

Claudio Records

Colin Attwell

Sound has always been a strong magnetising force in my life and as a result I have spent many years in pursuit of the various ways of capturing its natural beauty. As a child in the '60s I was always interested in both music and science (wind-up gramophones, crystal sets) and produced films and puppet shows (with recorded sound) for my brothers and neighbour's children during the rainy summer holidays.

I even started a record club and broadcast music from my own pirate radio station!

I was a pupil of Wandsworth School in London, where my younger brother sang in the famous Wandsworth School Boys Choir where he later went on to sing personally for Benjamin Britten. It was quite usual to hear the wonderful, pure sounds of our choir rehearsing almost daily. On one particular day, I must have been about 15 years old at the time, I was on one of my regular lunchtime 'escapades' when I came upon a BBC Outside Broadcast vehicle (a green dormobile van) parked by the open school hall doors. There was a marvellous sound (which, in my mind's ear, I can still hear to this day) emanating from a large loudspeaker (LS5/1A) strapped with a bungee to the van's rear door; it was the sound of the bass drum and some percussion with orchestra (New Philharmonia) and the choir rehearsing 'O Fortuna' from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. This was a very exciting sound and when I investigated further by following the cables to the open doors of our school hall, to my surprise the sound was almost the same as if the door of the BBC van was left open, and there was no loudspeaker there at all!

When Lucia Popp joined in to sing her part, the whole experience made me think how wonderful it would be if I could learn to capture beautiful sounds like this and preserve them



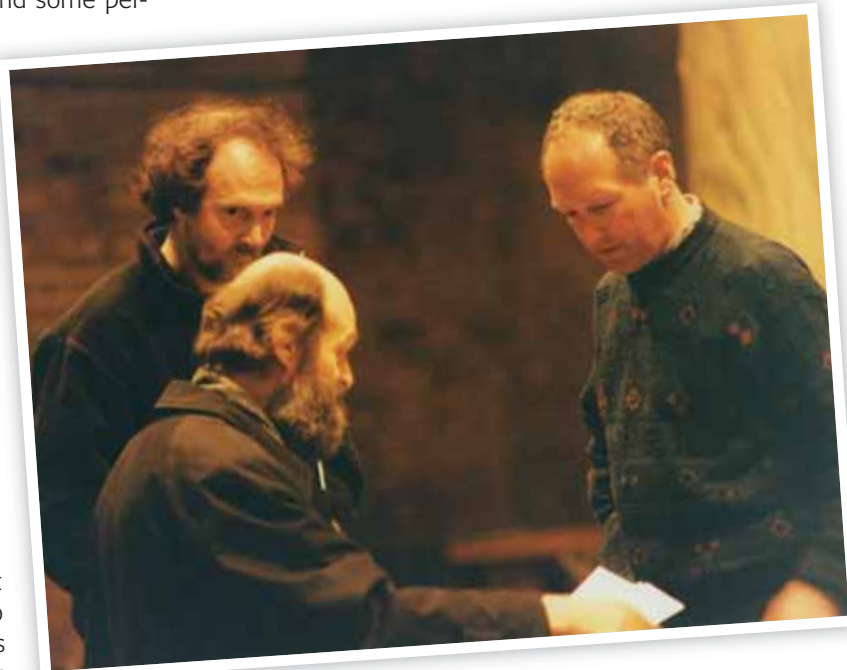
Robin White conducting Nunc Dimittis at the Henry Wood Hall

in all their glory before they evaporate into the air forever. This was a great inspiration to me and little did I realise that I would end up devoting my whole life to just that quest.

I went on as a teenager to build tape recorders, amplifiers and loudspeakers, with which I used to record school plays

and, for the practice, my cousin's pop group.

At the time, I had two like minded friends with the same interest in music and Hi-Fi. Not one of us could afford to own the complete systems that we heard at Studio 99 (the famous Hi-Fi Studio in Swiss Cottage) so we would meet up at my house and connect a professional reel to reel machine (with smuggled BBC master tapes) to a valve amplifier and my BBC LS5/1A monitor speakers, after which we would simply listen in awe to the sounds.



