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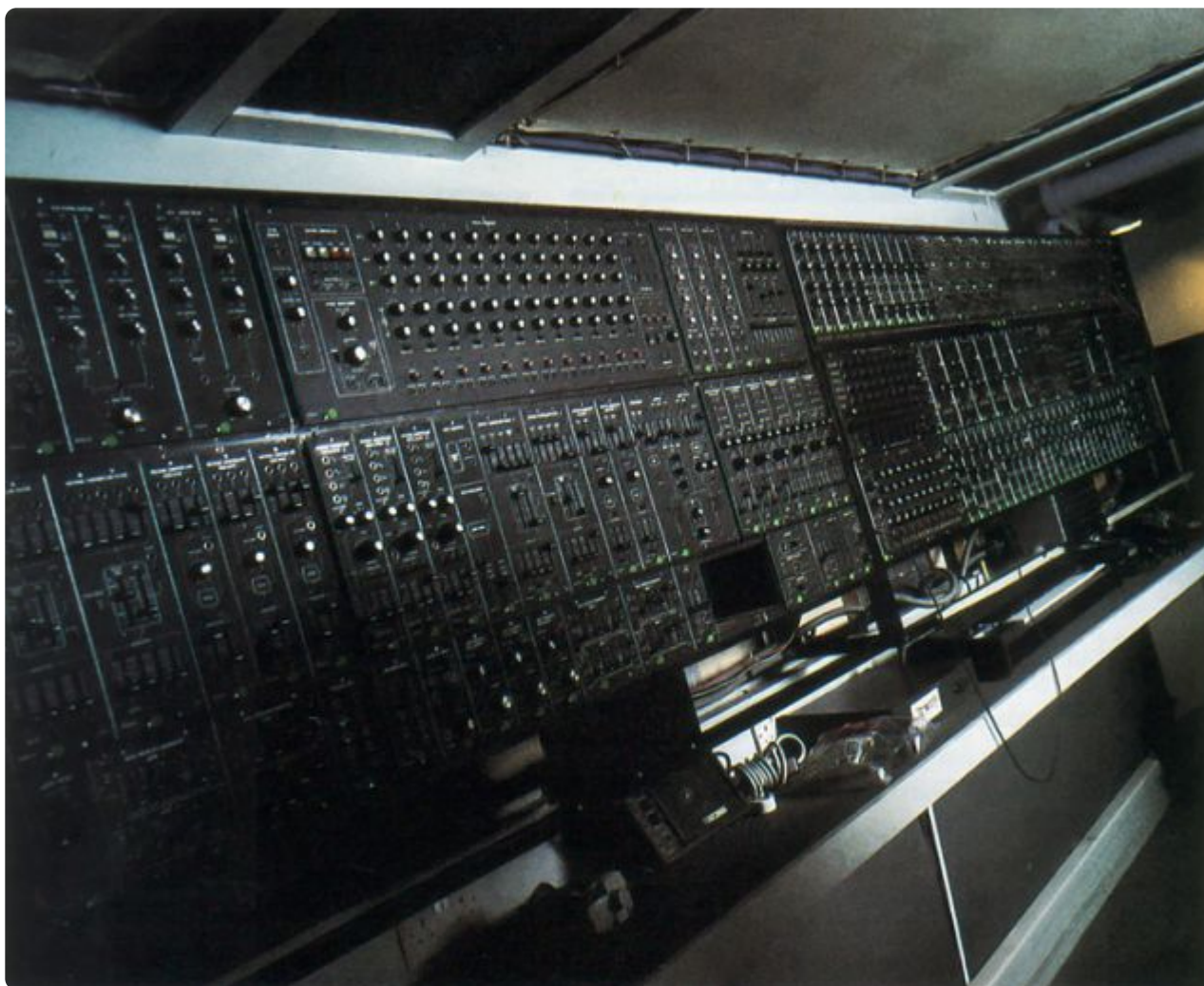
Yards Ahead

Lillie Yard Studio | Hans Zimmer

by [Matthew Vosburgh \(/search/a/Matthew+Vosburgh\)](/search/a/Matthew+Vosburgh)

Where can you find a complete audio-video recording system, a Fairlight a separate programming suite and the biggest modular synth in the world? Matthew Vosburgh discovers heaven off the Earl's Court Road.

Tucked away in one corner of Earl's Court is Lillie Yard, a recording studio whose equipment list stretches all the way from a massive analogue modular synthesiser to the latest digital technology.



TO THE AVERAGE LONDONER, Earl's Court is famous for housing The Ideal Home Show, large numbers of Australians, and similarly large numbers of homosexuals (though not, as far as I know, homosexual Australians). What the average Londoner doesn't know is that Earl's Court is also home to a remarkable 24-track studio with its own programming suite — Lillie Yard.

