

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: It's Studio Radicals, a new dCS podcast that celebrates the musical pioneers who are breaking new ground in their field. I'm your host, Kate Hutchinson – join me and dCS Audio as we meet some of music's most innovative minds, exploring how leading producers, composers and engineers approach their craft.

Marta Salogni: We are at my studio, Studio Zona. I took the name from one of my favourite films by Tarkovsky and the 'zona' in this film is the place where your innermost desires and wishes become true, but you're not my... perhaps know what they are exactly. So you might think that your innermost desire is to be successful, but really, maybe your innermost desire is to become a gardener. And you're granted those wishes in 'La Zona'. But to get there, you need somebody who walks with you. Because you need a guide...

Kate Hutchinson: Marta Salogni is a recording engineer, producer and mixer who has guided plenty of major artists over the years. She has a visual, tactile approach to sound, and has helped to build richly layered worlds for some of the most exciting names in alternative music. While she's based in an old warehouse unit in East London, she's often drawing inspiration from further afield – whether that's flying to Reykjavik to mix with Björk, or recording in the Mojave desert with Depeche Mode.

Landscape looms large in Marta's work, harking back to her childhood spent by a picturesque lake in northern Italy. She got into audio engineering at a punky social centre where she did live sound. When she moved to London in 2010, she studied audio engineering, and went on to assist on records by the likes of Sampha, FKA twigs, Bon Iver, and Frank Ocean.

Formerly based at revered indie label Mute Records, for the past few years Marta has mixed from Studio Zona – and it's a bit like an extension of her living room, with shelves of records and art books offering inspiration. Her work lingers somewhere between analogue and digital, and she's become especially known for her experiments with tape.

On one side of her studio stand her trusty reel-to-reel machines: she uses them as instruments, adding an eerie atmosphere to her recordings and her own releases – and she performs live with them too. Looking at her discography, it's clear she's drawn to idiosyncratic artists who have complex sounds, whether they're established modern-day greats like Björk – with whom she sat side by side to work on the 2017 *Utopia* album – or emerging DIY-minded artists. She compares her job to that of a translator, helping artists to communicate the big picture behind their music.

Marta Salogni: Music to me is always this sort of intangible – slash very tangible – art form that you create by transforming ideas into sounds. So through a conversation or a vision that you might tell me, I would like my record to feel like I am looking at a Georgia O'Keeffe painting, hung in a club on fire.

Kate Hutchinson: I love that visual. I want to listen to that record.

Marta Salogni: So then, then it's me and I'm like, OK. To me, that would sound like this, and I start describing to you, that it has bright colours that fade into each other, it will have a very daring element to it. I interpret what you say and I try and say it back to you and see whether you feel like, oh yeah, this is still belonging to my idea. And then I will start translating that in

sounds. Maybe we would record something. And I would say, OK, this to me sounds like the flame part of what you told me. And this is the painting, and you can then guide me through it. It's like a trial and error until we get to a common plane of existence. And we know the palette of instruments, perhaps, and we know the vocabulary that we use. That's when things start flowing.

Kate Hutchinson: What's an example of a daring element?

Marta Salogni: I'll give you an example of a lucky, daring element that happened when we were recording 'John L' by Black Midi. I was recording the vocals with Geordie and a helicopter flew overhead. And I had the mic so compressed, I heard it. It sounded like an earthquake. I was like, what's that sound? What's that noise? Hang on a second. This is insane, I love it. And we kept it in. 'John L' is very fast. And silence, and then in one of the silences, there it is – that's the helicopter sound. Or, I was recording with Bon Iver, and I had my cassette dictaphone. And at the end of a song that you can hear on the album, it was the sound of the dictaphone at the end, it sounds sort of like the cassette tape turning, and I go and switch it off, but by going to switch it off, I stumble on it. And so there is a sound of me stepping on the dictaphone and just screaming, 'Ugh!'

Kate Hutchinson: Which is not what you want during a recording.

Marta Salogni: No, but it was at the end, everybody had left the studio, but they kept it in. And you know, those little moments of life. Life is daring, life is imperfections and I like that a lot, because it makes the art of music feel human again. I don't like when I'm made to believe that something is perfect and all the imperfections have been painted out of the picture. I just find I'm cheated on. So the last thing I want is to cheat on artists or listeners that give me that trust. So yeah, I find perhaps it's daring to be human, it's daring to be honest and raw. Sometimes that means let's just show this vulnerable part of our recording process that is not perfect

Kate Hutchinson: What kind of vulnerability is required when it comes to mixing your debut record?

