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Decca's Vienna Venue

JOHN BORWICK

One of the world's great serious music halls
is also a recording studio (venue). The author
guides us through this unique installation
located in the city of classical music.

SURELY THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS recording venue is the Sophiensaal in Vienna. I have just been on a visit to Vienna and spent a fascinating time in the Sophiensaal at the invitation of Gordon Parry, Decca's senior recording engineer.

The Sophiensaal — there are three splendid halls in fact, superbly architected *en suite* and decorated in Vienna's richest style — has hit the audio headlines in various ways. First, we know it is the place where Decca (London) recorded their monumental complete cycle of Wagner's *Ring* — and numerous other recordings with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Willi Boskovsky, etc. Then a wider public saw Decca at work on recording *Götterdämmerung* in the historic film *The Golden Ring* made by BBC Television and since shown all over the world. And John Culshaw, formerly classical record director of Decca, has now set down in print the whole story of these Sophiensaal adventures in his book *Ring Resounding*.

Perhaps the most unique feature of this special "remote studio" is the thoroughness with which John Culshaw and Gordon Parry (as long ago as 1956, set about locating a suitable hall in Vienna and, having been delighted with the Sophiensaal acoustics) dug themselves in. They did this both technically and domestically, wiring the whole place for sound, designing and building a huge custom control console and even setting up house in an apartment of rooms upstairs. (This flat is the scene of many between-recordings parties and discussions and while lunching there I was very conscious of the great names who had preceded me, Flagstad, Solti, Nilsson, Karajan, Fischer-Dieskau, and so on. There were many momentoes too, like the actual steerhorns used in *Götterdämmerung*).

THE CONTROL CONSOLE

A general view of the massive control desk is shown in FIGURE 1. The now-familiar concept of slide fader modular strips each containing all the facilities for that channel was adopted. There are basically 20 Channels, in the unusual

configuration of 19 to each operator position with the producer's chair (originally for John Culshaw) in the center.

This mode of working is a Decca speciality and it is common for Gordon Parry and his colleague Jimmy Lock to work in tandem, mixing the orchestra on one panel and voices on the other. Sometimes, as in the orchestral interludes in the recently completed *Der Rosenkavalier* recording, the whole desk will be used for the orchestra alone, even though the 8 switchable echo-return faders can be used as extra microphone channels. So a modification is planned, using space-saving integrated circuits, to increase the number of channels.

Four echo sources are on tap, two echo chambers and two stereo EMT echo plates, with remote-control reverberation period. The send/return circuitry is novel in that the return can be controlled either separately or ganged in with the channel fader. For truer orchestral reverberation (hardly ever needed) or special effects, the subsidiary Blauersaal can be co-opted as giant echo-room. It is effectively sound-proofed from the main Grosse Saal and has an 8 seconds reverberation time. It is heard to impressive effect in the *Ring* recordings when Fafner's voice was bounced in there from 12 different loudspeakers! More subtly, I was given a foretaste of its use in the still-to-be-issued *Der Rosenkavalier* master tape where a beautiful airy perspective was achieved by placing the stage orchestra of some 40 players in the Blauersaal (with a separate conductor) and mixing this with the main performers in the Grosse Saal.

The distribution networks are unusually versatile. Outputs from individual channels, grouped in any required manner, can be sent to a variety of listening points. (It is important that the cue signal sent to off-stage performers does not contain their own sound.) Tape replay too is tricky, and can be stereo or mono and either selected or reduced from four-track as required. The Dolby noise reduction system is always used and this was certainly the first location in the world to install 8 Dolby units to give 4-track stretch and de-stretch (for monitoring) operation.

OTHER TECHNICAL FEATURES

Closed-circuit television is widely used. The control room has no window into the main hall and so the console faces two large t.v. monitors flanked by Tannoy loudspeakers (behind gauze curtains). British Quad 50E power amplifiers are used for line and speaker distribution etc., but the channel limiters and equalizers are all of Decca design.

With so many expensive and busy artists to record, great care has been taken to double up on equipment. The rack-

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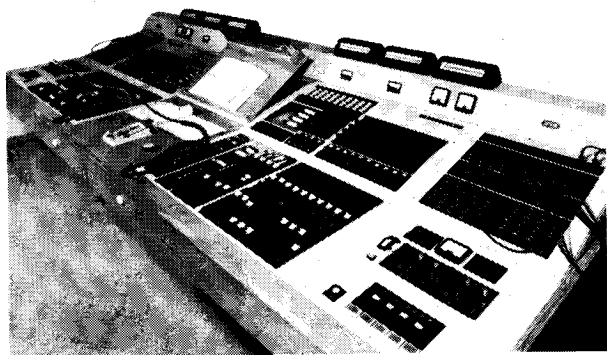


Figure 1. The console installed by Decca (London in the U.S.) at Vienna's Sophiensaal. Note the use of strip-type peak-reading meters.

mounted amplifiers, for instance (see Figure 2) have instant change-over switches and pull out for physical replacement. This is true of the power supply banks too, which identify faulty units by warning lights and can be replaced in a few seconds. Taping too is normally double-banked, using the EMT/Studer C37 and J37 studio machines so widely employed in European studios. Final editing of the tapes is carried out on the spot, so that it is the final *masters* which are sent back to Decca headquarters in London. They are Dolby-ized, of course, and so are compatible with the rest of Decca's classical record program.

Neumann electrostatic microphones have been first choice for a number of years but a revolutionary new microphone technique is presently being tried. This includes a trial of new AKG dynamic microphones and has been prompted by the need to look ahead to combined audio/visual presenta-

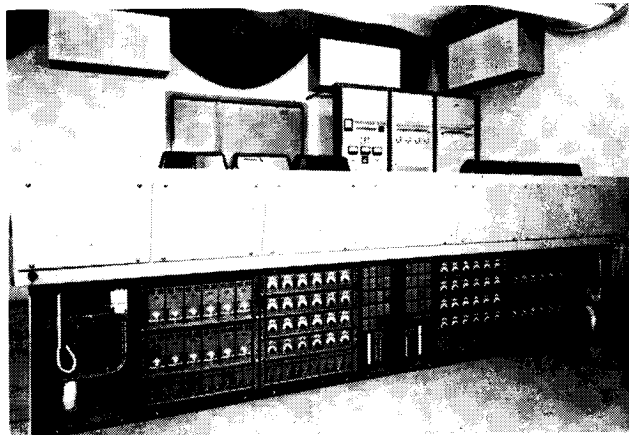


Figure 2. A rear view of the console shown in Figure 1.

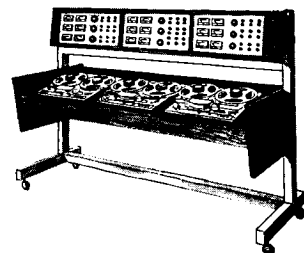
tions. As cameras and microphones will increasingly need to work together, re-thinking of the microphone's job is vital. Film and television needs have now been joined by EVR (electronic video recording) and Decca wants to be ready for any move towards the audio visual gramophone record of the future. During my visit, indeed, they were completing the sessions on a t.v. film soundtrack of *Così fan tutte*. The Decca engineers and the singers reluctantly agreed to voice dubbing for the arias but they felt that miming the recitatives was too prone to timing errors and so these were filmed and recorded simultaneously.

Nobody can measure the total effect on gramophone records (and equipment) sales brought about by the public impact of a major recording like the Decca *Ring* cycle. No doubt it is considerable, and clearly we can expect further treats and maybe surprises from Decca and from the Sophiensaal.

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