

## RECORDING AT ST CECILIA'S HALL

*The process of producing recordings of instruments in the Raymond Russell Collection at St Cecilia's Hall presents many special challenges. Edinburgh-based Delphian Records has recently completed recording "Instruments from the Russell Collection II, with our own John Kitchen, scheduled for release in November 2005. Previous Delphian recordings at St Cecilia's Hall have included "Instruments from the Russell Collection I" (John Kitchen) and "La Paix du Parnasse", which featured Lucy Carolan and John Kitchen in a programme of solos and duets by François Couperin. "Soundboard" caught up with Delphian's Managing Director, Paul Baxter, to gain an exclusive insight into how the initial idea develops through to the CD appearing on the shelves and garnering reviews.*

*In the case of the two "Instruments from the Russell Collection" discs, and others, how do you go about crafting the programme?*

The A&R (artist and repertoire) aspects of the company's activities were not, at Delphian's outset, my responsibility. I picked up the reins on this one three years ago. Since then, I've surrounded myself with a solid board of advisors who've seen me through a steep learning curve. I'm confident that experiences over the last five years have equipped me with a good sense of what's worthwhile and that which stands a fair chance of commercial success. My aim is to offset the costs of the former with the latter, resulting in, what I hope, is an interesting and uncompromising catalogue. It's a delight to work with an artist of John's calibre. He can draw on his wealth of experience by performing appropriate repertoire on each instrument, demonstrating their strengths and differences in an illuminating way.

*Preparing for a recording session in such a specialized environment must require a large amount of forward planning. How does it all come together on the day?*

Given that this is a recording of solo instruments with an experienced artist, the logistics are relatively relaxing! I asked John to confirm the instruments to be recorded three months before the sessions, then he and I both



*John Raymond, Assistant Curator at St Cecilia's Hall, gets down to some fine tuning for a recording session.*

collaborated with the Curator and Director. A month after this John devised a list of repertoire and then we produced a recording timetable. Because of the difficulties presented by extraneous noise at St Cecilia's, we recorded this project over three days. The engineer and I were there early on the first morning, setting up and ensuring everything was ready for the artist's arrival, and off we went!

The secret lies in attempting to recreate a successful live concert environment

*What particular difficulties are presented by recording these historic instruments in terms of*

*achieving a true-to-life sound?*

The secret of producing a great-sounding recording lies in listening to the instrument and performer in a successful live concert environment, and attempting to recreate that during the recording process. Although the difficulties presented by the instruments themselves are fairly surmountable, making the recordings of the individual instruments does require some thought.



*John Kitchen playing (top) the Goermans-Taskin double-manual harpsichord, Paris, 1763/83-84, and (above) the square piano by Andrew Rothead, Edinburgh c.1805, during Delphian recording sessions at St Cecilia Hall.*

*You've mentioned the problems caused by extraneous noise due to the Hall's situation on a busy road (Cowgate). How do you overcome these difficulties during a recording?*

Working within the environs of St Cecilia's presents the biggest problem to any engineer. Indeed, most engineers wouldn't chance compromising themselves by hoisting microphones in

that Hall. The noise is formidable. I don't want to give too much away - suffice to say that Delphian has some fairly advanced noise reduction equipment. The process is a compromise among how much noise to remove, hence how little to leave in, and what lengths one ought to go to in recreating the hall's acoustic, which will have been significantly removed in the noise reduction process. Essentially, it's an arduous process, but I hope that it's worth it, and that the instruments and artist sound as they do in concert.

*Tell us about some of the special equipment you use.*

What makes Delphian's recordings 'special' or unique amongst its peer recording labels is the fact that all the recordings are made at 24-bit resolution. This offers many more opportunities at the post-production stage - I can achieve more noise reduction before giving rise to artefacting (strange sounds arising from using digital techniques), etc. Delphian also has a special silent recording computer - we don't record to tape. It's large, and hosts over 500 gigabytes of removable hard drives. I designed and built the machine myself, and its role takes a couple of days off the editing process.



*Paul follows the score in the control room.*

*What is the next stage in the process after the recording sessions have been completed?*

There's the editing. The 'marked-up' scores go to the engineer for editing, plus all the 24-bit WAV files, which will be transferred on portable hard-drive format. The engineer produces a first edit, copies of which go to the producer and the artist for comment. The engineer will effect any changes requested and then the disc comes to me for mastering. That's when the noise reduction takes place. Gain levels are thoughtfully adjusted to make the album flow cohesively, and the spaces between tracks are finalised. Eventually we end up with a master for production, the artist having been consulted at every stage of the process.

Delphian's artwork has been fairly unconventional from the outset...

*The covers of Delphian releases are often interesting and sometimes unconventional. Do the ideas and images come from different sources?*

I am ready to acknowledge that the artwork isn't the most important part of a recording, but nonetheless it does play a significant role. For this reason, Delphian's artwork has been fairly unconventional from the outset, often focusing on details of an image, which is displayed in its entirety somewhere else in the booklet. I currently use two independent designers. I ask everybody involved in the project in question if they have any thoughts apropos cover images. Sometimes the covers are obvious - an organ case for example. More often inspiration is a bit of a challenge. I then take the assembled ideas to the appointed designer and seek his thoughts. It's to be hoped that the

end result reflects the collaboration and complements the repertoire on the disc. I can reveal that the cover design for "Instruments from the Russell Collection II" has already been decided.

*Previous St Cecilia's Hall recordings: "Instruments from the Russell Collection 1" and "La Paix du Parnasse" are two of the many Delphian recordings to have received stellar reviews from the media. What makes you more nervous: waiting for the reviews to appear or making the recording?*

Approaching the recording can be fraught with potential problems, though the inevitable reception from reviewer is slightly nerve-wracking. We all say that we don't care what reviewers think - that's not the reason for our doing it. We do care though. Were it the case that reviewers were predictable, then nerves wouldn't be involved, but one can never be sure how a recording will be greeted by an individual reviewer. Here's hoping that *Instruments from the Russell Collection 2* will meet with the same praise as did its predecessor!

*[Photographs: Raymond Parks]*

*'putting  
technology  
into  
practice'*