

Verbal Communication Strategies for Recording Eurogenetic (Western Classical) Music

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Abstract

This research explores verbal communication strategies in classical music recording sessions, with a focus on the interaction between the recording team (producer and/or recording engineer) and performers. The paper outlines how challenges encountered on a self-produced record led to the development of a notation system by the researcher to address performance issues during recording classical music. The study evolved into investigating communication dynamics within recording sessions, emphasising the importance of effective feedback exchange. The paper outlines classical music production processes, highlighting the collaboration between performers and the recording team. It identifies gaps in existing literature concerning marking performance issues, translating them into constructive feedback, and how these interactions impact the recorded sound and production processes. Research questions centre on understanding and enhancing communication in recording sessions, aiming to observe and improve verbal interactions between recording teams and performers. Methodologically, a practice-based approach is adopted, integrating elements of ethnography, descriptive analysis, and case studies to capture the complexity of communication dynamics in studio work. Emerging themes include the performer's understanding of studio recording experiences and building trust between producers and performers. Importance is placed on setting mutual expectations, accommodating different communication styles and personalities, and involving performers in pre-production discussions. Further research directions involve exploring communication in diverse contexts and integrating recording studio practices into educational curricula. By continuing to investigate communication dynamics from both performer and recording team perspectives, efforts aim to refine communication strategies in classical music recording scenarios.

Keywords: Verbal Communication in Recording Studio, Classical Music Production, Producer-Performer Interaction, Communication Dynamics, Trust Building

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Introduction

I initially started with the idea of developing a notation system to mark performance issues on the score as I struggled while recording my master's final project (Ekici, 2022). I was recording Hungarian Dances by Brahms, and I could not give sufficient constructive feedback to the performers as I felt overwhelmed by the power I had as a producer. I knew what I wanted to say but did not know how to say it. I considered making a notation system to mark performance issues while recording classical music so that I could explain these verbally as feedback to the performers. However, during the build-up of current research, the topic gradually expanded from the development of a notation system to a consideration of all aspects of communication in the studio, as the notation part is simply one aspect of a complex system of communication. The notation system is still in development, and this paper focusses on the verbal communication in recording classical music.

What happens in a standard classical music recording session regarding involved parties and related activities? In contrast to a concert where music is performed only once, the music is usually performed multiple times in the recording studio, sometimes in tiny sections. Based on these recordings, the recording team compile the best version of these takes. The performer reads the score and interprets it during their performance. The producer listens to this performance in the control room. The producer reads the score simultaneously with the performer and marks the score to keep track of performance issues. When the performer finishes their take, these markings are translated into verbal feedback by the producer, becoming a dialogue between the performer and producer. This process of studio recording of a classical piece is demonstrated in Figure 1.

