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Audio Engineering Society Chicago Section Meeting

AES 2004-2005

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Tuesday, January 18, 2005, 7:30 PM

An Applied Approach to Performance Recording by Chris Willis.

Members and non-members are welcome. Mr. Willis will discuss his approaches and equipment used to record a live performance with an audience, and will guide a special access tour of the control room & acoustical environment at Chicago's Symphony Center.

Special invitation: Before the meeting, you are invited to attend a choir recording from 4 to 7 pm, engineered by Mr. Willis. If you would like to attend, RSVP section secretary Jeff Segota at 847-600-8634 or chi_aes_sec@comcast.net by noon on Monday, January 17. No RSVP is required for the main meeting.

Meeting Location:

Symphony Center, 220 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.
NOTE: Enter from Adams St. adjacent to the Tesori Restaurant (65 E Adams) and sign in at the guard station.

Parking is available in the Grant Park South Garage near the Art institute on Michigan Ave. A map, more parking and public transportation information, as well information about Symphony Center can be found at the CSO: <http://www.cso.org/>.

About This Month's Speaker:

Chris Willis is the son of the late Thomas Willis, who was music critic for the Chicago Tribune during the late '60 and early '70s. This background provided access to both the concert experience and a substantial record collection. After some failed attempts to play musical instruments, Chris turned instead to recording and DJ work, starting a crude Disco service catering to frat parties. At 19 he hit the road with Delta Records, a recording company that produces High School Christmas records throughout the Midwest. This provided a valuable opportunity to confront working in a wide variety of acoustically varied recording environments. It also instilled the "survival" instinct necessary to succeed at location recording.

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In 1988, Chris joined Classic Digital, and together with a group of friends invested in Chicago's first DAW.. the Sonic Solutions vs. 0.9-Beta test, complete with a pair of whopping 500MB hard drives! They also boasted a Sony 1600 system with U-matic tape drives for CD mastering. This further prepared Chris for the long road ahead dealing with lunatic clients, bad sounding new technologies and bug-infested software.

As Classic Digital floundered, things began to open up at WFMT radio, which had also recently installed Sonic Solutions. In 1997 Chris was designated as the engineer/producer for the weekly syndicated CSO broadcasts and engineer for the then local-live-then-syndicated Lyric Opera broadcasts. This also happened to coincide with the dedication of the newly renovated Orchestra Hall. Some of the other radio projects included the Civic orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony, Montreal Symphony, Saint Louis Symphony, Grant Park Symphony, and the Ravinia Festival as well as extensive use of the WFMT performance studio. Though few of these broadcasts remain due to lack of funding, both the CSO and Lyric Opera have retained Chris to record their concerts anyway for potential future use. As a result of this extensive experience, he has been enlisted by various record companies to co-engineer their projects at these venues. One such collaboration with Bill Maylone of Cedille records has resulted in two successive Grammy nominations for Best Engineer-Classical. These two projects feature different orchestras and artists but use the same venue and production staff.

Chris in recent years has taught the fundamentals of stereo recording at both Northwestern University and Columbia College. Last year he made his debut as the reinforcement engineer for all the Grant Park Symphony performances at Millennium Park. Some notable newly released CDs include Clark Terry and the Chicago Jazz Orchestra playing *Porgy and Bess* (A440), Sephen Jones: *At the Exactest Point* (Tantara), *American Work for Organ and Orch* (Cedille), Bolcom: *A View from a Bridge* (New World Records), Barton/CSO playing Brahms & Joachim violin concertos (Cedille) and last year's nominee, Kurka: *Symphony No. 2* (Cedille).

Last Month's Meeting:

WFMT Studios hosted a Chicago Section meeting on December 16th. About thirty attendees participated in a binaural sound reproduction presentation and live demonstration by AES fellow and former president Robert Schulein. His presentation began with a discussion of the 1931-32 Bell Labs demonstration of binaural reproduction in cooperation with Leopold Stokowski, and the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. Two moving coil microphones, flush-mounted in a wax figure near the ears, fed an elaborate system of amplification, equalization, and earphone distribution. Although there was difficulty with front/back localization, the results were promising. Today, binaural techniques allow for more realistic sound field recreation with earphones or just two loudspeakers (although the latter requires complex cross-talk cancellation).

Mr. Schulein described a personal, portable system that allows for simultaneous binaural recording and monitoring. Miniature electret microphones are attached to insert earphones, so that the microphones are located at the ear canal entry. Careful consideration was made of the difference between the sound field sensed at the outside of a blocked ear canal versus that at the eardrum when the canal is open, and it was shown that the frequency response of this transfer function is quite independent of sound field direction. Such corrective equalization was implemented acoustically by virtue of the coupler frequency response of the earphones selected.



Live and pre-recorded demonstrations were conducted to evaluate the technique and to show how visual and other non-auditory cues affect directional sound perception. The binaural signal was broadcast with a wireless transmitter, and each audience member was given a receiver and insert earphones. For the live examples, a volunteer was fitted with the system described above. First, Mr. Schulein spoke while walking around the room, and the audience was able to hear the sound as if he or she was sitting in the location of the volunteer. Next was a pre-recorded voice sample coming from a sequence of locations in the horizontal plane around the head, played first with the audience stationary and then with the audience physically rotating so that the virtual source remained stationary. This was followed by binaural audio/video recordings made by Mr. Schulein in Times Square, Helsinki, and on a sailboat in the British Virgin Islands. Lastly, to demonstrate music reproduction, professional violinist David Yonman performed while moving around the volunteer.

The live demonstrations generated enthusiastic discussion, and were special in that each audience member was able to experience binaural reproduction first-hand.

Thanks

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Information about past and future meetings can always be found at the AES Chicago Section website at: www.aes.org/sections/chicago

AES Chicago Section

January Meeting Summary

What: An Applied Approach to Performance Recording by Chris Willis.

When: Tuesday, January 18, 2005, 7:30 PM

Where: Symphony Center, 220 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago Illinois.



Chicago AES Secretary
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