

GEORGE MARTIN'S ROLE IN THE BEATLES' MUSIC

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

Producers, engineers, and recording personnel enjoy a symbiotic relationship with artists. Working hand in hand with musicians, the production staff ensures that the performer's musical ideas are correctly translated onto playback material. As the Beatles' producer, George Martin played a vital role in capturing the group's sound – no easy task, given the group's frequent demands and the technological limitations of the era. Willing to experiment with recording techniques and tools to have a recording sound "just so," Martin meshed perfectly with the Beatles' own penchant for pushing the limits. More than just capturing the Beatles' music, Martin, with a close group of engineers and recording personnel, facilitated the transition from idea to music. Combining his classical and technical experience with the Beatles' creativity, he helped create music that defied conventions and awed listeners.

A relatively little-known producer at Parlophone before he began working with the Beatles, George Martin relied on his classical music training and technical knowledge in recording the group. Martin's musical acumen was long in the making. As a child, he took piano lessons and discovered many fundamental musical principles (Martin, *All You Need*, 15). As he recounts: "I was very excited when I discovered a new chord, and especially so one day when I realized there was a natural cycle of chords" (Martin 15). His curiosity and interests eventually led to performances in school and part-time gigs at local dance halls. After completing wartime service, Martin continued his musical education at the Guildhall School of Music in London at Sidney Harrison's behest (Martin, *All You Need*, 25). For three years, he studied classical music: conducting, orchestration, musical theory, harmony, counterpoint (Martin, *All You Need*, 27). As he recounts, arranging and orchestration – the skills he used to great effect on the Beatles' work – were the most difficult to master: "I would spend ages scoring what would be one movement of a symphony, but the trouble was that I never heard it played" (Martin, *All You Need*, 33). Eventually, he gained enough experience arranging and orchestrating music that he could "colour [...] the lines that are already there" (Martin, *All You Need*, 34). Martin's education established a solid foundation for his later orchestration and arrangement work.

In addition to musical talent, Martin utilized considerable technical prowess in the studio. A result of a long apprenticeship at Parlophone, Martin's recording experience spanned years and encompassed everything from classical ensembles to comedy groups. Having to record many different performers quickly taught Martin the basics of production: tailoring microphone placement, recording "live" sound, and attaining a desired tonal effect. Just as important, Martin's experience recording snobbish, touchy, and sometimes bad-tempered artists taught him to "tread a very fine line between, on the one hand, submitting to an artist's every whim, and, on the other hand, throwing one's own weight around" (Martin, *All You Need*, 45). Tact helped Martin to express his opinions to musicians without unduly inciting tempers.

"Yesterday," described by Ian MacDonald as Martin's first "major arranging contribution to the Beatles' discography," typifies Martin's early involvement with the Beatles (MacDonald 157). Before the Beatles transitioned to a studio-based band, Martin had mainly provided authority in the studio, advising and occasionally playing on songs. "Yesterday" marks a departure from the Beatles' earlier style, which centered on lead and rhythm guitar, bass, and drums. It was the first Beatles recording with a string accompaniment (Gould 278), as well as the first Beatles song on which none of the other Beatles sing or play on the track (Gould 279). Spare and unembellished, the string quartet possesses an "austere clarity" that won praise from critics and imbues the song with its characteristic tone and hue (MacDonald 158).

The straightforward accompaniment can be attributed to McCartney's "one stipulation [...] No vibrato" (Gould 279). In contrast to "sweetened" pop standards, "Yesterday" stands out for its economy and restraint. Combined with McCartney's equally restrained vocals, "Yesterday" is unique for its succinctness.

Equally important, Martin's arrangement alerted the Beatles to unexplored musical territory, unveiling a "hitherto unsuspected world of classical instrumental colour" (MacDonald 126). As the Beatles wound down their hectic touring schedule and gained more time in the recording studio, Martin continued to guide them in new directions. In time, they melded Martin's input with their own ideas to produce groundbreaking new songs.

After the Beatles ceased touring in summer 1966, they returned to EMI Abbey Road Studios. Free from the time constraints of relentless touring, they could experiment with sounds as much as they wanted. The end of touring coincided with an evolution in the Beatles' sound; it afforded the Beatles an opportunity to explore new sonic subtleties and technical complexities. Whereas they used relatively few electronic production techniques in their earlier albums, their music from *Rubber Soul* onward fully utilized studio technology, incorporating tools from Automatic Double Tracking (ADT) to Musique Concrète effects (Reising 144). *Revolver*, the Beatles' transition album, reveals the extent to which they explored the possibilities available in the studio. By incorporating new sound effects into their albums, the Beatles challenged George Martin and set a high creative bar for their rivals.

