

Lockdown, remote recording and the EUYO Digital Orchestra

An interview with EUYO Alumnus Andrew McCoy on the EUYO Digital Orchestra project

After the cancellation of the entire Summer Tour 2020, the EUYO launched a **Digital Summer Residency**. Using EUYO's new *EUYOdigital* platform, musicians took part in a variety of activities, among which there was a special "**EUYO Digital Orchestra**" recording project.

EUYO Chief Conductor **Vasily Petrenko** led the recording of two pieces: John Adams' *The Chairman dances* and Györgi Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, both performed by EUYO musicians at home. The music recorded will be used in two films the EUYO will be producing.

EUYO Alumni and friends Andrew McCoy and Ulf Breuer, having worked together on a special commission between the EUYO and the EU delegation in Turkey for a special, online virtual Europe Day concert, were keen to work with us in the EUYO Digital Orchestra recording project, with Andrew McCoy working on the audio side of the recordings.

We caught up with him to find out more.

What makes this project so special?

What's interesting to me about this project compared to basically every other similar one is that **every single take was workshopped and rehearsed**. No player recorded either piece in its entirety. We divided each piece into five sections and they would record multiple takes of each section.

We recorded both pieces entirely at least two or three times, plus patches for individual sections or passages done by orchestral sections or individual players. In one case, we changed a clicktrack during a take, as we did a slightly different tempo – and of course, the previous takes were then null.

So, how was this done?

It worked this way. We had the full orchestra every couple of days – sectionals at the beginning, then the full orchestra. Vasily Petrenko would send me videos of him conducting, and from those I created a click track, mapped to his beat. When the full orchestra convened, Petrenko would explain the part that was to be recorded, ask to make changes, discuss with musicians the single parts.

Then the musicians would record the assigned part and send me their recordings the

same day, or within 12 hours.

Upon receiving those files, I would then put together all the recordings in a master file and send that to Vasily Petrenko within 24 hours from the initial recording. The master file was made in a way that he could listen to the recorded part as a whole or divided for instrument sections, so he could listen independently to – say – the brass section, the woodwind sections and so on.

Vasily Petrenko would then make his comments, request second takes, and then the whole process would start over the next day for another section of one of the pieces. Multiply this by the number of players and you can see how quick and easily the files added up.

In the end, I had **3.703 files including recordings, clicktracks, multiple exports of sections** for tutors and Vasily



ANDREW MCCOY

Trombonist, composer, photographer and blogger, Andrew is an EUYO alumnus who currently lives and works in Dubai.

Petrenko accruing to 157.14 gigabytes.

How many players took part overall?

In the Adams piece there were 88 players. Every time that there was a recording of a part, I would receive at least 88 files; you should then multiply that by 5 for each part in which a piece was divided, and that accrues to 440. Of course, this does not take account of all the different takes every single musician had to do, which were many.

The Ligeti was much the same, with 89 players, although, unlike the Adams piece, **every single player had their own unique part**, even in the strings sections!

What was your biggest challenge?

The big thing that players missed was to play with other people. Being in lockdown, everyone had to perform from their own home. When you play in a live orchestra, when a conductor gives a steady beat, we as musicians are trained to follow the flow, evening the time and instinctively playing all together in with a collective sound.

However, when you record from your home following a click track, that doesn't work. Not only did I have to take into account the varied recording qualities of different recording equipment, as well as the different acoustics of the rooms in which people were in, but we soon realized how different people may feel the peak of a musical phrase in a slightly different time because they were not together.

What issues did that throw up for you?

If I were to simply take the files of the different recordings of an orchestral section – say, the first violins – and layer them on top of each other, none would fit together. Therefore, I had to go back to the musicians, having them listen to their recording compared to the others, and get a second take of the part, which would then fit better.

That is also why we changed the click track half-way through: I took important rhythmic and melodic lines from certain individual players and incorporated them into a new click track which would then be a helpful guidance.

By the end of the recording session, they were not listening to a midi file click-track, but to a click-track which had not only the click but had important lines taken from certain key players from an earlier recorded take, which it was agreed it had the right articulation, correct phrasing, etc. This was a great help for them.

What have you learned from this experience?

I got a really unusual and deep insight into the orchestration of these pieces, and actually doing this kind of recording you appreciate very quickly how well orchestrated they are.

When you listen to a normal recording your ears latch on to the melody, maybe some rhythmic things, but you cannot single out what an instrument does for an entire piece, let alone how, say, the celli and violas may work together or relate to another section. Ligeti's *Atmosphères* is particularly challenging in this regard, as you do not have the first violins acting as one, but **you have fourteen first violin parts, and every single one of them is unique**.

When you listen to it, it is impossible to focus on a single instrument, as there is a wall of sound which is always evolving, always changing.

From an editing point of view, that was indeed a nightmare – some of the changes are happening unbelievably quickly, and throughout the entire orchestral score, so precision has to be absolute.

What do you think players have learned doing this recording?

There is a real art and skill in recording. Recording in a studio, with other players, is a very different thing compared to recording at home, of course; but I think that the entire process the musicians went through was highly beneficial.

In the future, it will be more common for musicians to record themselves, as it is a growing trend; the lockdown emergency has accelerated an already ongoing process.

The music industry is changing, technology is developing and musicians need to adapt.

There is a growing market for musicians who can provide high quality recordings. It is great that the European Union Youth Orchestra decided to engage its current members with a project that gave them new skills.

THE RECORDINGS

JOHN ADAMS: *THE CHAIRMAN DANCES*

A commission from the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, John Adams described it as an outtake from Act III of his opera Nixon in China, which would have seen Chairman Mao descending from his portrait and dancing a passionate fox-trot with Madame Mao.

GYÖRGY LIGETI: *ATMOSPHERÈS*

Ligeti wrote this piece exploiting what he called a "micropolyphonic texture", which discarded conventional melody and metre in favour of a dense sound structure with tone clusters of notes. The piece is popularly known for its use in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey.