [for both]. That may seem obvious, but the goal of all kinds of producers is to yield the best, most interesting product musically, to get the most out of the artist, and to make the surroundings for the artist comfortable so that he or she can be at their inspired best.

Of course, rock or pop recording is generally different in the sense that a whole album is rarely put

together in real time; one section or group of instruments is layered, and then the vocalist does their thing over already-recorded material. In classical or in jazz, the idea is to do it all in real time. There are some producers that might not have a problem recording jazz with a significant amount of overdubbing, but my feeling is that, since everyone is spontaneously supposed to play off everyone else and derive their inspiration at that moment—that, after all, is what makes jazz exciting and wonderful—it should all be recorded in real time and without overdubbing.

A classical music producer has to very closely follow the musical score and make sure that all the notes that are being performed are the same as all the notes in the score. In pop, on the other hand, pretty much anything goes. In jazz, it's also a case of pretty much anything goes; you have a lot of latitude in what is correct and what isn't correct—you can get away with what are called "dirty" notes or slight blemishes, whereas in classical music, that's unacceptable. In jazz, those notes impart a color to the sound. As a result, a jazz artist might say, "What do you think of that solo?" and you might have one feeling, while the artist might have a different feeling—it can be quite subjective. Then, the next day, when each of you listens back to it, your impressions can easily be reversed, unless there's something obviously wrong with it.

One big difference on the technical side is the much wider dynamic range in both jazz and classical recordings than in pop releases. Is your goal more to capture what actually happened in the studio, than to enhance it?

Yes. In classical, my goal is to capture as naturally as possible the illusion of the reality that takes place in a concert hall. I like to use as few mics as possible; many of my symphonic recordings have been done with only two microphones, even though I like to set up more than two and send them to other tracks just in case we need to call on them during a mix.

Many times I work with a conductor or artist and explain that the approach is to get a two-mic balance, which means that, once we position the microphones accurately, that balance is going to be locked in, without room for manipulation later on. Often the artist is excited by that, though many times during playback, I warn them, "I just want you to be sure that you understand that we can't change anything with regard to the balance later on." That's what I call "natural"

According to Epstein, the most important thing for a producer to have is a strong musical background, so their ears can be focused.



recording. But you can also do a natural-sounding classical recording using 20 mics—it depends on the acoustics of the venue that you're in. You basically have to tailor your setup to the acoustics of the hall.

In jazz recording, I aim to get the sense of an ensemble performing in a real room, rather than in a dead studio. That's why I like to go to venues that have some life in them, and I like to have all the musicians in the room at the same time, with the drummer usually semi-enclosed, so there's some drum leakage into the room,

but not *too* much. It's necessary to have some control over the drums, because so much of the time the drum leakage will spill into the bass mics, so if you're trying to increase the bass level, you're raising the drums also.

I also like to have all the musicians work without headphones, because sometimes the headphone mix will dictate what the final performance sounds like. And if the headphone mix isn't exactly the way it should be—whatever that means—the musicians will be rebalancing and playing with different dynamics, based on what they're hearing in their headphones. You get a much more cohesive performance when they can all hear each other in a room without having to use cans.

That said, sometimes we have to use headphones for the drummer and the bass player—depending on how they are physically situated in relation to each other—so they can really lock into their groove.

Presumably, though, you never use a click track.

Only if we do overdubs, and the only overdubbing that I've done in the classical realm is when we've had to lock to visual cues, or when we're approaching making a recording like a pop album, layering tracks together. When we were doing the soundtrack for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, for instance, we actually recorded Yo-Yo Ma, on his own, before we recorded anything else! Normally we would record the orchestral and ensemble material first, and Yo-Yo would overdub to it later. But due to scheduling considerations, we needed to approach these sessions somewhat uniquely. We had him play as he watched the parts of the film he was performing in, with the composer and director both present to provide their input. But all of the orchestral backing and the other Asian folk instruments had to be married to Yo-Yo's performance, so we obviously had to put down a click track for each of the cues prior to the recording.

When you record an orchestra with just two mics, what are your mics of choice?

My favorite microphones—which I've been using almost since their inception—are B&K [Brüel & Kjær] omnidirectionals. When they were first made, I started off with the 4003s, either as two spaced microphones or in a Decca tree-type configuration. Then they came out with the 4009s, which were a matched pair of 4003s, so I used those. I've used them for most any classical ensemble. They have a very open high

end and a natural response— not as tight a bass response as, let's say, some of the Schoeps omnis. But overall they are a more natural-sounding microphone— though I like using Schoeps MK2s and MK2Ss occasionally, too.

What mic do you use on Wynton Marsalis?

