



## Mike Oldfield

**Still producing creatively challenging output many years after his initial album set a benchmark for what a musician could do when left to his own devices in a studio, Mike Oldfield has built a new facility for himself that boasts a Euphonix System 5MC. He talks to GEORGE SHILLING about his changing work methods, classical music, and playing the console and the Mac.**

**S**INCE PROVIDING BRANSON'S fledgling Virgin Records with an iconic catalyst in the shape of the first one-man concept album, Tubular Bells, Mike Oldfield has been renowned for creating luxurious soundscapes, famously undertaking most of the hard work alone — composing, playing, engineering and producing. Tubular Bells has been revisited several times over the years, with an orchestral version, live recordings, two sequels and an entire rerecording of the original in 2003, complete with 5.1 mix.

The Macintosh computer has gradually come to dominate Oldfield's working methods, and having recently relocated to the southwest of England, he now uses two adjacent rooms for working, with both rooms connected to the same central computer

system. His recently acquired Euphonix System 5MC is in the 'little monitors, big mixer' room in a converted garage, while the conservatory is the 'big monitors, little mixer' space with a Tascam fader controller. He has co-written a soon-to-be-released autobiography Changeling (Virgin Books), which goes into great detail about his early years, Tubular Bells and The Manor, and his astonishing career path, including childhood difficulties and struggles with depression. He describes doing the book as being like a 'marathon psychotherapist session'. Your intrepid reporter had had a professional encounter with the man some 10½ years previously, engineering a series of sessions at his Neve Capricorn-based studio in Buckinghamshire, so it was interesting to see how things had changed. (Photos [www.recordproduction.com](http://www.recordproduction.com))

### How do you work now compared to the old days?

All the old equipment got carted away. Gradually over a period of two or three years, more and more I moved over to the digital audio workstation, and one day I realised I wasn't even going through a mixer at all. I thought, What shall I do with it? It was a beautiful machine, the Neve Capricorn, but it was just not part of the signal path any more. I found I could do everything native in the Mac, even though it was very slow at the time, and used to crash. So I did a deal with a company to come and take the lot off me. Since then I've been battling with the Mac, trying to make it be a proper studio. Which it kind of did, but it was too much workload for it.

Eventually, the Intel Mac has come out, which is the first proper machine to do the job. It's a question of arranging windows so that they look like tape machines, and the Arrange Window in Logic looks like my track sheet. So I've got a track sheet, kind of a tape machine, plus I've got a mixer. That's why I've got two big screens. It's very difficult to do something with one square screen, so I've worked out how to do that.

The last album I made completely on the Mac, no faders, nothing. You can do it, drawing points on a curve is different from moving a bunch of faders. I looked into all kinds of possibilities of control surface. One of them is the Tascam which has 24

faders, and that's pretty good. And then I looked into the Euphonix System 5MC, which really looked like a real mixer. But then when I first got that I was working on a previous generation of Macs, and that slowed it down. System 5 works beautifully with Nuendo on a PC, and I've worked out how to install Windows on a Mac using Boot Camp, so I've got one machine which has Nuendo working on Intel Mac running Windows XP, and it works perfectly. And it's pretty good with Logic, that works on a second Intel Mac, but there are certain things that slow it down like adding channels, deleting channels, packing and unpacking folders. When I'm doing that kind of work, I disconnect the Eucon system from the Mac and it works fine, it never crashes, or hardly ever. Plus I've got two places to work now, I can work outside in the conservatory, which is lovely, or if I want to be more concentrated and don't want to look out of the window at the view, I can work in the next room which has got the mixer in it.

#### What other gear do you use?

I've got the SSL Duende. It sounds and feels like a real mixer. I've got the plug-ins for PowerCore, but that doesn't work on Intel Macs yet, I've only got that working on the card in the Nuendo system. And I've got the UAD card for Intel Mac, but the SSL just feels nice.

#### Do you ever play the guitar these days?

Oh yes, I do, I'm writing a piece of orchestral music. I'm making a demo of the whole thing, keeping all MIDI parts, so that the MIDI parts can be transcribed into Sibelius, and a proper orchestral score can be worked out. It'll be all orchestral apart from classical guitar, and grand piano, I'll be playing those two instruments.

