

A Day (Plus One) In The Life...

Fun and games with corporate audio

By Steven Midkiff

My sound company, Audio Media in Seattle, is not all that large, but we do get a major share of the many industrial/corporate rallies, rollouts, parties in the region, and just about all of the society galas.

In the process, we manage to attract more than our share of weird gigs where the producers must sit around and say to themselves: "This is gonna be a bit of a strange show. Who can we get to do the audio? Wait, how about Midkiff? He'll do anything!"

Recently, I felt the gods of time and planning must be crashing into each other, laying waste to my schedule. In the midst of accepting new shows and

planning for the annual ones, a very large client who builds multi-seat flying platforms called to ask if I'd like to provide a sound system for a little party they were throwing for 6,000. At first I blushed. Then I accepted.

Next came a call, not totally unexpected, from a non-profit client for its semi-annual gala with about 600 in attendance

Trick is, both events were to happen on the same day.

As I said, we're not a big company. We have 20 main loudspeakers, 10 subwoofers, and a large supply of "speakers on a stick" – 40 at last count. We do what we can.

The first event, to be held in an air-

plane hanger, would use all 12 of my Community SLS960 mid-high boxes as well as eight Community XLT415 subwoofers and numerous small loudspeakers for fill here and there. Classic industrial gig: high-energy CD starts the show, "talking heads" on the podium microphone and/or lavalier mics, video, more talk, more video, feel-good music to wind it up.

The second event, hosted at the Conservation International Gala at Fisher Pavilion in the Seattle Center, would use the balance of my Community mains and subs (XP530s and TD2118s, respectively). Funny – almost the same program. (I see a pattern here...)

Next (as in, next!) came a call from old friends who throw an annual black-tie fund raiser. This year, it was going to be held one week after the double-duty hanger party/gala day. This non-profit client has the idea of topping last year's \$2.6 million raised in a single night, funds that go to fighting a disease that strikes mostly children.

His idea? Surround sound. Wow. This is coming from a decorator, a guy



A big gig in an airplane hanger, where Steve Midkiff and company provided big sound.



who normally paints sets, hangs huge planters from the ceiling and worries about how the draw curtain looks. Would he ask me to adorn my flying SLS960s with gold lame cloth suggestively draped over the grills?

As it turned out, he agreed to leave my loudspeakers alone if I would agree to provide a 5.1 surround format in the 14,000-square-foot ballroom with 20-foot ceilings and 600 guests at dinner rounds. Deal.

The program would be nothing too splashy – just a few special “beam me up” effects to accompany talent entrances, having the emcee’s (and occasionally an auctioneer’s) voice sound like it was coming from “all around” and moving. Oh, by the way, we need 45 music bites. Is that a problem?

Normally, my arsenal of large-format loudspeakers would be more than up to the two jobs and, yes, we could also handle the subsequent surround sound event. But as the space/time continuum of the schedule was being



The Audio Media crew, left to right, PJ Newman, Dave Clark and Craig Barrus with Tiffany Mitchell (above, taking after the boss). They do the heavy lifting, stacking and flying, whatever the gig calls for.



stretched, I felt I needed a little something extra.

My phone rang yet again, snapping me out of my reverie. On the line was a local rep friend. He has something new, brand new!

It’s a 4-input by 8-output digital speaker processor that he promises will double the sampling rate of my current box. And most importantly, he promis-

es its GUI and accompanying manual are understandable. (Even to those of us who are temporally challenged!)

This new “wonder box” has a name too: Community DXP4800. Cutting to the chase, two DXP4800s arrived just in time to be slipped into an unused processing rack and shipped off to the airplane hanger. No time to set it up at the shop.

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As the crew rigged and cabled the system, I set out to install my own parameters on the DXP4800. My personal learning curve has always been a little slow out of the gate with any new menu-driven unit, but it only took me a few maneuvers to understand how to work this piece (See sidebar).

The "industrial grade" hanger is some 260 feet wide, 55 feet to overhead steel, and deep enough to accommodate four or five of the company's premier flying platforms, end to end. You could measure the hang time in here with a calendar.

As a result, I thought this would not be the best place to judge the sound quality of new electronics. Unless, or course, the difference is so obvious you can't avoid it. And as the event rolled along, it did seem that the system was sounding better than the last time I was in this room. Hmmmm...

A good show, and 6,000 folks indeed did come out. Soft to thundering music up to show time, client video, talking heads, more video, thundering music play-off. When the president and chief executive took the stage, I had exceptional wireless lavalier sound – very big and open, clear, solid bottom, crisp highs, and a noticeable improvement in gain before feedback.

While the crew was taking down the hangar show, I rushed over to Seattle Center. My crew had set up this system the day before, with eight Community XP530s flown at the ceiling via some very creative rigging (thanks to the video guys, not) to cover the crowd of 600. Just a single podium mic for the talkers, including actor Harrison Ford and a Pulitzer Prize winner, as well as audio from video.

Around these parts, we consider the XP530 a "miracle speaker" – speeches, discos, galas, rock 'n' roll (with kick drum and bass in the mix, and no subwoofers!), acoustic music. Basically anything where the necessary throw is not more than about 60 feet, these things will do it all.

