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Percussion

Clocking On

Steve Rance, Helden

On the surface Helden is (are?) keyboard player Hans Zimmer and drummer/percussionist Warren Cann (also a fulltime member of Ultravox). For some time they've been working on a project album — "Spies" — which makes plentiful use of synth and sequencer technology.

Recently they took over the London Planetarium to perform parts of the album, a few other songs and a selection of Ultravox material. On stage were three Fairlight computers and that was just the start. Warren's drums, Hans's keyboards and the elaborate PA system stationed at every corner of the hexagonal stage had to be linked and supervised by an outside agent — the third unofficial member, engineer Steve Rance (left).

READING

"Syncing everything together is mostly done using the Fairlight code, it's something the computer puts out itself. It's a straight tone, the higher the frequency, the faster the Fairlight will run. It's just a pulse, a sinewave, and every time that wave reaches a peak it clocks the Fairlight on one more time. The faster the pulses, the higher the tone, the faster the Fairlight runs.

"That code can be divided to run virtually anything whereas if you were using say a Roland MC8 Microcomposer it can't generate enough pulses to operate the Fairlight.

"For 120 beats per minute that code is just over 2K, which is roughly dividing a second into 2,000 sections,

you can get it to play anything with a thousandth of a second accuracy... not as though you ever need it, but it's there."

WRITING

Helden is really a studio band, and you can't play live with two people unless you bring the studio on stage, which is what we did! It won't be long before other bands are using Fairlights or similar computers in exactly the way people are using drum machines now.

"Perhaps the mathematics might worry some people. On the Microcomposer everything is a number, if you want the note to last longer, it's a bigger number. With the Fairlight it's different, it has a programme called the MCL — Music Composition Language — where instead of using number for notes you type in the notes themselves, say a scale of ABCD and you can see it on the screen. If you want individual timings, you enter a fraction after the note... so for one and a half beats it's 3/2.

"That's still the most convenient way, especially over an instrument that has a large range, like a grand piano — a four note chord in one hand, a five note chord in the other... that would be nine numbers flashing up, what does that mean?

"For me, I suppose I'd rather have numbers, but for most people score notation is still the best."

ARITHMETIC

When we first did the original demos for Helden, everything was on the Roland MC8, the MC4 wasn't around at the time. I'd seen Hans programming various pieces and I just wanted to get something out of it... ANYTHING out of it. But I'm not a musician, so I knew anything I did would have to be on a mathematical basis. So I wrote what turned out to be the first track on side two — 'Moonlight In Vermont'.

"I divided the bar into 16. For the first four gates outputs from the MC8 I only used two to trigger the synth. Da-da. Out of the next four I used three da-da-da, then all four da-da-da-da and finally I put one on the end, so the rhythm was basically two, three, four, one. Everything evolved from there, certain offbeats come in at particular moments and other sounds are thrown in.

"For the pitch information I started off with a C, or rather the value of a C which is... er... let's see, an A is 33 so C is... well, anyway, I can't remember, I just typed in a note, put it on the tuning meter and it was C.

"From there I knew you could build up a chord not from the white note next to it, but a white note further apart than that. On the Microcomposer each note has its own number, so after a while I worked out a formula which would tell me everything in the chord that could exist. It didn't always work, sometimes even my ears realised there was something wrong, but most of the time the notes were right. I just kept experimenting with different numbers.

"I remember there was something about the square root, third root and fourth root and if you multiplied them down it would produce a chord... no idea what it was, but it sounded good.

"Warren heard it and liked it, he was the one who made Hans put it on the album.

Hans played a bit of piano and put the whistling on and the rest was done by me in about 13 hours.

"I even had to use a pen and paper, my Apple was somewhere else."

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