

The Grouse House Gazette

Weekly Thoughts on Music, Nature, and Politics, from the Catskill Mountains

CLASSICAL MUSIC'S DIGITAL DEMONS

WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE "PERFECT"?

Over the past few years I have found it amusing to see to how much attention Americans have paid to the use of steroids in sports. Congress devoted more time to the hearings on steroid investigations than to the hearings into the financial collapse of 2008. Odd when you consider that the crash devastated many people's life savings and cost millions of Americans their livelihoods and retirements. You would have thought that the sports players had committed major criminal acts against humanity but to me their "crimes" were no more dishonest than actors or actresses physically altering their appearances for better job opportunities, "authors" having books totally ghost written by others, or musicians and singers advancing their images and talents with technologically "improved" performances using the magic of today's digital technology.

In the words of John Lennon... "Nothing is real".

EVEN in the hallowed ground of classical music.

When recording labels first started using digital technology in the 1970s it brought with it more than just a new way to store musical information but also a near infinite possibility of changing or "enhancing" musical performances in ways never before dreamed possible.

DIGITAL PITCH CORRECTION

Today the public is all too familiar with digital pitch correction software with its' overuse in popular music as an easily distinguishable "effect" on pop songs by artists such as Katy Perry. And to be fair, I can understand and defend the usage of these digital techniques in pop music, as in that format I consider the artistic form to be the overall "song" and not necessarily the virtuosity of the players or singers on the track. It's all just tools from a broad toolbox used to create and "craft" an end result. The Beatles and scores of others have made many brilliant recordings the results of which the artists fully understood could never be performed in concert. The recording IS the art form rather than it being a simple recreation of a "live" performance.

But I believe that things have gotten out of control with digital technology when it is being used to overly enhance or perfect classical and jazz recordings, which are then sold under the premise of virtuosity of playing or singing.

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URSA THE BEAR COMING DOWN MY TRAIL LAST SUMMER!

BEAR WATCH! I WATCH BEARS SO YOU DON'T HAVE TOO!

It looks like the bears have woken up from their six month "nap".

There was evidence early today of a visit with one destroyed bird feeder on the second floor deck and a dismantled trash container down by the hot tub. There was no food in the trash can and I can only assume that they were attracted to the smell of empty chlorine containers! They are such strange animals. And something also ripped one of my solar spot lights off of the deck railing.

Unlike the Grizzlies (that don't exist east of the Rocky Mountains) Black Bears are generally peaceful animals. But they can be a nuisance as they search on an endless quest for food to satisfy their needs. And as many of them are over four hundred pounds, it can take a lot of food to keep them going. I'm careful to remove all food from my decks and only load the squirrel and bird feeders that hang out in the trees beyond their reach. But they still of course try and I frequently find my main bear Ursa sitting up in a tree trying to get the food. She has figured out how to pull the feeders into the trees on their pulleys so I have had to tie off the lines so that she can't get them. But this doesn't stop her from trying to shake the feeders off of the lines. I have an external small microphone on the deck near the feeders which has a line to a small guitar amp in my bedroom so I can hear the bears if they come late at night. I have also hung cowbells from the trees as alarms.

Black bears are perhaps the most misunderstood animals around today. Even people that have lived in the area their entire lives are terrified of them. But the truth is that in the past one hundred years, in the eastern United States, only four people have been killed by Black Bears. And they were nearly all really idiotic situations where people were keeping them in cages or seriously poking them with objects. They generally don't want to have anything to do with you. But if by chance you come across one in the woods, simply walk slowly in a direction where they can see that you are moving away from them, and they will usually do the same in the opposite direction. My main bear Ursa has been coming onto the property since she was a baby, and unfortunately she is so comfortable here that sometimes I have trouble getting her to leave. She is now around four years old and had her first mate here last June (a HUGE beautiful male I named Levon). So she SHOULD have cubs when she returns this year. Not sure if it was her that visited early this morning but I have my cameras ready for her return. NEW PHOTOS HOPEFULLY NEXT WEEK!

VIEW URSA VIDEO ON YOU TUBE! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nRYUjLQMtU>

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DIGITAL DEMONS...

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I recently had a "debate" with someone on an online classical bulletin board who was an opera singer and claimed that she could ALWAYS hear the pitch correction when it was being used. But in further questioning I learned that she was talking about pop recordings, many of which had used the programs as an added effect by OVER using it. But when a talented engineer carefully uses pitch correction, I honestly don't believe that anyone can tell the difference.

Today, the most popular and probably most sophisticated software for pitch correction is from a company called "Antares", and I have spent a lot of time working with the program. Far beyond the simple abilities to bend wrong notes into perfection the program allows you to "draw a curve" for the correction allowing you to still allow some of it to be incorrect, thus making it sound more natural and less manipulated. The notes sound "correct" but not really "perfect", which makes it totally believable.

