

Clear Trends At PLASA '04

Technology and distribution strategies emerging

By Phil Ward

The exhibition mounted in London every September at the United Kingdom's PLASA (Professional Lighting & Sound Association) show continues to attract a large number of international visitors. Overall attendance appears to have levelled off, which may have something to do with the timing of 9/11 three years ago, but the show still provides a good measure of quality over quantity.

Major trends are apparent. With respect to audio this year, there were four telling pointers – three of them technological, the other illustrating the emerging business models of multi-branded suppliers.

For example, the remarkable similarity between the profiles of beyerdynamic UK and Sennheiser UK. Not simply that they're both United Kingdom subsidiaries of German microphone manufacturers, but that they both presented a cohesive portfolio of complementary brands, just as Harman does.

Brands with beyerdy-

namic: Altec Lansing, ASL, Biamp, Bittner, ClearOne, Cue, GK, K+H, PowerSoft, Renkus-Heinz and XTA.

Brands with Sennheiser: Rane, D.A.S. Audio, Lab.Gruppen, Adamson, NetCIRA, Apart, Anchor and Rycote.

beyerdynamic UK's logo mantra is "system solutions providers," with every brand represented on staff business cards like the flags of all nations. Hand-in-glove with this is a growing emphasis on systems support, training and general package integration, a habit picked up by every type of U.K. business at the show: Marquee Audio, a reseller; SSE Hire, a rental company; and Fuzion and Shuttlesound, distributors – all emphasising multiple-brand solutions and the company's ability to get them working, whatever the budget level.

"We've been transitioning into systems and solutions," confirms Jon Stanley, beyerdynamic UK's director of technical sales. "Instead of just taking a microphone and box-shifting it, it's about designing a package of products that will fit around it and its application. Installation and AV applications are the main focus, so we're showing a lot of new brands that we've brought on board to complement this."

Sennheiser UK can say the same thing, but in contrast, there was a particular focus on the new Sennheiser Evolution 900 Series microphones. "We invited top front-of-house and monitor engineers to a day in London when we set up a PA and discussed their ideal requirements from a range of live performance mics," recounts



Martin Audio Managing Director David Bissett-Powell on hand at PLASA to debut the new AQ Series.



Show Scene

Sennheiser UK's John Stevens. "That led to the 935 lead vocal mic, and subsequently to a whole range of instrument mics. The new 600 and 800 Series take much of that unique industry input and make those developments available to a wider market."

HIGHLY REVAMPED

Meanwhile, Audio-Technica added to its flagship performance range Artist Elite 5000 and 4000 wireless systems, but also introduced highly revamped Pro Series microphones covering a wider clutch of production applications.

Notable new British loudspeaker ranges included Martin Audio's AQ Series of versatile installation models, and a debut for Turbosound's Aspect Series – scoring a PLASA Award for Innovation in the process.

Martin Audio Senior Loudspeaker Design Engineer Nick Pocock explains that the AQ Series supersedes

the company's EM Series in an expanding marketplace. "We've taken the opportunity to renew the drive units in the range," he says, "and make the horns rotatable so the speakers can be in vertical and horizontal formats. There's also a new configuration to handle both dimensions at the same time: a 6.5-inch horn-loaded model with a 1-inch tweeter. The EM26 was particularly admired for its ability to handle all sorts of music very smoothly, and with this range going to a huge variety of installations we've retained and improved those characteristics."

The diminutive AQ5 exploits a plastic structural foam in order to adopt an unusual shape: both drivers produce high frequencies and are angled at 50 degrees for considerable dispersion. In horizontal format, they would suit almost any balcony or concourse application.

The future of package integration is,

of course, networking – the first of our three technology pointers – and it was Marquee Audio that underlined this with its demonstration of EtherSound. The booths of Digigram, AuvitrAn, InnovaSon, Nexo distributor Fuzion, NetCira distributor Sennheiser UK, Stardraw and Yamaha Commercial Audio were all linked by the protocol, and as Marquee's Andy Huffer points out, it was the first time anything of this type had been attempted at PLASA.

"We've got the Yamaha PM5D (digital console) at our booth," he outlines, "with 16 channels of (Digidesign) Pro Tools coming into it. There are AuvitrAn cards in the back to EtherSound-enable it, and a single CAT5 cable coming out. This will carry up to 64 channels, so we're only scratching the surface with 16, but it goes into an off-the-shelf switcher with multiple feeds coming off that to all of the booths on the network. Each of them can receive those 64 channels.

