

Setting The Bar Higher in Audio Education

BY JACQUES SONYIEUX

At University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, students are encouraged to take advantage of the first-rate recording facilities within the multi-purpose Duderstadt Center. The recording environment—superior to many top commercial studios—is used primarily by music composition students, but also for many applications apart from music, such as engineering and medical sciences.

The studio features two production-oriented rooms referred to as EMS A (Electronic Music Studio A) and EMS B, in addition to a full-blown tracking space that WSDG designed in 2008. “When John Storyk originally did the acoustic work on the big studio, it was so successful that we were able to leverage additional funding to facilitate the other two smaller studios. The acoustics had been very poor in these two rooms, and we also needed a huge upgrade to the equipment,” recalls David Greenspan, Audio Resources Coordinator for the facility.

The project requirements for the two new electronic music studios were complex—far more than a ‘MIDI-studio’ as one might expect. “First and foremost, the spaces had to accommodate the creation of electronic music,” says Greenspan. “Then we wanted to be able to mix to picture in stereo or surround, and then there was gaming audio and critical listening among other things. There were all kinds of things we threw on John’s [Storyk] plate, and he came up with a rather unique design that incorporated all of that.” In fact, one of the rooms features an Octophonic playback system in addition to being able to accommodate a more traditional 5.1 or 7.1 system. “The idea was that if you can dream it, the highway has been paved so you can drive on it,” explains Greenspan.

Another secondary purpose of the EMS rooms was to provide an overflow for the original audio studio, which has proven to be immensely popular among students, staff and faculty.



University of Michigan’s Duderstadt Center Digital Media Commons’ custom API Vision-equipped EMS B studio.

EMS A features an API 1608 analog console, with three flavors of compression in dual channel pairs: two API 525s, two API 527s and two Pendulum Audio OCL-500s. EMS B meanwhile, features a brand-new API Vision console, custom built by API to facilitate both 7.1 or 8.0 surround configurations. EMS A&B integrate seamlessly together and with the big studio for larger or more complicated productions. For monitoring, the facility relies on Adam A7 loudspeakers in EMS A and in EMS B, eight matched Genelec 1037s.

As far as recording consoles are concerned, the original decision to ‘go analog’ followed several months of careful consideration. “We wanted to be good stewards of the taxpayers’ money and came to the conclusion that if you buy a good, solid analog console, that it will be around for years,” says Greenspan. “With analog consoles, you don’t have to worry about software changing or compatibility and we figured that a good one would last 15 years or longer.” Having been pleased with the performance and reliability of the original API 1608 in the main tracking room, the University decided to acquire two new APIs for the electronic music studios. “Now, we can move all of our projects back and forth among our three studios—the automation goes with you, all of it,” observes Greenspan. In addition to having a ‘common core’ of recording consoles, each studio also shares several high-quality pieces of outboard gear.

“The heart of the outboard gear in the two EMS rooms is very similar,” he says. “There’s gear from Eventide, Drawmer, Pendulum, GML, the whole gamut. We want to provide our students with a ton of options to play with and train their ears.”

The facility is now in the process of building out multi-media ‘in the box’ rooms, which have full-blown Avid Pro Tools HD systems plus UAD software. This provides students with yet another palette of sonic flavors that they can easily integrate into their tracking or mixing workflow. Greenspan says that the total sum of the ‘in the box’ rooms, combined with the EMS rooms and original tracking facility, provide students with nearly limitless options: “It really depends on how they prefer to work,” he says. “It can be in the box, out of the box; it doesn’t matter. These rooms do it all and it is up to the user to develop the workflow.”

As one might expect, the facility boasts a stellar collection of microphones for student use, including Neumann TLM 193s, KM 184s, AKG C 451s, C 414s, Sennheiser MD 421s and MD 441s, Electro Voice RE20s and many others. There is also a second collection used for research projects that can

only be accessed by faculty staff or students working on thesis papers: in this closet, there are Neumann U87s, TLM 170s, KM 140s and a pair of TLM 103s.

While the recording facility is used predominantly for music recording, it is frequently used in many other research-oriented applications by students and teachers alike, explains Greenspan. “We’ve had doctors come in and put contact microphones on arms and legs to help them test to see if a patient’s arteries are clogged. How fast is the blood moving through your arteries and what does it sound like? Here’s a clear one, here’s a clogged one.” He also says that the studio has been used in conjunction with the Make A Wish Foundation by stage four cancer patients of the University’s cancer center. “Some patients with brain tumors came in and recorded a couple songs they wrote for their families,” says Greenspan. “These were some of the most difficult—but rewarding—sessions I’ve ever worked on in my life.”

Jacques Sonyieux is a devout explorer of recording studios and the artists that inhabit them. Please send any tips or feedback to Jacques at: jacquessonieux@gmail.com.

STUDIO: ELECTRONIC MUSIC STUDIO (A&B)

OWNER: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LOCATION: ANN ARBOR, MI