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Hans Zimmer

Hans Zimmer

Music composition for films and Helden

Hans Zimmer is a young German synthesist probably best known for his musical collaborations with Ultravox's Warren Cann under the title Helden. Previous work included programming synthesisers for The Buggles, writing film and TV music. Along with Warren, he has performed live with French singer Ronny (see [E&MM July '82 \(/articles/ronnys-electro-music-cabaret/4295\)](#)) and in March of this year performed an exciting series of shows at London's Planetarium ([E&MM, April '83 \(/articles/concert-review/5975\)](#)).

In an interview with E&MM, Hans talked about the Planetarium concerts and his increasing involvement in music composition.

"The Planetarium concert was really Warren's idea. We wanted to do a concert of some sort but we didn't want to drag the whole band out so we just thought we'd try to do it ourselves with a load of computers, Fairlights, MicroComposers and synthesisers. Now one of the reasons for doing the concert in the first place was that we wanted to try our music, not the album, not premiere the album as such, but try our music, a new orchestrated version of some of the tunes on the public and see how it goes down.

We knew we were sticking our necks out by not really doing a proper performance in the sense that there was absolute darkness on stage and all people had to watch were these lasers, which do get a bit boring after a while. We just wanted to see how an audience would react if they were just shoved into a room and just had music played at them rather than 'guitar hero pose number 33' all the time on stage etc.

You had almost made a classical concert of modern music which was very exciting as you had married the two ideas together.

Exactly. But the thing we found actually, afterwards, is that most people misunderstood what we were trying to do. As far as the record companies go, they all thought this was our album, even though they had been told hundreds of times before this is not the album Hans and Warren are doing, it's only another one of their little experiments. So we got little comments back like "Are you going to have 'Vienna' on the album" and stupid things like that.

Programming

When Warren and I set out to do this concert we thought it was going to be really easy you know, just sort of do a bit of programming, turn up and do it. Well, of course, things like this never happen quite the way you had envisaged them in the first place.

The first thing that went wrong was that the Planetarium suddenly got very carried away and everybody around us said, "this is a marvellous idea, we can make this much bigger." Therefore we suddenly started to knock out orchestrations for songs, you know, proper symphony orchestra type orchestrations. Now, if you write something for symphony orchestra of that length, you usually write away for about a year, or longer, two years maybe. Well, some people have been known to write on them for six years and never get them finished and we had literally two months to do the writing and then the programming.

The first problem we encountered was that the programming took much longer than anticipated then something really lucky happened that our engineer **Steve** Rance managed to read all the music off the score. For him it was just a mathematical exercise and he can programme, so he suddenly got involved in the programming. We literally finished the last bit of programming at seven o'clock on the morning of the concert.

I think some people were misled by the concert program in that it said 'Programming – Steve' and some people asked me, 'Doesn't Hans do any of this, then, himself, on the Fairlight?'

Well, to be really honest, what happened was that **Steve** ended up programming most of the stuff on the



Fairlight and I did all the MicroComposers and things like that.

It was really only the time factor wasn't it?

Yes, and the other thing was that **Steve** is now a musician of a new breed. He can't play a single note on a keyboard, he can't play guitar or sing, but he can compose and he can write music onto paper.

This little exercise taught me more about music and orchestration than anything else in my past.

Why do you think it did that, is it that you are using new equipment?

No, in fact the equipment had very little to do with it, it was more like getting back to some sort of basics, which meant we gave ourselves a number of instruments, virtually a classical orchestra line-up and worked very strictly to that and forgot about the 'synthesised original sounds'. We just tried to use the sounds on the album in a better way. So in some ways you are coming back to Tomita's idea where he records his instruments as Violin 1, Violin 2 and so on.



Hans and Warren with the Planetarium's Zeiss projector.

For this particular exercise was that a requirement as well?

