



Willi Zürrer

Spending most of his days in a truck behind a Stagetec console, Willi Zürrer's workload regularly covers sport and music for TV with a particular inclination towards downhill skiing and opera. **GEORGE SHILLING** covers all the angles in Switzerland.

WILHELM ZÜRRER IS EMPLOYED by the TV Production Centre Zürich, (TPC AG), a commercial division of the Swiss broadcasting corporation SRG, which was split off six years ago. After reading economics at university, he discovered the Tonmeister course — he studied partly at Surrey University. In the holidays Zürrer worked for Swiss radio in Bern, where he recorded all kinds of music, and experienced the commercial pressure lacking from the University course. Following a brief period in live theatre in Bremen, he landed a job at ZDF. Initially he did FOH ('artists always talk to PA people, not to me now!') In TV sound he set about trying to persuade his bosses to do more show content live rather than using playback tapes. After six years at ZDF it was time to move on, and he returned to his native Switzerland to head the Audio Postproduction department of Schweizer Fernsehen.

He now works mostly on location, covering a range of events including classical recordings, jazz, and sports productions such as the Rowing at the Athens Olympics in 2004. His regular recording control room is the rear section of the new TPC OB truck, which was finished and first used in November 2005 for a chamber music production with oboist Heinz Holliger and a string quartet, for HDTV in 5.1. Zürrer was involved in specifying a Stagetec Aurus for the truck, being already familiar with the Cantus console that was installed in previous vehicles and production rooms. Apart from chamber music, Willi has also recorded eight operas on location with the new truck. Previous projects include a number of major sporting events, and Absolution with the Absolute Ensemble under the direction of Kristjan Järvi, recorded September 1999 at Clinton Studio NYC and nominated for a Grammy in 2002.

What is the difference between sports and music events?

A lot of the work is similar, but in music production, the whole communication is not a lot, the director speaks to the cameramen and the musicians. When you do sports it is completely different, because it lives on communication, everybody has to speak with everybody in seven corners. It is an important part of TV, to do with organisation and to make it work. Communication is the basic part of it. What's interesting in sports is that to get the sound that you think is true, a lot of things you can't do live, because there is too much ambient noise, or you are too far away, so it's a combination of live sound and sampled sound. It's like doing part of a movie, live. It's really good when it works.

People ask, 'How do you get the click of the rowing, how do you record it?' Of course, I am honest and say, that's just a sample! It's hard to do, because rowing goes for hours, and it's fast, so you really have to concentrate for a couple of hours. With downhill skiing, you have to concentrate, say, after an hour when someone falls down — you shouldn't hear them skiing any more, [laughter!] What I like on the Stagetec Aurus is the flexibility of the audio-follows-video switching feature. With the rowing, when it goes from close-up to far away, you have no way to do this manually, so you make really good configurations to get this done so that

when it switches to the other camera you get the other sound. From what I hear, the Aurus — and the Cantus — have this flexibility which few other consoles have. You can have triggers, and make configurations with delays. There are so many other things to do that you will always be late, and the director doesn't speak for audio.

Do you do much work in 5.1?

In music but not in sport. It is easier for, say, football, where there is a fixed location, but for things like downhill skiing you need much more mixed synthetic sound. For music, SRG has the transponder to transmit surround by satellite, also High Definition for the European Football in 2008. As soon as you have commentary, normally in Switzerland there are three languages, so where should it be mixed in surround? You need three control rooms, and then you have to record the international sound for later on. A lot of people haven't really thought about the problems, the whole chain with all the different products that are needed. It is possible to do classical music live in surround, but the results I heard so far are mostly not very convincing. And you have to still concentrate on stereo and do a good stereo mix with some surround ambience. It's different with multitrack recording, then you have the facilities and a quality control room to make a decent surround mix.

How easy is it communicating with musicians or people on stage?

I'm always happy when the truck isn't too far away, I like to go inside and speak to them, it's important to see each other. But you can't always do it. Some video directors communicate with camera people but not with artists, so you also have to stay here and explain



what's going on, changing lights or whatever. Some studios have speakers in the ceiling, when you speak they look up — 'his master's voice'!

