



# Sony Music Studios Tokyo

It's the grandest and most ambitious ground-up studio complex built anywhere in recent times. Sony's in-house facility is in for the long haul and combines forward thinking technology with old-fashioned character and values.

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**T**HE IN-HOUSE RECORD label studio has served as the base upon which the recording industry was built. Any look at newly developing territories, or indeed a historical look back at the genesis of any national recording industry, reveals strong initial record company investment and involvement in the creation of studio facilities. While it is true that commercial pressures and competition quickly slackened what many regarded as a stranglehold, it is also true to say that should a record label be committed enough, and, of course, have the funds and inclination, then it still makes a lot of sense.

It gives control and an input to the way things operate and communication can, theoretically, pass up and down the chain of command to increase efficiency and keep the record company in touch with what is happening, from a creative and technological standpoint, at the coal face. The downside is the oft-sited criticism of 'institutionalisation', which, while it has been valid for some operations in the past, is not an accusation you could levy at Sony Music Studios in Tokyo. This is a far more progressive outfit and set-up.

Few Tokyo commuters can realise that the enormous leafy covered building is home to what is probably the most advanced and ambitious studio complex built anywhere in the world in recent memory.

From the outside it looks like the sort of high tech, almost European looking, building that would house a happening and, it has to be said, very cash-rich international operation. And that's what it is. Sony has consolidated and unified, into one building, its record company, administrative and creative operation, with its highly acclaimed studio operation from its previous site in Shinanomachi.

The building is big, boasting some six floors, but it also houses basement levels in which the studio complex is placed. Located at Nogizaka Junction, it's not quite central Tokyo but you hear jaw-dropping tales about the cost of real estate in certain parts of the city: stories that recount how the cost of a good large analogue desk is eclipsed by the price of the land that it stands on. Whichever way you cut it, Sony has spent an absolute fortune on the new building and studio complex.

Describing the place is difficult without first creating a few lists. There are five recording studios - two

with large recording areas and large isolation booths and three, used predominantly for remix work, with accompanying small recording areas. There are 12 mastering studios, four authoring rooms, three video edit suites, a preview room and a VTR room. When recounted like this, it doesn't sound nearly as impressive as it actually is. Let's try again then.

Studios 1, 2 and 3 have AMS Neve 88R consoles, Studio 4 has an SSL 9000 J Series (with gold plated contacts on all the switches), and Studio 5 has a Euphonix System 5. Studios 1 and 2 are effectively back to back and represent mirror images of each other right down to the same size live areas and arrangement of their complementary five large iso booths. Sight lines across the areas are excellent and ceiling height is 8m. All studios have large well-equipped artist lobbies with all amenities, right down to the ability to monitor control room audio.

The whole place is networked, there is enormous centralised storage and archival, and the mastering and authoring facilities can take care of all audio, video and data format completion and they even do the Playstation games here.

Acoustic design throughout was by Studio

Bau:ton. The previous site at Shinanomachi was designed by Tom Hidley and encapsulated the look of the time. Bau:ton's selection came about after staff visits to well-known studios in New York and Los Angeles illustrated its work and Sony Music Studios also liked Bau:ton's conceptualisation of what they would do with the site.

All the rooms are designed for 5.1 production and have TEC:ton TTH1s but only Studio 5, with the Euphonix, actually has all the channels fitted along with two subs. This is because the other rooms currently only operate in stereo and fitting the extra channels, which the rooms are ready for, will happen when it is required.

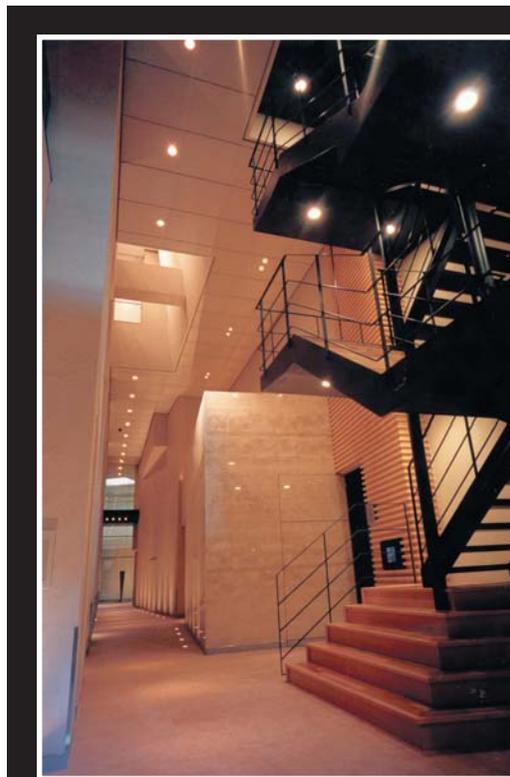
The choice of the AMS Neve 88Rs is perhaps a bit predictable given that the studios' previous facility at Shinanomachi was rich in VRs.

'Our engineers like the Neve sound and they worked for a long time on the VRs and when we heard about the new desks we were obviously interested,' explains Tesuo Tomita, senior director, archive room. 'Also, for music production recording and comparing them to digital desks, the 88R is very flexible.'

The SSL was chosen because of its worldwide popularity and the fact that incoming artists bringing their own engineers would expect to see one. Tomita says that the System 5 fulfils a requirement among the in-house engineers to stay in contact with new technologies and release formats and to experiment. So why no Sony Oxford?

'We discussed the whole business of all digital consoles seriously many times but finally the recording engineers chose the Euphonix,' he replies. 'However, it is a very difficult decision to make because we are still looking at what are the first developments of digital consoles. We believe that digital consoles are still a relatively young technology.'

