

On the Cover

PIANELLA STUDIOS, MALIBU, CA



Photo: Jay Kaufman

Marco Beltrami's separate writing room is centered on an Avid D-Command and MOTU Digital Performer.

After years of using a converted walk-in closet in a rental in Malibu, Calif., as a demo production studio, Oscar-nominated film composer Marco Beltrami (*The Hurt Locker*, 3:10 to Yuma and the upcoming remake of *The Thing*) decided it was time to build the kind of facility that would provide him and his sound designer/co-composer, Buck Sanders, a place to compose, record and mix final score recordings.

The result is Pianella Studios, completed in 2010. Situated on a mountaintop in a rural portion of Malibu in Ventura County, the studio offers a

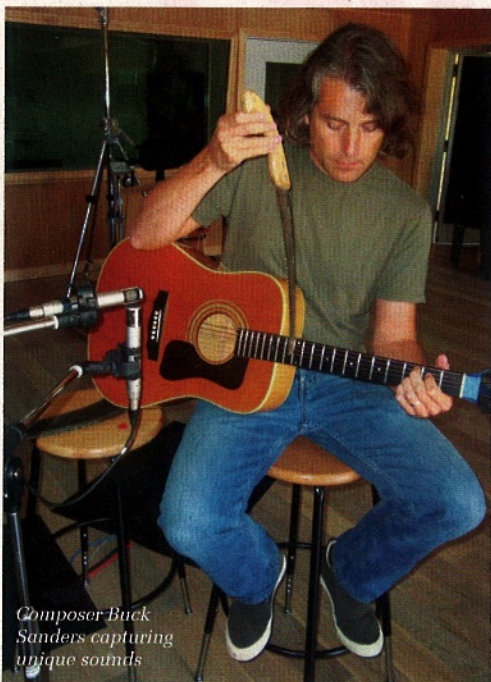
uniquely reverberant—particularly for its size—recording stage, designed under the supervision of Abbey Road Studios alumnus John Kurlander, who has also been Beltrami's scoring mixer for more than 45 films.

"We do a lot of experimentation," Beltrami explains of his and Sanders' composition process. "I found that we were spending a lot of time in studios recording sounds, and when you're paying for the studio, it gets prohibitive. You can't really explore to the fullest. And that's something we really enjoy doing."

An avid motorcyclist, Beltrami had explored

the area that would become Pianella's home. "It was just raw land," he says of the 20-acre site. "It was just an amazing place." Working with architect Gary Williamson, Beltrami initially planned a three-fold design: a house, featuring the recording studio on the lower level; a guest house for visiting production teams; and a 60x40-foot barn to store his bikes and other materials.

The permit process, however, forced him to change his plans. While the simple barn structure was approved quickly, the approvals for the house were delayed. As Kurlander recalls, "He called me to lunch with Gary, and said, 'Look, we have approval



Composer Buck Sanders capturing unique sounds

for the barn, but the house is going to take forever and I need a studio. How about we put the studio in the barn? It was very big, and when we overlaid Gary's studio plan onto the barn, it was dwarfed. So I just drew out on a napkin a little plan, which we built."

Kurlander, who moved to Los Angeles from England in the late 1990s, wanted to see something that didn't exist in L.A. scoring stages. "All the orchestral studios and recording venues in Europe, particularly in London, have ambient spaces where the reverberation time is much longer," with decay times of more than two seconds. "The converted soundstages of Southern California, however, are closer to 1-second RT. They definitely have a dead sound. It's just a different mindset."

So while Kurlander could have spec'd a false ceiling to deaden the room, he chose to take advantage of the 28-foot ceiling the barn structure offered, maximizing the reverberation in the 30x35-foot studio area, where up to 35 musicians can fit. A 10.5-foot balcony underhang allows room for an additional five players.