The studio is owned by two successful film music composers, neither of whom are homosexuals or Australians - Hans Zimmer and Stanley Myers. E&MM (sorry, MUSIC TECHNOLOGY) readers will probably remember Zimmer for his work with Warren Cann under the name Helden; the duo's London Planetarium performance, reported in these pages a few years back, was notable mainly for its use of *five* Fairlights — they borrowed Syco's entire stock.

While continuing to work with Cann on an occasional basis, Zimmer has since gone on to do a vast amount of work, penning soundtracks for some critically acclaimed British movies like *My Beautiful Launderette* and Nic Roeg's *Insignificance*.

This makes Zimmer a respected up-and-coming film composer. His partner Myers, on the other hand, is an extremely well-established one, with years of experience behind him, and credits that include *Theme from The Deerhunter* among many others.

With owners like these, it's not surprising that Lillie Yard has been designed with working "to picture" firmly in mind. The facility is equipped for three different video formats (U-matic, Betamax, and VHS), and has both a professional video patchbay and all the sync devices you could possibly want, like an SRC Friendchip, a Fostex SMPTE machine and a Q-Lock. (Technical Note. The Q-Lock makes syncing your Fairlight to a feature film a slice of Battenburg. It also costs a vast amount of money. I'm not saying what I'd do if I had that much money, but it involves Bananarama, a small tropical island, and a large amount of whipped cream.)

A lot of money's been spent on the audio side, too. Would you believe eight different digital reverbs? (That's an AMS, an Ursa Major, a Lexicon, two different Yamahas, two different Dynacords and a Roland.) And that's not counting the two Yamaha SPX90 multi-effects processors.

Make no mistake. When it comes to hardware, these guys are *serious*.

Lillie Yard also has classic MIDI *and* pre-MIDI synthesisers (including the largest modular analogue system I've ever seen), the most expensive drum machine known to man, and a Fairlight. Most important of all, the studio has a truly *post-MIDI* design philosophy. More on this later.

All this does not, of course, come cheap (it comes at **£650** + VAT per 12-hour day, actually). But then, Lillie Yard aren't exactly in the business of cutting corners.

In the flesh, Zimmer is 28, very hi-tech, and has more energy than a Real Roxanne gig. (Technical Note. A Real Roxanne gig generates as much energy as a large nuclear power station, but doesn't kill quite as many people. That's why there isn't a Real Roxanne Exhibition Centre.)

Tell us, Hans, how the studio started.

"I bought the place in '79 but didn't do anything with it until a couple of years ago. Basically my partner and I got a Fairlight, and then we decided we needed a mixing desk, and then a few monitors, and then a tape machine. So you see, it started up as our 'home' studio and it grew from there. It wasn't *designed* or anything like that, it was just *done*, if you know what I mean.

"We've always had friends coming in, but really it was never designed to appeal to anybody other than ourselves; we were just lucky that keyboard studios caught on. Everybody's building them now. It's only since this April, though, that we've started having serious clients here from the big bad outside world."

Since April? Well yes, Zimmer and Myers had a spring-clean which consisted of re-equipping and re-wiring the entire place. In fact, **£25,000** was spent on wiring alone. This is partly because the studio was wired for 48-track, so it's now just a case of hiring another 24-track machine and flipping a switch when more tracks are needed. Another reason so much wiring was needed was the size of the new mixing desk installed — a large and fairly unusual console made by a company called DDA.

"We were guinea pigs with this desk, because no one other than **Steve Levine** had one at the time", says Zimmer.

Does it have Total Recall? (Technical Note. Desks with Total Recall, most SSL desks for instance, can remember and "set" the positions of their various knobs and sliders, so they can do the mixdown for you.)

"No, nothing like that. In fact that's one of the reasons we got it. With all the electronic stuff that we've got in here, I wanted the desk at least to be nice and clean, and not *add* anything to the signal. We did think about getting an SSL for a bit, but (a) everybody else has got them, which I think is really boring, and (b) they don't actually sound that good.

"We found that the more electronics you have in a desk, the worse it sounds. I was talking to **Steve Rance** (old friend and probably the best Fairlight Series III programmer in the world) about it, and he suggested I go and have a look at this thing (he gestures at the imposing DDA desk). You see, all the stuff that he does now is digital, and he's found that the SSL is just far too noisy for that sort of thing. I agree. We were doing some remixing here the other day, of stuff that had been recorded on two Sonys via an SSL, and it was pretty noisy. This desk is far quieter, and because it's completely balanced internally, there's no crosstalk either. And anyway, I needed a very large desk because of all the synthesisers and everything that are permanently coming in."

The desk certainly *is* large, with 24 fully-equipped monitor channels becoming inputs in remix mode, giving 60 inputs in all. This means the Fairlight and all the sequenced keyboards and drum machines can be kept off-tape until the final mix, saving tracks and increasing sound quality.

