

Ken Silber on Recording

By Andrew Sgro

Ken Silber has been engineering or singing in choral groups for over 20 years. As part of the full-time engineering staff of Tanglewood Music Center, (www.tanglewood.org), he has recorded Yo-Yo Ma, Emmanuel Ax, and Hilary Hahn and in 2005 he founded Silken Audio (www.silkenaudio.com), located in Cambridge, Mass. Ken recently traveled to Europe to record the Tanglewood Festival Choir as part of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's European tour and uses his expertise to reach out to elementary school students through the Massachusetts Music Educators Association. *Choral Director* sat down with Ken in Cambridge and chatted about his favorite gear, recording techniques, and many of the challenges that he battles when recording choral ensembles.

Choral Director: What was the first recording you worked on?

Ken Silber: The first recording I did was an audition for a flutist. I had a friend of mine who I had met at a choral gig, and we had access to Boston University's Marsh Chapel, which is a nice space. We recorded her and he did the post at his apartment. I sat there watching. I saw how he did the editing and I said, "This is cool." The vocalist had made a mistake and we took it out like it never happened.

Then I recorded the Loose Cannon Chorale and got my first pair of nice mics, Neumann 184s. The next job I did was at the Marsh Chapel choir. I had picked up some Octava Russian mics, which sound good and are incredibly cheap. And I picked a pair of Earthworks QTC 1 Omni Mics. I still have those and I use them once in a while. It was a Bach Cantata with a soloist and I was recording to an external

hard drive using Digital Performer (DP) – that’s my program of choice. My backup rig is a Tascam 788.

CD: I would imagine that one of the most challenging parts of your job is capturing sounds in a variety of rooms that are completely different.

KS: Every room is different and every choir is different. After the first few times recording a choir, it gets easier. For the rooms that have a lot of reverb, I still use the omnis, but use them as a reverb return. I’ll put them further away to just get the sound of the hall. I’ll have cardioid and wide cardioid mics, which is kind of a hybrid between cardioid and omni. It’s a little more directional than an omni and has a longer reach.

CD: Do you feel you need to track a choir a few times to get a sense of how to best record them?

KS: Well, I need to hear them a few times. I do what most guys in town won’t do, which is go to dress rehearsals the week of the concert or the night before, and I just sit there and listen. I don’t bring any gear, but it means a lot to the performers and shows them I’m serious about making them sound good.

From hearing the group, I can assess how “wet” the place is. For example, if it’s a stone church, you get very long reverb trails. Our guys call it “Our Lady of Eternal Reverb.” [laughs] If you just go in there with omni mics, you’re just going to get washed out sounds. When I was doing my initial mic purchases and talking to

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other engineers about it, they said, “If you’re going to only have two mics, they can’t be omni.” You could be in a job where you just can’t use omnis because it’s too wet, and if that’s all you have, then you have to start with cardioids. I don’t like the sound of these mics as much; I prefer the low end that an omni gives – a cardioid just doesn’t have that. Low end is what gives it the enveloping sound. What I like about recordings of choirs is that if you put one on in your stereo, it pulls you in and makes you feel like you are right in the middle of things. And just using cardioids, you can’t really get that.

CD: So is your goal to make the recordings sound as live as possible?

KS: I want to capture an experience for the listener and make them feel like they were there, to get the energy of having been there.

CD: What is your current set up today?

KS: I have six Schoeps from the Collete series; they have interchangeable capsules and mic bodies. I was turned on to Schoeps by a friend of mine that records school groups because of their flexibility. If you buy one pair of bodies and you can get cardioid capsules for them and omni capsules for them, then you have four mics.

CD: Do you feel like it’s just the mics you use or is it the positioning of them as well?

Ken Silber on his Musical Background

“I have been involved in choral groups since high school and I’ve been singing for over 20 years.

I never took a voice lesson until maybe 10 years ago; I was just kind of doing it for fun. But when I came to Boston and saw the Boston Symphony Choir, I said, ‘I have to be in that.’ The first time I auditioned I didn’t get in, so I started taking lessons and the next time I auditioned, I made it. I’ve been taking voice lessons from the same teacher since I started. I’d sung on a few recordings and talked to the engineers a little bit, but I had never really thought about engineering at that point.