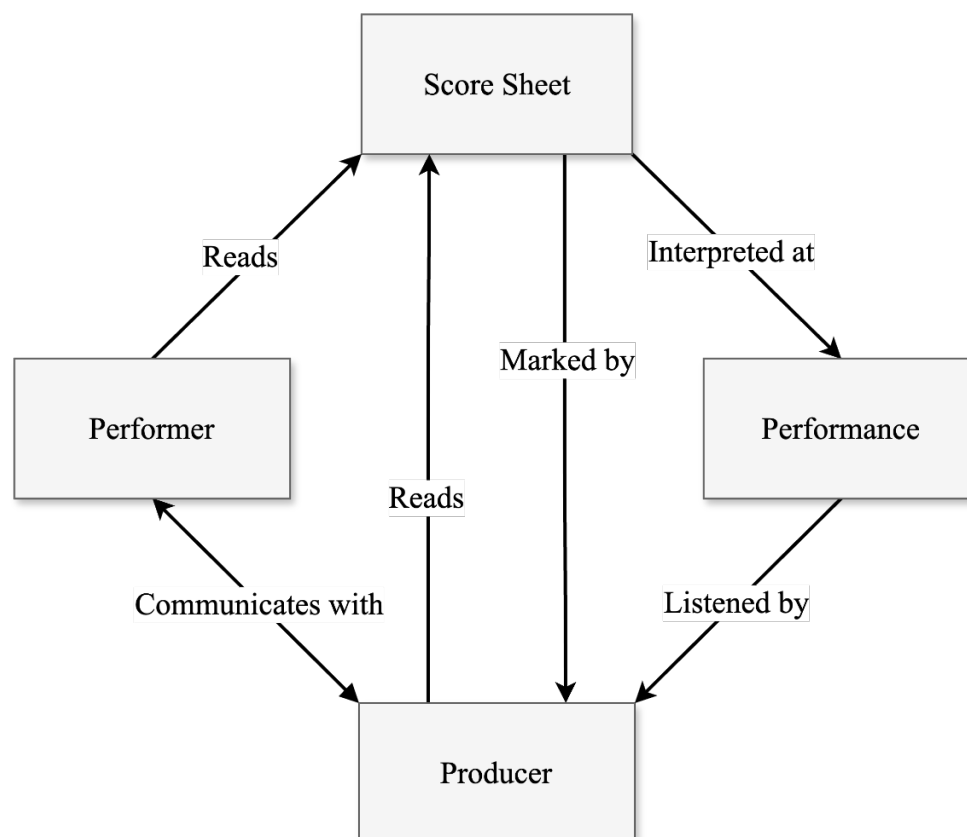


Figure 1: High-level process map of classical music recording in a studio setting.

The activities mentioned above are researched in detail in the previous literature. There are sources on how to read a score (Dickreiter, 2000), interpret a score based on a specific style (Dart, 1963; Kramer, 2010; Matthay, 2013), listen to music critically (Corey & Benson, 2017; Everest, 2006), or record classical music (Dickreiter, 1989; Haigh et al., 2020; King, 2016; Toft, 2019). However, there is almost no literature on marking the score for performance issues and converting these markings into constructive feedback. Due to the practice-based nature of sound recording and music production, these skills are gained over years of experience, but it is worth exploring this gap as a practitioner and researcher. This research combines practice-based research supported by qualitative interviews with professionals (performers, producers, engineers, and conductors).

Justification

To facilitate the development of performance-based mediation forms, it is necessary to move away from viewing recording as a straightforward, transparent capture process (Hepworth-Sawyer & Golding, 2011; Zagorski-Thomas, 2007). Instead, the music producer's role is integral to the recording process and contains a range of responsibilities (Hennion, 1989; Jarrett, 2012). A key responsibility is offering constructive feedback to performers during recording sessions (de Francisco, 2019) and this feedback significantly shapes the recordings. Music is inherently social, and the actions surrounding it are heavily influenced by the context in which they occur (North & Hargreaves, 2013). Like many other fields, communication in music production is often assumed to be straightforward. However, many experienced professionals have enhanced their production skills through verbal communication over time, raising the question of how this is achieved. Existing literature on communication in recording studios predominantly focuses on the technical aspects of popular music production and its theoretical implications (Greene & Porcello, 2004; Horning, 2004, 2015; Porcello, 2004).

Performers often experience stress related to their performances (Pecen et al., 2018), and many hold negative perceptions about the recording process (Blier-Carruthers, 2013a, 2013b; Fabian, 2008). Therefore, it is crucial to create a comfortable environment with the right vibe (Watson & Ward, 2013) and carefully choose words when providing feedback. But what exactly should these words be? We also recognise a wide variety of personalities, experience levels, and production styles. For example, a highly experienced performer might prefer to rely on a producer to complete the recording. In contrast, a less experienced performer might opt to self-produce with assistance from a recording engineer. All these possibilities highlight the need for sustainable communication strategies to address the diverse situations encountered in recording classical music. Brackett et al. (2023, 2024) have explored these strategies within an educational context for popular and jazz music productions. What distinguishes this research from Brackett et al.'s work is that it combines insights from qualitative interviews with experienced practitioners and tests these insights across multiple recording scenarios using a practice-based research methodology.

A better understanding of this topic also has potential to facilitate the more rapid development of novice engineers and producers into experts, as the interpersonal and communication aspects are often overlooked in the relevant literature (Haigh et al., 2020; King, 2016; Toft, 2019) and in the technical training of recording engineers. One of the aims is to make the knowledge held by experienced practitioners more accessible to a broader audience, which is a significant step towards democratising classical music production.