"Another reason we chose this desk is because DDA were prepared to do all the mods I wanted them to do. We had them add an extra patchbay, which was a bit of an experiment for them. The one on the far right is not quite standard — in fact there are so many wires going into it that the bottom lid doesn't fit anymore!

"We have *all* the control voltages for the effects coming up on the second patchbay, which is something I don't think any other studios have. We do have a lot of effects, and I can get at everything now. A certain amount of experimentation went on with how to label all the sockets. DDA's idea was to have a book with it all written down, but I can't expect my people to work like that. We ended up with it all colour-coded."



The Lillie Yard array of sound manipulators is pretty extensive, stretching past the various reverbs to encompass such things as four dedicated DDLs, two different harmonisers, and all the normal dedicated phaser/chorus/flanger kind of stuff.

"We do a lot of 12-inch remixes here because we have all these toys and effects, and because we're able to run everything live in the mix. We had one guy in who had been paying **£350** a day somewhere else, but **£600** a day in equipment hire. Here, he didn't have to hire anything."

And there's another good reason to have all those different reverbs, as Zimmer explains.

"As you know, we do a lot of film work here, and you do need a lot of gear for Dolby Stereo mixing. Very few engineers know how it works, but really, with Dolby Stereo you've got three tracks: the centre track is the main, heart track, and the two side tracks (ie. hard left and hard right) have your echo and stuff on them. The Dolby system then looks at the two side tracks, and anything that's out of phase between them gets sent to the speakers at the *back* of the theatre, which is how it creates the ambience.

"That means you can't just have one AMS reverb going left and right, because the Dolby system then thinks everything's out of phase, and sends it all to the back speakers. To avoid that, you really need a separate reverb for each thing.

"Of course that's just the short version of what Dolby Stereo does - there's a lot more to it than that. It does quite a bit of playing with the academy curve — the 8kHz roll-off and stuff. If you listen to a Dolby Stereo mix without the system in, it just sounds *horrendous*, but it's great for cinemas.

"I do love doing cinema sound, because you don't have to worry about how it'll sound on little speakers. They just want lots of bottom, and you can do big things, and proper stereo."

Away from sound treatment and on to sound creation, starting with drum machines. In addition to the fairly standard Sequential Drumtraks, Lillie Yard also have a Linn 9000. It's a machine with considerable virtues, combining a digital beat-box programmed from small dynamic rubber pads, with a sophisticated MIDI sequencer. (Linn's final product before bankruptcy, the MIDIstudio, was really just a repackaged version of this.)

Despite a mammoth price-tag, the 9000 has found favour with quite a cross-section of musicians and producers. And Lillie Yard's Linn has had the user sampling upgrade, which adds to the machine's usefulness as a drum machine considerably.

The multitrack real-time sequencer aspect of the Linn is the cornerstone of Lillie Yard's post-MIDI studio philosophy — something that also requires a fair number of MIDI sound sources to work. Luckily, there are quite a few of these. And whereas the Linn is the brain of the system, the underrated Yamaha DX1 is the heart — its weighted keys make it a fine master keyboard, but it is also capable of generating some uniquely

complex and dirty FM sounds of its own. The studio also has a Yamaha TX816 rack (effectively eight DX7s), making its FM capabilities pretty awesome.

There's a PPG Wave 2.3 on the equipment list, though this is "subject to availability", because it's shared with the programming room upstairs. The purely analogue side is taken care of by a Roland Super Jupiter module and a multi-timbral Oberheim Xpander.

Spread throughout the keyboard area are the various bits of the (MIDI) Fairlight. Zimmer has had **Steve Rance** write some special filmscore software for it.

"You just log all your cues into the Fairlight and it works out on which beat things fall; it's like painting by numbers now – you just fill in the gaps!"

Surprisingly – given the studio's devotion to the latest technology – the Yard hasn't yet been equipped with a Series III Fairlight. I'm told it's in the pipeline, but that the owners are waiting for a few more pieces of the system to be finished before they buy it. Typically, Lillie Yard are thinking of having their cake and eating it, by keeping their old Fairlight when they eventually upgrade.

In the meantime they've bought an Akai S900 sampling module which, with 12-bit resolution and a large sample memory, comfortably handles areas where the Series II Fairlight dare not tread.



The advanced MIDI system forms a strange contrast to the huge black modular wall, which evokes memories of the earliest days of synthesis. Pride of place here is given to an ancient Moog 55 system, which Zimmer bought from Tangerine Dream. It's one of the first synthesisers ever built, and it's a classic. More modern is the extensive collection of Roland System 700 and 100M modules – the sort of equipment

responsible (thanks largely to producer Martin Rushent's enthusiasm) for the most interesting noises on the Human League's album *Dare*. The system is completed by four of the French-made RSF Kobol units (each is a self-contained modular dual-VCO synthesiser) that Depeche Mode are so fond of.