The parallel walls of the high ceiling are lined with 8x4-foot classic-core ¾-inch maple panels treated with a polyurethane finish, resulting in a highly reflective tower, in a sense, above the musicians. The lower-level walls are lined with an untreated Plyboo panel material made of compressed bamboo, and the studio floor is built of white oak, also uncoated, except for a slight wax-oil treatment. "Marco said to me, 'What if someone spills coffee?'" recalls Kurlander. "I told him I would



By opening the barn doors, Beltrami can change the acoustics of the interior space.

personally clean it up! [Laughs.] So what we have is the liveliest surface—the hardest surfaces—up in the air, and the surfaces where the players are, such as the sidewalls and floor, are relatively softer."

The main three-microphone tree picks up the overall sound, plus that natural reverb, with an additional pair of mics attached to the back wall of the high wall, recording mostly room alone, giving the engineer added flexibility during mixing.

"Everyone said to us, 'But won't you get a

terrible slap?'" Kurlander says. "Yes, but nobody's going to be up there to hear it. We've done impulse-response tests, and, empty, it measures a smooth 2.3 seconds and about 2.1 with the orchestra present. With that decay time, we have a recording space unlike anything available anywhere else in Los Angeles."

Pianella also features on its first floor, two iso booths—one big enough for a piano and the other, narrower, behind the conductor for a few soloists.

Photo: Jay Kaufman

There is also a kitchen and a single restroom, which Beltrami quickly realized would not be enough for the multitude on break between cues. "When we did our first session with an orchestra, I made an announcement suggesting the gentlemen make use of the bushes outside, leaving the restroom inside for the ladies," he says with a laugh. Expanded facilities are already in the works.

Upstairs is a lounge, as well as a work area for copyists to make any between-session changes. There is also a balcony over the rear of the stage, on which either musicians can be placed and miked from below, or microphones can be placed (and connected through tielines) to record the musicians below. "It provides a different perspective," explains Sanders. "On *The Thing*, there were some effects we were trying to get with the woodwinds. We wanted them to sound distant so we had the players up on the balcony and recorded them from down on the floor."

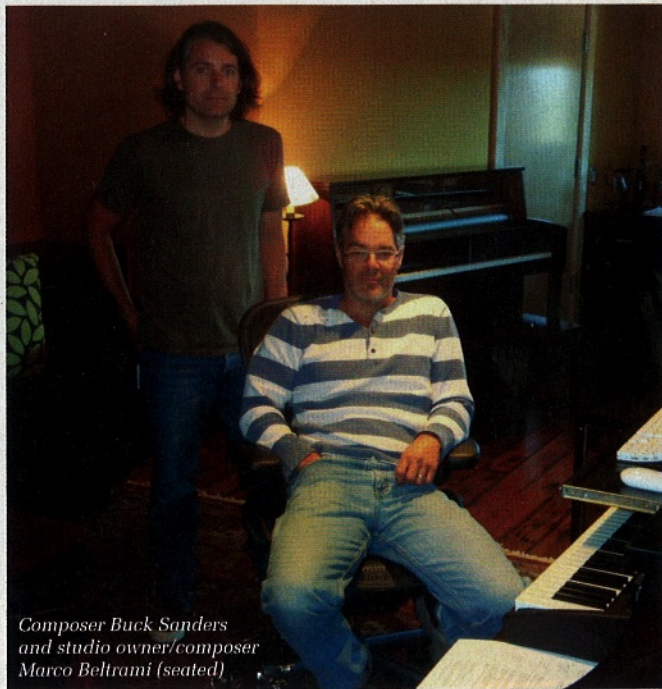
The upstairs is also home to Beltrami's warmly decorated writing room. Both he and Sanders work in MOTU Digital Performer; Sanders works below, in a portion of the control room and in the main studio, creating sounds that are sent up to Beltrami to incorporate in his compositions. "Buck records sounds that we use in a template of sounds to be used in the film, and then I start working on cues," Beltrami explains. "Our work together has evolved since we started 15 years ago. I initially had brought Buck in because I needed someone who was technically savvy, but we also co-compose."

