

Classic rockers and classical rock

When American rock legend Kiss called on the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra for classical support, it could have gone horribly wrong. Instead, Cat Strom learned how to 'orchestra'



From an audio perspective, the idea of the *Kiss Symphony* looked potentially hazardous. How would Kiss's rock music sound with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra acting as a rather large backing band? Would the 60-piece orchestra get lost in the mix or would Kiss mellow and produce some strange new kind of chamber music?

In the event, the show was divided into three parts: it started simply enough with the four band members banging out Kiss classics. An acoustic opening set followed by an eight-piece string ensemble helped to breathe life into 20-year-old favourites. Then came the finale everyone was waiting for - Kiss with the full orchestra, all wearing Kiss make-up. Concerns that the orchestra would churn out some strings on top of Kiss's wide selection of ballads did not materialise. Neither did the screaming guitar riffs smother orchestral arrangements.

There were two key factors making this unlikely combination work - the orchestral arrangements of conductor David Campbell who did an excellent job of scoring so that both group and orchestral instruments would find their place in the mix and the talents of front of house engineer Ken 'Pooch' Van Druten, who has mixed for Kiss since 1998. He has gained experience mixing for other somewhat loud bands such as Guns 'n' Roses, Kid Rock, Ozzy Osborne, Ted Nugent and, for some strange reason, Whitney Houston. 'He sent about ten sends back to me of string section, then a brass section, then a woodwind section and I mixed it all together along with all the band inputs,' says Van Druten. 'There was also a split to two other record trucks, supplied by ABC Broadcasting, that did the DVD and pay-to-view recording.'

The PA used was a JBL VerTec system with 18 boxes per side, plus nine on either side of the rig for side coverage, and Jands proprietary 18-inch subs. However in the States Van Druten prefers to use a Showco Prism system although he admitted that he is beginning to like line array systems. 'I'm a little bit old school when it comes to PA systems,' he says. 'VerTec is my favourite line array system at the moment but I'm a big, front-loaded, prism kind of guy. I love the JBL front-loaded PAs as that's what I grew with, however for this application with the orchestra, the line array makes a lot of sense.'

'The VerTec system is excellent and I actually got involved in the research and development of the system. JBL really listens to your comments and makes adjustments accordingly. Companies should listen more to the engineers because, at the end of the day, we're the ones who deal with their equipment. I don't care about the technical speak, it either sounds good or not.'

At the Telstra Dome Van Druten and his crew spent a long time aligning the cabinets

between the side cabinets, front fill cabinets and the main system. To do this they used a Simms system. 'My philosophy is that this is a job for the system engineer not the front-of-house engineer,' says Van Druten. 'I lean heavily on the system engineers to know their job and make sure that all the audience areas are covered. We work together as a team and Jands have done a great job in making sure all the seats sound good in this venue.'

Front of house Van Druten had two Midas XL4 consoles while two Midas Heritage desks operated by Orris Henry, dealt with monitors. The band uses both wedges and in-ear monitors as well as side fills. There were 22 Clair 12AM wedges that, added to the Ultimate Ear UE-7 in ear monitors, made 24 different mixes. 'You have some band members who have a single ear piece and also hear via wedges and that is a true challenge for a monitor guy to make all that happen,' says Van Druten. <->Van Druten is an Audio-Technica endorsee when it comes to microphones and consequently there are a lot of AT mics used for this show - mainly AT4050 condenser microphones. Added to them though are Shure Beta 58s, SM98s, SM57s, SM91s, a few AKG451s and beyerdynamic M88s.

'The Audio-Technica condenser microphones are very, very good over some of the major companies such as Shure,' says Van Druten. 'I enjoy their product but the company has also courted me so I use their product.'

Where ever possible Van Druten always chooses the Midas XL4 as his desk although he was not able to use one on the *Kiss Farewell Tour* as the front-of-house foot print was so small.

'I had to use a Langley Recall desk which was alright but the XL4 is definitely my choice,' he says. 'It's a great-sounding console and I've been using them since they first came out so I'm very comfortable with them. This band is a lot more vocally orientated than the other acts that I work with. They're really good at harmonies so I spend quite a lot of time getting the blend of vocals happening correctly. All four of them sing, and they sing well together, it's just getting the blend correct for each song.'

Van Druten has one word that describes mixing the Kiss Symphony and that is 'crazy'. The combination of three different sets certainly kept him on his toes all night. 'For the first act we had the full guitar thing happening on one console, and the second act we had a whole different drum kit, acoustic guitars, acoustic bass, and the eight-piece string ensemble. That's a whole set of inputs on a different console. That got a little crazy and then mixing the strings in with that was interesting. Then there was the third act with the full 60-piece orchestra and Kiss playing their electric guitars. It was hard to get all of that to work together sonically. The orchestra by themselves sound fantastic, the band by themselves sound fantastic but putting the two together was a little difficult. However, it really worked.'

He believes he achieved the best result by mixing the guitars and band lower than he normally would and then putting the orchestra on top of that. As a result the orchestra was fairly huge in the mix.

The effects rack Van Druten used held an Eventide H3000 for the vocals, two tc electronic 2290 delays, two Lexicon 480 reverbs, and two tc electronic M5000s. 'However I was getting the orchestra mix back to me from Angus Davidson (orchestra mixer) in the Metropolis truck and he had his own effects,' he says. 'Angus added a little reverb to the strings, woodwinds and brass to make them more lush sounding and full. He did an excellent job in giving me what I needed to make the finished product sound spectacular.'

There are some classic Kiss effects that just had to be in the show; 'God of Thunder' uses a pitch shift in one of the choruses - Van Druten uses the H3000 to pitch the vocal down an octave thus producing a more ominous tone. While some of the material from 'Psycho Circus' uses some specific delay cues that are important to the show; kids that have heard the record expect the effects to be there live.

'But I'm really a meat and potatoes mixer, concludes Van Druten. 'Technical specifics mean nothing to me but I know what sounds good and it's my job to make this band sound good.'

The event was also recorded by Melbourne's Sing Sing Studios, using an ARX Level 8 as the interface and -10dB to +4dB level adapter. The recording will appear on DVD as

Kiss Live in Melbourne. It was reported after the gig that there was a new compliment going round: 'You guys symphony.' Apparently the conductor David Campbell told the orchestra after rehearsals 'You guys rock,' and Gene Simmons replied with typical wry humour, 'Well, that would mean that we symphony.'

The Crew

Kenneth 'Pooch' Van Druten - FOH engineer

Orris Henry - monitor engineer

Angus Davidson - FOH orchestra mixer

Rod Matheson - orchestra monitor mixer

Mark Opitz - recording engineer

Jands Production Services provided Live Audio

Metropolis provided desks and recording for the Orchestra

ABC studios provided desks and recording for the band

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