

Swiss Precision



That's what the Swiss are famous for: being precise and accurate. Especially when it comes to good tone, sound engineer Christian Zimmerli is not easy to please and here he considers himself as the partner of an accordingly demanding clientele that keeps growing. For almost twenty years Zimmerli has been running his mastering studio in Düsseldorf and also supervises sound recordings with mobile technology. Furthermore he's a contract teacher at the Institute for Music and Media in Düsseldorf and thus in permanent contact with the young generation.

Interview: Norbert Lehmann Pictures: zimmerli sounds

NL: How did you get into the sound recording business?

CZ: When I was still a child, I discovered some albums in my father's record collection which have been fascinating me ever since. I'm talking about recordings of the Partita no. 1 by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by pianist Dinu Lipatti who I feel died much too early.

I was intrigued by the enormous spectrum of emotions which was then preserved in the form of music and made accessible anytime. From then on I wanted to create recordings myself.

NL: Which musical genres are you primarily active in?

CZ: As to recordings, we cover all genres that are produced using acoustic means. With mastering there are no limitations. Apart from classical music, jazz, lounge and metal are just a few examples from the daily studio routine.

NL: What are the most essential characteristics of a successful recording?

CZ: Technical details are a splendid field for debate. But the crucial point is to create arcs of suspense in the music which cast a spell over me. That way I'm literally forced to listen closely and the emotional effect will last much longer

than the actual recording.

NL: Which part of a production usually consumes most of the time?

CZ: 1. The preparation. Personal talks with the performing musicians are very important to me. On the one hand there are always a lot of organisational matters to discuss, on the other hand I want to define right from the start: what expectations and demands do the artists have on the forthcoming recording? After that a suitable room needs to be found that will not only meet my personal requirements, but also those of all involved. At the same time I'm studying the score and drawing up a recording concept. Finally the appropriate equipment must be booked and prepared.

2. The decision process as to when the quality of the production is ready for hitting the market also takes a lot of time.

NL: According to which criteria do you select recording locations?

CZ: In the first place, the recording locations must match the works, but they must also be right for the performing artists. For instance, the Jesus Christ Church in Berlin has a special effect both on musicians and sound engineers. Conductors like Herbert von Karajan and Daniel Ba-

renboim bear witness of an impressive recording history. In my opinion the acoustics is breathtaking and virtually allows all classical orchestrations. Personally, I recorded works by Jean Perrin in this place. My credo is: only if the musicians feel at ease, they can perform at their best.

NL: Are you still using analogue technology?

CZ: The Frankfurt Music Fair 2012 has shown: the trend towards analogue technology has greatly increased, the demand is growing. Personally, I've always remained faithful to the analogue world. The sound benefits from the harmonic distortion products of analogue components. These are caused mainly by the use of filters and also by summing up multiple tracks. For example, a dependable piece of inventory in the studio is my mixing console, a custom design by Michael Zähl. I co-developed it many years ago and know it inside out, in the true sense of the word. Nevertheless, I love to exploit the advantages of both the analogue and the digital domains. The signals are converted by devices from Sonic Solutions and Daniel Weiss.

NL: Which role do high-resolution digital formats play for you?

CZ: The degree of resolution determines the level of detail in the reproduction. This is an important prerequisite for the production process. But the consumers increasingly value high-resolution music, too. Meanwhile we can enjoy music in studio quality (i.e. with a resolution of up to 384 Khz) in our living rooms.

NL: What is more important: the microphone or its position?

CZ: The position. I would like to draw a comparison to photography: it's clearly an aesthetic difference which

camera I'm using to shoot a picture. However, criteria such as light, focal length and image section ought to be selected consciously before. Transferred to sound recordings, this implies to give the highest priority to reverberation radius and recording angle. And this happens exactly through the positioning. The most decisive point is, of course, to analyse the room, the music and the instruments. Only after I could develop a fine sense of the tonal aesthetics, the microphone selection will make sense.

NL: What's your opinion about surround technology?

CZ: Although we give preference to stereophony, we still offer recordings and mastering in surround. This greatly expands

the creative leeways. The economic relevance is only subject to the market. Lately we got the order to conjure a 5.1 mix from an ordinary pop song. According to definition this has nothing to do with high-end, but we were very happy with the result anyway.

NL: How strong is the innovative pressure for your studio? Which devices/investments require absolutely state-of-the-art from you?

CZ: Fortunately digital devices can be easily kept up-to-date with updates. The monitoring situation is the centrepiece of our stu-

dio. Here we are working in close cooperation with our partner Myro from Celle to continually optimise the loudspeaker system.

NL: What does the lecturing activity in Düsseldorf mean to you?

CZ: Being in contact with young interested people at the Institute for Music and Media in Düsseldorf, but also at the Academy Of Arts George Enescu in Romania means a lot to me. It's exhilarating to pass on my expertise to the next generation. And I'm always delighted at how inspiring such a science transfer is for myself. Explaining always means understanding, too.

NL: How do you evaluate the quality of

portable recordings?

CZ: Basically I create recordings in such a way that as many decisions as possible can be made later in the studio. On site I need high-quality headphones and amplifiers for a reliable assessment of the individual tracks. The headphone amplifiers from Lehmannaudio are ideally suited, especially for complex recordings: the transparency of the sound and the precise localisation of the sound sources allow a fast and dependable evaluation. Therefore the Linear Pro is a reliable companion with our productions. For many musicians there is nothing better than to hear their own recording right at the instrument ■

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Selected recordings:



Thomas Blomenkamp
„Orchestral Works - Chamber Music - Piano Music“
Düsseldorfer Symphoniker (John Fiore), Nikolaus Trieb, Stefan Irmer a. o.
NEOS11205/06



Jean Perrin
„Musique Concertante“
Kammerakademie Potsdam, Brigitte Meyer, Tanja Becker-Bender a. o.
Divox, CDX 20906

LA Lehmannaudio



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