

Report: REMIX-PROJEKT

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English translation

MUSIC FOR THE STARS

The songs are familiar, but the sound is excitingly new with added dimension. One of the most elaborate remix projects of recent years was not undertaken by a record company but commissioned by a car manufacturer. AUDIO looked behind the scenes of the Mercedes-Benz Signature Sound program - and went to his place of origin, the legendary Skywalker Sound Studios in California.

Mercedes cannot be said to be known for fanciful or novelty projects--which makes it all the more surprising what the serious Swabian automaker places in the glove compartments of each new model SL: a DVD with over two hours of music ranging from 70's rock classics to a Beethoven symphony, each track reworked from scratch by the best sound engineers at a state-of-the-art studio and remixed in surround so that each selection makes the best possible impression when played by the optional 5.1 channel system of the SL. An acoustic technology made exclusively for this very expensive vehicle (with a V8 model costing in the vicinity of 120,000 euros) in very small quantities. So many highly paid work hours spent to release what can only be described as a "limited edition?" That doesn't sound like the practical Swabians – it's so crazy as to be remarkable. In order to find out about the people behind this project AUDIO traveled to California because it's there that the spark was ignited that jumped to Stuttgart and lit up the fireworks that would become Mercedes' Signature Sound.

MR. SURROUND IS A MUNICH NATIVE

The idea for the Signature Sound came from award-winning (including two Grammys) producer Herbert Walth, a conservatory-trained pianist and composer who is a native of Munich, Germany and makes his home in Los Angeles, California. Here he established his company, mediaHyperium, close to the pulse of the media industry. Talking to Walth, you suspect that this man even dreams in 5.1. He was instrumental in the development of the DVD as well as the launch of SACD, helped define new audio formats, supported the advent of Blu-ray, produced countless surround music discs in a variety of standards and even composed an opera in 3D surround. For Walth, the use of surround is not just a show effect, but the real deal which maximizes music's impact and best represents a composer's intent. It's a deep conviction as opposed to a business model.

If only the uncertainties on the playback side didn't exist. Surround systems, from micro-satellite systems, to the sound wall of THX theaters, to high-end monitor speaker setups with five full-size super boxes, all sound wildly different. Often they cannot be installed perfectly and unfortunately, just as often are simply installed incorrectly. From a sound producer's point of view, the situation presented by a car like the new SL is like paradise: an extremely competent system is precisely matched to the interior and the position of the listener predicted within centimeters. Additionally, the driver will spend more hours listening to music in this mobile studio than at home.

Waltl offered Mercedes the idea of customized “sound-couture,” a concept that was received with open ears—and apparently an open wallet. Signature Sound was born. Soon Waltl was working with his excellent music industry connections to put together a list of desired titles, acquire the necessary rights, and negotiate licensing terms and conditions. Not an easy task, especially since he was only satisfied with the very best. You will not find surround of dubious origin, possibly generated from stereo material with computer tricks. Signature Surround mixes all emerged from original multi-track recordings, each track an independent creative effort.

SKYWALKER SOUND

Mixes were created at Skywalker Sound, the Lucasfilm recording facility located in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. It is part of a surreal environment: a virtually self-sufficient 20 sq. kilometer ranch with its own herd of cattle, winery and fire department. Tomatoes are grown that ripen in the California sun to almost shockingly strong flavor and may be served as a lunchtime appetizer in George Lucas’ legendary headquarters. Since photography is prohibited there, these meager words must suffice: redwood paneled living room the size of a tennis court--no problem. Original props, from Luke Skywalker’s light saber to Indiana Jones’ whip--everywhere you look. A research library reaching up two floors covered by a 10-meter stained glass dome under which you just want to sink into a sofa and, in the filtered light of the fiery midday sun, leaf through some rare book on French military items.

A ten minute walk through the surrounding vineyards brings you to the Technical Building which houses several studio units. From outside it’s discrete; inside it’s huge and packed with high-tech. The quiet in the corridors and lounges is deceptive. Several major Hollywood productions were being worked on during our visit—behind closed doors in top secret conditions, of course. The largest studio was free. Here we were greeted by Leslie Ann Jones, Director of Music Recording and Scoring, the recipient of three Grammys and the mother of multi-channel mixes.

However, a lot of effort was needed before the creative work could commence. Digital multi-track masters, some with up to 150 tracks (depending on their age), arrived from all corners of the world. Since it’s often the case that no documentation about the settings and effects used in an original mix is available, the tracks were first reconstructed by a sort of reverse engineering and compared to the album version. In some instances it was only discovered during this production phase that tracks were missing, like a few backup vocals on Alanis Morissettes’ “Ironic” which her record label were able to find after some searching and then delivered.