Marta Salogni: So, I mean, debut records are quite a courageous thing to do, I think, and to let go of once they're finished. Because they can seemingly define you as an artist, or as a band, and there is that big responsibility of feeling like you've encapsulated the essence of what you want to be and what you want to present to the world. And also they mean that your project is no longer yours, once the music is out. And I find that quite beautiful, because the listeners can just make of it what they want. It's definitely a vulnerable place to be.

Kate Hutchinson: You've worked on some great debut albums, but specifically the English Teacher record, which in 2024 won the Mercury Music Prize, which was fantastic. What were you thinking about, or what was the world that you were trying to create with them sonically on the album?

Marta Salogni: So we talked a lot about the conceptual elements behind the album and the hidden and the more overt elements of that, that transpire in the lyrics. So I tried to immerse myself in what is the landscape, and what the world that inspired those lyrics was. And it was such a universe. It was a big, big universe filled with books, inspirations of paintings, films, abstract images, and also we had a giant piece of paper where we had all the names of the songs and then we would draw on it. We would write ideas, or maybe this is gonna be nice to be

recorded with a Mellotron or a vibraphone, or this needs a guitar. So we tried a lot of stuff, and then maybe that doesn't work out, but you will never know whether it did or not, unless you tried it. So that was also very important to me in the studio is to never have the arrogance to think that you know the answer. So if I get asked, 'Could we try this?' Even if I think, 'Oh, I don't know whether that's a good idea,' I would say 'Yes, let's try it.' Because I don't know the future, I can't predict how it's going to be. So I would be such an asshole if I would say no. And I don't want to be an asshole in the studio.

Kate Hutchinson: Can we talk about landscapes in your work? Because that's a word that seems to crop up quite a lot. Can we go back to where you grew up, with these gorgeous landscapes in rural Italy? How much of an influence was that on your world of sound?

Marta Salogni: A lot, I think. I was born on a lake. You see the water and an island in the lake and the mountains that rise up. So that always made me feel so at home. The outline of the mountains, I know it by heart. I know exactly where the dips are, where the peaks are. It always felt to me like I was reminded of a presence that is bigger than myself, and I found that comforting because I find that nature can be so powerful. So I always loved being by the lake on my own, listening to the sound of the little waves coming in to the pier, or against the rocks. It's a very different sound that a lake has, than any other body of water. So yeah, the landscape just felt like it mirrored my internal landscape, too. At night, all the lights on the mountains would switch off. And so you would feel like you are the only person awake at that moment. I always liked spending nighttime awake because of that, because I find that it's time to breathe and the sounds are more accentuated. You can hear them better. So I bring that with me. I think I was aware of it when I was growing up, and even more so when I moved away. Now I yearn for it.

Kate Hutchinson: So you were influenced or aware of the sort of acoustics of this gorgeous landscape. And then you moved to Brescia and you were part of what sounds like this incredible community centre where you discovered engineering or where you discovered the mixing desk. Can you remember the first time that you saw a mixing desk?

Marta Salogni: Yeah, so I went to high school in Brescia and there I immersed myself in the new landscape of the city that, coming from a small town, was a big change. I started taking part in student collectives and demonstrations, occupations and organising the student movements with other friends. And we formed this collective and we would meet at Magazzino 47, which is the social center where I saw my first mixing desk. So after one of the meetings that we would always hold on Wednesday after school, talking about, for example, school reforms and how would they impact us and how could we protest. And one afternoon I went around the back and I saw the venue, Magazzino 47, had, and it was a stage and a DIY PA, and this massive mixing desk.

Kate Hutchinson: Was that love at first sight?

Marta Salogni: It was, yeah. I looked at it and I didn't understand at all what it was. But to me it just looked like an instrument, like a musical instrument. I asked, 'Can I speak to whoever runs this?' This is so fascinating to me. I don't know why I have this pull towards it. And my friend Omar introduced me to Carlo Dall'Asta, who became my mentor. And Carlo was a sound engineer of the place at the time, in-house, and a lovely man. The realisation that through this piece of equipment I could sculpt the sound that came from a source on stage, that I could then modify and enhance the experience of a listener and of the performer by changing the parameters, I felt so empowered. I felt, wow, the biggest secret of the universe was just

revealed to me. And I thought, I want to be that person who can enhance this experience and create it. That's an instrument in itself. And I thought, I can perform with this. Nobody's going to be looking at me. They are gonna be looking at the stage. But I am going to be as invested as the person on the stage.

