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John Keltonic conducting the strings for *Their Finest Hour* at Omega Studios.



Photo: Rick Arenz

HEROIC MUSIC FOR A HEROIC TIME

John Keltonic Scores *Their Finest Hour* for NBC

By Tom Kenny

When I had my first talks with NBC, it was clear that they wanted this to sound like a heroic, World War II score," recalls composer John Keltonic, referring to his most recent project, *Their Finest Hour*, an hour-long documentary hosted by Tom Brokaw and airing in prime time on the last Saturday of the London Olympics. "No synths, no screaming guitars. Just that rich, historic feel that we've come to associate with that time."

The time was the early days of WWII, and the

title refers to Winston Churchill's famous speech to Parliament in June 1940, rallying his countrymen for the Nazi onslaught that was surely coming. NBC, in mapping out its 2012 London Olympics coverage, wanted to pay tribute to the host country in a major way by honoring its defense of the West.

Keltonic, owner of JDK Music in Richmond, Va. (jdkmusic.com) and a composer for more than 20 years, with a CV that includes a wide range of record projects, as well as scores for BBC, PBS and Discovery Channel, received a call in late February

from Mark Levy, Creative Director for NBC Olympics. "It came out of the blue," he says, "and they turned out to be a great client. They know what they are doing, but even so, with any new client, I like to get some rough ideas early on of what they like and don't like—so I asked if they could put some temp music in the fine-cut version so that we'd have a common frame of reference to chat about. Then we started trading ideas back and forth. Sometimes that's a dangerous thing to do because a client can fall in love with the temp

Composer John Keltonic (left) and engineer Jim Curtis at the Neve VR in Omega Studios Studio A.

Photo: Rick Arenz



score, but in this case, it worked out really well."

Writing and pre-production took place in Keltonic's JDK Music studio in Richmond, where the composer is set up with two Macs and four PCs, the former hosting Pro Tools 10, Digital Performer 7.24 and a number of sample libraries, the latter housing GigaStudio, East West Gold and even more instrument and sound libraries. ("The libraries have gotten so much better," Keltonic says, "even over the last five years.") He has two modified older-model Ramsa/Panasonic DA-7s that he uses as summing mixers when tracking. He listens primarily through Genelec 1031A monitors, which he ended up bringing to the final mix sessions for an additional reference.

While Keltonic can play piano, flutes and guitar, he usually prefers to write the old-fashioned way, on paper and in Sibelius. He says that whenever he finds himself composing on a real instrument, he finds it self-limiting, meaning that he won't often write what he himself can't play. When *Mix* first talked to him in late-May, he was still busy with the back-and-forth approvals of his mockups by NBC, in anticipation of one packed day in June for the tracking session at Omega Studios in Rockville, Md.

"That was a pretty busy day. [Laughs.] We had the strings in from 10 to 2:30, brass from 2:30 to 4:30 and then all of the solo instruments from 4:30 to 8," he says. "Then we took two full days to mix. There are 27 music cues and about 43 minutes of music in the score. It was a few long days there."

The players came from the National Symphony and elsewhere, and Keltonic raved about their performance, though he says that it wasn't too difficult for them because "the music needed to be fairly uncomplicated so as not to conflict with the narration or voice-overs." The tracking and mixing were handled by Omega Studios chief engineer Jim Curtis, assisted by Nick Martin, at the 60-channel Neve VR in the main room, recorded to Pro Tools.

"We had it laid out pretty traditionally for the sections," Curtis says. "We set up some close mics for enhancements, but the bulk of the material came from a Neumann USM 69 set up M-S in the middle of the section, with a pair of KM 83s up in the air behind John as he was conducting."

Besides writing, arranging and orchestrating, Keltonic also often conducts his own music, and for this session he and Curtis implemented a three-monitor approach for the tracking. Curtis had the Pro Tools screen up in the control room, with another at the producers desk running Quick-Time video, while out at the podium Keltonic looked at a monitor that ran the Pro Tools MIDI window, "for tempo changes and bar markings," Curtis says.

"The players blended so well together in the room that it was just that much easier to mix," Curtis says. "Sometimes I would find myself just bringing up the faders. We did end up doing some submixing within Pro Tools and bringing those up in the session, and we did bring one or two bits from the mockups in at the final—brass and percussion—for taste."

Mixes were monitored on the Westlake T1s and Yamaha NS-10s in Omega Studio A, along with the Genelec 1031As that Keltonic brought from his own facility. Taking it one step further, Curtis says, before printing any mix, they ran it through a Studer 2-track just to hear what it would sound like out of "a little speaker."

"We had some 4-second cues and we had some 4-minute cues," Keltonic concludes. "We had some traditional Irish instruments and sometimes we tripled

the 24 strings. Anything that the material called for. It really was outstanding to work on this Olympic project. Even after all these years, I'm thrilled that I get to do what I love for a living." ■



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