# Sound Insight With Donal Hodgson



Donal Hodgson has been a sound engineer, mixer and Pro Tools expert for more than 25 years, working in recording studios and in live environments. During his

career he has participated in numerous high profile projects for artists as diverse as Tina Turner, Duran Duran, Brian Wilson, Richard Ashcroft, Mirwais and Sting. He has also worked on Hollywood film productions and UK TV shows as music editor and headed up the sound department for several music DVD productions.

A DPA Master since 2014, Donal's favourite DPA microphones are the d:screet 4011 Cardioid Microphone which he loves for ambience, acoustic guitar and vocals, and the d:vote 4099 Instrument Microphone, which he describes as 'amazing' and uses on everything else.

How did you get started in the recording industry?

Through a friend who was already working as a sound engineer. He was kind enough to put in a good word with his girlfriend who was manager of a studio in Soho, and as a result I got a job as night receptionist, aspiring to the next stage of tea boy!

How did you progress from there and what have been your career highlights?

I'm old school in that I really did start as a tea boy and went on to become a tape op (we still had tape machines) at Jacobs Studios in Surrey, then a house engineer at Eden Studio in London. I eventually went freelance in 1993.

During the late 1990s I moved away from sound engineering for a while to work as a Pro Tools operator. In late 2000 I met Sting through a friend and ended up helping him record All This Time, a live album that was released in 2001 and went on to win us an Emmy. I was asked back for the next studio album, Sacred Love, which earned Sting a Grammy for Best Vocal Duet with Mary J Blige.

In 2005, Sting asked me to manage his studio (Steerpike Studio) and tape library. A year later I went on tour with him as sound supervisor and production manager, mixing and overseeing the recording of live shows for radio and TV broadcast. In recent years I've been involved in the Police Reunion World Tour and in 2011 I won another Emmy – this time for mixing Sting's live orchestral show, Symphonicities, which was recorded at Red Rocks for A&E's private Sessions TV Show.

What's the biggest project you have worked on in your career?

I've done seven Sting studio albums, several DVDs and some TV shows, but probably the most 'seat of the pants' experience was mixing the Police Reunion show at the Maracanã Stadium in Brazil. This was a live mix for radio broadcast, which I did on Pro Tools - with a mouse.



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How long have you been using DPA microphones?

We had some B&K omni’s at Eden Studio, but we didn’t really use omni’s during the Brit Pop days - I have no idea why. My first hands on experience with DPA was in 2006 when Sting was recording Songs From The Labyrinth, which was a collaboration with lute player Edin Karamazov. I had always considered DPA to be

classical music microphones so I thought it would be a good idea to try them out on this project. We bought a set of d:dicate™ 4006 Omnidirectional microphones and used them exclusively to record Edin's lutes. We were all impressed with their sound quality in the studio so when we went on tour and wanted continuity for the live shows, we decided to use 4023 Cardioid microphones (now known as the 4011-ER) because they have a similar sound and a very small footprint on stage. They worked brilliantly and were a real eye opener for the sound crew. After that experience I was sold on DPA.

What productions or projects have you used DPA mics for and which models did you use?

When I am recording there are always DPA microphones in my setup. Sometimes clients ask for other mics but I always squeeze in the DPAs and people who have never heard them before always comment on how good they sound. I usually smile and nod in a knowing, and hopefully un-condescending, way.

Over the years I've added more DPA models to my arsenal – d:vote 4099 Instrument Microphones, for example, which we used in 2009 for the live DVD recording and broadcast of Sting's If On a Winters Night from Durham Cathedral. The Cathedral has a lovely sounding reverb, but it's at least five seconds long and the only way to make it sound good was to close mic all 38 musicians. I used d:vote 4099s on the string and brass sections, d:screet 4061s for the harp and Sting's lute, d:dicate 4011 cardioids for the vocalists and 4023 compact cardioids for percussion. They all sounded really good, especially Sting's voice which was excellent through the 4011. We also tried out DPA's 5100 mobile surround mic because the show was being recorded and mixed for stereo and 5.1.

What are some of the challenges of miking the projects you work on? How does using DPA help solve these challenges?

The d:vote 4099 series - and in particular all the different clips - have been a game changer for me, both in the studio and in live situations. I can get in close to the sound source and really lift out the instruments in the mix as result. They are just brilliant. No one I have ever worked with has ever said a bad word about the d:vote 4099.

Tell us about your working style and some technical details about your daily workflow.

I like to think I have a very relaxed style, no stress, easy going. It's all about the music and the musicians feeling relaxed, comfortable and ready to perform without any pressure. Once I hit record, I'm in until the musicians walk out of the room. I always record everything - that's the beauty of Pro Tools, you never run out of tape! I have also been lucky in that I've never really been limited equipment-wise, which means I can record my chosen mic set-up and still have room to add in a few extra 'suck it and see' mics for creativity. I can then move these mics around as the



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sessions progress, fine tuning and tweaking. This works well in situations where there is no time to play with the set-up and the artist wants the sound right on the first down beat.

What future projects do you plan to use DPA mics on?

Future projects? My sound engineer’s crystal ball is a little hazy at the moment, but whatever I’m doing it will involve DPA because I use DPA on everything. I am currently involved with a company called Rock Choir and I use DPA microphones exclusively to record and mix all their productions. They are proposing a major show in 2020 at Wembley celebrating 15 years of Rock Choir. It will probably be across two nights, with 15,000 members singing along to every track each night, plus 80 lead singers and a band. Hopefully they will want to record it for a live album.

Where do you see audio for recording going in the next 5 years? Do you see any major trends that will affect how you will work in the future?

I think we’re still seeing the results of the home recording/mixing in the box effect, coupled with more people starting to pay for monthly streaming services. Eventually (hopefully sooner rather than later) streaming services will generate more revenue than physical sales ever did, but whether those funds will trickle down through the layers is yet to be seen. My personal plan is to remain as flexible as possible. I think traditional production will be limited to a few top flight studios and the rest of us will need to wear many hats when at work. Owning your own kit and knowing it inside out will be extremely important if you want to stay competitive.

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