Kate Hutchinson: It sounds like that eureka moment was so powerful and brilliant the way you describe it. How much of those teenage years with activism, the sense of community, how much of that is still relevant now? Because it feels like those things you've kind of continued.

Marta Salogni: They're very important to me. So I felt very lucky to have had my start in such a radical place, because that meant that I had always felt like music was a vehicle to be able to change things. And I saw it with my eyes and I experienced that music has that power. It was involvement in the reality of things, the engagement with the political. And with political I mean our everyday choices. I always felt like true democracy comes from grassroots. True democracy is a direct form of people organising. I've always believed in that.

Kate Hutchinson: And do you still have that grassroots mentality now when it comes to who you choose to work with, for example?

Marta Salogni: Oh, definitely, yes. I mean, everything that we do is political. So people who I decide to work with, that's also a political choice.

Kate Hutchinson: Do you also give opportunities to artists who are starting out, who maybe come from that same grassroots level? You're not just working with big stars like Björk, for example.

Marta Salogni: Totally, I mean, the artists that are starting out today, they'll be the big artists of the future and I think it's super important to nurture that, because otherwise we just get detached and then we don't understand society as a whole, but we just understand it as a very small section. And I think that my job is not just to amplify some voices rather than others, but it's also a responsibility towards the landscape of art itself. So I always want to see the best version of society be represented in music. And also the most daring, because we need artists and bands that shake the status quo. We need artists and bands that inspire, and that fight what's wrong in everyday life, and artists and bands that represent minorities and take cover from what is the norm.

Kate Hutchinson: So you came from Italy to London, and you were studying here, freelancing around lots of different studios. What was your big break?

Marta Salogni: My first sessions on my own felt like a big moment. I was at Strongroom engineering and I was asking the studio manager back then if I could have downtime, if the studios weren't used during the weekends. Because that way I could bring in bands that I perhaps saw in small clubs earlier that week and say to them, look, I have not many credits under my belt, but I have access to the studios and you can come and record and I'll do it all. And there I would put into practice everything that I would have learned about. And that really made me feel and realise, wow, this is where I actually know what my strengths and where my weaknesses are. And I can work on them. Because there is nothing like putting yourself into the deep end and realising, this is how it feels, there is no safety net.

Kate Hutchinson: I've got this wonderful image of you, Marta, having moved to London, freelancing around different studios or working your way up as a producer, as an engineer, and busting into the Music Producers Guild Awards in a charity shop suit, I think, as the story goes.

Marta Salogni: Good suit, that was.

Kate Hutchinson: I mean since then you've won lots of awards, you've won lots of MPG awards for best producer, for best recording engineer, etc, etc. Do awards matter to you?

Marta Salogni: When I snuck into the first MPG, I wanted to be there because I wanted to feel inspired and see my heroes getting awarded because of their craft. And I was looking at them thinking like, I'm so happy you're receiving this award. And I feel like I'm part of it by being here. And when I went on that stage myself to receive an award, I felt humbled and proud. I felt also a responsibility towards others like me that, years prior, just like me were at the back of the room and looking up. So I always want to make sure that the kid at the back knew that I see you from the stage, and you're going to be in my place next year, two years, three years, doesn't matter when. But you'll be here, if you keep showing up and just keep being true to yourself. I think that we really need strong people around us who make us feel empowered to be who we are and to bring forward a really good and solid version of what the music industry can be.

Kate Hutchinson: To work with Björk, I mean, she is one of those artists who's really top of so many people's lists. She ended up inviting you to Iceland.

Marta Salogni: Yeah, we did.

Kate Hutchinson: How was that?

Marta Salogni: It was beautiful. I stayed there for I think about a month, in August. It was really special to be there because to mix in the same place where she was based and some of the songs were made and composed and, looking out at the mountains – that was the view from the studio that I had – the harbour and the mountains and to just be in the same geographical spot, I think really helped me to immerse myself into the world of *Utopia*.

Kate Hutchinson: There's this amazing quote that she said to you, that she wanted it to sound like whispering among the fireworks, which is so vivid and brilliant.

