



DIAMANDA GALÁS FROM FOH

TPI's Ste Durham sat down with Audio Engineer Daniel Neumann to talk experimental sound and life on the road with one of music's most enigmatic and creative figures.

Even after over 40 years of creating some of the most bold and challenging compositions ever committed to tape, avant-garde icon Diamanda Galás continues to push the boundaries of musical expression. In order to give her the perfect platform to do so, the artist needed an engineer that was unafraid to follow her to new and often dark frontiers - enter Daniel Neumann.

He began: "My background is in media art, and at that time I did sound engineering as a job to make money. At some point I feel like these two interests started merging more and more so that the professional sound work entered into the artistic activities and vice versa. To me, that's the interesting thing - to approach live sound with real artistic sensibilities - which also lends itself to working with unconventional and experimental artists like Diamanda."

The only UK date on Galás' tour was at London's Barbican Theatre and given the extremely light way in which Neumann travels with the artist, was largely reliant on equipment sourced in-house.

"Usually I advance the show with the venue and then request certain mics or monitors," he said. "If the venue doesn't have what I feel comfortable with then they go to their local supplier and rent it for us. It's a nice way of doing things because then you can begin a conversation with in-house technicians who know the room and what gear will work best."

The equipment at the Barbican was based around a Meyer Sound MILO system, with a DiGiCo SD9 at the FOH position and d&b monitor wedges on stage. Neumann commented: "I am happy with the MILO system, which

sounds great in this room, and I really like the sound, EQ and workflow of DiGiCo consoles.

"I also run MainStage alongside it on the laptop for song-specific effects. It's basically like having a very flexible effects rack that I can carry in a little computer pouch and the latency is decent. I have a good quality RME audio interface and with MainStage I can programme a set list and change the entire architecture of the effects setup with the touch of a button. This is great when the set morphs during a tour or, sometimes, even during the show itself if she spontaneously isn't feeling two intense vocal songs in a row, for example."

With what some would consider to be the key elements of a venue's sound up to scratch, Neumann was allowed to go into more detail with some of the more intricate aspects. He continued: "It depends on each venue but we've recently started using two pairs of monitors around her. She wants the ones on either side of her to be really loud and retain all of the same effects that are coming through the main PA. The second pair are slightly behind her and soaked in reverb in order to give her the room response that she isn't getting from any particularly dry concert halls. This really helps her with the operatic vocals in particular and saves her from overly exerting her voice."

Given the naturally occurring acoustics in the Barbican, Neumann was able to get by with only the front pair of monitors, which were in this case d&b audiotechnik MAX2's.

The engineer's usual protocol is to use a single vocal microphone,



Above: FOH Engineer Daniel Neumann makes extensive notes during soundcheck to ensure any venue-specific issues are ironed out.

with another five or six on the piano, allowing him to make use of different aspects of the instrument for different songs, or parts of songs.

He said: "I place one of the stereo pairs very close to the hammers of the piano in order to capture the attack and an aggressive, almost percussive, sound. I then place a pair further back above the soundboard for a bigger, more full-bodied piano sound. The fifth mic is actually a pickup that I position even further back, which gives me a lot of signal before feedback and can be used for heavy piano effects. I travel with the pickup as it's not the kind of thing that is readily available on the road, but most of the gear changes venue to venue."

At the Barbican, Neumann opted for a pair of DPA d:vote 4099's at the hammer position and d:dictate 4011As above the soundboard. He continued: "It's interesting how every piano, even if it's the same Steinway model, sounds different. I always fiddle around with both mic pairs to see where is best to get the sound that I want."

Getting this elusive sound is perhaps not as cut and dry as it might be if the engineer was travelling with the same equipment to each venue. The solution for this is a meticulous process that is developed through the course of a show day.

Neumann explained: "I usually set everything up in the morning before Diamanda arrives at around noon. First she warms up on the piano, which is my chance to really focus on that aspect of the sound. I can go back and forth between sticking my head into the piano and going back out into the house to make sure I have the perfect mic positions. She then goes away for vocal warm up before we do a quick sound check of every song in the set."

"It's kind of nice for us both to be able to go through and make sure the monitors behave and all of the effects are dialled in correctly. I even take little notes on each of the songs for effects levels that I can use to stay a few steps ahead on the night."

When the performance itself is underway, Neumann mixes from the ground up - focussing on the fundamentals and allowing the artist and her songs to convey maximum impact. He said: "I want to squeeze an intense and full sound from the piano and voice without running into feedback, and the two places that are the most dangerous for that are the piano in the subwoofers and the vocals with effects in the monitors. Beyond that I just want to make sure the sound comes across in the entire room and each song is articulated specific to its artistic intent."

Although Galás makes uses of various musical styles and forms to express her creative vision, the subject matter is generally geared towards the macabre, meaning Neumann has to follow her to the dark side when

operating at FOH...

A prime example of this is the epic and disturbing, *Die Stunde Kommt* [The Hour Comes], which is based on a 19th Century poem by Ferdinand Freiligrath. Neumann explained. "Diamanda composed an 8 - 10 minute song from the poem, and it's essentially about someone who is standing at the grave of a deceased love that they said something awful to. It's about this regret and the fact that the hour might come where your love will die and you won't have the chance to reconcile anymore."

"During the chorus she puts in these earthquake-like, low piano notes that can often come at slightly different intervals. I crank the bass to emphasise these low notes but I have to hit them in exactly the right spots or the effect reveals itself. I wait for these notes and engage the effect a split second before she hits it. It's these kinds of nuances that I am picking out during the whole performance."

He continued: "She also does these multi-phonetic high vocals that I try to emphasise by saturating them towards the point of overdrive in order to pick up the higher overtones. By doing this you add more overtones to the sound and it really helps - you can almost feel her vocal chords vibrating against your head!"

It's this odd dichotomy of the classic and the experimental that characterises both Galás' challenging sound and Neumann's captivating approach to mixing her live show.

He commented: "When I first started with Diamanda I asked her whether she wanted me to push the effects or keep it clean and operatic; and she encouraged me to experiment and push things as much as possible. I think her exact words were, "if you're not going to push the limits, why bother doing it," and that, to me, describes really well what it is like to work with her. It's a real dialogue and she has a very precise artistic vision, but not in a dogmatic way. I can always make suggestions, but she is very vocal on what she feels works or doesn't work."

The strength of this working relationship was underlined further by the fact that Galás herself was keen to give TPI her side of the story. She said: "Dan Neumann has phenomenal ideas, endless energy to implement them, and great ears. When I make a suggestion, he exhausts the possibilities and hands me back something I never thought of. Working with him is one of the great joys of my life."

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