#### For an album?

Yes, a classical album, it's going to be based around the festival of Hallowe'en, rather than the Hollywood horror film. The ancient festival goes back to BC. I'm talking to the composer Karl Jenkins about collaborating on it, hoping to record it somewhere special like Abbey Road No.1, and we'll do a live concert. The advantage of that is we'll have an orchestral score, which anyone in the world will be able to pick that up and play it.

#### How do you use the Euphonix? I remember being inspired by seeing you play the Neve like a musical instrument...

I can do that now with the Euphonix, but I've got used to working just with the mouse really, drawing curves, editing points on a graph. The way I work at the moment is just with the mouse, but then I've got the automation. I've got to almost re-learn how to play the mixer, but it's capable of doing it now. It wasn't until this generation of Mac that it was able to do that. You'd put too much automation, and — Crash! Fingers crossed, I think the machine is fast enough now.

#### Do you always work here or do you have other studios?

No, I work in here or next door with the mixer. It's nicer in the evening in there, it's lovely. I've spent most of my life in dark, dungeon-like studios, I can't bear to be locked up any more. I want light, I want to see the clouds.

#### How do you feel about the music business these days, compared to the 1970s?

I have hardly any contact with the music business

or read about it or listen to anything. I think in the music business these days, the best job would be choreographer or make-up artist, they seem to be doing most of the creative work. It's all about the image and the dancing. Or a programmer — you've got so many plug-ins. People work very hard to make them do special things, and from time to time I catch by accident something that I really like. The musicianship, and I would imagine the engineering side of things has fallen away and become less important, because anybody can do so much. Even without being a musician, with a reasonable piece of software, in a few minutes you can have something that sounds very professional.

It's for that reason I'm trying to make a transition to the classical world, because there's no two ways

about that, you've got something written out, and you've got acoustic instruments actually playing it, so it's not false, it can't be faked. I'll try that. If that doesn't work, I don't know. It's actually fun working on computer music, I really like it. On the last album, it was great. You'd dial up a plug-in, find a nice preset, off it goes... Dooga-dagga-dooga-dagga-dooga-dagga, add a bit of guitar, a pad, it's great, oh, this is easy now. Then you realise that everybody's making that kind of music. Go into my local Sound Control in Bristol and over in the corner somebody's doing exactly that, because it is so easy. I'm in an unusual situation, in that I've done pretty much everything I wanted to do. This is the only thing I haven't done. I can't do it on my own because I don't have the training, I don't want to sit down and wrestle with crotchets and quavers...

### What motivates you to work?

Motivation is a problem, sometimes I wonder whether I'll continue making music in the future, I've slowed up incredibly. I'm able to go in the studio and force an idea out of almost nothing, and make it sound respectable, it doesn't mean it's that good. But there are little ideas that pop up, with the frequency of comets or shooting stars. I have to wait until — call it being visited by the muse — these moments arrive, they don't come very often. So it takes me a lot longer to do something, I don't want to force and push it, squeeze it out when it doesn't really want to come.

And it can be a bit frustrating sometimes. So that's why I've arranged my room, I've got my nice sofa, I've got a few books, if I don't feel like working I can lie down and read a book. I've got other hobbies now, a new child Jake, he comes and plays with his mixer, I read my books, we fly model aeroplanes, I go out on my motorcycles.

### Just for the record, Jake uses an O1V96...

[Raucous Laughter] Well I started off trying to use that, I made the last album with that, but I don't even need that with this project.

### Are you a musician, engineer, producer, composer, what's your main role?

Since I very first started I just had a picture of what I wanted to hear, and I'd go to any lengths to make that come alive, and in doing that I had to use technology so I learnt how to be an engineer. I naturally just ended up producing, simply by sitting down at a mixing desk and wanting to do the best mix possible, and staying up all night, and the next night if necessary. I know how much can be done in the mix, and that's why playing the mixer is so important. It's something I can do again now, rather than trying to mix with the mouse. So I didn't start out trying to be any particular thing, I just had a sound picture of what I wanted to hear. If I'm anything I'm a guitar player, because I love playing guitar, I started off very, very young and I still love playing guitar.