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“I sang on a recording in Washington D.C. of a Berlioz mass; it was actually the North American premier of the mass, it had been locked in a choir loft in Belgium or something. This was in 1993, when they were still doing a lot of classical recordings. The business has changed a great deal since then – all of music business has changed dramatically, but classical especially. And as I started to talk to more and more people [about engineering] in 2003, they were saying, ‘You’re too late to the game, buddy. The catalogues are huge and nobody needs any more recordings of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.’ We transferred the catalogues from analog to digital in the ‘80s...

“We went through the quad phase, and surround and all that. And besides that, there are specialized master’s degrees programs. And I was talking to Tim Martyn, the head of Tanglewood Audio since 1982, and he said, ‘I won’t hire you unless you get this Master’s degree at McGill.’ But others said, ‘You don’t have to do that to make it doing engineering, you have the musical background.’

“All of the engineers that I’ve met are musicians who have switched career paths. They got their musical knowledge through playing or performing. The engineers from the older school who didn’t come up musically, they learned it a different way, but there’s no substitute for the direct musical experience. I can walk into a room and know it sounds good even if I don’t know why it sounds good. Just the act of sitting of through rehearsal after rehearsal helps.”

For more information or to contact Ken directly, visit www.silkenaudio.com.



“There’s just so much choice in how to produce something.”

KS: It’s both. I use ORTF a lot. If I don’t know what to make of a room, my default is to set up an ORTF. *[Ed. Note - ORTF is a technique for recording stereo sound, in which two cardioid mics are placed 17cm apart, facing away from each other at a 110-degree angle.]*

CD: Do you have time to monitor yourself? Can you say, “Let me move this mic”?

KS: It depends on the job. I get there ridiculous early. If you want a good recording, I need to unload and

figure out where I’m going to set up my monitoring station.

If I get in early enough and get everything set up roughly where I think it will work and then the chorus gets in and starts doing their warm-ups, then I can listen to all that and I can move stuff around. By the time they’re warming up or they’re reading to start, I’ve got pretty much what I need.

CD: Do you feel that your experience in the field, at Tanglewood for example, is more valuable than classes you took?

KS: Classes are good to learn how to hook up gear, signal flow, understanding that stuff – and troubleshooting: when something goes wrong you need to be able to fix it. But there’s no substitute for making recordings. And the reason the Tanglewood job is so great is because you are making about one recording per day.

CD: And in the end you want to have to do as little mixing as possible?

KS: Ideally I’d like the stereo mix I get live to be the one that I use. Sometimes that happens. Where Tanglewood was especially valuable for me is that everything is mixed live. Before I had worked there, I didn’t have the guts to do it. My backup would be mixed live, but everything else I would remix at home later on. My goal is to mix it right, live, the first time, but you don’t always know what’s coming. Micing soloists is tricky because they can move, and if they move, the mic doesn’t move with them. I can’t glue their shoes to the floor, but I can talk to them and say, “This is where your mic is.”

CD: What are other common obstacles that you encounter? Are there things you’ve learned to nip in the bud?

KS: Taping everything down so that nobody trips is important. So is taping down stands, so people don’t walk into them and knock them over. Finding a room I can use that has electricity is also key – in some of the older churches it’s not as easy as it sounds.

It’s not something you think of until you have to do it. *[laughs]* Working at Tanglewood didn’t teach me to record in a church on Newbury Street where there are ambulances driving by!

CD: What is typical post-production for your recordings?

KS: I’ll have my multitrack of however many mics I used. I’ll start listening to it and start fiddling with levels to try to compare the best I can get from the remix to what I recorded live... and if I can convince myself that it’s pretty much as good, than I’ll just use what I mixed at the concert. Not always all of it, sometimes I’ll use part of a concert. It’s gotten easier to do. There’s just so much choice in how to produce something. 🎵

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