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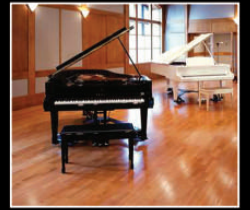
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LIVE SOUND: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Clear as a Belle

UK Productions' *Beauty and The Beast* musical has been on the road for three years, with a Funktion-One system as the main PA. Head of sound Glen Beckley explains to **Andrew Low** how the sound design for the show is far from kids play...

While punters at a live concert or festival may favour volume over intelligibility, theatre goers are a different animal altogether. Mixing in sterile, unforgiving venues with a captive, seated audience, Glen Beckley, head of sound for UK Productions' travelling version of *Beauty and the Beast* the musical, has a small margin for error.

There are a wide range of venues on the itinerary for the show, from Dublin's 900-seat Olympia Theatre to the 3,000-capacity Alhambra Theatre in Bradford, UK. Consequently, Beckley needed a sound system that would adapt to each new environment with enough head room to be able to actually mix the show, rather than merely providing sound reinforcement.

Provided by London's Orbital Sound, the PA for *Beauty and The Beast* consists of mostly Dorking, UK-based Funktion-One point source loudspeakers, including ten Resolution 1 two-way loudspeaker enclosures and three AX88s two-way passive loudspeakers for mid/high coverage, along with its 18-inch F118 MK2 bass enclosures. Additional boxes from EAW's JF80 series are used as front fills while Apogee's SSM boxes are employed as delays around the theatre and underneath the balcony, with d&b audiotechnik's C-Series for fold

back delays around that stage.

Beckley handpicked each piece of the system for the tour. He explains: "I'm not really a career designer; I'm more of an engineer, but I am quite particular on the types of systems I will work on, which either means you have to not do very much work or design it on your own."

He approached the show with a high fidelity audio mandate in mind and chose equipment that gives him an enhanced amount of control over the system. Beckley comments: "The philosophy behind this particular system, as a whole, was to focus on the fidelity, principally because I want to produce theatre sound that is amplified rather than reinforced. It is a cartoon brought to life for kids so it has to be larger than life."

"There is a propensity in theatre that if you hear something that is likely to offend the human ear than you turn it down until it's gone, which means that you are never doing more than just reinforcing the sound. This leaves you with audio that you can't really mix, because you are never working at a level that you have a reasonable amount of control; the level of the PA is never significantly more than the level of the show

would have been before you put the PA there in the first place.

"We wanted to go a bit further than that so that we could mix it more like a film soundtrack. We felt that we needed to really focus on fidelity of the system, because I didn't want to go around offending people with loud or distorted audio."

The performance of the Funktion-One speakers has been essential for providing the control that Beckley needs to mix the show. "One of the really nice things about the Funktion-One system is that it projects really nicely, which is another way of saying it throws really well, but it is really more than that," states Beckley.

"It makes you feel like you are involved even if you are sitting far away from it, which to me is more than saying that it throws really well, because you can have a box that throws really well, but you can still tell that you are 100 feet away from it. The nice thing about the Funktion-One system is that, because it is horn loaded, it tends to involve you from a great distance."

Beckley also feels that the engineering of the Funktion-One speakers enables him to deliver the loudest, cleanest show possible. He says: "It has the ability to deliver quite deceptively loud moments without people really noticing, because it doesn't snap or bite. Even the cone drivers are engineered to a point where there is no distortion or propriety processing that adds another level of electronic distortion into the mix. It's a very pure sounding system and we tried to focus on maintaining the purity in the rest of the signal chain."

Although Beckley is not anti-digital, he chose a mostly analog system to stay in line with his vision for the show. FOH for the show is handled by a Midas 3000 console with a stretch that provides a total of 64 inputs and an additional Yamaha O1V, which mixes 16 channels down to four for a string section on a

"The Funktion-One system has the ability to deliver quite deceptively loud moments without people really noticing, because it doesn't snap or bite."

backing track, totalling in 90 inputs. A minimal amount of outboard gear is used on the tour; there are XTA SiDDs inserted across groups, a few Lexicon PCMs, and an Akai sampler that handles over 150 samples used during the performance.

"We tried to reduce the amount of links in the chain so that there is a minimum amount of colour being introduced at any point," Beckley continues. "In that way I have a system that is phenomenally responsive and produces a very dynamic sounding mix."

"It can go from really quiet to quite loud in an instant,

LIVE SOUND: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST



Glen Beckley chose an analog Midas desk to mix the show

which allows me to make people jump and play about with it to a much greater degree.

"In the three years I have only had three complaints. Normally, if you try to do stuff at that level in the theatre world you won't get away with it without upsetting a certain amount of people, but it seems that we are getting away with it to a much greater degree, and I think that is down to the fact that we have taken this approach."

Keeping in line with the tour's high standards, the show's supporting band is miced with Neumann KMR 82is, U 87s and Hebdon Sound microphones, simply because Beckley feels they are the best mics you can get. Nick Lowenstein looks after the 26 DPA 4060 and 4061 mics worn by the 26 singers in the performance, which are transmitted by Trantec's SD7000 wireless system.

With his system of choice assembled, another factor Beckley wrestles with at each venue is its trussing accommodations. As such, Beckley spent many hours with Funktion-One, working on different shaped pieces of metal to array and arrange the boxes and subs in various different ways. "It's a very versatile tool kit. We have a blueprint to work with, but you never quite know how it's going to work from venue to venue. You're never in a situation where you pick a point in the roof and say that is where it is going to hang, that never happens, ever," laughs Beckley.

"We have a FOH truss that hangs over the orchestra pit; if we have a place to hang that it makes our job easier. Most venues can provide the facility to hang it, but for us anything beyond a couple of points to hang a truss off is considered a luxury. For example next week we are going to The Grand Theatre in Leeds and we are not going to have the FOH truss, so we will have to figure out a way to work around that, but we have the means to solve these problems."

Beauty and the Beast is making stops around the UK until December 2008. Parents, children and audiophiles alike are sure to enjoy Beckley's custom theatre sound design. One thing is certain; you won't need a pair of earplugs to enjoy the show.

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