Introduction

There are no doubt a number of ways in which popular and classical musics can inform each other. But for me, there are several important distinctions between the various popular music genres and truly acoustic music; the differentiation between electronically mediated and acoustic sound being the single most significant. Classical music performance is perhaps the last remaining genre to remain almost exclusively acoustic: even jazz and folk are more commonly heard with some degree of amplification.

Classical music's adherence to acoustic performance is not only one of its most distinguished features; it's one of its great strengths. The acoustic mode of listening differs fundamentally from that of listening to electronically reproduced or mediated sound. It permits, indeed, requires adaptive listening – a kind of refocusing of one's consciousness – an acuity, the exercise of which, is largely impossible or, at the very least, severely impeded, when listening to electronically reproduced sound, which folds all the multi-dimensional variables into one undifferentiated source.

Electronic sound mediation, in effect, takes much of the control away from the musician and reassigns it to the engineer: dynamics become balance, timbre becomes equalised tone quality, reverberation is stripped of its connotations of acoustic space and become *spatiality*. Furthermore, the popular music recording studio removes musicians from their familiar performance spaces to which their musicality and performative skills are adapted. Their isolation in booths that only allow them to hear on headphones the sound of one another's disembodied instruments, facilitates the engineer's isolation of each instrumental sound as a discrete sonic component on a separate recording track. In so doing, the engineer acquires control even of space and time.

My point here is simply to highlight the fact that classical and contemporary popular music recording practices are quite distinct. The pop engineer is much more overtly creative - in many respects pop recordings are constructs founded in the studio; the genre itself, an outcrop of technology. Classical music is not, and although its recordings are no less electronically mediated, this is no reason for it to adopt popular music practices or become infused with its effects. The role of the classical engineer is, in my view, not one of creator so much as facilitator. It's a craft that is best deployed in furthering the aims and transliterating the presumed sounds and intentions of classical musicians as faithfully as possible. This is not to suggest that it's in any sense transparent: it too involves manipulation and subjective practices that have tended to escape all but the most superficial scrutiny.

As long as we're unable to record sound in the continuously mutable way in which we listen to live, acoustic music, the fidelity of classical music recording to real world listening experience will remain a compromise.
For this reason, I think musicians and practitioners alike, should be encouraged to consider more carefully what the objectives of classical music recording really are; rather than continuing tacitly to presume that perfect fidelity is the ideal toward which we ineluctably move closer all the time.