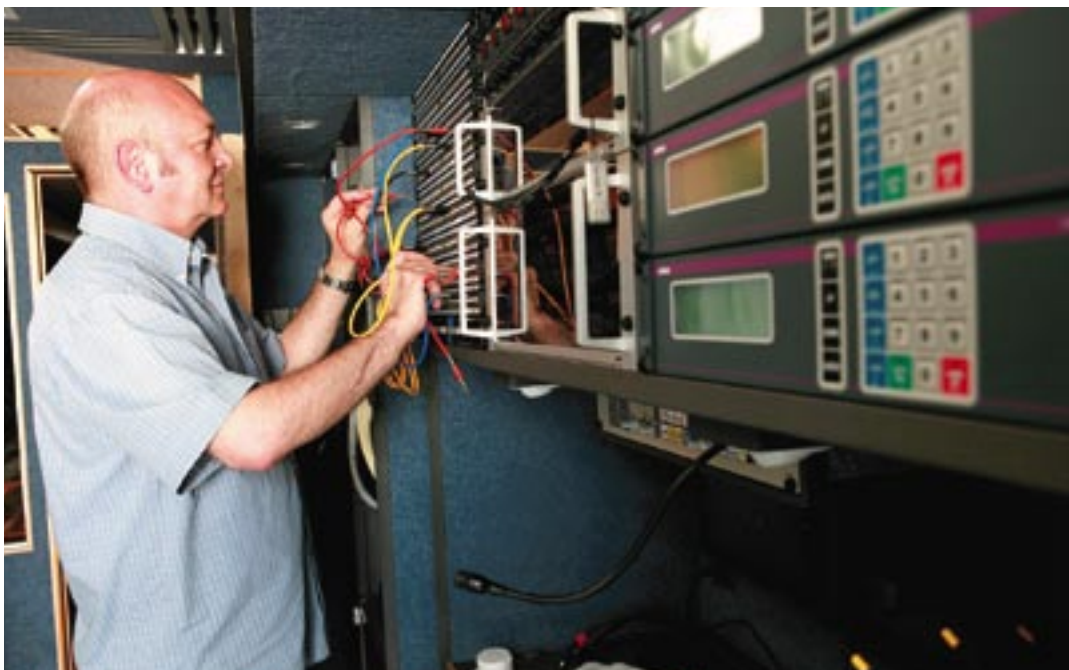
Do you follow a musical score for classical productions?

Yeah, I have to, to get to know what is right or wrong, to make the marks about good or bad things, and in a production like this it's always important to speak to the musicians. I understand my job is this, to get their interpretation to here, on a new medium, not live or in a concert hall, but at home, for DVD or on

television, to understand their interpretation, not my fantasy world. My work is to speak to them about how to achieve this, because sometimes things have to be a bit different.

In what way?

When you play something live, for a different medium, sometimes things have to be a bit clearer, a musical line played differently. Maybe things I can't do in a mix. Musicians have to help, but first I have to understand what they want, then I can say, maybe you should play this a bit louder or less...



How do you cope with people talking to you and distracting you?

This is one of the major problems. Television lives a lot with communication, and audio is about listening so you always have conflict, and make priorities. For sport it's really important to hear the producer and maybe other people, and also concentrate on your work. But doing music production, I just switch off everything else. During the production, if there is something really important, there is a talkback button for everybody. Doing music production means you have to be with the musicians and you can't postpone things that don't work, you can't correct them, they have to be perfect in the moment you produce them.

What is special about the Stagetec console?

The connection to video makes the flexibility to work in TV production, and it offers a lot of flexible possibilities, just generally. The console philosophy is easy to understand. Perhaps this is not different to others, but it is very reliable. For productions, this is important.

What is the recording format?

