Steve Price

He's recorded more orchestral sessions than most and established himself as a big session deliverer of results. The pianist's son who turned engineer talks to GEORGE SHILLING about track counts, stems, and the importance of getting the band 'happy'.

STEVE PRICE WAS INTRODUCED to the studio world at the age of seven, when he would accompany his father, busy session pianist Ronnie Price, to sessions. Ronnie's work was mainly in the jazz and light entertainment field, and it was during one of these childhood outings in the 1970s that Steve noticed the big thing in the control room with all the knobs and lights, and decided that being a sound engineer was probably the best job in the world.

When he was 18, his father alerted him to a job opportunity at CTS Studios, where he took a tea boy/tape op job, and fell in love with film music when he was almost literally blown away while witnessing at close range the brass section playing to the famous James Bond 'iris' title sequence. Having learnt from experts Dick Lewzy and the late Paul Hume, and assisting on memorable soundtrack sessions for Batman and Who Framed Roger Rabbit?, he was engineering within three years. In 1993 Steve took a job at Angel Studios,

where he is still an employee. He has engineered a large number of film music sessions, having recently worked on Hitch with composer George Fenton and The Wedding Date with Debbie Wiseman, and his other work includes frequent orchestral and string overdubbing on mainstream pop and rock material such as Stereophonics and Jamiroquai. Steve is also frequently involved with music recording for TV, and there is the through-flow of library music recording and mixing, often for Angel Studios' parent company DeWolfe Music. *Resolution* caught up with him in Angel's impressive and recently refurbished Studio 1.

How has your role changed over the years?
I use Pro Tools every day, to me that's one of the biggest changes in the music business in the last 10 or 15 years — in good and bad ways. It gives you the flexibility to keep everything. Unfortunately, it gives you the flexibility to keep everything and at some point you've got to make the decision!

Do you do a lot of editing?
Yeah, most of the work we do here now is either on Pro Tools or Radar. The last album I worked on on tape was three years ago. There are some who like the compression and sound quality that tape gives you, but the flexibility that Pro Tools gives you outweighs that, in a strange way. And when Pro Tools is working perfectly, it's a dream to use.

Presumably it's faster to edit...
To let people hear it within a minute of recording it, within reason as it's going to be, and knowing that edits are going to work and that tempos are going to work between edits, is fantastic. Just doing a quick vocal comp in five minutes, and from possibly 40 takes, but making up a new Playlist as you go along, and at the end of the piece somebody coming in and going, 'Can you just put something together?' — it's already together, and I'm not sitting at the desk trying to fluff through five faders over the course of a song or a piece of music.

Do you use high sample rates?
Only in experimentation so far, not in anger. It sounds amazing. I think ultimately the problem is the storage, and then the backup of the storage. On a few movies I've done recently, I've ended up at 126 tracks, and hundreds of takes. We've done a week of rhythm section, and 48 tracks of orchestra, and it's just a colossal amount of information, and to add that time

on at the end when you go, I'll just back that up... And likewise it starts to limit the number of voices you can use with Pro Tools. If you've got three or four drum tracks running at once, suddenly you've got 24 tracks of drums, eight tracks of bass, 28 tracks of guitars, and it just goes mental. And it's so easy to do that nowadays. I remember ten years ago if somebody said '48 track' everyone got nervous, locking up with timecode. Whereas now you're permanently over 24 tracks on 85 or 90 percent of things you do. And the way orchestral studios work, it's all about preparation and knowing that everything's going to work at ten o'clock in the morning, within reason; where you put the mics... The headphones are basically preset — there are always minor adjustments on the session. But you could have a rhythm section and orchestra of 60, and you have to be ready to record at twenty past ten. And nobody's played a note before ten. If you don't have the preparation you're really screwed. You rely on people you know in the business, like the drummer, to be there ten minutes beforehand. And thankfully, I know most of the guys, they're happy to get a drum sound because it gets their headphones going.

Do you use a Decca tree?
I come from a 'more control' school. I'll have the Decca tree, but I'll multi-mic everything as well, so there's more...

How many tracks will you use for a typical orchestra?
Probably 24. Depending on the size of the orchestra, you could end up with a Decca tree, outriggers, and surround mics as well. Plus a close track for each section of the orchestra — each woodwind section, a track or two tracks, depending on solos. Likewise French horns, trumpets and trombones, and certainly a lot of tracks for percussion as well. Most of the people I work with prefer a bit of control. Everyone loves the room, but everyone wants to be able to turn things down as well. Nobody wants to do everything separately, which I understand, because showing a director how it's going to be, you want everyone playing in the same room, because that gives you the right impression. But you still need an element of control over every instrument you record.

Do you always work here?
No I've been all over the world really.

Presumably the job is harder in unfamiliar territory?
It is. You rely on the people who work in the studio a lot of the time. I tend to do most things myself, I tend to do the headphones, I tend to ride the click myself — only because you trust yourself. It's not that I don't trust somebody else, but if they got it wrong, you'd end up looking at somebody else, whereas I figure that the buck should stop with me.

