



Option AV

An increase in its market for audio has seen this Belgian facility install three Fairlight Constellations and broaden its client base in the process. ZENON SCHOEPE visits a complex that would offer all the services you could need under one roof.

CENTRALLY LOCATED BETWEEN Antwerp and Brussels on a business park that includes Endemol as neighbours, Option AV has carved a reputation for itself as a leading player in the region and prides itself on being able to offer a broad range of complementary services.

Option was the result of a staff buyout of the studio facilities from a large company that went bust. When the new operation started in 1993 audio was not part of its business model. 'Video duplication was very important, video editing and translation for subtitles — all of which we still do now although the video duplication is on a much lower scale but we now also do DVD and CD,' explains technical manager Koen Smedts. 'We have five Avid suites but we started with audio postproduction nine years ago.'

Upping the audio service side of the business was seen as an opportunity and a potential area for early expansion but it was not without its risks. 'Before that the audio was being done at the same time as the video editing by the video editor,' says Koen, 'but the market was asking for higher standards. We took a chance and it was quite difficult to convince the client that they now had to pay for something that had been part of the package before. After a year and half the clients were convinced that the results were much better.'

That first audio room kicked off what has been a long-term relationship with Fairlight when Option bought an MFX3plus. 'It was a strange position for us to be in because at that time other people were using things like Akais and the Fairlight wasn't the cheap option. But we ran it with an O2R because there was MIDI communication between the two and it was a good combination.'

It's interesting to note that this first audio room has only been upgraded in the last few months and Koen says it's a good example of expensive equipment paying for itself many times over. However, three years ago Option had to admit that its single room audio capacity was insufficient, and had been for a while, and although it toyed with the idea initially of building a small suite to take up the strain it became clear that something bigger and better would make more sense. The second room was built and equipped with a Fairlight Constellation and Dynaudio Air 25 speakers for 5.1. 'That room has been pretty much fully booked since the day it was finished,' says Koen.

A third room was completed in December, also with a Constellation, and when that was finished the original MFX3 room was refitted and a third Constellation installed. 'The MFX was only 16-track and not big enough and if we wanted compatibility

between all the rooms and being able to move projects around it had to be a Constellation.'

Smedts says that the audio rooms are nearly always fully booked and acknowledges that they've been lucky in making this expansion work, particularly as when they made those initial tentative steps into dedicated audio they were so unsure about its acceptance.

The audio rooms are nicely finished, have voice-over booths and have acoustics by Koen and Pierre Thomas from Fundamental Acoustic Research. Dynaudio Air monitoring will be installed throughout when the Genelecs in the original room are replaced for the sake of standardisation and to make it 'easier for the editors to move around'.

Smedts attributes the success to having rooms able to handle the projects and to connections from its freelance audio staff that has allowed the facility to move into film work. One of the engineers, Bart Van Voorden, works at the facility for most of his time but when he's not there he's making location recordings, which he brings back for final mix to Option. Koen also believes that success breeds more success and that one of the problems that facilities can encounter as demand increases is not having the capacity to accept the new work when the clients want to come back.

Standardisation on Fairlight has also contributed to the success. 'It's difficult when Pro Tools is the reference, we own a lot of Avids and integration between Avid and Pro Tools is very easy and everything works like it should do,' explains Koen. 'However, our experience is that Pro Tools is built for mixing, not editing, and what we do here mostly is editing. We've done jobs three times faster than Pro Tools.'

While there can be issues with OMF sessions from video editors that have started putting levels into the mix, new clients are often intrigued when they don't

see Pro Tools in the room. On the other hand, long-term clients were alarmed when they were told that the original MFX3 was due for an upgrade because they liked being able to see and understand what the engineer was doing. 'But they can see that the Constellation is faster and now with the integration of AudioBase, we have a couple of 100,000 effects too,' adds Koen.

All the rooms are networked and every room has its own Pyxis picture system. Option is a classic example of a facility's initial choice of an editor being the important one. They liked the original editor, liked the idea of integrating a mixing desk with it, and because they had to open more rooms they liked the idea of networking the systems for efficiency.

Most of the work is for TV with some film and music DVDs and even the occasional radio commercial — 'but it's another world,' says Koen. 'They work at different prices — cheaper prices — and there is more composing and music involved, which we don't tend to do. Whether that's a weakness, I don't know, but it's one of the things that we're still missing — composing and sound design.'

With 30 employees and 6 freelancers Option also has a room for graphics creation, one for special effects for video, a subtitling and translation department, and a section that works on DVD authoring and compression. It works with replicator Technicolor for whom it is now an important client as last year it passed the million mark with 850,000 DVDs and 150,000 CDs. The big news is the refit of a huge TV studio area at the back of the plot, which has been block-booked for a reality-style TV series.

With the business rolling and new opportunities presenting themselves, Koen remains cautious but never complacent. 'The market changes so fast,' he says. 'Last year was a very good year for us,



but this year we can't tell yet and that's always the problem — you can't predict. What we're seeing with video editing is that many production companies are now doing their own because Final Cut Pro is cheap and we may lose some of that work as a result.

'We're also seeing that broadcasters are accepting much lower quality and you can see that from all the programmes on the television. When we started working with broadcasters it was quality, quality, quality — it couldn't be good enough. It's not like that now.'

The approach they adopt, he says, keeps their

client base broad so that a downturn in one area can coincide with an upturn in another, something that can be helped by keeping an eye on new technological developments. New forms of distribution will still require content, and helping to create content is what Option is all about. But then it has always prided itself on providing all the facilities you could need under one roof. ■

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