Once checked for completeness, Jones could then remix the recordings for multi-channel surround playback. However, this was not done by template. Each song was approached in a highly individual style. Skywalker Sound uses five B&W Nautilus 802 monitors in an ITU-setup reinforced by large-cube subwoofers under the three front channels. To this writer that arrangement sounded almost like home since the AUDIO listening room has almost the identical monitor setup but without bass extensions and a slightly smaller 801 model. More exciting was the opportunity to sit directly behind the 72-channel Neve console (in itself worth a small pilgrimage) to compare the stereo mix of Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face” with the fresh multi-channel

version. The Gaga song is one of the most spectacular remixes with its expressive, yet lively use of the surround channels and a drastically more gripping beat than the stereo mix.

The big B&W's however, did not play the role of the main monitors for the Signature Sound production. The decisive factor was the adaptation to playback in the SL. That's why Leslie Ann Jones unceremoniously had the test car driven right onto the "Scoring Stage" – one of those spacious areas isolated from the control room by three layers of bulletproof glass where it's more usual to find a large orchestra recording a film score. Thus can the "Skywalkers" switch within seconds from a director's chair in the control room to the driver's seat, and back again. The difference in the sound impression between the two environments was not so great because the SL surround sound system from Harman/Kardon belongs to a luxury line of one of the best OEM systems. Above all, there is a tonal match, which effectively repudiates any prejudices against car audio systems. With its serious precision and avoidance of all exaggeration, the SL audio system sounds more like a playback from good studio monitors.

SOUNDBATH IN BENZ

When the sound meets the road, it is very advantageous that Mercedes mounted the mid-range driver higher than has been customary. The new speaker positions are no longer in the shadow of the knee, and the tonal cohesion is now received, even in challenging productions such as the superior recording of the Mozart violin concerto featuring Marianne Thorsen and the Trondheim Solistene. Very exciting is the transition from the purist Norwegian recording to the opulent Beethoven Fifth played by the San Francisco Symphony under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas—who coincidentally sat next to me on the flight to San Francisco. The 2L-typical "middle of the orchestra" perspective gained in the new remix of the Mozart as well as the Beethoven recording with its more conservative vantage point in which the orchestra is situated in front. It delivers a wonderfully realistic impression of the depth of a concert hall.

That the system is not only good for customized, exclusives mixes was proved by listening to the Apple Lossless material on my personal iPhone connected via dock on the car's center console enabling intuitive navigation on its big screen. Listening to Karate's "Small Fires" while gliding over winding roads in the misty California countryside puts you in a road movie rather than a driving experience. The Mercedes engineers can be rightfully proud of their "front bass" system. For the hifi-savvy, it is only logical that the bass should ideally come from the front and is channel-symmetric. However, in a normal car environment there is no reasonable place to install subwoofers. The SL, however, is not normal. Its designers have included two generous cutouts for subwoofers in the footwell of the all-aluminum car body; - where the subwoofers get on the backside a free gift: the volumes of the frame's two hollow longitudinal beams acting as chambers.

The bass was bone dry, with absolute precision in the timing; even when played back in the "Original Test Volume" it was free from any unnatural thud. The throbbing bass drum as well as the singing Fender Jazz Bass remained intact. — A pleasant side effect of the installation location is that the low-end sound is much less audible on the outside of the SL than other cars, especially when the roof was closed.

What Mercedes still doesn't know is how to go forward with Signature Sound. Selling the mixes through traditional retail outlets is not possible, since this would require even more expensive licenses. Many SL customers will of course want more of these customized, exquisite productions—so maybe some kind of subscription arrangement? But even with only one new DVD per month, the production costs would be huge. Expansion to other, more affordable car models would make sense because of increased sales volume. Front Bass is not SL exclusive—this has already been decided. Whether the E- or B-class model will get a similar, or any DVD in their glove compartments is still in the stars.

Captions:

ENVIABLE WORKPLACE

Master mixer Leslie Ann Jones and producer Herbert Walt behind the big Neve console.

UNUSUAL VIEW

Behind three layers of glass "Monitor" SL shimmers on the orchestral stage

SURROUND FOR ADULTS

Five woofer-supported B&W 802's are the main monitors, powered by Chord amplifiers

EXPENSIVE FUN

The original DVD with the 25 Signature Sound mixes in DTS costs 120,000 euros. After all, a Mercedes SL500 is included.

PLACE IN THE SUN

Ralf Lamberti (Mercedes-Benz), U.S. journalist Robert Harley (stereo audiophile), Dr. Stefan Schwehr (Mercedes-Benz) and mastering engineer Michael Romanowski in ideal convertible weather in front of the Technical Building.

LOWS FROM THE FOOTWELL

The bass cutouts (here on the passenger side) are calculated so that the rigidity of the car body is not compromised.

HOMELIKE

Skywalker Sound (entrance hall shown) combines high-tech with the style of a relaxed country home.

ENOUGH MOTOR

The SL 550, comparable to the German model SL500, is powered by a 4.6-liter 345 hp twin-turbo V8 engine.