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BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Harris Jayaraj opens Chennai studio



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Building for the future

Prolific Tamil film soundtrack composer, Harris Jayaraj, has moved into new purpose-built studios in Chennai.

Caroline Moss visits Studio H

FOR INDIAN SONGWRITERS AND MUSICIANS, THE SUREST way to commercial success is via the film industry. A key song on a Bollywood movie guarantees wide exposure and pre-release promotion, and this also applies to India's other regional markets, including the Tamil film industry.

Known affectionately as 'Kollywood', India's second largest film market is based in the Kodambakkam district of Tamil Nadu capital, Chennai. One of Kollywood's leading composers is Harris Jayaraj, who has produced a string of soundtracks from Trinity Wave Station studio, based in his apartment building. However, a number of ongoing issues were part of a decision to build a new studio from the ground up, not least a problem with the air conditioning.

'I needed to turn off the A/C in the studio to record because it was so noisy,' explains Mr Jayaraj. 'But because of the hot weather in Chennai, the 35 or so musicians I was working with would have to stop for a break after five minutes. I realised the A/C was really affecting my career and I'd have to sort it out. It was a silly thing, but very important, and fixing the problem would have been expensive. It was an old building, with not enough ceiling height, so we decided to build a professional studio from scratch.'

An 8,360 sq-m plot was duly found, and architect Ananda, a French national living and working in nearby Pondicherry and known for creating light-filled, serene spaces, was summoned.

'I told him I wanted to build a studio and a house, but he built me a house and a studio,' says Mr Jayaraj, not altogether joking. 'I thought the studio should have more space than the house, but he did it the other way around. I spend 16 hours a day in my studio, so that is where I mainly live. He told me not to worry, and dug a 560 sq-m basement.'

The result is a modernist, spacious family home with adjoining studios, linked by a Zen garden which borders the swimming pool. The studios were designed by another Frenchman, Didier Weiss from acoustic consultancy Sound Wizard, together with business partner, Kumbha Young Grenier. And in a nod to German film composer Hans Zimmer, whom Mr Jayaraj admires

greatly, both control rooms have been installed with Qested monitoring.

'Hans has these speakers in his studios, and many Hollywood composers use them for scoring,' says Mr Jayaraj. 'Roger Qested made them for us and travelled to India for the calibration. That kind of personal dedication is what makes it special.'

Mr Jayaraj has now moved into both the house and Studio H, and is getting used to working in a space that includes a 130 sq-m orchestra-sized live room on the first floor, two large 18.5 sq-m isolation booths, a 43 sq-m control room and a 26 sq-m writing suite.

'There are hardly any studios in India where you can record a 60-piece orchestra,' he says. 'Music is my bread and butter and I felt it was time to give something back, as we have plenty of talented, world-class musicians working here in Chennai.'

The studio's incarnation was partly influenced by Mr Jayaraj's training in Western classical music. Born into a musical family, he studied classical guitar under Trinity College London's assessment programme. 'My roots are in Western classical music, but I went on to train as an electronic musician,' he says. 'I started my career as a keyboard programmer at the age of 14, and when I turned 24 I had my first big break.'

This was on *Minnale*, a 2001 film for which he received the Filmfare Award for Best Musical Director, ending the nine-year run of fellow Tamil composer A R Rahman, for whom he had previously worked as a keyboard player. The soundtrack established Mr Jayaraj as a musical composer to be reckoned with; 15 years later, he has more than 50 soundtracks and countless awards under his belt. And to date, this has all been accomplished from Trinity Wave Station.

It's immediately clear on entering Mr Jayaraj's new live room that there will be no issues with overheating musicians. Designed by Sound Wizard using EASE software to predict how the room would respond, it features many new acoustic innovations from Mr Weiss. 'We designed the room so it would be very usable for a wide range of applications,' he explains. 'If you have a fixed type of acoustic it's specific for a certain kind



The Euphonix S5 Fusion digital mixing system in the main control room

of use, and you're stuck for everything else. So we designed it with variable acoustics, using louvres on the walls and ceilings. We used EASE to calculate different configurations of louvre openings and came up with several combinations, from one acoustical extreme to another. Working with Harris within this full range, we selected instruments to put inside, such as tablas, acoustic guitars, an orchestra, a vocalist, a quartet. We took anechoic samples of these, put them in different parts of the room, tried various microphone placements and then moved the panels and listened - for hours. There were so many different combinations it was daunting, but as a sound engineer I could



Central machine room



L to R: Roger Qusted and Sound Wizard's Didier Weiss



Live recording room

feel the room and set it up as I would if I'd come into a studio for the first time. I selected what I thought were useful settings and presented them to Harris so he could refine them with us, telling us what he liked and wanted more of and what he didn't.'