Do you use Pro Tools plug-ins?
All the time when I'm mixing. The favourites tend to be the simple ones, because you know when you move between rigs you can still call them up. If I'm trying to do things quickly, but I know I'm going to go somewhere else and work on the tracks later, I'll just use the Digirack plug-ins. My favourite thing when mixing is the combination of Pro Tools and desk. Most of the mixing is probably done in Pro Tools now, my basic balances. Because if you're having 100 tracks, you have to submix, you work the mix as you go — I suppose a lot of people do that nowadays, but I find that the best

way of working. I'll shout instructions to the assistants and submix as we go. I'll get on it at the end of the day and make a few adjustments, and leave the desk [faders] in a straight line. You can do that now, you don't have to worry about signal-to-noise as much as you used to. When I mix I'll have three or four sets of 5.1 channel outputs, an orchestral output and some solo channels as well, then I can just assign as we go.

Surround sound is something else you've had to learn...
When I started, Dolby Surround was only just around, your surround track was mono, had no top, and everything was pulled into the centre — the Dolby box. I come from the era of trying to fool the Dolby box — short delays to make things wider.

What's the Dolby box?
The domestic title is Pro Logic, it's the encoder-decoder box, using the console and listening through the box to hear what it's going to do to the score...

To see how much it's ruining everything?
Yes exactly! So the way the box sees a stereo mic is it sees it as the same signal, and anything common to both sides is pushed to the centre. Basically so that wherever you sit in the cinema you can hear what's coming out. Unfortunately, stereo ambience mics, you want to hear them as stereo, so you ended up with lots of tricks like delay one side, only tiny little delays, but suddenly the box didn't see it as a mono signal. Then 5.1 came around, and that's been a revelation, from the cinema side of life, which is fantastic.

My surround philosophy is sort of, your stereo laws still apply; in a film situation it gives you lots of possibilities, I'm not sure you should use them all the time. I've watched movies I haven't worked on, and a guitar will turn up surround-right, and the first thing you do is look there, because it's not something you expect. And for me, music should never detract from something you're supposed to be looking at. I guess a feeling of surround is what I look to get. I tend to put additional orchestral mics out and feed some of that in, and I've used surrounds to move perspectives of instruments. You can't put anything too transient in the surrounds, purely because when it starts thrashing around in a cinema, you get terrible delay problems when the speakers are maybe 300 feet apart.

Do you have much communication with dubbers?

If I can — it depends on where it's being mixed, or if I know the guy. But nine times out of ten it's '48k, 24 bit', that's about as much information as you get! More and more now stems are being used — you're mixing rhythm stems, orchestral stems, keyboard stems, just because they want ultimate flexibility later on. I can understand that, but I don't particularly like it, because what you want is a representation of what you've done. If anything is rhythm or percussion heavy it tends to be requested, just because that's the thing that's going to get in the way of A, sound effects, and B, dialogue. Once it's out of your hands, they are the gods, the dubbing theatre.

So they'll dynamically ride the stems?

Yes, hopefully not too noticeably. We'll listen in here with dialogue, so hopefully you'll mix so it will sit or it's written to sit with dialogue and effects.

Presumably laying stems takes a long time?

It does, it's something that you have to factor into the mixing time of a film now. Whereas it used to be, say, three days, it's now five days just because of laying stuff down.

What's the mix delivery format?

Nine times out of ten it's Pro Tools. We'll burn a DVD with the files or as a Pro Tools Session. If you have a music editor, he or she would have another rig, and you'd mix to that rig. Otherwise it's me or my assistant, and you'll mix into the same Pro Tools Session that you're working the multitrack in; export those files, or import them into a new reel, and just checkerboard the files so they appear in the right places on the Session for the movie. It's great, because you know the stuff is sort of in the right place when you put it in.

What's the secret of a successful orchestral session?

The whole swan syndrome — it's maybe all going off and going wrong, but if you make it look as if you're in control of the situation, even when it's all hitting the fan, that's your best trick. It's like a virus — if it gets round the control room and then into the studio that things aren't going well, and there's a lot going wrong, you'll lose the session. The other biggest trick I know is if you can get people happy with headphones, your life's a dream. If you can get a band 'headphone happy' anything else is easy because they just play, and they don't get on your case about the sound, or this or that.

So presumably you've grown to know what people want to hear in the cans?

Well hopefully, yeah. This sounds wrong, but I don't record things in necessarily the best possible way. I'd hate you to write that down, but hopefully when people come into the control room to listen, they go, 'That sounds fantastic' — as everything, as a band, or drummer, or whatever. But maybe if you soloed every single thing, not every engineer would do it that way. But you're trying to give something, for the players to be inspired by what they're hearing. Whether that's good or not, I don't know, but if you can get the required results out of players and if you can get players in a room and they're happy with everything, it's just so easy. ■