

Fantastic voyage

Pro Audio Asia

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Entering sound and lighting distribution by chance, Vietnam's FSL now finds itself perfectly placed to exploit the country's rise in importance and appeal to visitors

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audio and lighting shows in Southeast Asia and China in the early 1990s, a large number of Western manufacturers sought distribution partners in dealers in the Asia-Pacific region. Trading hubs gradually emerged in Hong Kong and Singapore, and regional offices gradually penetrated the more remote hinterlands. As these peripheral markets have matured over the past decade, Hong Kong and Singapore have declined in influence, with neighbouring countries such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan and Thailand gaining importance. Indo China – Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – has, however, bucked this trend, remaining something of a mysterious backwater to most manufacturers. But an emerging tourism industry coupled with new legislation is now attracting a steady trickle of inquisitive manufacturers to seek partners in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Vietnam-based Fantasies Show Light (FSL) exemplifies the extraordinary growth in the region – almost an entertainment technological revolution that is bringing unprecedented live concerts and events to the country of 80 million inhabitants along an extensive 2,000km-plus coastline. When Nguyen The Viet and Nguyen Bao Lan opened a small nightclub in Hanoi called Fantasies, they could not have realised that they would become one of the largest and most prestigious audio and lighting distributors in the country a decade later. 'We required some lighting for the club and we had some moving heads in mind,' recalls Mr Nguyen The Viet. 'They weren't available in Vietnam at the time, so I flew to Singapore and bought some from Martin Professional directly.'

It was an astute move. Once installed in the nightclub, the moving heads turned the heads of patrons, some of whom wanted to rent or buy them for their own personal use. A trickle of moving heads made their way from Singapore to Hanoi until Martin Professional decided that they had found their dedicated Vietnamese distributor. 'We were very honoured, and agreed to their suggestion,' says Mr Nguyen The Viet.

Having crossed the line from supplier to distributor, the company had to supply, service and educate the vast market it covered – it was a steep learning curve: 'Essentially,



Rock Storm 2008



Rock Storm soundcheck

we had to keep a stock of spares and parts, update ourselves with new product launches and familiarise ourselves with the entire Martin Professional product catalogue,' he continues. 'We had to get up to speed very quickly.'

In due course, the company was approached to supply sound systems and again realised that it would need to learn the technical considerations behind the equipment that it wanted to provide to its customers: 'Following the Pala exhibition in Singapore, we bought a number of Nexo PS15 speakers. Some months later, some of these speakers needed re-coning through misuse,' Mr Nguyen The Viet says. 'The kits in Hanoi were hard to come by and very expensive, so we had to buy in a stock for such eventualities.'

Making inroads into Vietnam necessarily involves having government connections. Large-scale concerts and performances

require special permission, and licences are rarely granted – which has deterred many large international touring acts from touching down in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Similarly, bars and clubs are required to close their doors at 10pm and midnight respectively. Now, a relaxation of these laws should see licences being granted more readily, and entertainment nightspots keeping their doors open later into the night. The combination spells good news for FSL, although the company's contacts have previously secured it licences for concerts throughout Vietnam, including the Rock Storm festival and a series of corporate and private events.

In 2005, Mr Nguyen The Viet again travelled to Singapore for the Pala show, where he was impressed by the Funktion-One loudspeaker system on display. He took the plunge and ordered a concert system consisting of Resolution



Rigging the stage for Rock Storm



Masa-san and Funktion-One founder Tony Andrews

2 and 5 cabinets, together with a number of subwoofers. Before the consignment had arrived in Vietnam, he flew to London for the Plasa show, where he inadvertently made the acquaintance of Funktion-One Japan and noted Try Audio owner Azuma Masaaki. 'The PA system was being shipped to Vietnam at the time and I expressed my concerns at setting this up properly to Mr Masaaki,' says Mr Nguyen The Viet. 'He said that he would come to Hanoi and configure and set-up the system for us. I was a little suspicious as he didn't want payment for his services or even any expenses, but when he did arrive, I was immediately won over by his passion and knowledge.'