Marta Salogni: Yeah. She came close to my ear and she whispered as I was playing the mix. And I thought, OK, what's the quality of her voice? How different is it from when she just talks further away? So I thought, OK, I can hear her sibilance, like the S's of her voice, they're more pronounced. And the softness of the EQ curve is more pronounced as well. There is a warmth that is definitely brought out by the closeness and the proximity of my eardrum. And there is also the chaos that goes on in the background, all those fireworks. And that's the end of 'Arise My Senses', the song on *Utopia*, and so I tried to replicate that with the vocals that she had recorded. So I went in and shaved off some frequency, I boosted some. I made the vocal feel very closed and dry, but also not like it was in a room, because when you look at fireworks, they are outside, and I try the fireworks to feel so present, but yet not to overshadow the vocal. So they're all slotted in with each other by carving frequencies out of the fireworks, boosting the vocals and vice versa for them to coexist within a sonic world, which is technical. And it's based on frequencies and volumes and parameters that are set. But within there, there are so much that you can do to create a result that you're dreaming about.

Kate Hutchinson: So was there anything about that experience that stayed with you or changed how you viewed your role, your job, how you approach sound after that?

Marta Salogni: Well I felt really empowered by the trust that she put in me to deliver her vision and I thought that the power that you can give to somebody else when trusting them with your vision can be so important for the vision to be then executed. I felt like I had so much to learn from her, and I felt the exchange within a creative process is so precious. I could try things that were new to me and I felt so honoured to be trusted. It was very special to me to find myself in the quotidianity of life in Reykjavik with her, and the warmth of it and the humanity of it.

Kate Hutchinson: How did you work with Heba Kadry and Mandy Parnell on that record? What were your different sort of roles?

Marta Salogni: That was a dream team, because Heba and Mandy are two people who I look up to. So Heba mixed some of the tracks, already when I came into the equation. I then mixed them again and then some of the tracks were actually married together. So for some of the tracks, Björk had this vision of perhaps the vocal being one way and the instrumental being another way. So me and Heba worked with each other to merge and create that vision that Björk said. I will send her vocals, she will send me the instrumental, I will make adjustments, she will make adjustments and then up to the point of which there will be the final version, then Mandy will take over and Mandy will get the tracks and master them. So it's a big collaborative project that I loved, yes. I mean, they're amazing. They're amazing people, amazing professionals, incredible women. I love them both dearly.

Kate Hutchinson: Artists come to you because you do have a specific thing that you're doing with tapes. We're sat in your studio and we've got all these amazing tape machines behind you, all these reel to reels. How did that come to be one of your definitive interests?

Marta Salogni: When I started, tape wasn't a necessity, it was a choice. So I started engineering on analogue desks. To me, the essence of engineering and my interest within it, that started from wanting to historically understand how people would record. And I got fascinated specifically with tape. The concept that magnetism and sound can work together. To me, it was poetry. I was fascinated by the science of it and by the fact that the tactile elements of a tape machine, the reel spinning and how the tonal quality of tape manipulation can bring into a recording, became dear to me very quickly. I was an assistant when I saved up to buy my first tape machine. Simply, I asked myself: What piece of equipment should I get? I don't have money to buy a microphone, a compressor, a delay unit, an EQ. So a tape machine can do pretty much all of those things, if you use it in different ways. So a tape machine can saturate sound, a tape machine can add delay to a sound. A tape machine can pitch shift if you have a varied speed. And so I thought, that's amazing, I can do all of this with this, with this. I would start thinking, well, I want to play this tape machine. This is my instrument. I know very many artists who are amazing pianists, amazing guitarists, amazing drummers. But I want this to be my instrument. I understood that if you feed back a tape machine onto itself, then it starts creating sounds and you can then decide the timbre of these sounds by how much you feed it back onto itself and the speed of it. As you feed it back, it will change the sound of the feedback that you will get. There are so many ways that you can use a tape machine, other than record. And I find that they just keep giving me the relationship that I love.

Kate Hutchinson: Do you enjoy that contrast or the meeting point where the analogue of the tape machines meets digital?

Marta Salogni: I think now, with the fact that digital is so present in our life, if we use it wisely, it really expands our outreach in terms of creativity, and it can do that. Some people use computers as just big calculators that sort of like just do the job that they need to do. They just record, but I think there are creative ways to use them and to marry the two, that serves a purpose of creativity.