All this (33 oscillators in total) can be controlled with a Roland four-note poly keyboard controller, an MC4 Micro-Composer, or from MIDI via a Roland MPU101 interface. Viewed in conjunction with the MIDI equipment, it is that rare commodity, a keyboard system with the best of everything, and beautifully integrated into the studio of which it forms a part.

Upstairs is a separate programming room, where most of the MIDI keyboards from downstairs are duplicated – another Fairlight, another Linn 9000, another TX816 rack and so on. However, there are some things here that don't exist downstairs – like an Oberheim Matrix 6R module, and a DX7 that justifies its existence because a lot of programmers have their own collection of DX7 sounds on RAM cartridges, which are no use if they've only got a TX816 rack to work with. Master keyboard here is a Yamaha KX88.

The programming room also houses one very rare item – an E-mu Alpert modular analogue synth. Now I don't know about you, but I'd never seen one of these before. In case you don't recognise it, it's the big silver thing in the top right-hand corner of one of the photographs.

The upstairs room also has an Akai MG 1212 12-track recorder, to help people get their ideas together, and a few outboard effects.

All in all, a pleasant programming environment, complete with daylight coming through the skylight in the ceiling. It's also completely wired up to the main studio downstairs.

Back downstairs, the main control room is well thought out, too. It's full of neat touches, like the two large Sony Profeel colour monitors between the speakers, the left-hand one of which shows a video picture of the meters on the multitrack – a way of keeping in touch even though the machine is nowhere to be seen.

"I wanted to hide the tape machines out of the way, so that you don't hear all the clinking and clonking", explains Zimmer. "All you're supposed to hear is the music. Another thing is the heat aspect; everything that makes a lot of heat is behind a partition, and the amps are all in a separate room anyway."

As soon as the VCR starts, the left-hand monitor switches over to video, while the other monitor is normally used to put the Fairlight display up where the engineer can see it. As I arrived, it was being used to show the display of **Steve** Rance's special Fairlight program mentioned earlier.

The most recent Lillie Yard purchase is the aforementioned Q-Lock, but why did they need one when they already had two perfectly good sync units?

"All the engineers who work on films in this country are used to Q-Lock", says Zimmer. "It doesn't matter if there's a better system around or not, it's the fact that with Q-Lock they can just come in, sit down, and start

work. Alan, who does all my film recording, still has problems with the Fostex, because being so used to the Q-Lock, he expects something to happen when he presses a certain button, and it doesn't."

There's been another major addition to the studio recently. A sizeable room on the ground floor, formerly rented out to a photographer, has now been turned into a live room for the studio, making the facility rather more than just a keyboard-based setup.

"We had all these wonderful plans about what to do with the live room when the photographer moved out", says Zimmer. "What happened in the end is that we stuck a drum kit in there and it sounded so great that we're going to leave it just as it is. Everything here is a bit designed by accident, and if that works, great! If it doesn't work, we get somebody clever in to give us a hand."

The live room is also now the home of an Ibach acoustic grand piano, though Hans feels that this now has unfair competition.

"We've just got one of those Roland MIDI pianos, and they sound really good, I mean, they're good enough for 'in the track' any day. You have to tweak the internal sounds a bit, but really they're very good. The vibes in particular - I think there's going to be lots of vibes on everything coming up. We only got the rack-mounting version of it, simply because we don't have space for any more keyboards; everything runs off the DX1. I'm just worried that all my chaps are going to forget how to mic up real pianos.

"Our MIDI is pretty well sorted out here. Syco gave us one of those M16s and now we have to get the expander for that, because we've just run out.

"It's funny. Every time you do something you think that you're going to overbudget and overdo it, like on wiring. Two months later you've run out and you have to get the guys back to lay a few cables. It never stops.

"We get a lot of people coming round here saying: 'We want to build a studio, what's your advice?' And my advice is always the same — don't. It's crazy. I find it hard to understand how a studio which is just there for the sake of being a studio can make money, because you do have to buy new gear all the time. Here, the money is also being made through our own music.

"I really never was interested in making this place revolutionary. I just wanted it to be very functional, and to have all the things in here that you normally have to hire in."

So Lillie Yard is just a well-designed, functional studio with more or less everything you'd ever need. For synthesised film work it's pretty unbeatable — the price is probably justified by the Q-Lock and the reverbs alone. The programming room is pretty extensive too, and as it duplicates so much of the MIDI gear, it enables you to get the bulk of your sound-creation work out of the way upstairs, before moving down into the more expensive main studio — an excellent idea, and one that may well become more widely applied.

Overall, I'd say Lillie Yard is one of the nicest studios I've seen in London, and I've seen quite a few. In fact, I think this might be my Ideal Home...

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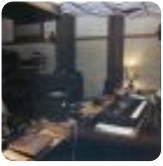
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