My favorite mic on Wynton is an [AKG] C12VR, which has been modified here at Sony Studios by our chief engineer. Ninety-nine percent of the time when I record Wynton performing jazz, I experiment with dif-

ferent microphones, comparing them against a main mic that I was happy with—that's how you evolve, that's how you hone your art. The great thing about working for Sony/CBS all these years is that I've always been encouraged to experiment with different techniques and different microphones.

Do you ever compress his signal?

Rarely, unless we run into problems. I try to leave Wynton's sound as flat as possible, though occasionally I might add a little bit of low midrange EQ, at around 700 Hz. Sometimes I compress the bass to keep a fairly linear dynamic, usually using the onboard compressors in our Oxford console; they're very clean.

What's your mic of choice for recording Yo-Yo Ma?

It depends on the type of music we are recording. I've used [Neumann] U 89s on Yo-Yo for some chamber recordings, but again, my overall philosophy of doing classical recording is to use as few mics as possible. Therefore, if we're making a concerto recording, I like to have the body of the sound of the solo instrument be picked up by the main mics. Not necessarily the complete sound, not necessarily to have the optimum balance, but just to get the body of it. Then I define the solo sound with a spot mic, and on Yo-Yo I've used everything from a [Schoeps] MK4 to a [Neumann] KM 84—usually a small-diaphragm condenser.

One recording I did with him called the *New York Album*—an album of concertos for cello and orchestra by different composers—was a very unusual situation, where, with exceptions in just three places, I actually did the entire recording with two B&K microphones, capturing not only the orchestra but Yo-Yo as well. The only way I could do this was to balance the mics during rehearsals—not to record, because the union won't allow you to record rehearsals—but just to listen while moving the microphones to find the optimum position. In a concerto recording, it's almost unheard of—for me, anyway—to use just two mics. But in this particular recording, the acoustics were perfectly suitable; plus David Zinman, the brilliant conductor, had a great sense of balance with the very fine orchestra he was leading—the Baltimore Symphony. So everything was clicking, and as a result, I was able to optimize the dynamic range and achieve a more accu-

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rate soundstage with better depth than a multi-mic setup might yield.

When you're recording drums for jazz, is it also a minimal miking, or do you stick a mic on every drum, as is normally done for pop recording?

In the old days, I close-miked every drum. Then I wanted to try something different. At one point I was recording a version of *West Side Story* with the original orchestrations, and the drummer was Shelley Mann, the great jazz drummer—it actually turned out to be his last recording. I

tried something a little different, and he commented, “You know, it's really refreshing that you're using fewer microphones on the drums.” I was pleased, because I was happier with the sound as well.

Again, pop music is a different beast, but for jazz I prefer to minimally mic the drums. I usually use two B&K 4009s as overheads, and I let them basically pick up the entire drum set as an organic unit, allowing the drummer to create his own balance. I supplement the overheads with a bass drum mic and a snare mic, and the snare mic sometimes doubles as a hi-hat mic. Occasionally we use a separate mic on the hi-hat for greater control.

What mics do you like to use on the snare and kick drums?

On the snare I like to use a B&K 4007, which is also an omni. It's a great snare mic—it's got a high SPL and can take a beating. Sometimes I use an AKG 451. Same with the hi-hat. On kick drum I like to use a [Neumann] U 47; I used to use [AKG] D112s, but I felt that the 47 has a little more character. I prefer using a tube 47, though in a pinch a FET does the trick, too.

But if the drummer is in a fairly dead booth because I need to get more isolation, I don't like using omnis for overheads, because then you're more apt to pick up the sound of the booth and whatever anomalies or resonances are within it—so you end up losing a bit of punch and brightness in the drums overall. In that case I'll use either two B&K 4011s for overheads—they're cardioids—or two [AKG] 414s in cardioid; they get a little more sizzle, a little more punch out of the drums when they're in that kind of configuration. If we're able to have a more open drum sound, though, I prefer to use the 4009s as overheads.

You say that it is critical in recording classical music to strictly follow the score, which not only has all the notes, but all the dynamic articulation clearly defined. How is a classical artist able to add their own interpretation when they have to work within such a rigid structure?

Making sure that the notes are correct is *not* actually the most important thing, in the sense of prioritizing. It's a tricky question, but basically, you can't leave a classical recording session with incorrect notes—you can't come out with a recording that either represents

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the artist having made mistakes, or does not speak truly of the music, of what the composer intended to do.

However, within that framework, the producer must make sure that the artist is free to perform, free to interpret the music without feeling that he or she is constrained by having to play the correct notes. I remember the days of direct-to-disk, when people were saying, "Well, you know, you can't do any editing, so you're getting an actual performance." But, frankly—and my conversations with musicians have borne this out—when you got to the last two minutes of a direct-to-disk recording, the artist would tend to give a very safe performance because they didn't want to make any mistakes and have to start all over again! So, paradoxically, what you can end up with if you don't have the option of editing is a safer performance. Having the option of editing allows the artist to be much freer with the performance. Preferably, though, you do as little editing as possible so that you don't destroy the overall performance.

