

**Preview: Recording in Cleveland—the making of  
Joshua Smith’s second Bach CD (Part II)**

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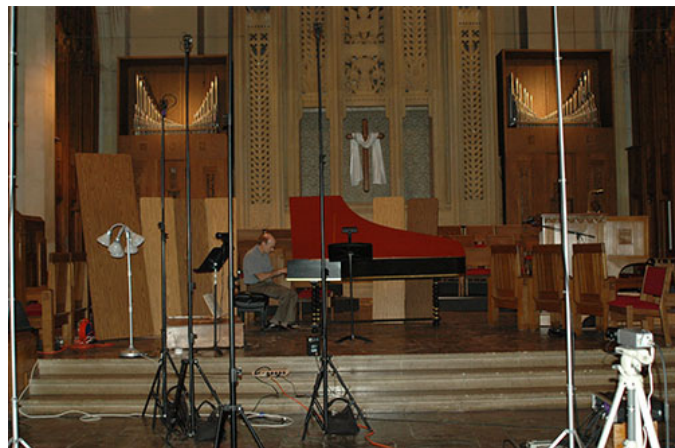


Last week we talked about how the project team for Joshua Smith’s first Bach CD came together – Smith’s introduction to harpsichordist Jory Vinikour and his very positive experience with producer Erica Brenner and audio engineer Tom Knab in a previous recording session. Disc no. 2 would add violinist Allison Edberg and cellist Ann Marie Morgan for continuo sonatas and the Trio Sonata from ‘The Musical Offering’, and like the previous disc, would be recorded at First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights.

The sessions were scheduled during the middle of April – taking profit of the musicians’ appearance on the Baldwin-Wallace Bach Festival but also during a rather intensive week of performances and recording sessions with Mitsuko Uchida at Severance Hall. The schedule became even tighter for logistical reasons: Erica Brenner decided to avoid any sessions between 2 and 5 in the afternoon – learning from the team’s earlier experiences with school busses and other traffic noises in the neighborhood.

The tight scheduling also didn’t allow for a lot of rehearsal time before the group went before the microphones. “You need to work with musicians who are at the top of their game”, Joshua Smith noted. “If you take some artists out of their comfort zone, they’re not able to function. You need to be able to adjust and adapt quickly.” Having done

this many times before, Erica Brenner wasn’t too worried. “Even though everyone had only met two days prior to beginning the sessions, I was confident that everything would work.” But this wasn’t the environment in which musicians usually operate. Brenner: “In a studio recording – which is not a live performance – one can set up mics and musicians to optimize the recording without the consideration of an audience. But without an audience, musicians need to rely on a different set of motivations to get the music across. One of those motivations is a sense of collaboration with the other musicians, the producer and the engineer, which I find to be one of the most satisfying aspects of the recording process.”



When we dropped in to observe, the group had already recorded the ‘Musical Offering’ trio sonata the day before and had just done the first take of one of the sonatas with cello continuo. Everyone was very conscious of little glitches in their individual parts they wanted to fix, but there were some ensemble issues too. Vinikour and Morgan were concerned about matching their articulation. Some also thought that the cello needed to be more present. Vinikour, who is always ready with a humorous remark, said, “Ann Marie, if you just had steel strings and used more vibrato, you’d be louder.”

Smith commented that today’s conditions were more humid and changed the sound of the flute. Tom Knab noted that in the second disc, “the

cello brings a completely different color to the ensemble, it's more warm and luscious. This is much more of a chamber music situation."

Erica Brenner, who had been keeping detailed notes in her score, had a number of suggestions to make. As a flutist herself, she knows the music cold, but as a producer, she's careful not to assert her own interpretational ideas too strongly. "I do need to push back and suggest things, but there can be a fine line between guiding and insisting. I only got in the way once", she recalled at the end of the recording sessions. "I had some militant ideas about a rhythm, but Josh was going for something else." "But it was good to have outside ears", Smith replied. This time, she noted that runs in one of the movements seemed to get "bogged down." Smith agreed. "It needs more of a cascade."

Before the retake, we went into the sanctuary with Tom Knab to have a look at the recording setup. He had obviously been very busy before the first measure of music was ever recorded. "Tom is good at asking the right questions", Brenner notes, and these are asked and answered before the musicians arrive. "Most of my work ends with the sound check", he noted. He had set a number of banquet tables up on end as



sound reflectors, and arranged a platform for the cellist. The sight lines were not the best between cello and harpsichord. Morgan had her back to Vinikour and was separated by several more feet than in a conventional concert setup, and Smith was well separated as well. But it produced the sound the team was after without making communication too difficult for the musicians. Brenner noted that "Tom does a great job at finding out what is comfortable for musicians. Slight changes in position can make musicians uncomfortable. It's important to be flexible."

Tom Knab explained his microphone setup. Having worked early on for Telarc, he subscribes to the philosophy of minimal miking. He used two main mics powered by vacuum tubes along with

a set of auxiliary instruments he would only bring into the mix to fix balances if absolutely necessary.

Back in the makeshift 'control booth', we watched and listened to the next set of takes. In the old days, sessions were recorded on magnetic tape, first on open-reel machines, then as the digital era arrived, on digital audio tape. Now there are no moving parts to the process, although it's tempting to say "tape rolling" at the beginning of each take. As Tom Knab kept a meticulous log of different takes, Erica Brenner was busy circling details in her score and making notes of items that needed to be re-recorded. With the current state of technology, audio micro-surgery has become sophisticated enough that only a few measures need to be re-recorded to fix tiny glitches, and with great efficiency, Brenner asks the musicians to play measures 30-33, then 45-50.

At the time this article was written, the production team has finished the first edit and all the musicians have been listening to the second. Brenner notes that as a flutist, she needed to learn "to listen from the bottom up rather than just listening to the flute. Then I find myself listening to one part at a time." In critiquing the edited versions, Brenner notes, "you have to have a good perspective – confidence and a healthy understanding of what is important." Things can be made nearly perfect, but "you can easily end up with something sterile." Knab agrees. "In post-production you hear things you make judgments about but don't have to take action on. I ask myself, 'is this great enough for a world-class recording?'" Smith also tries not to obsess about microscopic flaws that remain. "99% of people will not notice."

During the next few weeks, the process will result in a version the entire team is happy with, and the disc will enter the mysterious process of "mastering." Tom Knab says "that could mean blessing it and sending it off to the company as is, or it might mean adjusting levels between pieces and mitigating any noise, if possible." And so Bach is sent off via a PreMaster CD or DDP (Disc Description Protocol – the DVD form of a PMCD), for replication and packaging. And by sometime in the fall, fans of Joshua Smith will be able to enjoy his latest recording of Bach's flute music.

*(Photos courtesy of Erica Brenner. Top: Ann Marie Morgan and Joshua Smith with Tom Knab in the background. Middle: Phillip Cucchiara tunes the harpsichord. Bottom: Tom Knab adjusts a microphone.)*