Research Questions

RQ1. “How does communication take place in a classical music recording session?”

RQ2. “How can we observe and improve the verbal communication between the recording team and the performers in classical music productions?”

Methodology

The topic under investigation is a vast domain that requires a multifaceted approach, necessitating the employment of practice-based research methodologies (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Candy, 2006; Scrivener & Chapman, 2004). In essence, the practice itself generates questions that enables further exploration. By integrating these questions with a conceptual framework, researchers can effectively incorporate their creative practice, methodologies, and outcomes into the research design. Given the centrality of practice to this project, the research is designed to initiate the cycle of practice and reflection at an early stage. Consequently, despite the research being in its pilot phase, I have already completed several production projects. This proceeding is based on my initial reflections and insights from these projects.

Throughout the research, I will employ additional tools to address the complexity of the topic. Specifically, I will integrate elements of ethnography (by observing other production sessions), descriptive analysis (through interviews with experienced performers and practitioners, followed by analysis of the data), and case studies (by synthesising these diverse perspectives in practice). The methodology will be adapted to the research context and requirements as needed.

I employ the Tonmeister approach in my practice, wherein the same individual fulfils the producer and recording engineer roles. However, there are other methods of producing classical recordings. Therefore, a critical component of this research is the observation of alternative work configurations. By comparing my practice with that of others, particularly those who operate within larger production teams, I aim to represent multiple approaches. Observing other practitioners in action is crucial, as it allows me to incorporate insights from these interviews into my practice, enriching the research with diverse perspectives.

Figure 2 illustrates the research design and project cycle. During the recording sessions, I will tailor my communication style to align with the repertoire, personalities, and experience levels of the participants. This approach will enable me to identify various methods of classical music production. Upon concluding the sessions, I will compose self-reflections on these experiences, which will serve as a basis for consultations with experienced performers and practitioners. In the pre-production phase of subsequent projects, I will integrate or explore new concepts derived from these consultations. The notation system referenced within the project cycle will be detailed in a later publication.

