

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

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## Citation

Orton, Richard. 1977. 'Review of *Sound Recording Practice*, Ed. John Borwick'. *Contact*, 16. pp. 20-21. ISSN 0308-5066.

SOUND RECORDING PRACTICE, edited by John Borwick  
Oxford University Press, 1976 (£16.00)

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My interest in this book comes out of my involvement with electronic music, and the establishing and directing of an electronic music studio. I am therefore not among those for whom the book was primarily written (presumably budding sound engineers in the audio industry) but, since all electronic music studios must rely heavily on the equipment produced for recordings, stand to gain considerably from its study. There is no doubt that it fills a notable gap in the literature on the subject. There are many books, and articles galore, on specialised equipment or techniques, but there is no authoritative, even didactic, recent book on all aspects of sound recording. The Association of Professional Recording Studios is to be congratulated for supporting those of its members who recognised and responded to the need for a comprehensive manual of this sort.

The editor has assembled a team of contributors considerable in authority and number, which provides for both interest and variability. There are 21 authors for the 25 chapters divided under six broad headings. John Borwick himself writes an opening chapter as a 'Technical Introduction', then follow three chapters on 'The Studio', eight on 'The Equipment', seven on 'Techniques', three on 'Manufacturing Processes', and three on 'Allied Media': 'Sound Broadcasting', 'Television' and 'Film'. Rightly, I find the emphasis placed on the two central sections, with a total of 236 pages. I have found no other book which puts all the information on professional recording equipment and techniques so clearly and succinctly. Occasionally contradictory attitudes between authors appear (e.g. Tryggvi Tryggvason's clear preference for multi-miking techniques, and John Borwick's equally clear suspicion of them) but this does not obscure a general desire to inform. A very odd exception is John Keating's chapter called 'Popular Electronic Music' which should perhaps have been titled 'How I made these four albums'.

The editor's opening chapter, 'The Programme Chain', briefly outlines the various stages in the planning, recording, manufacture and marketing of a gramophone record. Inevitably, perhaps, my oblique relationship to the author's received economic assumptions gave pause: '... it is of first importance that records do ultimately make money ... However popular the work is felt to be, its marketability must be coldly assessed in terms of the record buying climate.' (I later reflected that, in this sphere too, electronic music 'may disobey this rule...' (cf. p. 15).)

Alex Burd's chapter on 'The Acoustics' of the sound studio (later complemented by Stephen Court's 'Monitoring Systems') gives a salutary reminder of the importance of knowing the acoustic properties of the spaces you are recording in, on the one hand, and monitoring in, on the other. Thorough consideration of the frequency response, reverberation, background noise, sound insulation and possibilities for varying studio acoustics at need, would avoid the situation where the only acceptable place for listening to a tape is where it was made! It has often happened that recording engineers, performers and composers have been disappointed with recordings for this very reason.

I would like to have seen a more thorough consideration of special purpose microphones in the chapter on 'Microphone Circuits' or elsewhere. This is perhaps one area where the recording industry has over-dominated. In a book of this title, one might expect to see mention of hydrophones, contact, rifle and probe microphones despite their peripheral relevance to most professional recording studios.

In the section on equipment Richard Swettenham discusses 'Mixing Consoles' and signal routing; Michael Beville writes, in a chapter entitled 'Extra Facilities', on limiting and compression, noise reduction systems (concentrating largely on the Dolby system), equalisation, reverberation and, very briefly, tape phasing. Angus McKenzie writes informatively on 'Magnetic Tape' (the pocket history is interesting), on 'Tape Machines' and 'Equipment Alignment', and chapters on 'Mobile Control Rooms' (Richard Swettenham) and 'Maintenance' (L. G. Harris) complete the section.

The 'Techniques' section includes Derek Taylor giving a thoughtful account of BBC practice in recording speech and drama, Tryggvi Tryggvason on recording 'Classical Music', from solo performer to full orchestra and opera, Bob Auger on 'Location Recording', and Peter Tattersall on the special techniques used in recording pop. Tristram Cary just manages to encapsulate 'Synthesized Music' in 15 pages, and to point to some of the developments in the uses of digital devices that are taking place.

The theory and practice of disc cutting and manufacture, and tape duplication are well covered in the section 'Manufacturing Processes', while in the last section on media, Glyn Alkin writes on 'Sound Broadcasting' and 'Television', and Edgar Vetter on 'Film'. There are some useful appendices: on units and conversions, a selection of references to published Standards, on 'A.P.R.S. Information Sheets', and on 'High Sound Levels and the Impairment of Hearing'. The one appendix I find totally inadequate is the bibliography. Many more references should be given in a book which by its nature is likely to be used as a textbook. Virtually no articles are listed, and the selection appears haphazard, especially so for electronic and computer music. In addition to this too-brief bibliography, one or two of the chapters have short lists of references, and it would have been helpful if all authors had done this. One is not quite sure what the editorial policy was, but it has produced inconsistency here.

Complaints on technical matters are few. (I should like to thank David Malham for his consideration of the technical aspects of the book.) The phon, mentioned on page 20, is neither defined nor appears in the glossary or index. After John Borwick's exemplary definition of dB(m) as against dB(v) on pages 10 and 11, where an exhortation to clarify uses of these units is implied, it is a pity that later writers add to the possible confusion by referring to 'dBm as a voltage measurement' (p.51) and introducing yet another variant — dB(u) on page 56! The technically-minded will no doubt desire greater information on actual circuitry than is generally given in this book, and one might hope for a companion volume giving the technological side of the recording industry's coin.

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