"Tomorrow Never Knows," the first track recorded for *Revolver*, encapsulates the sound effects used on the entire album (Reising 144). Beginning with John Lennon's double-tracked voice, "Tomorrow Never Knows" utilized an array of other effects, including reversed sounds, tape loops, and Leslie speakers (Reising 144). The seagull noises in the opening bars of the song exemplify Musique Concrète sound effects. Musique Concrète, an avant garde art form that uses fully saturated tape loops, gave "Tomorrow Never Knows" an otherworldly effect (Ryan and Kehew 412). Paul McCartney, who created the tape loops, had George Martin and engineer Geoff Emerick place the loops in tape machines, which were then fed into the mixing console. With Lennon, Emerick, and Martin, Paul manned the faders on the mixing console and "played" the loops by riding the faders up and down. The brief "concert" of tape loops eventually made its way onto the song, yielding a mesmerizing effect Lennon later described as "very desirable" (Ryan and Kehew 412).

In addition to tape loops, Martin and Emerick used rotating Leslie speakers to distort Lennon's voice to sound like the "Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan monks chanting on a mountain top" (MacDonald 152). When channeled through the Leslie speakers, Lennon's voice took on a slightly wobbly echo, enhancing the trippy ambience of the song. As Geoff Emerick recounts: "Lennon's voice sounded like it had never before, eerily disconnected, distant yet compelling. The effect seemed to perfectly complement the lyrics he was chanting" (Emerick 10). Taken together with the tape loops and lyrics inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Lennon's vocals evoke the spaced-out feeling of an LSD trip, compelling listeners to lose their "time-sense" (MacDonald 191).

"Eleanor Rigby," also from *Revolver*, is distinguished not for its combination of electronic effects but for George Martin's double string quartet. The subject of the song—death—and its completely unsentimental presentation called for an equally innovative accompaniment. "Grating, insistent, and bleak," Martin's accompaniment adds a sonic dimension of desolation and grief to the song (Gould 350). Inspired by Bernard Herrmann's score for *Fahrenheit 451*, the string accompaniment comprised four violins, two violas, and two cellos, recorded separately from the vocals and overdubbed (Spitz 612). With short, emphatic stabs punctuated by a flowing, descending chromatic line the accompaniment achieves exactly what McCartney envisioned: a concise musical metaphor for death, sorrow, and desolation. Indeed, the octet alludes to the "death drive" of Baroque tragic operas such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (Reising 147). Combined with McCartney's stark double-tracked vocal, the string accompaniment sets the tone for the song.

"Strawberry Fields Forever" is significant in the Beatles' discography as a song that combines studio production techniques and instruments; in short, a combination of two potent creative forces. Described by Martin as a "modern Debussy," "Strawberry Fields Forever" was written by John Lennon in Almeria, Spain. With its deeply introspective lyrics and nostalgic tone, "Strawberry Fields Forever"

invoked Lennon's childhood memories of a Salvation Army mansion near his home. Both Ian MacDonald and George Martin praised the song, acknowledging the "Halting, childlike quality of [Lennon's] lyrics" (MacDonald 217) and likening it to a "summery meadow in shimmery warm sunshine" (Martin, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 14). To produce a dreamy aura, Martin and the Beatles used a variety of instruments and sound effects. Mellotron, svarmandal, cellos, brass, and resonant drums gave the song texture and contrast, making "Strawberry Fields Forever" "famous in the studio world" for its adventurous, unusual instrumentation (MacDonald 219). As Martin describes it, "I decided the cellos should speak with one voice, forming a bass counterpoint to the melody. The trumpets I wrote either in simple triad chords, or with a unison staccato emphasis, blasting away at one note" (Martin, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 20).

