

The Commercial Sound

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WHEN I was asked to give a talk concerning the problems of the commercial world of a record company, I found it not too easy to select the proper theme. After some thought, I came to the conclusion that it would be of considerable interest if I investigated the problems which occur at the boundary points between the engineers and their non-technical partners—in

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other words, the areas of the business people, the sales people, the marketing people, the producers and the artists, the stores and the customers—and to see where our mutual problems overlap or perhaps even collide.

As far as the exact technical problems are concerned I only want to make the brief determination that they are the professional life to the engineer, spooky and too expensive to the business and marketing man, a source of annoyance to the producer, suspicious to the artist, and, on the whole, mysterious to the distributors, dealers and clients.

But I did want to speak about an area which borders on the activities of the studio engineer. In this regard, I considered music production as the most immediate area from the standpoint of the engineer: What does one have to ask of the performance and what can one expect of the engineering? The title "Commercial Sound," which might sound somewhat profane to strictly professional ears, was not chosen to insure a well attended lecture but rather because it is always those people who cry loudest for "commercial sound" who are unable to see clearly the boundary between musical content and technical packaging. As Dr. Steinhausen¹ once said so poignantly, "it is just those people who during and even after the recording session expect from engineering a replacement for what *they* were unable to accomplish."

The following descriptions should not be taken as a polemic, but rather as an attempt to bring to this division between artistic offering, manufacturing, and the activities of the artistic-technical personnel which encompasses both activities, some sort of guide-posts—perhaps even as a small bit of education for future producers among you.

First of all, let us look at the situation as it always should be. To those who might think me naive, I would like to explain that this example is obviously somewhat idealized. It starts with a producer who only concludes contracts which he can live up to, with artists who represent, in actuality and not only reputedly, significant talent in the role they are to play. It follows that these artists are given the opportunity to fully know their part on the day of the recording session, and that the producer, director and perhaps even the studio engineer had previously coordinated, controlled and corrected their individual roles in this session. The orchestra too will have been rehearsed diligently in such a well functioning production, especially if its role in the recording is a sizeable one.

For realizing the best results from this performance, one will select an excellent hall with the best acoustical properties since the resulting sound is next in order of importance after the value of the composition and its interpretation.

One will then conscientiously choose the physical setup, and, hopefully, make clear to the fully assembled performers, in calm terms, the importance of the impending unique performance. This part of the task is, incidentally, the responsibility of the producer. In such a production, in which nothing whatever goes awry, the performers long before have been precisely instructed as to what is expected of them in front of the microphone. The producer will not attempt to gel the setup during the session, possibly even against the desires of the artists. In the control room there will be no senseless debates about hoarseness, sibilants or presence of the tympani sound, and in the end there will be a minimum of required editing.

I don't want to go into the many equally important details

involved. This record will, no doubt, become a major *happening*; it will be well reviewed by the press and will become a world-wide success. But above that, a recording *must* be made in this way today if it is to enjoy *any* success.

What happens after this point is a matter of precise engineering. The fact that engineering will know the requirements all the way to the mass-produced disks and tapes is a matter for which we rely on the professionalism of the engineering community. In the engineering profession certainly, nobody will measure output level with a manometer, or tape speed with a light meter. This might sound banal to you, but parallel things occur in the aforementioned professional disciplines now and then. But I do not wish to give the impression that the complex requirements of recording production could be served using a simple set of devices. In the quest for more cooperation between the various segments contributing to such a project, I want to point out the vast gap between the methods of commercial technique and engineering technology, which would not exist if the artistic side of the effort would utilize the same systematic methods that are used in engineering. I am convinced that even outside the world of engineering it is possible—and logical—to eliminate accidents and failures, for here, as there, all it costs is money.

To make all of this more graphic, allow me to construct a negative example. First of all, the producer sees himself in a bad situation since most repertory ideas are considered white elephants to begin with. He therefore tries to switch to a strategy of "special interpretation" of a work which already has been recorded in abundance. Such special interpretation is almost always restricted to the world of *stars* and first-rate orchestras. While searching for such stars, the producer soon discovers that very few suitable artists can be found in his own stable. Aside from that, he probably will have considerable contractual problems with Miss X and Mr. Y. So he arrives at a recording date with such a compromise cast that everyone feels a miracle would have to happen to make this recording anything more than a mediocre effort.

In the spirit of this example, there will doubtlessly be available at the designated time and place only one suitable hall or studio, whose sole claim to suitability will be that it has enough square footage to accommodate the entire cast. Besides all this, we must assume that there have not been sufficient rehearsals, that the soloists are not altogether familiar with their parts, and that the conductor is scheduled to conduct a concert only three hours hence. Aside from the fact that this should be sufficient to cancel the whole thing, the producer now commits another serious error: he thinks the engineer will be able to evolve a brilliant recording from these haphazardly assembled fragments, using his magic conglomeration of machines.

At this point, though, I would like to say that nowadays even the production side of the fence is relearning an old truth: Artistically demanding and commercially viable recordings cannot be obtained by indiscriminate editing or "cooking with acoustic artificial flavoring." Even if a valuable work is praised now and then which has been recorded by overwhelmingly excellent artists but with inadequate sound realization, this is no proof against that "old truth." The most skilled jeweler would not, in the long run, stay in business if he offered his valuable gems in tin mountings.

