



Benny Andersson

Busy as ever and still finding ways to challenge himself, the man behind the songs, the theatre productions and a film has just opened a studio in Stockholm. ZENON SCHOEPE

Benny Andersson still turns up for work every day and puts in the hours at his keyboards just as he always has. ‘Work’ for him is a comfortably apportioned room at the back of large old ex-Swedish Navy warehouse in the central waterfront district of Stockholm. It’s the same building that houses his SSL Duality and Genelec surround-equipped Mono mix studio used extensively by his long-time engineer Bernard Lohr (*Resolution* V4.1) who mixes and records most of Benny’s creative output including the *Mama Mia* projects and his Benny Andersson’s Orkester. The building is also home to his administrative offices and he’s getting his son Ludvig increasingly involved with his business.

Benny will tell you that he’s not as busy as he has been — the stage and film versions of the ABBA-soundtracked *Mama Mia* ensure his compositions remain

firmly in the public consciousness — but his return-to-roots ‘folk’ Orkester project occupies him currently. Oh, and together with his son, he’s also just opened a brand new studio in a similar nearby building, which is the first new commercial studio to be opened in Stockholm for many years. RMV studio (Riksmixningsverket — Swedish for national mixing authority) is targeting the tracking market with a smashing selection of outboard, a wonderful double Neve 8068 and a live room big enough for a bands, string sections or Benny’s Orkester.

Resolution met him in his personal studio room, which is still centred around a Synclavier system — he has four systems. He’s been using it since Chess in 1985: ‘People were telling me I should have one of these but I didn’t really know what it was; I thought it was a synthesizer. But I decided that I did need one. I’m used to it now.’

What was the idea behind the studio?

We've done a lot of work in our room at Mono but that's mostly for postproduction although you can squeeze in four fiddlers there if you have to. It was actually Ludvig's input because I've had my eye on that building for some time; ten years ago I said we should build a studio in there. This here became my working place and the office. About a year and half ago the people who run all the buildings for the government came and said we could have it — they rebuilt it and the outer shell and we made it into a studio inside.

There will always be bands wanting to play together — no matter if they sell records or not! And you want to be in a real studio — you don't want to sit in your basement with your little Mac — you want to develop your ideas and for bands who are on their way then it's a good place. I wanted it big enough that we could fit in a small chamber orchestra and we've had one session with 24 strings; piece of cake. For my own band with 16 of us it's perfect.

We'd been doing most of our stuff at Atlantis studio, which is the old Metronome studio where ABBA once recorded. It still looks exactly the same and it's a good place but it's not state-of-the-art when it comes to the technical side and you need the man who runs the studio to be there because he's the only one who knows where to hit it when something isn't working.



Mind you, an 8068 is not what many would regard as state-of-the-art...

It absolutely is, I think it is. We have another one in here [the SSL Duality in Mono] and that's another type of state-of-the-art. Ludvig said we should have a Neve console because the rock bands want Neves, and I think they do. It's a commercial studio, anybody can hire it and they're welcome to do so. If not, I'll be in there!



Ludvig, Linn, and Bernard with Benny.

Can you remember the first time you went into a studio?

It was in a school and they had this auditorium with a little stage and three storeys up at a little window was the engineer looking out. He had his tools up there and he was like 75 years old. I was in the band The Hep Stars and we brought in our equipment, which was before PA systems — we had two large speakers with everything in it apart from the bass. We put up two microphones and one for the bass and we started playing and recorded three songs in three hours. One was called Cadillac which became No. 1, one was called Farmer John, which became No. 1 and the last one was a tribute to Buddy Holly and that became No. 3.

That's a long way away from ABBA where the studio was used as part of the production process. Am I right that you write away from the studio rather than in it?

That's always been my way. It's an expensive spot to sit and compose because it takes a year to write eight good songs. I did a calculation because I was speaking to someone about this yesterday. I've been at this since I was 19 and I'm 64 so that's 45 years. So I've been writing songs for 45 years, spending maybe an average of 4 hours a day trying to write songs and the result of that is around 18 hours of music altogether — all the ABBA stuff, Chess, Kristina, my band, put it altogether and it's 18 hours. Split that over 45 years and it's something like 20 minutes a year. Sitting

in a studio and composing like that would be rather expensive.