Yes, the only difference is that we write our own stuff while he doesn't; Tomita interprets classical music. The arrangement of 'Vienna' was actually written for the London Symphony Orchestra and listening to the orchestra and then our version, it's amazing, as virtually every sound you can get on a synthesiser you can get inside an orchestra!

At the Planetarium we were in an extremely confined space, but we managed to drag virtually a whole 24 track studio up there. We had a lot of stuff under the stage, that wouldn't need changing. Initially, we were going to use the house PA but it sounded dreadful! So three hours before the show we got Chris, the sound man from Ultravox to whip up these amazing speakers. It was semi-stereo, the speakers were set up in a six way system and we had Warren's foldback speakers.

If you lie down in the middle of the Planetarium and talk, your voice reflections are louder than the voice in your head. It's very strange. The acoustics of the place did throw us a few times as we had a problem hearing the original sound against the reflected sound. I had a little Boss monitor in front of me with a 'click' as well, to enable me to come in at the right places.



Stack of Fairlight disk drives.

What equipment were you using?

All I used were four Fairlights, all my French Kobil synthesisers which I think are the best monophonic synthesisers for sound quality. They are just absolutely amazing. We also had my Roland System 100Ms, MicroComposer and masses of toys like the Quantec reverb unit which we borrowed off Syco Systems. They were very helpful by lending us lots of equipment, like a hundred grands worth of Fairlights.

How have you become so financially successful to gather the equipment you have actually got?

I do a lot of jingles and film music for which I get paid a lot of money. Instead of being sensible and buying myself a house, I then buy equipment - the same with Warren. The whole thing about Helden is that we are totally self-sufficient, we don't rely on a record company because like this, we have the absolute freedom to go totally wrong and make complete fools of ourselves. But it's quite nice to be able to be your own boss.

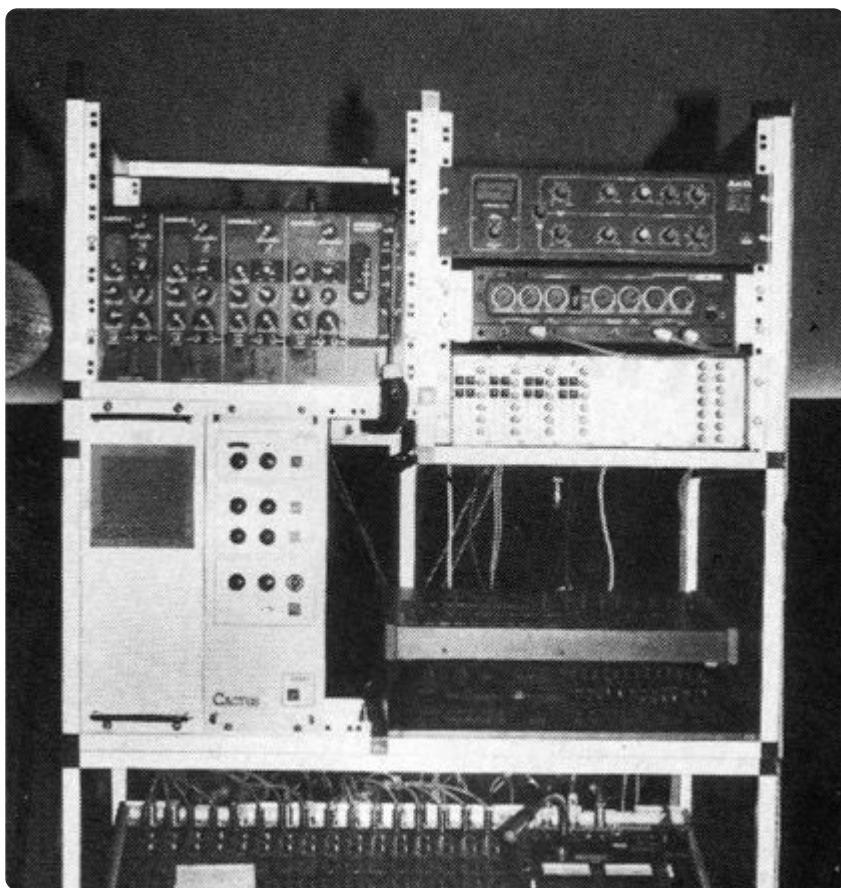
The Fairlight was bought not for Helden as such, but for a Nicholas Roeg movie called 'Eureka'. On that project we used the Fairlight and my other synths in conjunction with the Royal Philharmonic which worked very nicely.