### And do you have any collaborators in those other roles?

No, I do all the plugging in, installing and authorising software, I do everything and don't have anybody helping me. In fact, I find I enjoy that almost more — I'm quite happy when I'm trying out that card with that interface, that monitor with that USB down there, thinking if I can just get that keyboard down there, or if I can send that bit of ADAT optical down there and a real buzz when it pops up somewhere else, I love that! It's just tinkering and I really love doing that. I spent ages plugging it all together. Things like some Mac monitors, they are so fussy, especially if you want over the 1.5 metres you get. I ended up going to PC World and buying these little monitors which you plug in anywhere and they work.

I've just come off a big tour in Germany with a symphony orchestra. That was quite exciting to be in front of a big audience again, we've got two more concerts in Spain in March with the same orchestra. I suppose I'm like the leader of the orchestra. The conductor Robert Groslot, and the leader of the rock band John Miles, they're very good people, but apart from that I don't collaborate. With Trevor Horn on Tubular Bells II we tried working together, but it just didn't work. He ended up taking bits off to work on them in his studio. When he brought them back, wow! But being in the same room, grrrr! The lovely thing about doing the remake of Tubular Bells in 2003, first of all I had the first one to copy. And my engineer at the time, Ben Darlow — I'd go in there and play six takes of acoustic guitar, and he'd compile them while I'd be out the back flying my model helicopters.

### You did Tubular Bells in Quadraphonic, what do you think of 5.1 and current marketing of surround?

Actually, it wasn't Quadraphonic, it was this strange fake out-of-phase system. We tried to remix it, but the actual mix of Tubular Bells was so difficult without automation, that we gave up after one day. We were doing it at Abbey Road, and I just left it to the engineer to put some bits and pieces of delays at the back. But with the remake of Tubular Bells we mixed it properly in 5.1 at my last studio; that was great. Obviously the mixer was fully automated. At the beginning we made a carousel so that everything was slowly spinning round, a very slow, dreamy merry-go-round. The chap from CD Magazine complained bitterly, 'Why does he keep moving everything around?!' I got a telling off for that, but I loved it.

I don't know if 5.1 will ever take off. Most people get these extra speakers with their home TV system and end up slinging them somewhere, or the dog bites the cable, kids knock it over, they end up in the



cupboard anyway. It's not ever going to be anything apart from the serious audiophile. And even now, although I can do 5.1, it's a novelty, and it wears off. I'm used to hearing stereo with a virtual centre, I found the real centre speaker off-putting, just because I'm not used to it I suppose.

#### Did you have formal training?

In the very early days I didn't really learn, but I got inspired to learn to teach myself, I suppose hearing the guitar playing of people like John Renbourn, Bert Jansch, classical players like Julian Bream, flamenco players like Paco Peña inspired me to want to be like that. I worked very hard to try and emulate them, and in so doing developed a technique that allowed me to write my own music. And then in recording studios I was fascinated by the mixer and the electronics, and wanted to know how it worked. It was only when I got to The Manor, I watched the engineers, when they left I could get in there and fiddle. I remember when I was mixing a bit of Tubular Bells Part Two, the 'Caveman' section, I just got so into it, I spent all night doing a beautiful mix. That was the moment I felt I had become an engineer. Now I've got to rediscover that. With this new project, there's no automation at all at the moment. It's confusing to have that running when you're in the working stage because suddenly a fader shoots up and you can't remember when you did it. But once I'm in mix mode I'll go to the Euphonix and try to mix again.

#### Do you think the inaccuracies and mistakes of classic records are what lend them their charm?

I've been unhappy with Tubular Bells since I made it; it was done in such a rush. There are clicks and pops all over it, there's a mains hum over the whole thing,



there's bits where we chopped out clicks, it's out of tune, it's out of time, there's distortion on the tubular bell, and I remade it — perfectly [laughs]. And in my local record shop they've had the original Tubular Bells there since I'd lived there, and they put the new one up, and after a month they took that down and put the old one up! So you're absolutely right. The

production, and even the tuning doesn't matter, it's the force and energy, idiosyncrasies that give it its character. If you think of the great eccentrics of this world — Patrick Moore, for example, we love him for his monocle and way he talks, we love him for that, if he didn't have those he wouldn't be Patrick Moore. Funny old world... ■