

# Comfort zone

It is a tough call being a musician. Keith Clarke visits a firm devoted to making it more comfortable

**A**re you sitting comfortably? That was the question Amadeus Performance Equipment started asking musicians 20-plus years ago, and the answer came back loud and clear: No. The result was the Opus chair, which got such a warm round of applause from Alexander technique teachers and ergonomic specialists,

not to mention players, that it is still bringing comfort to musicians two decades later.

But Amadeus had other questions, and the way those questions went led to the formation of two other companies: Amadeus Acoustic Solutions and Amadeus Auditorium Design. Sitting in their newly created offices in East Sussex, John Locke

and Anne Holliday, the husband-and-wife team behind Amadeus, explain the progression: 'We've gone on from what orchestras needed, chairs for proper posture, to sound in schools, the problems teachers were having, then on to modular studios and acoustics.'

In the end it all still comes down to the comfort of musicians, whether by providing comfortable seating, preventing hearing loss or giving people the comfort of being able to practise freely without coming into conflict with neighbours.

Before hearing problems among musicians became widely discussed, John Locke had been called in by the London Philharmonic, some of whose players were suffering after spending a couple of hours in the new pit at Glyndebourne. The result was an acoustic shield, placed in front of the brass players. It was an improvement, but had drawbacks, not least its size on crowded platforms. Over the years the design has been finessed and Amadeus recently launched the seventh version, a smaller, lighter model which comes with hard evidence of its effectiveness from acoustics experts.

'The responses from orchestras to the original shield was that it wasn't user friendly,' says Locke, 'so we started trying to create something with the designer at the Birmingham University furniture faculty, who had helped to design the Opus chair, and he started looking at different ways of cutting down the size. We decided we would test various polycarbonates and also various perforation sizes and air gaps.'

'We consulted with a very good acoustician and played all sorts of instruments to give him some feedback on what the void should be between the two layers, how many perforations there should be, what size they should be, what thickness the polycarbonate



◀ Helping hands: Anne Holliday and John Locke and (above) the M-Pod



▲ Outside chance: Amadeus garden music studio

should be, so that when a trumpeter is playing, in front of them would be a perforated radius shield which would not affect their playing but would reduce the impact to the ears of the person in front of them by x% or y decibels. What we've got now is something that is incredibly effective. It reduces impact by anything between 5dB and 13dB, which exponentially is quite substantial.'

With substantial development costs, the shields do not come cheap – a single one will set you back £350, though there is reduction in quantity – but Locke makes a good case for the cost effectiveness, given orchestras' obligations to restrict the time players can spend at the loud end of the scale.

'If they use the shields it increases the amount of time a musician can spend rehearsing or being on the platform by 13 hours a month.' 'Which becomes significant when it comes to running their businesses,' Holliday points out.

'If you start looking at the cost on its own, it's a lot of money,' says Locke, 'but it could save a symphony orchestra at least £30,000, because if you look at the number of reserve players they have to have, probably at least ten if not 20, once they've got to a certain dosage they've got to stand down and someone else comes in, and that is expensive.'


'You wouldn't have many of these shields on a platform – maximum of ten, six is fine – but the physics is all about the sound

being diffused. If we assume the average reduction is 8dB, in terms of percentage that is close to 35-40% reduction, it's staggering.' We don't have to take Locke's word for it – a comprehensive report by acoustician Adrian James gives chapter and verse.

If the screen – free-standing or attached to an Opus chair – is something fairly small that makes a big difference, the larger side of the Amadeus group's work is kitting out studios of all shapes and sizes. The Royal College of Music redevelopment incorporated 13 of them, each with adjustable acoustic panels to accommodate the different needs of all kinds of players and singers.

A less predictable aspect of the company's development was to go into the business of selling garden sheds. Following a request from a drummer who was driving his wife mad, along with the neighbours, Amadeus extended its range of modular rehearsal spaces to include a stylish 'garden music room'. A 5ft x 4ft version will set you back somewhere north of £25,000, but on a less grand scale a budget model M-Pod sound-proof room can be installed within a home in half a day for about £7,500 plus VAT.

The smallest is about 6ft x 7.5ft and all have equal acoustic properties – step three metres away and you are unaware of the musical heights being scaled within. A new market for the pods is the NHS, which has ordered units for use when interview-

ing child victims of abuse, where privacy is crucial. For musicians, the advantages are obvious, and could avoid the expense of moving home. Are you sitting comfortably? Yes, thanks. So are the neighbours. 

[www.amadeus-equipment.co.uk/](http://www.amadeus-equipment.co.uk/)



► Opus chair and acoustic shield