'Mr Masaaki rang many changes, consigning all damaged equipment to waste collection. He also recommended that we use a high-quality system such as a Midas console, MC2 amplifiers and XTA digital processors in order to

bring out the best sound of this loudspeaker system. Once we had built up a stock of equipment, he guided us through the set up for a concert, such as gating and equalising at front of house and monitors.'

The man more commonly known as Masa-san in his native Osaka made the company's transformation from audio enthusiast to systems distributors and concert sound provider possible. Suddenly sponsors and companies wanted to use their services for events and shows in Hanoi and further afield. Opera, ballet, classical theatre and popular concerts, together with corporate events and TV broadcasting, constitute the bulk of FSL's customer base. Most recently, FSL supplied the stage monitors and press conference sound system at the 2008 Miss Universe in Nha Trang. Indeed, approximately one third of the company's customer base today

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is located outside Vietnam, partly created by the booming Vietnamese economy and tourism.

Other brands have followed Funktion-One, Martin Professional, MC2 and XTA Electronics into the FSL stable, including Avolites and Outline Audio. 'As we required a good line array solution for many events, Masa-san recommended the Italian brand Outline to us,' says Mr Nguyen The Viet. 'We now have an inventory of Outline Butterfly speakers in stock for use at festivals, which are very well designed and engineered and so far have proved to be versatile and great sounding. I met the owners in Italy last year following Masa's recommendation, and was very impressed with their set-up and attitude towards helping us conduct business.'

Mr Nguyen The Viet is aware that Vietnam is still far behind the rest of the region when it comes to putting on a show: 'There are no schools or universities here offering courses in sound engineering, and so the technicians working in production companies are learning from one another as to what to do. Unfortunately, they are learning each other's mistakes – you can see this at an event when they are equalising the mix up until the performance starts. You rarely see this outside Vietnam. It's the same when trying to kill feedback. Most engineers are making mistakes and creating feedback, but don't know how to cure the problem. Furthermore, system compatibility is somewhat rare and rarely the right speakers, amplifiers, cables and consoles matched up correctly. Amplifiers commonly blow and that spells the end of the show.'

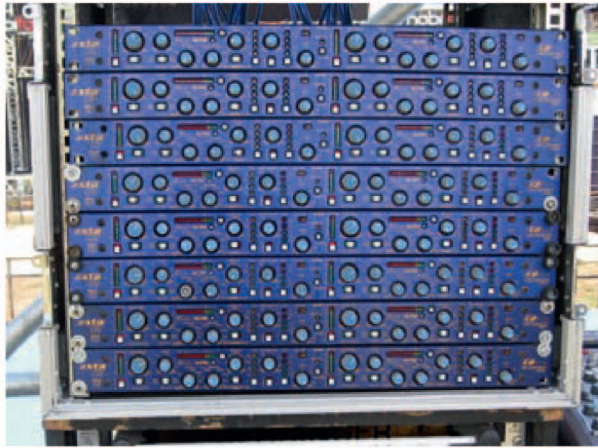
But FSL is working to improve the situation and Azuma Masaaki continues to visit Hanoi on a regular basis to lend an ear and a hand, inspiring all those around him with his expertise and infectious enthusiasm. With offices and warehouses now established in Ho Chi Minh City and Hue, FSL counts 60 full-time employees, sometimes swelling to more than 100 when freelancers are drafted in to help with event congestion. Penetration of the MI retail market also seems inevitable.

Vietnam's lure to tourists and outsiders is becoming greater and the demand for shopping malls, hotels, nightclubs, bars, restaurants and theatres will grow in response. FSL's introduction to sound and lighting distribution may have been by chance rather than design, but its timely arrival will ensure that its expertise and skills are increasingly called upon. This should, in turn, help to raise audio standards in Indo China.

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Racked XTA C2 dynamics/EQ processors at front-of-house



The characteristic design of the F1 cabinets