Kate Hutchinson: So do you often find that when artists come to you, whether that's in a mixing capacity or a producing capacity, and they've got a clear idea of what they're going to do, and then halfway through the process, or maybe even at the beginning, it completely changes and everything is different.

Marta Salogni: Yeah, I think there is this sort of malleability within the process that I find is essential, because otherwise it will feel like following a script, and it's not that interesting or exciting. So being open to that and being led by both the chances and the intention of the process is what then gets you to a very specific, yet particular, yet unique place, which you didn't plan out. And that's a life experience in itself. I've made a record with Will Westerman and we went to Hydra, the island. It was so hot in July that we couldn't record during the day because there was no air conditioning in this room which I wanted to record in because it was so beautiful. It had the view of the harbour and we couldn't open the windows because the crickets were so loud. So, we thought, OK, let's wait and see when the crickets are going to stop singing, and then it gets to 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 o'clock. At 9:30, the last crickets stopped. And so we said, well, I guess we need to record at night. So for an entire month we flipped our internal clocks and started recording at night. And there the quality of the feeling that you get at night when the window is open, you need to be a bit more hush. And naturally, I think at night we are feeling different. So it's that feeling of dense air. And the microphones we had, the equipment we had, ended up being quite limited. So I recorded most of it with just a handful of mics, because the song started having this quality and this identity that I started recognising. And I liked keeping the microphones in the room where they were, even if they weren't facing the instrument that I was recording, because the room itself was so special. It was marble floor, wood ceiling – that meant that this intricate woodwork was reflecting the sound in a very specific way. It was so naturally beautiful. So I would, for example, set up the piano microphones and the piano will be in one corner, and the drums will be in another corner, and an amp will be in another corner. But when I was recording vocals, I kept all the other room mics on because I wanted the sound of the room. I didn't want another reverb. To be in a completely new space, it forces me to think on my feet. And I like that because otherwise we just get comfortable, and I hate getting comfortable because it makes me feel like I'm not awake.

Kate Hutchinson: You enjoy that, that sense of danger perhaps, that tiny frisson. I mean, that sounds like such a special recording experience, but you mentioned the limitations that you had, that you're working within this certain number of microphones. Do you enjoy working within limitations like that?

Marta Salogni: Yes, I think so. Sometimes I quite like knowing that I don't have infinite choices because otherwise one gets lost within the sea of possibilities. And I'm not somebody who thinks that the tools define creativity. Actually quite the opposite. I think one person can make a perfectly great recording using normal equipment. It's not that if one person, or a band, goes to an incredible studio then the record they're going to make is going to be incredible if the content

of their songs is mediocre, right? I think that my tools to start off with are the quality of the song, the songwriting, the choice of the instruments. And then when we have all of that sorted out, then we can start reading all of the technical side of it.

Kate Hutchinson: Looking at your credits, you've got on there mixing, mastering, production, writing. You've also made music under your own name as an artist and you perform as an artist. Would you prefer to do projects where you can just be on top of everything?

Marta Salogni: I like doing everything. I like to know that if I was left on a desert island, I would be able to make the last record of my life. I would be able to plug stuff in, I would be able to engineer it. I'd be able to produce it, to mix it. Just be independent. Being independent is to me equal to freedom. Then you can be what you want. And I think that's a very important skill to have and one that I always urge other people to do, because you can realise your own artistic vision and it feels good, it feels empowering. But you know also, freedom means to know when you can delegate. Because it doesn't mean that you don't know how to do something, but you recognise and you realise that your ideas are so clear that you can trust somebody else to do them. And that's what artists do to me.

Kate Hutchinson: There are so many ways to make music now. There are so many ways of manipulating sound. What does being a radical in the studio mean to you? What does it mean to be truly radical?

Marta Salogni: I think today, especially being radical in the studio, means stay open. Stay open to being vulnerable and staying open to being empathetic and to leave the ego outside of the door. To just be completely humble to the idea that you don't know what is going to happen and be happy that all possibilities can happen, and be strong within that.

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio. This episode starred Marta Salogni. Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. Tune in for our next episode with Catherine Marks. "What is the thing that hits you in the chest or makes you jump up and down and wanna dance, or makes me cry, or any sort of emotion that elevates it and pushes it over to being something so unique." Head to dcsaudio.com/studioradicals and you can listen to playlists featuring all of the music we've talked about in the series and hear more episodes too. Subscribe now and don't miss an episode.