The result is an array of possibilities in terms of the room's acoustical response. 'We've managed to create a space which allows variety and richness of recordings, from dry and intimate to lush and full,' explains Mr Weiss. 'It's a practical alternative to artificial DSP-based processing.'

The large Control Room A, which has been built as a subterranean floating structure, is dazzlingly white, with a 7.1 system of Q412 monitors and QSB1118 subwoofers for left and right channels, a Q212 and QSB1118 for the centre and four V3110s as surrounds. A pair of ATC SCM1 10ASL Pros provide stereo nearfield monitoring.

'In India they tend to work on the main monitors most of the time, so Harris needed a system that was accurate and non-fatiguing on a long day,' says Mr Qusted. 'He also needs a lot of head room, particularly in the bass, so we provided plenty of woofers.' Customised white studio furniture, including a desk

to house the Euphonix S5 Fusion digital mixing system, has been imported from Romanian manufacturer Zaor.

'Since we had total freedom in terms of design, we were able to use everything in our box of tricks,' says Mr Weiss. 'We focused on bass trapping, and the response goes down to 10Hz without any resonance. We also worked a lot on diffusion, and the result is when you listen to music in the control room, there is a sweet spot that's so wide, you feel there are no boundaries wherever you are - behind the producer's desk, on the couch, at the console.'

While these two spacious rooms form the bulk of Studio H, Mr Jayaraj estimates that most of his work will be done in the smaller writing and programming room, located beneath the house. Mr Jayaraj has just purchased the new Avid Pro Tools S3 control surface, which takes centre stage in the room. The main monitors are a four-way active stereo system of Q212 full range cabinets with QSB1118 subwoofers, splendidly colour-matched to one of Mr Jayaraj's favourite cars, a Ferrari 458. This room has also been installed with an 11.1 surround system consisting of 11 nearfield ATC monitors.

'Last year after the Frankfurt Messe, Wilfried Van Baelen from Auro Technologies invited me to his Galaxy Studios in Belgium,' he says. 'I thought multichannel mixes should only happen in big spaces, but in one of his rooms he had small speakers to mix in Auro-3D, and it sounded incredible. So I decided to make an Auro 11.1 space in one of the studios.'

The associated electronics for both control rooms are in a central machine room which, instead of being hidden away, is proudly displayed behind a glass panel along one of the basement's interconnecting corridors.

Mr Jayaraj has transferred a large quantity of recording gear from Trinity Wave Station, while purchasing some new additions. 'I've bought some Neve preamps, and added a second Prism ADA-8XR converter from distributor KK Internationals, EQs from Chandler and Manley, and Schoeps and Neumann mics,' he says. 'I love analogue consoles but for the way I work and the quantity of work I take on, it's time consuming to switch between projects. With my outboard equipment, once the signal is in the digital domain, I can maintain the audio qualities of analogue, while switching between projects quickly. It's a very good combination.' Studio H's racks also include units by API, SSL, dbx, Avalon and Lexicon. Some of the equipment was procured from Vintage King in the USA, while the ATCs, for whom Mr Jayaraj is an endorser, were supplied through Indian distributor, Cinema Focus.

Just a few months in, Mr Jayaraj is noticing the difference Studio H is making to his projects. 'This facility is allowing me to spend more time on the creative process,' he says. 'The sound quality of the new studio is amazing and we have a lot of new toys to play with. People in India are now generally much more aware of sound and have higher expectations, and that's the reason we pushed the boundaries with this studio.'

Although Mr Jayaraj planned to keep Trinity Wave Station going, he soon found it wasn't practical to shuttle between the two studios, and has reluctantly closed the doors on his first facility. 'There were lots of memories there,' he says. 'It took two months to shift everything over; I didn't realise how many gadgets I've got. For two months I didn't have a studio, and I became crazy.'



Producer's desk in main control room



Isolation booth

So I moved to my new bedroom and set up laptops and writing gear there.'

However, the long build and subsequent move are now over. The first film project was Tamil sci fi action thriller, *Iru Mugan*, for which 15 vocalists were recorded in the new live room, with five musicians working in an adjacent booth. With four more films in the pipeline, Mr Jayaraj is embarking upon the next stage of his stellar career at Studio H.

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L to R: Sound Wizard's Kumbha Young Grenier and Harris Jayaraj



Ferrari-red Qusted monitors in the programming room