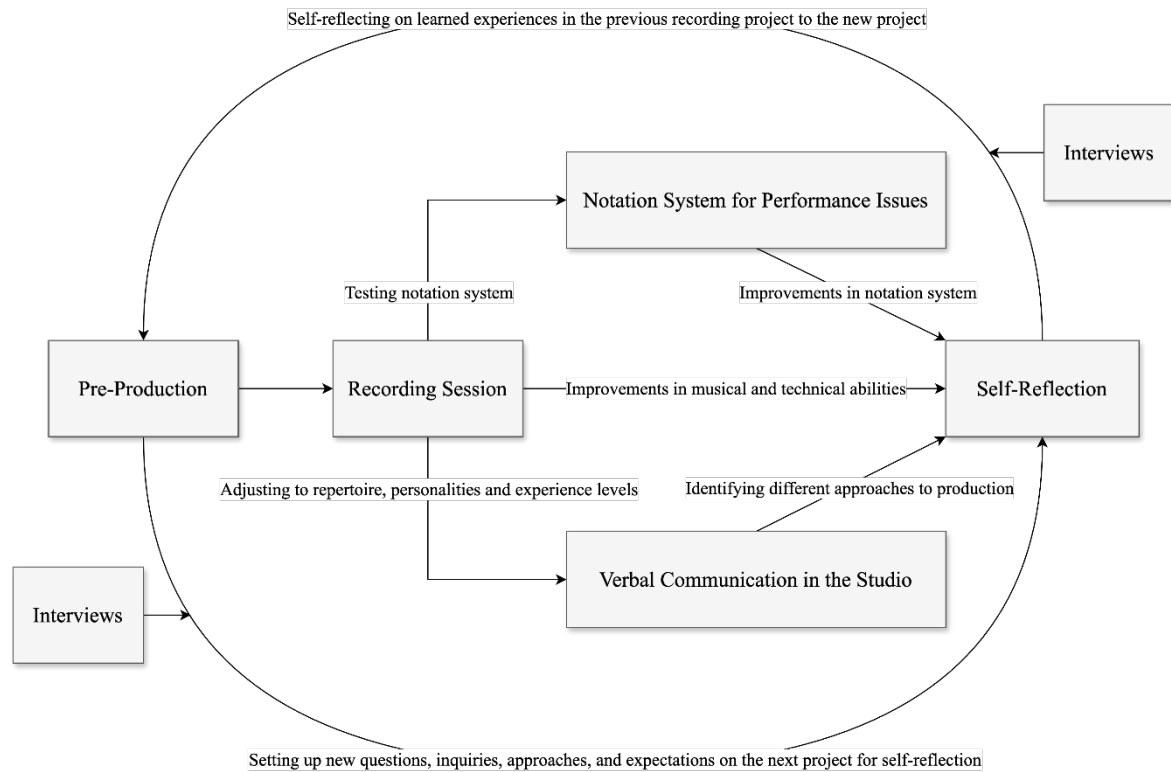


Figure 2: Project cycle.

Results

Theme - Performer's Understanding of Studio Recording Experience

The performer's previous experiences in the recording studio greatly shape the recording experience for the recording team. The more experienced the performers, the better understanding they develop regarding recording music in the studio, which means less psychological and technical work for the recording team. The producer performs two types of psychological work: emotional neutrality and empathetic emotional labour (Watson & Ward, 2013). Technical work involves recording and editing or overseeing both processes. The recording team can edit less if the performance is captured in longer sections.

Setting up expectations for the performance is essential, especially if the performer is not so used to the recording situations. At the beginning of the session, the performers should know that at least one to three complete takes need to be recorded to give an overall feeling for the music. Three full takes give a good variety of options and are manageable from the producer's perspective (in terms of time) and the performer's perspective (in terms of stamina). After or during these full takes, we can decide on the further steps, whether to start editing, record another complete take, or record small sections for patching. However, these mutual expectations should be set at the start of the recording session or pre-production stage, regardless of the performer's studio experience.

Another important moment for me was when an experienced performer nailed a technically challenging section, and we were cheerful. Before that moment, I was so focused on this section that I was unprepared for what should be recorded next. It was a suspenseful moment for me, and I was unsure what to say. Then, the performer finished celebrating and said, "OK, so what

is next?". That question was the essence of all I was doing; my role as a producer was to provide forward movement within a positive atmosphere. The experienced performer reminded me of my role to keep emotional neutrality and empathetic emotional labour in balance. Then, I quickly returned to the score and pointed out which sections needed to be covered next.

Experienced performers who are used to recording situations may function without a producer, and as a producer and recording engineer, recording team should be able to adapt to this workflow. In one case, we created an editing plan when the experienced performer started to hear himself after take 3. The listening session right after the recording brought us into a situation where we simultaneously criticised the recorded performance and created an editing strategy. It helped the artist's intention to maximise the expressivity as he thought some sections could have been performed differently. I realised that although my input is valuable, I should take a step back and help the performer create his ideal version in his head. I was there to record it and only tell what I think when asked. I also kept the session going and made sure every section was recorded at least once. There was no need for artistic direction.

Theme – Producer-Led Trust Building

The producer's role as communicator goes in hand with their role as facilitator. The producer should be able to gain the trust of the performer to yield the best results from the performer.

Different and adaptable ways of dealing with feedback are essential in building trust with the performer. During a patch recording session, the performer asked me, "Should I try once more?" I may not know exactly why the performer asks me this question, but I always want them to perform one more time if they are hesitant about any single aspect of it. If the request to record a section one more time comes from the performer, I will always accept it to ensure we do not skip anything from the performer's perspective.

One of the experienced performers I work with is recording unrecorded works of a 20th-century composer. Since the performer has worked on these compositions as part of his doctoral studies, he has spent significant time on how to proceed toward the project artistically, musically, and philosophically. It has been a fruitful conversation for me, especially as I learned about the details of his doctoral studies. I also asked him, "How do you treat the composition when you feel some sections are underdeveloped?" He replied that there were not enough descriptions on the score. As a classically trained pianist, he had to take a step back from his usual approach of sticking to the piece's directions and instead, interpret the piece based on the aesthetics of the late-romantic and modernist periods and specifically 1920s as the piece we worked on was written in 1929. In this conversation, I realised we had the opportunity to be freer than usual in a recording session for a classical piece. We had more room to explore and try out new expressions as the piece had almost no written directions for the performer. Overall, it was helpful that we had these conversations so that the performer was comfortable with his vision being understood by the producer. Such musical conversations also help build the project's vision and prove the recording team's ability to interpret music.

