

Miking the sound of music

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Ever wondered how the polished choral effects coming out of your loudspeaker get there? *Sarah Meyrick* lifts the veil

BEHIND any great recording there is a hidden team of technicians working to make it all possible. Literally hidden, often “in a draughty vestry”, according to the composer John Rutter, who has a sideline as a sound engineer and producer.

“Churches are not necessarily well set up for recordings,” he says. “Your control room is often a draughty vestry or a side chapel. There’s also the fabric. Some churches don’t mind if you stick tape to the floor to make the cabling safe, and some don’t mind lights. An experienced sound engineer will spot a solution and say, ‘Is it OK if we put a microphone in a gallery that’s inaccessible to the public?’ But, of course, you have to be sensitive.

“The advice I’d give anyone is to consult very fully in advance so that everything’s clearly understood on both sides.”

It can be a matter of explaining what is involved. “If professional musicians are involved, it’s very expensive if a road drill starts up [outside] and you lose 20 minutes. That’s costing you several hundred pounds per five minutes. So there’s an element of risk in a cathedral or church that you wouldn’t get in EMI Abbey Road Studio 1.”

THE welcome varies tremendously, he says. “You can be met with open arms or bloody-minded obstruction and everything in between. My advice to any fledgling sound engineer is to make friends with the head verger.

“If I turn up as John Rutter, composer or musician, I’m treated with great kindness and courtesy and consideration, and offered a cup of tea. If I turn up in sweatshirt and jeans, and big mic-stands and paraphernalia, quite a number of people think it’s OK to be rude or bossy or unhelpful.”

None the less, the joys of working in sacred buildings are huge. “You’ll forgive almost anything for a good acoustic. It makes the music sound glorious, and the musicians feel better. And, when you walk away and edit a recording you’ve got in a church, and you are left with glorious music, it’s all worth it.”

Gary Cole, an organist who runs Regent Records and nowadays works mainly as a producer, would agree. “My job as a producer is, within a limited time, to get the best possible musical result. People rely on me as an objective listener in the vestry — or wherever the control room is — to tell them exactly what to do, and get the best performance of the choir.”

SOME of the challenges are practical. “A cathedral is a place of worship, and that’s its principal function. As a recording team, it’s important to be sensitive, and ensure you are discreet and unintrusive. It’s not the recording itself, but [things such as] finding somewhere to park that’s close enough for you to unload your gear, and finding somewhere as your control room.”

Timing can present problems. “Usually, you can’t set up until after the cathedral has closed for the day, so you may have 15 minutes to get everything ready. It’s amazing how the [choristers] are consummate professionals, but in some cathedrals you can’t start until 6.30, and if you’ve got a three-hour session that’s late for the younger children.”

Saying evensong at 4 p.m. so that recording can start at 5 p.m. helps. “That’s the perfect time: the children have eaten, and it’s not too late afterwards to go out for a curry [with the choir].”

Another pressure is that many cathedrals do their recordings between January and March, when liturgical demands are fewer. “A lot of cathedrals are very cold in those months. Vestries can be very cold, and you have to wrap up warm.”

As well as the discomfort — the choristers of York Minster wear long black capes during recordings to help keep warm — the cold can affect the acoustic. “The bigger cathedrals are at their best when the combination of temperature and humidity is ideal,” he says. “St Paul’s Cathedral is more resonant during the winter. But in some cathedrals you don’t notice. Truro and Wells, for example, have glorious acoustics whether it’s January or June.”

Sometimes, that acoustic presents its own challenges. A freelance theatre technician, Phil Glenny, has also worked in sacred buildings. “Buildings that are as huge as cathedrals experience bonkers, huge acoustics that exist only in these kinds of buildings,” he says. “In Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, when the BBC comes to record *Choral Evensong*, they struggle to capture the seven-second reverb, and have to add it in afterwards artificially to make it sound right.”

The infrastructure of old buildings doesn’t help. “If you are working from a van, there isn’t any very useful way to run in cables. More modern buildings are built with these things in mind: there are strategically placed holes in walls. It’s the same in theatres: the older ones can present difficulties.”

Congregations can be resistant, too. “That’s not just for recordings, but the live-events world in general. Events people are used to crashing around, but people in churches like to take things slowly.”

BOTH Dr Rutter and Mr Cole came to production after careers as performers, and bring their experience as musicians to the task. “I don’t want to compose 365 days a year, and always had an interest in production,” Dr Rutter says. “It dates from when I sang in the original recording of Britten’s *War Requiem* as a schoolboy, and I was allowed to take a look at [what went on behind the scenes].

“I used to entrust the sound engineering to [people that I] hired, but then I thought: ‘Let’s do it myself.’ And I enjoy it. It’s the stitching together of as many takes as you have into something as near perfect as possible.”

Digitisation has transformed the industry, he says. “The cost of making a good recording has dropped right down. One of the reasons there were only a few labels in the 1950s was that the equipment was so expensive. Only the giants could afford it — EMI and Decca, and one or two others.

“What happened in the 1980s with digitisation was that the equipment became much more affordable. Now you can edit on a laptop; you can even record on a laptop. A good microphone will never be very cheap, because it’s the first link in the chain, and has to be

really good. There's a profusion of small recording labels now, and that's wonderful. There are many fine recordings, but it's a bit hit and miss."

THE job is not always straightforward. "I remember making a recording in Ely Cathedral on the eve of the first Iraq War," Dr Rutter says.

"The US air force was using Ely for bombing practice. It took 11 or 12 phone calls to get through to the right person. I said 'I realise the international situation is grave, and we're about to go to war, but could you stop flying over Ely?' Believe it or not, they complied. I've never walked away without something, but it can be quite hair-raising on occasion."

Once he was recording Handel's *Messiah* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at All Hallows', Gospel Oak, in London. "We'd checked beforehand with Camden Council if there were going to be any roadworks. In we went, and all of a sudden an angle-grinder started up. It was somebody cutting paving stones. When the RPO rang Camden Council, they said, 'Those aren't roadworks — you didn't ask about pavement works.'"

Another time, somebody stole the generator when Andreas Scholl was recording a series of Baroque arias in a church without mains power in Oxfordshire. "Suddenly, the lights went off. Andreas followed the wires to a hedge, and there was nothing on the end."

Mr Cole has his share of stories, too. "We were in the middle of one recording in one cathedral when a boy treble threw up. Massively. The choir matrons sorted that out, but we lost 20 minutes of the recording session, and then the other boys wouldn't stand in the area."

On another occasion, recording was about to begin in St George's, Windsor, when the bell-ringers began a two-hour peal in honour of one of the princes' birthdays. "That took some negotiation. The other big problem with Windsor is that you can only record for 90 seconds because of the planes flying in and out of Heathrow."

And, halfway through a recording in Truro Cathedral, an Afro-Caribbean evening, with live drums, started in a wine bar near by. "They kindly stopped the live music till eight. It probably helped that all the [choirmen] went across afterwards. Very few recording sessions pass without some incident."

DOES he have any favourite locations? "The job of the producer or engineer is to make it sound great wherever you are," Mr Cole says.

"It helps to have a beautiful supportive acoustic to work in, and a choir that knows the building well and responds to it. I work in a lot of places, and two of the nicest are Truro [Cathedral] and Tewkesbury Abbey."

"If I say, they'll charge more," Dr Rutter replies to the same question. "But for anything in the realm of early church music, or Gregorian chant, you want the Lady chapel in Ely. The atmosphere is magic. It gives you a kind of benediction over the music. If you give a half-decent performance there, the chapel makes it wonderful."