Composing is very time consuming. Actually, Bjorn and I wrote one song in the studio, which was Super Trouper, because we were a song short. We had to do something, we were in the studios and we had to record it tomorrow. And Arrival, the instrumental, was also done in the studio, when everybody went home.

So how tech savvy are you?

Not much anymore, I used to be.

Bernard says you balanced some of the mixes on the Mama Mia film because only you knew how it should sound...

Oh yes. It was important; if it's to become a movie then it's going to stay like this forever so I wanted to be in charge of that. We recorded it at Air studios in London and we mixed it all in this room here [at Mono] but technically I'm not so good. I used to be in the ABBA days but I don't know what's going on now, there's so much new stuff...

So how technical were you?

I used to know what was going on on the desk. We had a Harrison for a long time at Polar Studios. I don't care so much anymore because for me it's more about what you are going to record, not how and how it sounds. With my band now we record like it could be live, we don't fiddle around. But now with access to the studio maybe it's time to reconsider!

Your method of writing — composing and preparing in advance — must have prepared you well for your work in theatre...

In terms of layers, yes, but for the theatre it's different because of all the elements that come in — it's not just about what you hear, it's what you see and what you experience. So you have to be flexible. When we did Chess we wanted to do the recording first because we knew what we were doing and we wanted the record before anything else happened. So, it's a good record but it's better than the show!

For Kristina, it's three and a half hours and it's sort of composed all the way through — almost — it's more of an opera, even if it's not operatic, but the format is opera. That's probably a better performance than it is a record for the very reason that I aimed to try and visualise while writing — without knowing what it would look like because that's the director's business. But once the director came into the picture, which was a year before we opened, things started to fall into place. It took four years to write half of it and only one year to write the other half, once he came in.

What were the lessons for you from Chess to Mama Mia?

Mama Mia was easy because it was already written; no sweat.

Some theatre types must look at that with envy because not only have you had chart hits with the songs, you've then taken them to the theatre and had a hit there, and then crossed over into film and I think it's the biggest grossing musical of all time now...

It's not a competition but it's nice that it works so well. The soundtrack did really well and sold like 5.5m copies, which is not bad for the times. I think the interesting thing is that there are so many children that enjoy it so much and they don't know about ABBA. They know about Mama Mia and they have the DVD.

You say it was easy but there must have been a little more to it...

Absolutely yes. There's nothing wrong with the songs, it's good stuff. It was definitely Catherine Johnstone [script for music and film] and I've said this over and over and I'll keep saying it because it was so cleverly done from day one.

Did you have any say in that?

Yes I did, but I didn't say anything! We had a say — it's our company Judy Craymer, Bjorn and I. We said if this is going to happen then we have to be able to put a lid on it if we don't like it. I was afraid that it might affect something that I'm very proud of, which is what we achieved with ABBA. If it was bad would that reflect on us like we were insincere? But when we saw it, it was rather funny and they made it work. I might have changed some bass notes that they hadn't interpreted from the tracks — and they had taken out the 'Aha' thing from Knowing Me, Knowing You because that's happening between the father and the daughter. I thought it was fine and that they could do whatever they liked; it's the director's prerogative. The first preview and the audience all sang the 'Aha', so they put it in. I thought then that this was probably going to work.

But it is a lucky situation with Catherine, with our music, with Judy and director Phyllida Lloyd, everybody. We were all lucky — nobody expected this, I promise you.

And a hard act to follow then ...

Maybe I'll do something for the theatre again, I'm not sure, but nothing of that sort. And not a Mama Mia 2 and 3!



So it's accordions and the Benny Andersson Orkester now, is that going back to your roots?

It is. I did that after Chess. I decided I wanted to do something instrumental going back to what I grew up with, which is fiddles and accordions — I play the accordion like my father and grandfather. I was always more into the folk scene of fiddles, which is the basis of Swedish folk music. I did that just for fun because it felt good. We were successful commercially but that wasn't the idea.

What had you tapped into?

I wanted to do this thing with five fiddlers and me and we did two records. I was doing stuff and with the Synclavier and I noticed that I had a lot of tubas, trumpets and clarinets on it. I thought I should enlarge the band and do an Orkester to get some use of the music I had. I'm tapping into what I want to do; I like it, I like this song, it could have been written 52 years ago but I don't care.

And some of it sounds much more contemporary than just folk music...

It does and that's what happens when you do what you like doing. When you're put in a position where you can do whatever you want it would be stupid to do something that you don't like!