Recording "Strawberry Fields Forever" was made more challenging by Lennon's dissatisfaction with the first takes of the song. As Martin recalls: "John came to me a week later and said he still wasn't entirely happy with what we had done. The song kept eluding him: he could hear what he wanted, in his head, but he couldn't make it real" (Martin, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 19). He and Lennon started from scratch, using brass and strings in the second take (MacDonald 218). To complete the recording, Lennon asked Martin to splice the two takes together: "ever the idealist, and completely without regard for practical problems, [he] said to me, 'I like them both. Why don't we join them together? You could start with Take 7 and move to Take 20 halfway through to get the grandstand finish'" (Martin, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 22). Initially, Martin was stunned by the sheer complexity of the task; the songs had been recorded in different keys and tempos. After some experimentation, he noticed the two takes were exactly a semitone apart. By speeding up the first to match the second, he matched the two tempos (MacDonald 218). With Ken Townsend and a group of "backroom boys," Martin rigged a "Diplodocus-sized" frequency changer and found the right splicing point, which appears one minute into the song (Martin, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 22). There, the ambiance of "Strawberry Fields Forever" morphs from the "airiness of the first verse/chorus" to "something more shadowy, serious, and urgent," yielding an overall effect that matched Lennon's vision of the song (MacDonald 218). With that, Martin and the Beatles had pulled off "one of the most effective edits in pop, detectable only in a change in ambiance" (MacDonald 218).

In many ways, "Strawberry Fields Forever" represents the Beatles' artistic commitment. The enormous amount of studio time spent on the song – fifty-five hours – shows the effort the Beatles, Martin, Emerick, Townsend and others spent to ensure the finished recording accurately captured Lennon's original vision. "Strawberry Fields Forever" was a collaborative effort; all four Beatles contributed instrumentals, and Martin and the recording staff spent countless hours perfecting the takes before finally splicing them together. As a work of art, "Strawberry Fields Forever" showcases the amalgamation of technical and organic. The combination of exotic instruments and the equally adventurous splicing of two takes permanently expanded the Beatles' creative purview. Sophisticated, expressive, and deeply personal, "Strawberry Fields Forever" reveals the sonic possibilities enabled by studio production.

The concluding track on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, "A Day in the Life," exemplifies the Beatles' sheer inventiveness and creativity. The most unusual part of the song – the twenty-four bar transition – was initially left empty. To fill it, Lennon and McCartney asked George Martin to hire a full orchestra and record what they called an "orgasm of sound." At first, Martin questioned the expense and wisdom of hiring an entire orchestra to record a scant twenty-four bars of music, but eventually he relented, his curiosity piqued (Martin, *With A Little Help From My Friends*, 56). To create the rising wave of sound, Martin wrote a "very slow semitone trill for the strings, bowing with a gentle portamento and increasing gradually in frequency and intensity. This gives a suitably mysterious effect" (Martin, *With A Little Help From My Friends*, 56). Now that the Beatles were ready to record, they hosted a "happening" for the orchestra and encouraged the musicians to let loose in Studio One, where Martin and Emerick used the "ambiophony system" to enhance the recording. Recalling the evening, Emerick said, "We knew we were stretching the limits of the available technology of the times" (Emerick 155).

As the Beatles' most innovative song to date, "A Day in the Life" presented Martin and his production team with formidable technical challenges. To free the remainder of the tracks for the

instrumental accompaniment, they first recorded Lennon and McCartney's vocals onto one track. For three weeks, Martin and Emerick worked with all four Beatles, recording and re-recording their parts (MacDonald 231). Once the basic vocal and instrumental tracks were complete, Martin turned his attention to the orchestral buildup. Taking place over twenty-four bars, the orchestra was to bridge the two portions of the song in the manner of a "mini-operetta" (*The Beatles Anthology*). Adding to the challenge was the Beatles' request that the orchestral climax build from silence to an enormous onrush of noise (*The Beatles Anthology*). To attain this effect, Martin scored the glissando individually for each player, instructing each musician to ascend chromatically at different tempi and finish on the highest note on his/her instrument (MacDonald 231). To capture the sound, Emerick, Townsend, and Richard Lush manually synced two four-track tape machines together (Emerick 154). The resulting setup was somewhat rudimentary, given the machines' tendency to fall out of sync. According to Emerick, "We'd be thrilled on the few occasions when it worked perfectly" (Emerick 162). After recording the glissando four times, Martin mixed the takes together and used the resulting mix in the finished recording (MacDonald 231).

With its combination of plaintive, powerful lyrics, innovative orchestral accompaniment, and exceptional performances by all four Beatles, "A Day in the Life" epitomizes the ideal partnership of studio and artist. Martin and his engineers can claim credit for bringing one of the Beatles' most highly-acclaimed songs to reality.

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