When I sit down in the studio to record a piece of music, I discuss with the artist how we would like to approach the session, and ask for their input and their ideas—what would make them comfortable. I always suggest that we do at least two or three takes of a complete movement, so we get a full performance and a full overview of the piece; then let's see where we stand. If we have to, we'll touch up or fix places, and just lay in what we need to lay in—though we may do larger pieces than just the part to be fixed, so we get the complete context of the passage. Generally speaking, if the artist has a clear conception of how he or she wants to play a piece of music, then it usually doesn't matter how much editing is done, because the performances are all of the same character and style. That way, you'll undoubtedly have a seamless performance even if you have to resort to a lot of editing.

Chamber music, by necessity, usually requires a lot of editing, because you only have one instrument to a part, as opposed to in an orchestra, where you may have 40 string players—a massed group of instruments—so that, if somebody's playing a little out of tune, it's hardly going to be obvious at all. But in a string quartet, for instance, every note is critical—every pitch, every nuance becomes magnified a hundredfold. Because of this magnifying-glass effect, you are usually compelled to do more editing.

So in a classical recording, there are no overdubs; if there's a problem, you edit in a piece from another performance. But in a jazz recording, if someone is playing a great solo but hits a clunker, will you punch in that one note?

It's been done. But again, in jazz, it's rare that there's ever a wrong note! [laughs] Sometimes an artist feels that a phrase within a solo has been poorly executed and asks to just punch in, but that can't be done if the musician was in a room together with the other players and not in an iso booth—obviously, there's going to be leakage on the other mics; as minimal as it may be, you're going to hear a ghost of the original solo. So, unless it's something that the artist wants to punch in where no one else was playing, I would generally just record another take of the passage (or the complete piece) and look for a suitable edit point.

I also shouldn't say that we *never* do overdubbing in classical. For instance, I've recorded operas, and sometimes, because of scheduling problems, a singer might not be able to perform with the orchestra at the time of the session. So it is conceivable that, because of the realities of an artist's touring schedule, we might have to do

an overdub like that. But it would be extremely rare to overdub in a concerto, you're right; fixing problems is a matter of editing different takes together.

What's your recording medium of choice?

Sony's DSD [Direct Stream Digital]. It's evolving right now, but 2-track editing has existed for some time; it's computer editing, and it's very flexible and versatile. They've just come out with a system called Sonoma, and, at this point in time, it's capable of 8-track DSD recording, editing, and mixing, although they don't yet have full automation for multitrack mixing. But almost on a daily basis, they're coming out with software upgrades that make the process a lot easier, so I still prefer to use that system as opposed to a standard 96/24 system, because it's just superior-sounding; we've done a lot of A/B comparison listening. Even though I work for Sony, I am not limited to which format I use. I'm very much a proponent of the DSD/Super Audio CD format, simply because it sounds better.

How do you send DSD signal to and from outboard processors? Do you use the Oxford for mixing or just for recording and monitoring?

When we do 2-track recording, if we want to do something like add some reverb, we do it as a sidechain. We use a DCS 972 to convert the DSD signal to a PCM signal that the outboard processor can handle, then we upconvert the reverb signal back to DSD. But that's only as a sidechain, so the program itself never changes; it's still thoroughly DSD.

If we're recording multitrack, we record and mix directly into the Sonoma system and don't use the Oxford at all. For conventional 24-bit multitrack recording, though, the Oxford is definitely my console of choice.

Do you have any advice for somebody who wants to get into this field?

The most important thing in becoming a producer is that you have a strong musical background. When I started, there weren't colleges offering specialized programs in recording, so I went to Hofstra, studied violin, and majored in music education. Now, of course, there are some wonderful colleges that have programs in recording; for the past five years, I've been an adjunct professor at McGill University, teaching a course in special techniques in classical recording production. Two of the engineers I record with are graduates of McGill, and I have to say that they're two of the finest engineers I've ever had the pleasure of working with. One of them—Richard King—I work with frequently, and then there's Rob Rapley, who's now a freelancer.

So you're saying the main thing is to build a solid musical background.

Exactly. You can always learn the technical aspects as you go along, but you should have a fundamental knowledge and understanding of music so your ears can always be focused. As a kid I frequently listened to Columbia/Masterworks records, analyzing them, imagining what I might do differently. I also had a scrapbook in which I collected pictures from magazines of microphone setups. I know producers who have sort of fallen into the position, but, frankly, I have greater respect for those who have shown that it is part of their life's blood. ☺☺☺

Howard Massey's latest book, Behind the Glass, is a collection of interviews with record producers.