Acoustics in a small control room

S. Beristain

E.S.I.M.E., IPN, Mexican Institute of Acoustics, P.O. Box 12-1022, Narvarte, 03001 Mexico, D.F., Mexico
sberista@hotmail.com
Abstract

Acoustics in small rooms is always a problem, particularly at the low frequency range, because of their size and the fact that there is very limited space to install all the acoustic materials needed in order to obtain the desired acoustic response, but when an electroacoustic system has to be employed as it is the case in a small Control Room for a small recording studio, matters become even worse. First of all, the space is further reduced in order to accommodate the required sound system, and with the presence of hard to control low resonant frequencies, which can be excited at any moment during any recording session, it can be produced highly different sound pressure levels at those frequencies, changing the timbre of sounds. Some measurement results are presented.

1 Introduction

Small recording studios are very common within the broadcast industry in Mexico, with even smaller control rooms, with rare exceptions where plenty of electronic equipment have to be installed inside, many of them without any acoustic treatment or design.

From the onset of the broadcast industry in Mexico, many recording and transmission studios have been built, but very few have been acoustically designed or conditioned, although fortunately, in increasing numbers nowadays. Sizes range from 6 to 20 square meters of floor area, (i.e. 13 to 50 cubic meters), with the average closer to the smaller size, where no less than a mixer, few recorders plus related equipment, one table, one equipment bench, two or three chairs for the involved personnel, and often times with a couple of 1/4 to 1/2 cubic meter baffles plus a couple of so-called near field speakers for monitoring purposes, leaving only a few cubic meters for the sound to develop from the sources.

For many years, broadcasters requested from engineers some acoustical treatment for the studio, and completely excluding the control room conditioning, or even saying that the control room was only for the installation of the electronic equipment, while the studio had to be an acoustical room, because there were to be located the sound sources (voices, music), and the microphones to pick them up, so that the control room need not any acoustical treatment at all.

Some of those control rooms acoustically designed and treated have seen their walls originally covered with predesigned and costly diffusers and absorptive materials, with a second variable thickness layer of diffusing materials such as hundreds of tapes and CDs, dozens of handbooks, and many other materials, in a somewhat random fashion, drastically altering the room symmetry and the absorption balance established in the original design, and further reducing inner volume.

2 Development

This paper presents some of the sound measurements made in a recording studio, including the control room, which was designed and built for a broadcast station (actually it was a set of recording studios, but only one is herewith presented), in order to allow them to record short clips, news, interviews and commercials, so one or two speakers could be accommodated inside the studio for voice recording and interviews, or a small round table for up to five people discussing an specific topic. The total available space for each studio consisted of 28 square meters (4 x 7 mts.), with almost 3 mts. In height. Studio area of 4 x 4.5 mts was allocated, and control room area of 4 x 2.25 mts was considered appropriate by the owner. Fig. 1 shows simplified floor plan of this studio and its control room. Measurements results emphasize the Control Room acoustical conditions, but there are some of the Studio as well.

Rooms were made out of several layers consisting of two rocksheet plates with 5 cm. of compact fiberglass inside, alternated with layers of air space with some loose fiberglass in between, for a total wall thickness of almost 40 cm. which allowed to obtain acceptable sound insulation with low weight materials.

The observation window separating the studio and control room, in the size of 2.5 square meters, and consisting of three different layers of glass, and separated 7 to 15 cm. from each other (central glass vertical, and outer glasses non-parallel to the central one, nor to the wall), also produced sufficient sound insulation for the main purpose of the recording studio, namely speech recording, with reasonable sound levels for the monitoring activities within the control room.

Between the control room and the corridor, a large double glassed window with vertical glasses, floor to plafond was installed, allowing other employers and visitors to the broadcast station to have a detailed view of the action taking place in the studio during recording sessions. Insulation values obtained by this window were lower than those for the studio-control room window, but higher than those for the doors.