By the time the program ended at 10 pm, temporal shift was in full swing, and I wasn't quite sure anymore which time zone or event I was at.

A few days later, my head was

clear. Or at least, clearer. The next show was the 5.1 surround gig, to be held at the Seattle Sheraton Grand Ballroom. Nine SLS960s were flown

in three clusters for left, center and right main output, with eight XP530s flown along the back and sides of the audience for left and right surround.

DXP4800: Right Out Of The Box

The second paragraph on the first page of the manual for the Community DXP4800 digital loudspeaker processor is well placed: "Linking multiple channels is accomplished by pressing and holding the first channel key, then pushing the other desired channels."

So right off the bat, this turned a 30-minute process on my (then current, now former) processor into a 10-minute process. I only needed to set up the basics for band pass on one channel, and the other three followed.

High pass for the remaining four was the same process, and then I only needed to go back and set the inner cluster time delays, check routing, and I was done. The depths of the configuration menu are nicely "shallow" as well.

Having set up the DXP4800 manually from the front panel, I checked all parameters again (call me paranoid). My Dell laptop, loaded with the processor's XLink control software, was then linked via the RS232 port on the back of the unit.

The computer booted, I launched XLink, clicked "Connection," clicked "Online" and then clicked "Device 1." XLink found the DXP4800 immediately. Good-looking software, simple, clean interface. The large graphical view fills the entire screen.

The software has an option named "View Data" that shows all parameters of the DXP4800 on a big spreadsheet. Way cool. I could easily verify all settings before actually sending any audio through the box.

After transferring all input/output lines from the old box to the new. I ran signal through the system gingerly. With my crew, we checked out each section of the rig to verify correct function. All was good. Time to rev it up.

I was first impressed with the amount of headroom, judged by apparent meter comparisons. This thing has punch. I continued to push the processor and amplifiers harder, with the volume rising to astonishing levels. Stop. Go back, and cut the high-frequency amplifiers by 3 dB. Try it again.

My Crest 8200/5200 amplifiers are set to minimum gain (X20 dB or 26 dB). My former box would have been on knees, gasping for breath. The DXP4800 was saying, "Is that all you got?"

Overview of the DXP4800:

- Does everything it's supposed to do
- Sounds very good (subjective call, of course)
- Easy to configure from the front panel
- Mondo headroom
- Truly useful graphical view of functions (on PC)
- One rack space
- Dead quiet
- Nice price (\$2,325 U.S. list)

Suggestions (if anyone's listening...):

- Nifty "View Data" page needs a print function
- No 1/3-octave EQ on the inputs (Not a big deal to me – I don't use it anyway)
- Larger display on the front panel (Front panel ASF – "audio sex factor" – is lower)
- Software should have a real-time "drag" function

Since using the DXP4800 on the three projects described in this article, I've done seven more shows with it. Bottom line: Look for my former box for sale on eBay.

- Steve Midkiff



Six XLT415 (quad-15-inch-loaded) subwoofers were on the deck – the “.1” of it all.

It would take two processors to handle all of the inputs/outputs needed for this show. At the shop, I linked the first DXP4800 to my desktop computer, programmed the settings, and then loaded those settings on the second DXP4800. Easy.

We pre-set the Saturday show on Friday, and that evening, after much tweaking, I rolled my first surround track. The room was occupied by some 25 or so lighting, video, decor, and sound techs all working on the installation.

The custom 5.1 surround tracks for the show were rolled from a Roland VSR-880 hard disk recorder, directly into my console. I had a MiniDisc machine, CD, six handheld wireless mics and a podium mic to complete the show.

As the first sounds of an exploding mountain top, followed by rushing water and twinkling bells panning

around the room through all five mixes, and unloading copious amounts of bass into the subwoofers, I noticed collective “jaw drops” on many of the present faces.

The next night, I experienced what I felt was the clearest sound I’ve ever achieved from the SLS960 boxes, whether from talking heads or surround fireworks. I kept staring at the DXP4800, thinking “how’d they do that?”

For the show, we had 37 MiniDisc cues, five CD cues (all on different CDs), 11 VSR-880 surround cues, two live four-man singing groups (one with MiniDisc tracks), one live vocalist with accordion accompaniment (she sang in French), five audio-from-video cues, and a podium that came and went a few times during the night. (It was actually struck, restored, and then struck again by crew.)

And, the walk-on talent consistently managed to put their hands right over the brightly colored bands we’d taped on the handheld mics for easy identification. No one said this would be easy.

(What temporal shift? I left this planet the first time the podium moved.)

After the show, which, by the way, raised \$2.7 million for children, the (tall, blonde and ever-so-stunning in her evening gown) main client found me, took my arm, and explained how impressed she was with the sound.

Keeping clients happy is the name of the game in my world. Sometimes, a client’s priorities may shift and it doesn’t really matter how good you make it sound for their event. Their perception of our value may have more to do with how we handle any special challenges thrown our way. Audio skills can be completely overwritten by diplomatic skills – not very satisfying for an audio geek.

So it was indeed gratifying to have a client specifically address the audio quality of the event. The new processor helped that happen. ■

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