

How is the Bach Violin Project Different?

What began as a post-dinner idea to record 'a bit of Bach' soon ballooned into a large-scale project encompassing all six of J.S. Bach's solo violin Sonatas and Partitas (BWV 1001-6) in audio and video format, with accompanying discussion of performing practice, the collaborative creative process, technical choices and challenges, and the ideal to see the act of recording as an artwork in itself. This is typical of me, and – I quickly realised – of James. If something is worth doing at all it must be done to its fullest potential, and one must welcome and embrace the element of struggle inherent in achieving it.

The project aims to be thought-provoking and innovative on a number of levels:

- The first audio-visual (DVD) set of the complete cycle of sonatas and partitas;
- Unusually open discussion of the process from conception to completion;
- Unseating notions of the definitive in artistic practice;
- Displaying a diaspora of performing practices, instrument set-ups, and philosophical ideals;
- Experimenting with and perhaps subverting conventional notions of studio recording;
- Seeking to show that Bach's music, long fêted with canonic status, need not inhabit a closed artistic and technical world, but can respond to less conventional approaches.

Overruling Convention?

- Convention embraces the academy-trained performer, who is legitimised by 'big name' teachers, competition prizes, debuts in certain important concert venues, and a highly valuable instrument perhaps with provenance involving an iconic player of the past.
- Convention expects the performer to interpret music either according to modernist taste, or with deference to the 'composer's intentions' (HIP).
- Convention weds a performer to a record label – the longer-established, the better.
- Convention places the recording artist in a fine acoustic space, wherein they will deliver several 'takes' within the allotted time.

I take no particular issue with any of this – it is a tried and tested formula that works, and of course there are myriad exceptions to prove the general rule. But none of this is my experience, and I necessarily come to the recording platform from an alternative angle.

Recording as Collaborative Artistic Process...

My necessary subversion of industry conventions will be most apparent in the finished product in terms of varied artistic approaches to the individual works (discussed here in a separate article). One key thing, though, is what I might describe as a whole-hearted embrace of the recording as art form. Of course, the act of recording is a major part of most musicians' lives these days – what started off, as Timothy Day suggests in his *A Century of Recorded Music* (Yale, New Haven & London, 2000), as an entertainment technology, soon became a means of laying down performance 'for posterity'. In the post-World War II era, new editing processes allowed recordings to become idealised versions of live events; hence the now unseated notion of the 'definitive' performance, maybe. Often, it seems, the recording's own artistic value and purpose can be side-lined. One praises a recording for its remarkable parity to the live event (which is seen by many as the theoretical ideal even with its inevitable faults. One perhaps considers the best thing for technological processes is for them to 'disappear', as it were. This said, a number of figures – such as the controversial pianist, Glenn Gould – saw the potential of recording as a stand-alone art form.

...Promotes Creative Freedom

Our methodology seeks to maximise the possibilities afforded by the recording process and recorded medium – to embrace recording wholeheartedly as an artistic ideal in its own right. The performer works in a relaxed environment. The clock is not ticking; there is no financial imperative to complete work in a specified time. There are as few contradictions as possible between artistic and technical ideals. Instead, the performer and recordist are each given as much artistic freedom as possible – always with the opportunity to do something again (and again) if a daring fingering or bowing does not come off, or if a camera wobbles. Performer and engineer work in partnership to craft the artistic product. Risk-taking – maybe discouraged in some recording environments, and only partially/rarely embraced in live concert – is actively encouraged. There is a safety net, so ideas can be more freely explored. The editing process is taken at a relaxed pace: again, there are no time limits, financial imperatives or market expectations to impede the shaping of a final work with which all parties are satisfied. This, at any rate, is our ideal.