(L-R) Colin Attwell, Arvo Pärt, Neil Cox taken during the recording sessions of 'Triodion' at St. Bartholomew's Church in Brighton.



St. Bartholomew's Control room with Nagra Audio HD recorders

After I had left school, I went to college to study electronics and worked for Decca as an electronic research and development engineer, studying music grades and languages in my spare time. Working for Decca gave me the added advantage of access to their pioneering sound labs and to discover some of their recording techniques, especially as their sound was considered to be one of the best. Indeed

I think it is always important to remember that not all 'old' recordings are necessarily bad, and it pays to listen to the original recording techniques used, for example, on old Supraphon LPs or early mono, where acoustics and careful positioning of the microphones were crucial to getting any sort of acceptable result. I must admit to employing some of these techniques today, together with our modern systems, and I believe the results speak for themselves.

Some years later, I purchased my friend's reel-to-reel machine and found a 'victim' to record in the form of an unsuspecting harpsichordist! After the concert, I noticed an imposing gentleman packing away the harpsichord. This was Malcolm Russell – George Malcolm's personal tuner and supplier of instruments to all the major record companies and the BBC – and when I asked him for his opinion of my recording, he uttered the immortal words. "This is a wonderful recording, why can't Decca make a sound like this?", to which (somewhat taken back) my reply was, "Why, can't they? I'm sure they can!" He confirmed that they could not and that I should continue to record like this, and that furthermore he would like to work with me as my

producer! I remember, on my way home, feeling elated and dreaming that I might survive working in a field that I was passionate about and that while the wheels of my reel-to-reel machine were turning, I might even be able to make a living at this. How wrong I was at that time.

I started a 'family' business called 'Attwell Audio' in 1978, built a studio, began to advertise and even freelanced for other companies like Meridian and Pavilion Records. In reality, it took around seven years before Claudio Records was born and our first CD *Peter Katin Plays Scarlatti* was released in 1984.

Now, working for some years in the recording industry I cannot stress enough how important it is to obtain the best possible ingredients before making a recording. These are: a great composer; devoted and inspired musicians who can evoke the spirit and essence of the music;

the best instruments in perfect condition; tuners who have a passion for their work and love of music; a natural, perfect acoustic; a producer whose prime concern is to get the best for the music and yet at the same time managing to create a working atmosphere to inspire the artists to give of their best whilst minimising the editing task with all the correct notes available somewhere on a fully marked up score; a good engineer (naturally) and, finally, chocolate to keep us all going through the long hours! All these points are essential if we are to make a worthwhile and important contribution to the recorded music world.

At this point in the process the engineer is presented with the choice to either use a simple two microphone technique, or the more commonly used multi-mike format. As a result of my humble beginnings and subsequent experiences I favour the two microphone system, for in my mind, this approach is by far the most natural if used in careful conjunction with one's ears! It is certainly the more risky option as post-production corrections are limited. In addition, this method requires more time to set up and sometimes musicians need to reposition themselves so that the microphones can 'see' the waves produced by the instruments as well as 'hear' them. The artists may also have to listen to each other more carefully as they can't always see one another quite so well. However, with the correct working acoustic and modern equipment and techniques it is all becoming much easier. As always the key



Colin Attwell at the Wigmore Hall Filming a Concert

is to 'use the ears' – a simple but often overlooked maxim.