Access doors are on the right hand side of the complex, meaning that equipment and personnel have to be located off center, to the left hand side of the control room, producing a non symmetrical acoustics environment for the monitors, plus the operation and production people. Doors are double glassed mounted in an aluminum frame and with rubber seals all around the door (upper, lower and lateral sides). Insulation values shown in Table 1 reflect measurements made before and after each door and perimetral sealing was adjusted.

Table I summarizes average sound insulation values obtained by measurements following the procedure outlined in ISO 140 standard for in situ evaluations [1]. In the cases of both doors and the wall marked with 7 (the one between two control rooms), the results presented were measured before and after the doors were adjusted and the wall was properly finished. This table also shows end values of the reverberation time results as an average of two different measurement points, made with an impulsive signal, for studio and control room.
Fig. 1. This drawing shows a small recording studio for a broadcast station, where relative sizes for studio and control room can be appreciated. Total floor area is 7 x 4 mts. Control room floor area is 2.25 x 4 mts. = 9 mts². Total volume = 22 mts³.

Numbers 1 through 7 define all the walls and partitions evaluated for noise insulation, where 1, 6 and 7 are blind walls made out of several rocksheet insulation layers; 2 (double glassed), and 4 (three non-paralell glasses), are observation windows; 3 and 5 are double glassed access doors.

Table I bellow shows measured transmission loss and reverberation times for both rooms, it can be seen short reverberation times in both rooms, but better balanced times in the control room.

| Wall marked with number 7, separating two control rooms, although made out with the same layers as the others walls, showed very little attenuation in the first evaluation due to the fact that the construction personnel did not finish it properly, in the original construction, with all the sound insulation layers running all the way to the corridor facade as expected, with proper seals among them, and adequate support for both access doors to the control rooms (left and right), herewith located side by side, the second line shows results after the modification, showing improvement particularly in the low frequencies, as can be seen in the second measurement.

Resonance modes were evaluated within both rooms, by means of the retro-reverberation method, and found out that there were strong resonances at several frequencies, as can be seen in Figure 2 bellow. Sound level differences were in excess of 5 dB between the maximum and minimum (approx. 10 cm. away), at the 1848 resonant frequency shown, and were reduced to 2 dB after treatment. Absorption and diffusion was added to the room.

![Fig. 2. Resonant frequencies by the retro-reverberation method (1848 Hz, 2nd peak)](image)

Reverberation time measured at some resonance frequencies proved to be longer than expected for the given octave band. After some adjustment in the general absorption in both rooms, new reverberation time measurements were made, final values shown in Table I. Figure 3 shows the result of the 1848 Hz reverberation time in the studio, where the value now falls within the 1 kHz range.
Employing a TEF system, measurements were carried out to determine the Speech Intelligibility score and the reverberation time inside both rooms, the studio and the Control Room, by the Speech Transmission Index STI method. The score results confirmed the expected conditions of very good speech intelligibility due to the short reverberation times in the frequency range of interest for speech quality and a low background noise due to the reasonably good sound insulation values obtained.

As normally expected, the acoustical response of the control room is not fully uniform, but not so different either, although general conditions are good and the subjective impression of the trained people involved in the production of audio material in this studio was in accordance to the ‘subjective’ evaluation of the TEF system.

Design could have addressed the symmetry problem mentioned, but the architectural design based on the owner needs and preferences determined this layout. High absorption located behind the loudspeakers improved this condition.

Monitoring in this control room is made by a set of normal stereo monitoring baffles with three speakers each, located at the side of the observation window, and a set of ‘near field’ baffles, with two units each, located on top of the console.

4 Conclusion

Control room proved to have some sound level variations at some given frequencies, other that expected by source distance.

Reverberation time was not fully as expected, but close enough to work with little influence from the room.

After modification, sound levels were more uniform and the reverberation times at the resonant frequencies were similar to the reverberation times of the adjacent frequencies, reducing coloration of the sound within the control room.

References