The next mistake is committed if, after the recording gets under way, it turns out that the conductor, the producer, and the artists have entirely different understandings of the

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piece, and if the producer now tries to convert these people to his point of view.

The next error is committed if the recording dates are so arranged as to make it necessary to record small segments without any logical sequence. The next, when the call goes out from this now surely nervous group of performers for the "artistry" of the engineer which always salvages everything, and the last, when this mish-mash is actually offered for sale.

Of course I have painted a rather bleak picture, for naturally such a coincidence of failures will never occur in major productions. On the other hand, it is useful to remember that a *producers' manual* does not exist. Many of you could find yourself in a position some day to produce or direct such sessions, and what better way to learn than from both good and bad examples.

But let's get back to the moment where the man at the console — and this predominantly for pop music — is asked that he make the sound more *commercial*. What is meant by that? Well, the performers would like their voices and instruments to sound so beautiful that the buying public will literally tear the recordings out of the dealers' hands. They mean that instruments, basically, are instruments and voices, basically, are voices. Therefore, they assume it should be possible to record every instrument and every voice with bell-like clarity, since they have already heard instruments and voices for which this has been done perfectly. It follows, according to the artist, that it can be only a matter of engineering if Miss X or Mr. Y doesn't come out that way. Perhaps the compressor is not aligned properly or the microphone is too high? Couldn't it be that 3 dB more highs have to be set? And before you know it, the control room has become a laboratory. The sweating engineers drag in ever more gadgets and black boxes. Engineering is king, while artists and producers watch with approving glances. And somehow after all that, things *do* sound better. (In any case, everyone convinces everyone else that it is so, and after hours of monkeying around nobody has any idea anymore how the whole thing sounded to begin with.)

At the end, both the tired-out producer and artists will pat the engineer on the back and will not skimp with praise. Furthermore, they will tell him that he, and only he, is capable of handling their recording the next time.

If this engineer doesn't wake up the second time around to what is being played here, then he is well on his way to selling his "mixing soul" to the devil and once again is helping a producer and an artist to live a technically subsidized sham life.

The end then looks something like this: the artists, rather than strain at all, record heaps of performance pieces for the engineer in a slovenly manner, relying on his technical eagerness to magically produce a recording for them. Worst of all, these producers and artists find nothing wrong with this, but on the contrary, will praise this engineer as the true perfection of his profession.

Here, I do not exaggerate. I have actually experienced such cases, and the people involved didn't even notice it. Naturally the results of such a method are no better (and more importantly) no more saleable than solid artistic workmanship. As soon as this fact has been realized, the eager engineer in our example will have to look around for new technical tricks if he intends to continue to enjoy the praises of the producer and artist whom he himself has brought up this way. This is a vicious circle concerning which every aspiring young engineer should be informed *before* he under-

takes this profession. He can prevent it from ever coming to this point if he convinces the artists in a firm but friendly manner that the steps necessary to improve their artistry have to be taken by them alone. The artists, on the other hand, won't ever think of taking over his technical duties.

The young engineer should be aware that equalizers, limiters, compressors and the entire instrument pack available to him are intended to effect *quantitative* corrections — to correct for technical insufficiencies of the studio, the recording medium, the disk limitations — not, however, to improve upon the quality of the sound source! The sound source can not be improved, since that which needs correcting hardly ever lies in the technically controllable ranges. Should the technical-equipment arsenal nevertheless be brought to bear on problems which are actually created by lacks in artistry, we then get the well known sound conglomeration characterized by flattened dynamic range, shrill presence, and pumping reverberation which is flaunted by many professionals, especially in the field of pop music, as being the prerequisite for market success.

In the field of serious music, the problems are a bit clearer, although we find some tendencies even there to apply exaggerated technical tricks. Many modern-day recordings with metallicly sharp treble and unnatural proximity of sound sources to microphones testify to that fact.

What the crux of the problem is, was most dramatically demonstrated to me in the presence of several of my colleagues some years ago. Two orchestras were to be recorded in the same hall using the identical microphone setup, one after the other. The musicians of the first orchestra frequently asked after playbacks whether the strings couldn't be set louder and more brilliant and the basses less muddy (they believed these to be technical inadequacies). The sound nuances of the second orchestra were perfect right from the start. The difference lay solely in better instruments and playing technique.

And so we have arrived at the nucleus of the theme: The *commercial sound*; — that fascinating sounding, and therefore more saleable realization of a composition — is nothing else but the well-aimed coincidence of optimal performance attributes *in front* of the microphone. It is assumed, of course, that perfect engineering facilities are involved, but no more than that! The secret of success (and with it the business reward) in recorded music of all types, lies then as now in the culmination of talent, phantasy, temperament, and perfection in front of the microphone, and simple technical precision behind it.

In the future, the recording business must introduce to recording production, as well as to the research into and catering to the market, the same logical methodology which dictates the world of science, law, and administration. In an attempt to make a method of success, record production will not slacken its efforts, but, quite the contrary, will try to replace empirical methods with systematic ones, even if this means giving up some degree of enjoyable freedom of action.

As technically trained and musically interested professionals, we can be of significant help to our colleagues in the A & R department in this process. In the final effect, we can help in reducing costs and increasing the chances for success. In short, we can improve the product of our common task by means of technical and business systematics. It is in this field of influence, and not solely by the skillful operation of consoles, that the important, valuable, and superior professional task of a studio engineer lies.