



String Chamber Music of the Classical German School, 1840-1900: A Scholarly Investigation through Reconstructive Performance

THE NEW RECORDINGS: TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS & METHODOLOGY

David Milsom, 2009 (revised May 2015)

The original intention was to undertake all the recordings at the School of Music, University of Leeds, using Clothworkers' Centenary Concert Hall as the location. Part of the justification for enacting the project in Leeds was the plentiful supply of suitable period pianos, and state-of-the-art ProTools editing facilities and an on-site recording engineer to help undertake the work.

It became clear, however, that another venue would have to be found for some of the work. Clothworkers' Centenary Concert Hall is heavily used during term-time and this meant that it was difficult to book the venue. In addition, when the students were in residence, it was difficult to prevent noise pollution issues, exacerbated by the Hall's central location and a noisy air-conditioning system, which was turned off for studio recordings made in there from 2008-9, but which affect some of the earlier (and live) performances. Moreover, in the summer of 2007 both Erard grand pianos were removed for restoration, a matter not made known to me at the start of the project, and extensive periods of time saw the Hall out of use in the vacations for maintenance work – this included complete replacement of the floor in the summer of 2007.

As a result of these difficulties, I hired St John's Church, Ranmoor, Sheffield for all of the quartet recordings and some of the violin and piano works. This fine late-Victorian gothic church, which I know well and which is quite close to my residential address has an excellent acoustic and is reasonably protected against noise pollution. After much discussion and some substantial lobbying of the Parochial Parish Council and Church Wardens, I managed to secure an 1898 Broadwood 'boudoir' grand for the venue, which I use regularly, and which provided a fourth piano of appropriate type and vintage for the project.

Recordings ethos

It proved neither possible, nor even desirable to record the works in a highly edited way. The purpose of the project was to show how nineteenth-century performers of this tradition might have delivered the works in concert performance, and as a result we tried to maintain the ethos of a 'live' performance, with only minimal editing to remove errors that would distract the listener from the recordings' research purpose. Indeed, some of the recordings included in the archive are 'live' performances.

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Since the recordings were self-produced, the method was to record complete movements, and then any further sections to be spliced in. Inevitably, each session had a slightly different approach, as follows:

Violin and piano recordings: due to our familiarity with repertoire and general preparedness for the sessions, we tended to record in complete takes. These have very little editing.

String Quartets – 2008 session and violin/violin & viola duos: these complex works required quite careful editing to achieve the best results, and are compiled from extensive recording sessions.

String Quartets – 2009 session: in general, these had fairly minimal editing.

Mendelssohn Op. 49 piano trio: at the suggestion of Daniel Gordon, this was recorded in fairly short fragments, which were joined together at appropriate edit points.

In addition, the use of different venues required different technical solutions to recording.

Sessions in St John's Church, 2008 and 2009; live performances in Leeds, 2008-9: Technical Information

These were recorded using a Tascam HD-P2 Flash Disk recorder and single stand-mounted Sennheiser MKE 44P microphone. Whilst this was a simple recording solution, it results in a faithful evocation of the ambient sound.

Edited sessions in Clothworkers' Centenary Concert Hall: Technical Information

These works were much more complex in their engineering and utilised the following equipment:

Microphones: DPA 4009, DPA 4060, DPA 4011, Neumann KM184, Neumann KU-100 and Soundfield ST250. This set-up included a microphone in the form of a dummy human head (mounted, perhaps a little alarmingly, on a microphone stand!) which simulated the auditory reception of an audience member. This piece of equipment was used because of my avowed intention to make a 'natural' recording sound as heard by an audience.

Other equipment: Tascam HD-P2 Flash Disk recorder, Digidesign 002 Rack, Earthworks Pre-Amp, RME Octamic II and AppleBookPro.

Editing Process

I met for lengthy sessions with Kerry-Anne Kubisa, the School of Music Recording Engineer, mixing the various sessions in the Mac-based Pro Tools Hd3 Accel studio at the School of Music. This process, entirely new to me at the start of the project, proved to be challenging on many levels. One of the most difficult elements was the incompatibility of different 'takes'. The sessions taking place over several days, even with the equipment being kept in exactly the same places and so forth, resulted in very different ambient noise levels. The response of the instruments was also markedly different on each recording day – on some occasions, the timbre was bright and clear, and on others less clear but warmer. This illuminates another characteristic of gut strings – their high degree of variability. Modern strings are made of more stable materials and it is easier for them to react in a predictable way. With gut strings, one has to adapt one's approach according to how the strings are responding. Most difficult, of course, are warm and very humid conditions, which result in the strings going out of tune relatively rapidly and 'whistling' (especially the 'E' string). Unfortunately, the air conditioning fitted to Clothworkers' Centenary Concert Hall results in such conditions most of the time; later recordings in this venue with the air conditioning turned off resulted in temperature and humidity levels returning to more normal levels and more effective recording.

Moreover, the style of playing varied between takes, in terms of tempo, timbre and attack. Whilst this made editing difficult, it confirmed, perhaps ironically, the authenticity of our approach. Practical experience of undertaking the recordings with a careful eye upon the technical aspects shows that modern recording is an artistically-intrusive process – arguably as much so as in the days of early recordings (although the results are, seemingly at least, much more 'naturalistic'). To record successfully with modern methods requires a high degree of timbral control – matching dynamics, attack, bowing styles etc, as well, of course, as tempo and pitch. We decided to ignore such elements of compatibility in order to perform as spontaneously as possible – for the obvious reason that this was the experience of all musicians before recordings – and, as is evident with early recordings (even by the greatest players) technical errors remained in the final pressings that would not be tolerated by today's producers, engineers or indeed, the buying public, used as they are to 'perfection' on a technical level.

The result of this was that not all the edits we wanted to make were possible. It is hoped, however, that the results are sufficiently persuasive and communicative of our interpretational intentions to convey the meaning and purpose of this project.

Other difficulties related to the period pianos in use. The c. 1865 Broadwood 'boudoir' grand was in un-restored condition and suffered some pitch fluctuation; the c.1854 Erard and 1898 Broadwood instruments had noisy sustaining pedals (particularly evident in the Mendelssohn Op. 49 piano trio recording). These illuminate some of the difficulties experienced in using elderly instruments. Of course, such noises are inherent to the design of these instruments and may well have been evident in the nineteenth century although, of course, in the time of the period of study they would have been in much better condition. At the time of writing, replica instruments of this period are not being made and thus we have to

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use the originals. The very different sonorities of these pianos in comparison to modern ones were deemed essential to the evocation of historical performing practices and thus the mechanical difficulties had to be tolerated.