Discussion

Most of the insights I have discussed so far have been from my practice in an educational context: working with students without a budget to hire performers, assistants, engineers, etc. As the study progresses, I plan to explore these ideas in different contexts by attending sessions

with other practitioners/professionals and seeing them in action to enhance my understanding of the practice.

Nonetheless, this early work in an educational setting has raised some interesting issues particular to that context. For instance, before commencing my studies, I anticipated many performers would be eager to participate in recording sessions. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Encouraging performers to enter the studio proved to be challenging, perhaps due to their lack of prior experience of familiarity with this context. Ideally, the students would have opportunities to practice being in recording studios during their studies, so there is no fear about it, and they have reasonable expectations about recording studios.

The institutional attitude toward recording studio resources is an upcoming topic in this research. Interestingly, despite offering these experiences at no cost, the demand remains relatively low. Educators worldwide have reported similar findings, indicating that the practice of recording is often only exercised if it is fully integrated into teaching and curricula.

An additional 15 to 20 interviews are planned to be conducted and subsequently coded as part of this research. This process is expected to yield new themes and insights that will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of communication in classical music production. By expanding the dataset through these interviews, the study aims to capture a broader range of perspectives, which will enhance the robustness and depth of the analysis. Identifying emerging themes will provide valuable directions for further research and refine the existing theoretical framework.

I need to conduct additional recording sessions to enhance my adaptability in various production environments. By engaging in more recording sessions, I aim to refine my ability to respond effectively to diverse musical contexts and challenges, ultimately improving my technical skills and creative decision-making processes.

While theoretical strategies often serve as a foundation, the realities of actual practice may differ significantly. Participating in recording sessions can reveal practical insights and tips that deviate from established strategies, highlighting the dynamic nature of the recording process. Therefore, another study is recommended to observe the practical realities of such strategies.

The study also aims to further explore the concept of self-producing performers in classical music productions, as experienced performers increasingly tend to adopt this approach. This investigation aims to understand the motivations and outcomes associated with artists taking on the dual role of performer and producer.

Conclusion

The exploration of verbal communication strategies in Eurogenetic (Western Classical) music recording sessions has revealed critical insights into the dynamics between recording teams and performers. This research underscores the significance of effective verbal communication in achieving successful classical music recordings, highlighting the roles of both producers and performers in fostering a collaborative and supportive studio environment. Through practice-based research, including qualitative interviews and case studies, this study emphasises the importance of adaptability, trust-building, and mutual understanding in communication during recording sessions.

Key themes emerging from this study include the performer's understanding of studio recording experiences and producer-led trust-building. Performers' familiarity with studio settings can significantly impact the recording process, while producers must navigate emotional and technical challenges to maintain a positive atmosphere. The producer's role as both communicator and facilitator is pivotal, ensuring performers feel respected and understood, ultimately enhancing the artistic quality of the recordings. Moreover, the study highlights the necessity of clear and constructive feedback, recognising that each recording session presents unique challenges that require tailored communication strategies.

The implications of this research extend beyond traditional classical music production, suggesting that the integration of recording studio practices into educational curricula can better prepare emerging musicians and producers for the complexities of the recording process. The findings also call for further investigation into institutional attitudes toward recording studio resources and the growing trend of self-producing performers, offering potential for future research.

By examining the factors related to communication in classical music recording sessions, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the producer-performer dynamic and its impact on musical outcomes. Given that performers and producers often have differing values and perspectives, I will continue to investigate both angles to delineate the impact of communication during the production stage. When a session begins, both parties typically adjust their communication styles swiftly to achieve optimal results and ensure a collaborative and effective working environment. This study helps to explore how these adjustments facilitate mutual understanding and contribute to the overall success of the production process.

Although the evolution of classical music production processes is rather slow, refining verbal communication strategies will remain essential for enhancing collaboration, creativity, and the overall recording experience. Ultimately, this study aims to inspire practitioners to embrace constructive and inclusive communication approaches, enriching the artistry and success of classical music productions.

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Disclosure Statement

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