How many projects do you have on the go then to keep the money coming in?

Well, Warren has Ultravox and I have my projects. The way we split it up is that whenever we have acquired enough money to do something, we do it. The concept of Helden isn't just a band or just making music, it goes as far as trying to put money into developing things and ideas. I think today, you've really had it if you just want to do music and develop 'tunnel vision' towards your music. You can't get inspiration just from music, you have to get it from talking with people and from other things.



Warren Cann's Simmons kit.



Warren's ancillary equipment including Linn drum machines.

Equipment

Two of the Fairlights were just used as sequencers. All the bass, the cellos and stuff like that always came from my System 100M because it can create a hard, harsh sound to it which does cut through the mix.

I also had the Yamaha GS-1 with a Fairlight keyboard on top of it and my Prophet 5, the original one with the SSM chips in it. To my left I had another Fairlight – two Fairlight keyboards in all, on the stage. Two other Fairlights were driving the polyphonic 8 voice sequences, so we didn't need their keyboards on the stage with us.

We didn't use one acoustic sound. Remember, it was March 1st – the advent of the digital compact disc, so we thought we'd just use digitally created sounds only. Even the samples were synthesised samples, usually from the Kobil synths which ended up on the Fairlight. The strings for instance, were all Prophet 5 string sounds sampled on the Fairlight. Instead of having things on tape we had the chance to actually create our sounds there and get the timbres right.

Warren was using his normal set of Simmons pads. Half of the pads were actually linked to one of the Linn II

drum machines so that he could trigger a real cymbal for example. He used two Linns which ran off sync from the tape and one Fairlight. In fact, he was actually playing keyboards in places during 'Vienna'.

Soundcraft were very kind in lending us a Series 2400 desk and a 24 track tape machine. Originally what we were going to do was to have all the sync pulses just on a 4 track. However, we got to a stage where not only our equipment but also the lasers had to run off sync. All the sync came from this tape machine so there would be times, of course, where Warren and I would be playing totally free without anything else running, where the engineer would have to swap tapes.

The basic sync clock pulse was generated from a System 100M oscillator whose frequency was between 1kHz and 5kHz. **Steve** Rance has built a sync card which fits into the Fairlight and generates the right code for the MicroComposer, Linn and anything else.

The 24 track also contained some backing tracks, as we didn't have enough trust in the technology for certain things. There was always a complete backing track available on the tape which was switched out most of the time. All the percussion Warren didn't play live came from the tape, as did the pianos, as I wasn't going to drag a piano on stage.

We had SMPTE codes on the tape machine because it makes drop-ins and drop-outs absolutely perfect. SMPTE is a time code in hours, minutes, seconds and frames. The highest resolution you can have is 24 frames per second and the according 'bits' to each frame. Really what it is, is a video/tape machine synchronizer. The reason we wanted it was because we wanted to record the concert straight back onto that 24 track, which we sort of did as we recorded bits of one of the run-throughs on spare tracks. So it's 'do your live album while you're there.' Since everything is direct injected into the mixer, you might as well bung it back onto the tape machine, and with the SMPTE code you can link it up to another tape machine at a later date and do what you want with it.



Planetarium keyboard line-up.

Composing

There was a late 19th century school of composing, which in German was called 'Program Muzik'. It's music that doesn't deal in emotion, but descriptions rather than anything else, such as Beethoven's 'Pastoral' for instance and Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique'.

