



The Otari MX-5050 (top) and the Akai S-1000 sampler were the clear favorites of the TC sound designers' product survey.

"Of course," says the first sound designer to the second, "the only one that sounds any good at all is the JPI 599 Version 3.2, running at 44.1K into twin 15" drivers via SCSI. And it supports S/PDIF, AES/EBU, MIDI, and SMPTE!" "You must be crazy" says the second designer. "The Turbo S-APOS XD Mark V is much more musical, it's true diversity, and it supports Kellogg's HFOC interface! It's not that much more expensive, it has 16 million times oversampling and it uses custom DSP chips!" "Are you kidding?" replies the first designer. "On the DAT transfer into 8 ohms, its D-A converters clip! Plus, the JPI has a much sweeter sound!"

If you put more than one sound designer in a room for more than about five minutes, the conversation invariably turns to one topic—sound equipment.

Aesthetic concerns, particularly in the aural realm, are often difficult, if not impossible, to articulate, but one thing that is easy to talk about is hardware.

Here at *TC*, we thought it would be interesting to survey some of the industry's top sound designers and get their opinions on this tumultuous topic. Surveys were sent out to designers asking about their favorite pieces of gear, with questions ranging from microphones to DAT machines, and from delay units to mixers. We also asked a few questions about equipment trends and ultimate wish lists. We asked what designers use most and what their favorites are—the "favorite" category reflected the ideal situation; the "use most" category reflected the harsh realities of cost, reliability, and

other factors. We got surveys back from 14 sound designers in America, Britain, and Germany, and the results are summarized here. It should be noted that this is an informal survey, not a scientific one, and designers rarely have a specific favorite product for every situation and every application.

The survey asked about mics in four categories—area, handheld, recording, and instrument. In the area mic category there was an almost unanimous favorite: the Crown PCC-160. This microphone can be seen along the front of the stage on almost every show on Broadway (if only for backup purposes) and was the clear favorite of resident theatre designers as well. In hand-held microphones, there was another clear favorite—the Shure SM58 or the newer version of the same mic, the Beta 58. This has been a workhorse for hand-held vocals for many years. Other popular items were Sennheiser 518s and MD 431s. In terms of recording mics, designers varied widely, but there were a few mentions of Neumann U47s and 87s. Designers also varied widely in their opinions about instrument mics, but AKG had more than a few mentions.

In wireless transmitting systems, Sennheiser was the clear favorite. One or two designers prefer Micron, but use Sennheiser because of problems in getting support for Micron systems in the U.S.

In the sampler category, the Akai S-1000 or S-1100 was the hands-down choice among almost all of the designers surveyed; in fact, it was the only sampler listed by any of the Broadway designers. Some of the other recommended machines are Emu Systems' Emulators and Emaxs, the Dynacord ADS, and the Sound Tools Sample Cell System.

Otari's workhorse MX-5050 appeared the most in the tape deck "use most" category, although a few designers preferred other models in the "favorite" category (like Otari's MTR series). Studer/Revox had a few mentions with the Studer 812 and the Revox PR-99 decks. Designer Hans Peter Kuhn bemoans the fact that the Telefunken M-15 is no longer made; he thinks it was "the best deck for editing."

For studio-type DAT machines, designers were basically split between Panasonic's SV-3000 series machines (the SV-3500 and SV-3700), and the Radio Systems RS-1000, which is a Sony deck modified for the cueing needs of the

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Sound Designers' Equipment Survey

What do they use, and why?

BY JOHN HUNTINGTON

EQUIPMENT SURVEY

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broadcast and theatre markets. The Panasonic SV-255 was the clear choice for portable DAT applications, especially among resident designers who spend more time recording location sound effects than do their Broadway counterparts. Jim LeBrecht likes the SV-255 because it "sounds as good as the Sony but will lay down an actual index number." David Budries says, "The SV-255 is my portable of choice for sample mastering and music recording." A few designers also use the Sony TCD-D10.

CD players were perhaps the wildest category; in fact the only machine named by more than one of the designers was the Technics SLP-1300, and it was only listed twice. Otts Munderloh likes it because it "cues the tightest and has a jog wheel."