The Sony Music Studios Shinanomachi site was opened in around 1978 and operated for the best part of 23 years. The new complex is expected to last a good deal longer. Building started in around April 1998 but planning had been going on for some four years previously and Tomita admits that



Architectural design and construction by Oyabashi Corporation, acoustic construction by Nittobo Acoustic Engineering. Space is not an issue and this is Tokyo.

they'd been talking about it for ten years.

'It's a difficult process when there are so many different things to consider,' he says, adding that futurecasting likely technological directions was part of the deal. 'We talked at length about the number of studios, and what would do the job. When you start to analyse it you encounter so many opinions. Some managers will tell you that you don't need big studios at all because it's possible to record on any computer system anywhere. It comes down to trying to understand what is important in a studio. We came to the conclusion that you do still need studios

otherwise everything gets done on computer and everything sounds like it. You need to be able to make an impact with the music because that's where the magic is, and the magic happens in a real studio.'

'What we did decide was that the recording areas didn't have to be that big - our recording areas here are smaller than they were at Shinanomachi,' he continues. 'Acoustically, wide, tall and big is good for recording but it's not as convenient and you need to have quick and convenient access

to live areas that are versatile for productions today. Originally we were to have four studio areas and we looked at the booking patterns. If you have just two and some one calls to the booking office then there is a chance that they may be disappointed, but we can recommend one of the other studios.'

Recorder-wise it's the typical Japanese menu of Sony 3348, Studer 2-inch A827 (they have three Gold A827s) and an A820 1/2-inch for every room with Studio 5 also getting a Euphonix R1. There are three floating Pro Tools systems plus a number of Sony Sonoma SACD systems available.

A lot of gear was brought over from the old Shinanomachi site, most notably outboard and the six EMT plates, but the spirit has also been transplanted. Sony's studio has always served as a wing of the company's R&D efforts but it also builds for its own purposes. My visit to the Shinanomachi complex more than ten years ago involved an encounter with a modified 2-track DASH machine in one of the mastering rooms. This had a 'bread-board' contraption wired in to it that they were clearly very excited about but language precluded any real understanding on my part. A few years later, when the technology had come to market, I realised that I had witnessed the early trials of what was to become Super Bit Mapping.

This spirit endures. DSD is happening and convertor boxes are in evidence with multichannel boxes in planning and the knowledge is clearly spread to the other Sony affiliated studios around the world.

'This isn't just a studio: it's used for development, and that includes our own development,' states Tomita. 'We've designed and built our own artists headphones monitoring systems and we're looking into extremely high resolution and dynamic range monitoring systems. We've also developed a D-A convertor system because there are some good convertors around, but their problem is stability.'

He shows me a box, which is neatly legended and impeccably built, that he doesn't believe will ever be





## Petasite

Sony's Petasite large-scale digital archive and data backup solution is scalable and flexible for storage applications up to 29.0 Petabytes (compressed) or 11.2 Petabytes (native).

Composed of a user-defined combination of basic consoles, drive consoles, cassette consoles, and junction consoles, the modular architecture of Petasite can be designed for any storage and workflow requirement and can accommodate any physical layout. It's billed as an ideal centralised storage solution and will integrate with emerging network technologies like Fibre Channel SAN and gigabit Ethernet.

At Sony Music Studios it sits at the centre of archiving and storage issues. Offering future expandability and functionality it is also tied in with the company's plans for electronic music distribution and linking and transmitting audio via the Internet.

released as a commercially available product. 'It's only for us!' he laughs. 'It's for recording and mastering and we've standardised on it.'

'We're always thinking about how we can get an advantage compared to our competitors,' he continues. 'Basically we have to make hits and record good music.'

They'll tell you that the air conditioning is exceptional and that it manages to extract the tobacco smoke extremely efficiently, you'll hear that the power is incredibly stable and clean, and you'll be illuminated by the fact that the two concert Steinways were selected individually from five that were delivered following actual test-run recording sessions - solo and with string sections. The mic cupboards have temperature gauges on them.

I was also taken to a large hall in the record company 'section'. While its main function is to serve as the company restaurant, it has a stage, a PA system, lighting and projectors and can be used for small showcases to an audience of 200. The studios employ around 65 including managers but head count in the whole building is more like 400.

While the studios may be dedicated to use by Sony artists, it's clear that this is intended to extend beyond local talent to an international base. Given the exclusivity and privacy afforded by the complex, big name artists would be comfortable walking the amazingly high-ceilinged and silent corridors in peace and anonymity.

It is all just so high-tech and the feeling of space is overwhelming. You would be hard pushed to imagine the construction of something on such a scale in any capital city, let alone Tokyo. However, what endures is the sense of traditional engineering values — the sort of touches that are too frequently overlooked in formulaic studio builds. It is high-tech but it is steeped in almost old-fashioned character and values.

Without wishing to go overboard about this, Sony Music Studios is an engineer's paradise, a gear playground and represents all that is great about studio employment. It's not only about working with artists, but also about playing with and having input in to equipment, testing and experimenting.

We've all got to be glad that a place like this can still be built on planet earth. □



## More than just a studio

In reality it's a full-service facility that doesn't stop at audio. Video editing and authoring rooms take care of all formats and all disciplines, even Playstation.

Monitors in the mastering rooms were designed by Strauss Elektroakustik, Switzerland and combine with the Peter Grueneisen Studio Bau:ton acoustics. The TTMF2s are two-way, point-source loudspeakers with bass-reflex tuning and a switchable super tweeter for frequencies above 22kHz. Passive equalisation of the horn and compression driver is second order Linkwitz-Riley.

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