We've done four albums. We'll be on the road again this year and we only do eight concerts but we do play for four hours. And we bring our own dance floor. People are dancing, that's the idea. I think we're alone in bringing a dance floor along with us! Years ago in Sweden we had maybe a thousand Volkparks, now maybe we have a hundred.



Are you still putting in as many hours as you used to at the Synclavier?

Yes. If you're on your own then you need some sort of discipline otherwise nothing is going to happen. I don't know what I want to achieve but I do know that I have to take care of old stuff — everything that has happened.

Building the studio has been one of the most fun and exciting things I've done for a long time. I think we're going to do quite well; people like being there. ■



RMV STUDIO

RMV studio arose out of a practical requirement from Benny's work. While his Mono studio is a perfect place for stereo and multichannel mixing, and it's where Bernard Lohr mixed things like the Mama Mia film soundtrack among many other projects, when Benny wanted to record they had to go some place else locally and the options were not wide when he has his band of 15 in tow. In fact, with Mono so close to what is now the RMV studio building, Benny and Bernard had often looked at the building and thought it would make an excellent recording room.

Construction began in April last year for what has been a fairly prompt turnaround as it opened on 10 January this year. The old Neve in the control room is two 'combined' 8068s built originally for Battery studios in Nashville, then moved to Battery studios in London. Producer Max Martin next bought it for his studio in Sweden but apparently was only using two channels on it so it became the perfect desk for RMV. The desk was completely refurbished with Neve guru Fred Hill — who created the desk originally in Nashville — brought in to look it over with Bernard, studio manager Linn Fijal and a few others cleaning every pot and switch. 'It's in great shape but it's an old desk so we find little things on it every now and then but it works great,' says Bernard.

Acoustics are by Ingemar Ohlsson with his typically understated yet effective treatment. There are ATC 300s in the wall that Bernard bought 'for the future' when a studio was closing but these are eclipsed by the impressive physical presence of a pair of Genelec 8260s on the desk. 'I use the 8260s all the time,' says Bernard, who employs a multichannel Genelec system in next door's Mono studio. 'For me the big monitoring is not something I use everyday but when you have a rock band in it's fun to be able to turn them up. Mind you, the 8260s are loud too.'

The DSP in the 8260s is used for the listening position correction although Bernard says that very little was actually required. 'There's always a bit of a guess involved when you build a control room but this one is pretty straight and the measurements were better than we thought they might be.'

While the floors are floating and isolation between spaces is excellent, the thick outside walls are not

treated because they wanted to lose as little space as possible. What they've arrived at is a big live area with booths at the back and a generous control room by any standards. At the time of my visit, Swedish band The Hives were in for a two-month stint and the control room was big enough to accommodate what was effectively an extra a layer of the band and production teams' own outboard in front of the studio's own well-stocked outboard racks. It was gear nirvana.

The studio can run its Otari MTR90 MkII with an Endless Audio Clasp system. There are also Digital Audio Denmark and Digidesign convertors running to large Pro Tools systems.

There's some rare old gear around including some with Polar Studios stickers on it as they bought a lot when the studio closed, including mics stands and some mics. Recent additions include a plate reverb and a vibraphone. And then there are Benny's instruments — another Synclavier, his Yamaha GX1, Mellotron, and Wurlitzer.

There's also a relaxation area and the whole space has a very comfortable feel to it as Linn points out: 'The studio has only just opened but it feels like it has always been here.' She's right, maybe it's the gear choice, the colour schemes or the décor but you could be forgiven for thinking the studio has been operating for 20 years. It's not the sort of studio where you have a crisis of conscience whenever and wherever you park your coffee cup. The lockout day rate is 12,000 Swedish Krona (about £1000) and the clients are already coming.

'I think its mostly the location and it's a good place to be if you want to record in Stockholm,' says Linn. 'It's a calm environment, the equipment is good and you'll get the most out of it.'

'There's more than a little hype about getting the old-style back; people playing together,' adds Bernard. 'You can do that here.'

With a boutique hotel within a few metres, RMV manages to capture a balance of calm and creativity in a splendid location right in the middle of the city. Let's face it; if you want to record in Stockholm then it ought to be Stockholm central not some industrial estate on the outskirts. RMV is the first new recording studio to be built in Stockholm or Sweden for very many years. It's built in the old-school manner and it has customers. Interesting concept. ■