The majority of designers who use effects libraries use the one from Sound Ideas. Hans Peter Kuhn uses exclusively his "own collection of 1,500 effects on DAT." David Budries says, "I prefer to use sound effects that I create or gather."

Budries uses only about 25% prerecorded sounds, and those come from the Sound Ideas line. Other libraries receiving mentions included the Electra series, the Hollywood Edge, and the Network collection.

As one might anticipate, asking about mixers opened a huge can of worms, although a few favorites did appear. Yamaha's PM-3000 was mentioned quite

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a few times in the "use most" category from the reinforcement designers, although the "favorite" category of the same designers often listed Cadac or Midas boards. Playback show designers varied wildly in their choices, although the Richmond Sound Design system was mentioned several times in the favorite category. Soundcraft and Tascam boards,

in a variety of configurations, were mentioned frequently in the "use most" category.

Lexicon was the clear favorite in the reverb category, and these ranged from the bigger budget designers with 480Ls to smaller budget designers with LXP series gear. Other recommended processors included Yamaha's Revs 5 and 7 and the SPX series.

There were also a wide variety of models in the delay category. Klark Teknik, TC Electronics, and Yamaha were mentioned the most frequently.

Many designers expressed no preference in the effects processors category. Those who have a preference mentioned Yamaha SPX-90s more than any other. Eventide H3000s, Lexicon PCM-70s, BSS DPR 402s and others are also named.

For EQ or equalization systems, the Meyer SIM system and its CP-10 parametric EQ were named more than any other by Broadway designers, both in the "favorite" and "use most" categories. Other responses include White, Klark Teknik, and "my ears."

In amplifiers Crown slightly edged out Crest for the lead, with Yamaha next in preference. Others included QSC, Hafler,

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Meyer and Apogee were both popular speakers for reinforcement purposes among the Broadway designers, but Meyer was preferred overall when totalled with the resident designers responses. Meyer maintained a slight lead in the speakers playback category. Other responses included Apogee, Bag End, Bose, EV, JBL, McCune, and Tannoy.

Macintosh was most frequently mentioned in the computer category, although some designers use Macs in the studio and IBM compatibles in the theatre. Most Mac users apparently use them mostly for drawing system diagrams and for digital audio editing using Sound Tools. Ataris and Amigas were also mentioned, and one respondee does not use a computer.

The survey closed with a few general questions. The first of these was "What piece of gear do you wish you could afford to use but never can?" Responses included were Cadac, Midas, Neve or SSL consoles, or one of a number of digital audio workstations, including AMS Audiofiles, DAR Soundstations, and NED Synclaviers. Consoles and DAWs are the most expensive parts of almost any sound system, and theatre designers

seem to be feeling the budget pinch here.

The next question was, "What piece of gear doesn't exist but you wish it did?" Playback designers almost unanimously called for more automation in one form or another. Rob Milburn wants a "Light

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Palette for sound." David Budries wants "an automated theatrical audio mixer that has a user interface which allows the operator or designer to quickly execute levels, fades, crossfades, etc, and have the system remember each move." Others want DAT machines that could start

quickly. Topping Hans Peter Kuhn's wish list is, "A clock with more than 24 hours per day."

Reinforcement designers wanted more high-tech things like quiet fiber optic snakes, more automation, and quieter mixers. Tony Meola wants automation for input EQ. For tracking wireless mics, Andrew Bruce wants a "miniature radar to control delay units."

The final question on the survey was, "What future trends in hardware do you see?" The responses almost universally involved digitally stored, manipulated, and processed sound and MIDI.

What does all this mean? Obviously there are many factors that go into purchasing decisions—cost being among the foremost for theatrical applications—and whether you purchase popular equipment or not really does not matter all that much. It is surprising that those surveyed had so many opinions in common, but many of them are working under similar constraints. As for the future, sound designers will continue to discuss and debate the merits of sound equipment, and this will probably continue as long as sound continues to propagate through air, and this, we hope, will be for quite some time to come. □

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