In here we've got Pyramix, I've also got Tascam or the Mackie hard disk recorder, older formats, and I did quite a lot with Pro Tools, but in here for postproduction the Pyramix — it's a very well-known product these days, a lot of people have it, and it's also reliable. So far I work at 48kHz, 24-bit — it is important to have enough headroom and we don't have to always work on the limit. I think 96kHz is nice to have, but the advantage isn't really as much as having 24-bit.

Do you run a backup system?

In here I have started since High Definition VTRs have 12 tracks, so as the backup normally the VTRs provide enough tracks. If not, a second Pyramix or whatever. It is reliable, on the other hand they are expensive productions, it can't be a problem if the recording doesn't work because of a hard disk problem, for example.

And how is the monitoring here with these Tannoy's?

Last year we did a small test, the Tannoy gives a good impression about the sound you are producing

for home. It's a loudspeaker that forces you to listen exactly to equalisation, that's what I like.

There are Genelecs for the vision team...

Genelec doesn't really force you to listen, that's the difference, you have to force yourself — it very easily sounds nice on Genelec.

Have you had to fix gear when kilometres from home?

This is something that costs you nerves, doing outside broadcast means you don't have a support department close to you. You have to be good at improvisation, and not have sleepless nights, when you think about all the things that can go wrong in this complex technology in here. But you know, when you are good at doing improvisations, you almost always find a way round. It happens that something breaks down and nothing works any more, this never happened to me during a recording or a broadcast, but it can happen! Normally you find a work around, and you have to be prepared for that.

Is it a fibre link to the stage?

Yes, I like it very much, it is much easier than analogue, but if this breaks down — it is the sort of risk you have to be aware of. You have to have an emergency setup so it would be at least possible to say 'Goodbye' on the show!

What is your audience mic setup?

It depends, for a normal TV show, it depends where you can hang them, but just a couple of microphones, perhaps [Sennheiser] 416 cardioids or Neumann, I'm not really fixed on a particular model, I often use the Sennheiser MKH40 cardioid. It has to be a system that is workable, so it has to be where you can reach them or get to them, so my idea is to get a system where you have enough microphones so if you have a corner where someone is sleeping or laughing you can close it. But the more microphones you have, the more things you get you don't want to hear, the more you destroy the original sound.

Do you ever point them out from the stage?

Yes, that's more for rock or pop concerts, then you don't have the delay from the PA. For classical there will be mics for surround. For TV there are some nice

surround main microphones, but often you have the problem of just where to put them, so you have to have another idea, because a main microphone is in the centre of the orchestra, but you can't put stands there because that's the angle of the camera for the main shot. To hang it is not always possible, so you need of ideas to get a good sound but without this ugly thing in the middle that no-one wants to see.

Do you EQ to multitrack?

No, only just to get something off with a high-pass filter, but as little as possible, because everything I do, I can't really reverse. It just goes straight to the Pyramix, I equalise it for the rough mix, and later on in production.

What's the key to good TV sound?

To me, audio is to do with listening. Some people want to decide about audio by seeing something. Whatever equipment you have, the type of microphone you use, the most important thing is what you hear. Good sound always has something to do with listening, and in TV, sound has to fit the picture. But sometimes, we have to speak to the video director because there are things he can do to fit the picture to the sound, sometimes you really have to explain where the problem is. Sometimes they don't understand the problem at first. Not everything is possible live — in movies, most of what you hear is done in postproduction...

What project are you most proud of?

Lately these operas, with 5.1 surround sound. I did a crossover-jazz music production in a church in France with Michel Godard, all live. This was demanding because it was live, because it was jazz, but with a lot of playback with medieval music mixed, and a lot of scenes in a church with ambiences. But the idea of the directors was that the people moved — this was very demanding to get it sorted so the concept worked. On the other side, the downhill skiing for the Olympics got a lot of good feedback from the Olympic broadcast organisation.

What's next?

All the operas I recorded last month, there is postproduction ahead, these are all from the Zürich Opera House. In the autumn there are the big award shows, and there are already more operas planned, mostly for a company that produces DVDs. ■