With the exception of some basic orchestral sounds used for mock-up purposes, the pair avoid using any sample libraries in their scores. "What really sets us apart from other scores or composers is that we have a place where we can fully experiment and create sounds that you can't get from a sample library," Sanders says. Adds Kurlander, "It's one of the things that characterizes their scores; it's completely organic. If you hear what sounds like a drum loop, that means Buck has just made a recording and created a 4-bar pattern and looped it. Or they'll use something like the sound from the thumping of a piano pedal—Buck turned that into something."

On a recent visit, Sanders was using the back side of an old saw as a bow on an open-tuned guitar, creating a sound for an upcoming project's character theme. The instrument was recorded

using a M/S mic setup, which, later, using Digital Performer, allows him to vary both the stereo spread of the recording and its close pickup. "It can open up at times when the character becomes agitated, evolving over a scene."

Unique to Pianella is the ability to record with the studio's sliding "barn doors" either open or closed, allowing in fresh air from the beautiful—and quiet—environment outside, as well as acting as a natural baffle to adjust some of the room's reverberance. "The inherent problem with baffles is that they're not broadband absorbers," explains Jay Kaufman of Kaufman & Associates, who was brought in to refine the original building design



Composer Buck Sanders and studio owner/composer Marco Beltrami (seated)

to provide better isolation. "Most of the energy absorbed is mid- and high-band. So when lots of baffles are used, it changes the character of the room, becomes boomier. When you open those doors, it, in essence, becomes this wonderful broadband absorber. It doesn't change the character of the room; it just becomes drier."

In addition to adjusting the geometry of Williamson's original design to provide a smoother response in various parts of the building, and creating improved isolation between studio spaces, Kaufman also helped Beltrami and Kurlander realize their vision for the control room. "We had done the score for *I, Robot*, and they had given us the unusual opportunity to mix the music on one of their smaller dub stages rather than in a recording studio," Kurlander recalls. "The three of us had the

best time doing that." After a similar experience on another project, Kurlander suggested, "Let's build the control room like a little dub stage. On one level, it's a control room for the main stage. On another level, when we pull the blinds down and make it dark, it's a dubbing theater. And we put theatrical monitoring behind the screen."

The monitor speakers are Meyer Acheron Studio L/C/R behind the screen, with a pair of Meyer HMS-108 for the rear surrounds and UP-4XPs for side surrounds, making it a true 7.1 room. There is also a pair of X-800C subwoofers. Says Sanders, "The low end in the room speaks really well."

Kurlander has a 40-fader Avid D-Command control surface, with a Pro Tools monitor screen on the left and the D-Command controls to the right of the faders. "When you're sitting in the middle, you can get to the transport either by leaning to the left or to the right," he explains. Behind him are racks of his favorite mic pre's: 24 British-made Raindirk Series 3 preamps, as well as eight Millennia HP-3Ds. "The Raindirks I use for bread-and-butter mics, such as spot mics, and I use the Millennia on the mains."

Behind Kurlander's console is Sanders' workspace, with a Digital Performer station and his own collection of "esoteric pre's," as Kurlander describes them. In the rear is a sofa and desk for visiting producers and directors.

The original design for the room was inadequate in isolation, which Kaufman remedied by designing a true "floating room" system. He also added a THX baffle wall, a large broadband absorber in the rear and additional ceiling treatments.

And, keeping Beltrami's vision of a pleasant workplace environment intact, the control room not only has a large glass window for a full view of the studio, but another window surface opposite it to allow a view of the outside. "For a dubbing theater, it has a very high percentage of glass for the volume of the room," Kaufman explains, adding that he eliminated any anomalies the windows might cause through careful glass angle placement.

The resulting design, both for the studio and control room, has produced exceptional results. "John's been impressed with how well the scores translate to the dub theater," says Kaufman. Adds Kurlander, "The musicians all love playing in here, particularly the ones who have experienced recording in Europe. They tell us, 'We can all hear each other so clearly.'"