



CASE STUDY

BBC PROMS

SIS LIVE provided the television coverage for the BBC Proms, which enjoyed a record-breaking season in 2009. More than 12 million viewers watched the BBC Proms on television, even before the Last Night. More watched via the BBC iPlayer. All Proms programmes were broadcast live on BBC Radio 3, streamed live online via BBC iPlayer and were available on-demand for seven days. BBC Two and BBC Four broadcast a selection of Proms, and five concerts featured a new innovation via the red button: “Maestro Cam”, a dedicated camera fixed on the conductor, which offered an expert’s insight into the art of conducting. The SIS LIVE team worked incredibly closely with the BBC to create the coverage. SIS LIVE’s Unit 2 and MasterSound, the company’s high-end audio mixing truck, were parked up outside the Albert Hall from the opening night on 17th July until the Last Night on 12th September, when they were joined by Unit 12. A fourth, expanding vehicle was also used, featuring a Final Cut Pro edit area, deferral area, graphics

and subtitles. The deferral area was used to produce a deferred recording of a concert that could be played to air usually 30 minutes after the actual concert started.

SIS LIVE also had its Link 13 vehicle handling the outgoing circuits terrestrially via Crystal Palace to TV Centre. On the Last Night, the Unit 21 comms truck came in to handle all the incoming satellite feeds from the parks and the outgoing HD circuits to network.

100 concerts

In all, BBC Proms staged 100 concerts, including 76 in the Royal Albert Hall, 19 chamber music concerts at Cadogan Hall, and five BBC Proms In The Park events around the country on the Last Night.

For BBC TV, SIS LIVE produced an audio simultaneous mix for the BBC Two and the BBC HD channel, one in stereo and one in 5.1 Surround Sound. These were created in MasterSound, with the sound output added to the pictures as they were cut in the production truck.

“The BBC Proms was a huge job

and we worked really closely with our BBC colleagues to produce a terrific season this year,” says Jeremy Turner, engineering manager, SIS LIVE.

Initial planning started at the beginning of the year, building up during the Spring to an intensive planning week in June and rigging the week before the Proms started in July. For the TV coverage, up to 11 HD cameras fed pictures to the production vehicle, while a battery of microphones complemented Radio 3’s mics to produce the required television 5.1 Surround Sound and stereo mixes.

“Our camera supervisor Vince Spooner worked with a core camera crew throughout the summer and we had Andy Payne looking after all the 5.1 mixes to ensure we had a consistent approach. This way, there really is a positive difference in the quality of the shows,” Turner says.

Directors were given a set number of cameras and lenses they could work with. “The directors had a shopping list they could choose from depending on whether the programme was for BBC Two or BBC Four and it made it easier

because we had everything on site. We know the Albert Hall really well, which allowed us to supplement the standard camera positions with a series of interesting alternative positions, producing a better end programme as a result.”

Audio mixes

The audio side of the Proms was more complicated. Radio 3 had its own mix for all the Proms and BBC Four took a direct feed from Radio 3. This was added to the pictures in the SIS LIVE truck.

BBC Two and BBC HD have their own mix. For this, additional microphones were rigged throughout the hall.

Andy Payne, SIS LIVE’s sound supervisor on the Proms, says the BBC Two and BBC HD music feed was mixed in MasterSound.

“The primary function of us there was to do a 5.1 Surround Sound mix for the BBC HD channel and generate a suitable stereo mix for BBC Two,” Payne says. “This was all done live, or as live. We’re trying to capture that sound of being in the Albert Hall and at the same time we need to ensure the focus of the sound is compatible with the pictures. The cameras, especially now they’re in HD, can get you very close to the orchestra, so it’s important to get the detail of the different instruments.”

SIS LIVE placed a lot of microphones in the orchestra to complement the microphones for Radio 3.

“The 5.1 balance is really important, but even more important is the fold down from 5.1 for stereo for BBC Two,” he adds. “The stereo mix is still the most important product because it is what the vast majority of the audience will listen to.”

Deferral recordings

Sometimes BBC Two / BBC HD or BBC Four would decide that the playout of a Prom should start after the performance had begun in the hall. This deferral meant SIS LIVE had to record “as live” on to an EVS hard disk recorder and start



playing out during the performance. “Say a Prom started at 7.00pm but the channel doesn’t want to start until 7.30pm, we recorded as live onto an EVS – which was developed for use in sport for replays and instant access,” Turner says. “BBC Two might also want to change the duration. Using EVS we would edit even while recording before transmitting the deferred feed.”

The job then was to keep everything in sync. Turner says the cuts were never of the actual music, rather the links between pieces. With “Maestro Cam”, a camera trained on the conductor and shown as a split screen through the red button control, the feed also had to be kept in sync with the rest of the programme.

“Keeping everything in sync is fairly hard. You need the right operators and the right approach. And you need to know what you’re doing,” says Turner. “Fortunately, we did a lot of testing and had a very specific and loyal crew.”

Editing on site

SIS LIVE also had the capability to edit programmes on site, negating the need for the BBC to find post production facilities elsewhere, saving the producers time, money and hassle.

“If we did a recorded programme,” Turner says, “we would digitise the pictures straight into Final Cut Pro on the night. Then Dave Packham, our VT editor, would edit on site. The edit list would then be given to Andy Payne to do an audio edit to follow the picture edit and the audio would be laid back to the

pictures in MasterSound. These would then be transmitted from on-site to network.”

Last Night of the Proms

The Last Night of the Proms involved events in five parks around the country as well as the traditional night at the Albert Hall. For part of the event, music from the hall was played live in the parks and musicians in the parks responded live.

The international mix was done separately to the main BBC Two mix in Unit 2 by a sound supervisor and vision mixer. On the Last Night, the event went to customers around the world. Countries that broadcast the event on television included Australia, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia, China, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Japan, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and Romania.

For the first time, the Last Night was also screened via satellite to cinema chains in Asia, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the US.

Because the parks were not cleared for international playout, SIS LIVE had to mix round them with feeds from the hall.

Overall, Turner pronounces himself very happy with the whole event. “It was fun to do. It is great that we have such a good relationship with BBC Classical Music Television. It is all extremely well planned and a genuine two-way street. That doesn’t mean, though, that we are not looking at ways to improve things even more for next year.”