The guideline all the way through the album and concert is something that was actually written in 1256 and crops up everywhere. It's the 'Dies Irae'. I'm totally obsessed with it, it's very strange. If you've seen 'The Shining' you'll know what it sounds like. When I was a kid I must have heard it, then suddenly I kept hearing it everywhere and I didn't know what it was. It was like a primeval tune. This goes all the way through the concert, this theme, from start to finish in many different disguises.

Can you tell me about your concept of scoring music?

I think the person that writes 'hit' songs, thinks in a horizontal way but I think vertically. In other words, I think virtually section by section. I hear the top line, the cellos and everything at the same time in my head, so all these arrangements were written away from the piano and straight out of my head onto paper.

When I got really lost during the scoring, the only thing I had to check with was the Casio calculator, the really tiny one with the buttons you can hardly touch. Occasionally I would just plonk my melody into that and just see if it worked. One piece of music, called '2529', is 6 minutes 30 seconds long and for that I had everything worked out in my head, literally from start to finish, before I sat and wrote it down.

So you could sit down and play that as a piano construction?

No, I couldn't. I would never be able to as there is too much going on, and it's the sound colours as well, which are really important which I try to decide on right from the start.

I knew what theme I wanted at the beginning and it was this sort of dialogue between two violins and a viola, so I started with that. Only in one point actually, do the violins take the top line and it's at the beginning where they're playing the theme backwards. It's like putting a mirror into the middle of the score and then playing the theme backwards. You see, I like 'The Times' crossword and I always give people crossword puzzles in my score. The whole album is full of biographical crossword bits, and hints and clues in the music.

Nowadays, people I think, put far too much emphasis on everything being original. It's impossible. You look at the classical composers, Bach for example. He would have to write out his 'Magnificat' for every Sunday performance or whatever, and of course he would steal from the one four weeks ago because by that time they had forgotten it. Mozart did the same. There are very few pieces of classical music where you can't say a particular bar came from something else.

For the concert the songs were all around six minutes. One of the other things that was important for us was, rather than the normal rock and roll thing where you have the bass and the drums all the time; what we

tried to do was, for instance, drop the bass, drop the drums for long stretches of time so that people could have a breather. Bass, all the time is very tiring.

For us, the real experiment about the Planetarium was not the machines, not that we did it on synthesisers or whatever; but the real experiment was the music. There are so many synthesiser albums around these days and it's all great sounds, but the music — the compositional value — actually suffers. Warren and I don't care how we get our music onto tape — is it with a Fairlight or is it with a real koto or a real mandolin or a bucketful of bricks — it doesn't matter because people forget that the music is so important; that's why there were no lights on us on stage. The lasers were as far as we would go towards giving people entertainment other than the music.

The Future

My real project from now on is to write the music rather than do the programming because you can get so bogged down in finding one wonderful sound after another that the whole concept of the piece, as you had it in your head, goes to pot. So I'm going to discipline myself now, not to get too involved in the technicalities any more.

We are working in a team and admittedly Warren and I are dictators, but I think it is the only way it can run as you can't run something like this on a democratic basis. What Warren and I say goes, because we have the idea, the concept in our head. Your new pattern, which is I think, new for the electro-musician, is that you think of your sound away from the instruments because you know them so well. You then write the music down, which is another stage that most people have ignored in past years and said it wasn't necessary any more - instead they put it straight onto tape.

Well we created the album on tape you know; so now we've done that it's another process. I'm not putting any values on to the different ways of working, it's just that I'm trying to stay as flexible as possible. In other words, at this point in time it suits me to score out my music very, very neatly and not do my own programming any more, but get somebody else to do it, because like this, I get another input for starters from good ideas, and just concentrate on that.

At the same time I'm not going to produce any more. I mean, I once saw myself as the whizz-kid producer. I'm not going to produce any more artists because from the last album I did I learned a lot of things. An artist shouldn't be allowed in a recording studio to do an album unless he knows much more about how it works and how things are going on because otherwise, he's at the mercy of the producer and personally I don't want to be the Adolph Hitler of the studio!"

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