"I designate what goes onto the bus using the PM5D, which in this instance is the master control device, and I can monitor all their devices too. It's almost a case of just replacing the multicore with this point-to-point connection, and it's so affordable. In this increasingly digital age you can't just strap two digital devices together and hope that they work. The important knowledge is in how to control everything from one central point."

Stardraw is the developer of PC-based design and documentation packages, and launched its own EtherSound-compatible software Stardraw Control. "Stardraw's new global GUI allows you to take control of your network very simply," says former Peak Audio figure and Digigram's new Business Development Manager, Jimmy Kawalek, talking about Stardraw Control, "and the first network they've addressed is EtherSound. It's a significant statement and very exciting."

Digigram's own big announcement is that it can now provide the means for bi-directional audio down the same EtherSound cable, along with higher sample rate conversions of 88.2 kHz, 96 kHz and 192 kHz. As with all EtherSound directions, licensees are invited to assimilate these upgrades



EtherSound is proliferating, with numerous components in several booths all linked in a live demonstration of the protocol. Meanwhile Stardraw also unveiled a new GUI to facilitate easier network control.

Show Scene

on their own terms, rather than as part of a detailed sales package driven by Digigram itself.

WIDER DIGITAL SWATH

The second sign of the technological times was also digital. DiGiCo's D1 Live jostled with InnovaSon's Sy48 in the queue to enter wider installation markets with a digital console, both based on established higher-end platforms. At the same time, studio-focused Digidesign entered the fray with the much-heralded Venue, presented along with the revelation that long-lost Apogee Sound boss Ken DeLoria was back in the business as the console's international mentor.

The InnovaSon Sy48 is an update of the company's Sy40, offering new DSP, new software, more busses and more I/O (input/output). "It's more of a brother to the Sy80," explains InnovaSon's Nick Cook, "and the key difference is capacity. We've also introduced the option of pulling the DSP cards out of the chassis and putting them in a rack so that OB customers, for example, can get to them easily."

DiGiCo's James Gordon points out the ways that the D1 Live is junior to the D5. "It doesn't have the optics; it's a MADI co-ax connection that you can run up to 125 meters (more than 400 feet). The primary reason for that is that we're getting demand from smaller installations both in Europe and the United States. They want to use their installed line systems, so running the stage racks remotely isn't necessary. Another demand is from rental companies who want a digital console for smaller, up-and-coming acts. They like the recall of effects and outboard processing, but the D5 is too big an investment.

"The idea is that they can train their younger operators on the D1, and if the band gets more successful they can take the files and port them straight into a D5 for larger arena tours," he continues. "You can also load the same files back into a D1 for smaller gigs, and all you lose is 32 channels and 16 outboard processors. They're completely compatible."

Not to be left out, Midas staged an early offensive by having veteran touring engineer Robbie McGrath on hand to endorse the company's own digital entry, of which the equalization section is only visible (and audible). The point of this is that EQ is the sensitive sticking point with analog diehards like McGrath, and his "thumbs up" without a full console to evaluate is a positive vanguard.

Be that as it may, the contest is heating up, just as it is in

the comparable arena of the compact line array, where manufacturers are now challenging previous wisdom and attempting to impose the benefits of line array in smaller places. Adamson's SpekTrix is one such compact system, adding Convertible Cardioid Technology to the subwoofers in order to maintain low-frequency clout.

MORE ARRAY PLAYERS

U.K. manufacturer Logic System may not be a familiar name in the U.S., but Ethos is another such system designed to expand the line array concept. It's another package deal, inspired by the observation that line array is better understood and more widely adopted than ever before.

"You can spend a lot of time on set-up, going between different amplifier and EQ systems," says Logic System Managing Director Chris Scott. "Different places will change crossover points, phase and so on, and it can be a nightmare. It's one thing to give the customer the freedom to buy the amplifiers and controllers they like, but it means your systems will all sound very different. From the outset, Ethos has been intended to account for this."

It's a process that will continue. After PLASA, in fact, Germany's HK Audio has announced a compact version of the Cohedra line array launched last year. Again, there is no U.S. representation at the moment, but if Europe keeps this up, its compact line arrays will simply spill into America because of the cramped conditions here. ■

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The digital console tide keeps rolling, with (left to right) Bob Doyle on hand at PLASA to debut the Digital D1, InnovaSon launching the Sy48 and Digidesign entering the fray with the Venue.