And I have seen it used on recordings by some of the greatest opera and classical vocal singers of our time on CDs that have gotten stellar reviews. And no one knew the difference or that the program was even being applied. I was once at a crossover session with one of the greatest tenors of our time and I commented to the producer that he sounded incredible. I was then shocked when the producer said... "Just wait till we correct it a little!" It certainly didn't sound like it needed it to me. But today, perfection is an option. On another session I witnessed one of today's top sopranos being terribly off pitch for much of the session. But with careful usage of pitch correction the engineers were able to "craft" a gorgeous vocal "performance" that went on to win awards and become a best seller. And this happens a lot more often than people might think.

DIGITAL EDITING

Pop recordings are generally made with multiple overdubs and intensive mixing sessions, while classical recordings are usually made by recording the performances live (meaning without overdubs) to a two-track stereo master. So the postproduction on classical recordings is more involved with editing than with mixing. Several takes are recorded for each piece or section of music with the session producer taking notes on the musical score indicating places where he or she may have heard mistakes or imperfections in the performance. Then a master is assembled between these multiple takes by editing the best sections of each take together to make a

single final corrected master for duplication. In most cases the producer and artist choose one take which is generally the best and then in places where there may be mistakes or inferior playing they later drop in corrected notes or sections from other takes. Producers often use the phrase that they have everything "covered" at the end of a session to mean that they have correct notes for the entire piece of music across the various takes.

Editing in the days of analog tape recordings was done with razor blades and tape. But since actual damage was being done to master tapes the amount of editing was kept to a minimum and was usually limited to a few mistakes here and there. I can understand and defend a few edits in the interest of cutting down on the expense of many multiple takes of long movements and classical pieces. A few edits here and there are expected and totally acceptable in the interest of recording time. When I was working at BMG and I wanted to restore RCA's legendary Living Stereo recordings, I hired Grammy award winning engineer John Newton and his Sound Mirror company in Boston to do the job, and it was amazing to find how few edits these classic performances contained.

But with the advent of digital editing (where harsh physical razor blade cuts are not an issue) the digital technology has opened up a Pandora's box of "perfection" possibilities that never existed in the past as it is now possible to "construct" perfect performances from literally hundreds of edits. Today artists and producers can sit with the various takes of a recording and spend days, weeks, and even months, pouring over the musical score and making notations on a digital "road map" to then piece together the most perfect "performance" possible.

And this is being done by the same artists who then go on tour and perform the same piece in one dazzling pass in concert halls. But with digital editing the artists now know that they have the ability to make their performance EVEN BETTER in postproduction. For the artists, it is seriously addictive, and the time and money spent in expensive digital editing studios has caused the costs for producing classical recordings to explode in the past three decades.

I once saw a producer suffer through making over 1200 edits in a 60-minute recording by a world famous classical instrumentalist. They were literally taking the "attack" of one note and editing it to the decay of another from the artist's hand written instructions on the score. And I have seen artists nearly lose their recording contracts because their insistence on heavy editing had driven up the costs of making their recordings to a point where they would never turn any kind of a profit. And even "Live" concert recordings are corrected today, as there is usually what is called a "patch session" done later (or the next day) to make sure that all the correct notes are covered.

With thirty years of digital recording now behind us we now have an entire generation of classical artists who don't know any other way. So chances are, things won't change much in the future. But as the major labels generally back away from doing many new classical recordings, and more and more artists are now taking on the recording responsibilities themselves, the expense of these postproduction costs are waking a lot of them up to these expensive time consuming realities. And the smaller indie labels that now dominate the market don't have the budgets that the majors once had.

So hopefully we will get back to more "honest" classical recordings in the future.

But the "digital addiction" will be hard to kick...

After all... whether it's in sports, movies, books, or music, who DOESN'T want to be "perfect"?

For those of you that may not know my background, I worked for over twenty five years in the classical music business doing various jobs for PolyGram Classics, Telarc, Angel/EMI, Sony Classical, BMG Classics, and finally as President of Sony/BMG Masterworks before the whole business came crashing down around me in 2006. Today I work with a variety of artists and companies at my Grouse House Studios near Woodstock New York. Gilbert Hetherwick

SPRING COMES TO THE CATSKILLS!

This has certainly been a long hard winter. We got more than twice as much snow this year as we did the last two winters with over two feet on the ground for over six weeks straight.

But the snow has now all melted, I've cleared my hiking trails and taken the chain saw to several trees that came down in the various storms and blizzards over the past few months. You know you don't live in Manhattan anymore when you've taken chain saw lessons and know how to take down a damaged pine tree!

If you know anyone looking for a nice peaceful relaxing and romantic weekend get-away please send them information about my Grouse House Penthouse Suite! I get great reviews and people say they have never slept better!

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