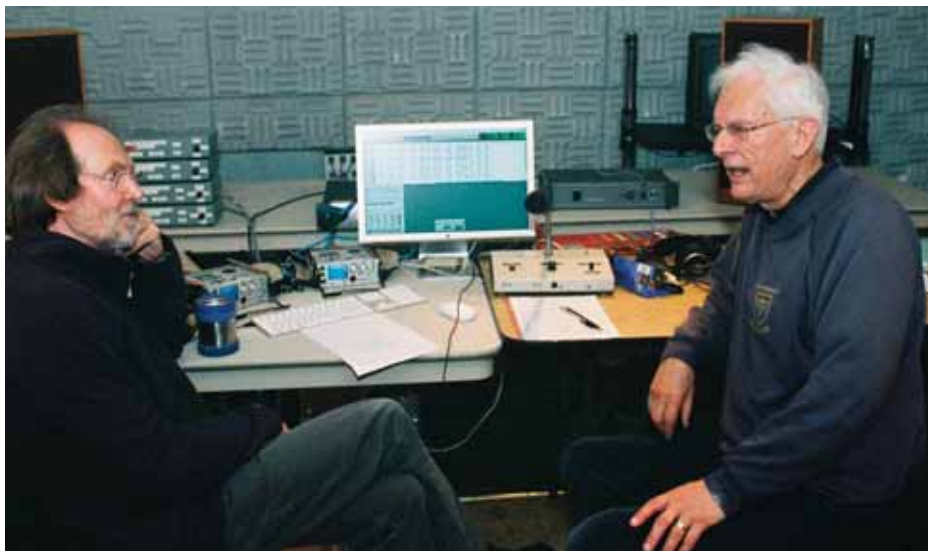
This brings to mind a wonderful quotation from Delia Derbyshire of the BBC's Radio-Phonic Workshop Dr Who fame, she said: "people hear but they don't Listen."

The simple two microphone technique can be used creatively to record all vocal and instrumental music. For example, with choral music the main consideration (as with any form of singing) is to be able to hear the words clearly, whilst minimising the unwanted sound associated with the mechanics of the voice. Using two microphones at a distance, in a good acoustic and correctly balanced, will usually overcome these problems if the singers are arranged optimally.

As the human voice is so dynamic it can present many problems on recording sessions, and it is sometimes necessary to ask soloists to move back or direct their voices off mic for the *fff* passages. Ultimately the singers must have excellent diction if we are to get good results. Harps and cellos for example, are another interesting case, and on one occasion I eventually found a microphone position about 45cm from the ground that proved to be successful – one must always hunt with one's ears in order to find the best sound.

When it comes to the piano I understood from very early on that it is considered to be one of the most difficult instruments to record. I must say, I relished the idea of this challenge. It has taken me approximately 29 years of constant experimentation in recording Steinway grand pianos to have finally found a workable solution that truly represents the actual sound from the instrument. I have been told by many other professionals that it is a genuinely magnificent sound. In order to help achieve this I use my QLAB system involving modified commercial microphones, our own specially designed microphone pre-amplifiers and HD 192 Stereo recorders. The final result is replicated onto DVD-Audio or Blu-ray discs.

Interestingly, as with many new discoveries the established scientific rules of recording are changing, as technology opens up hitherto undiscovered sound worlds, giving engineers new challenges and new rules to break. However as one can imagine with classical music the



Colin Attwell and Robin White in the Henry Wood Hall control room

acoustic remains an integral part of a final recorded sound. Therefore, it is a natural reaction of all good producers to be constantly on the lookout for the perfect venue. I have been very fortunate in this respect, having found St. Bartholomew's in Brighton; it is the biggest Church in Europe and was built in 1895. It has an incredible acoustic, giving natural freedom to the sound and an uncoloured reverberation. The huge space and symmetry of the building provides the artist with a whole new range of sound colours, offering them the option to explore the richness and creative potential of their instrument.

Certainly, if we are to keep specifically classical music alive and attract a wider, younger audience, then it is paramount that we do justice to both composer and musicians, and that we take sound quality

to the highest levels obtainable.

It is not difficult: the use of our ears is the solution. I once had a conversation with an eminent Dutch recording producer and engineer who explained that he would much rather use my simple 'two microphone' technique for which he was originally trained than the multi-miked system the 'company' dictated he must use. The problem is that with the system I use you must get it right before the session and at the risk of fraying tempers and exhausting musicians, unless you can balance during rehearsals or you know the acoustic so well that you can 'imagine' the sound. I equate the recording process to making the perfect cake, in which all the ingredients must be just right and of the best possible quality - the reasons for eating it are that you are hungry for quality and perfection! ■



Nunc Dimittis sessions with The Royal Ballet Sinfonia and the Maida Vale Singers