Take It To the Limit

Vegas-based RRS Audio Gets Edgy With the All-Software SAC System on a High-Profile Gig

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On Saturday, March 27, composer Michel Legrand was honored in a star-studded tribute held at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The event was filmed for a PBS concert special and featured a 66-piece orchestra as well as performances by Dionne Warwick, George Benson, Melissa Manchester, Frank Sinatra Jr., Andy Williams, Jerry Lewis and others, and Jon Voight and Jennifer O'Neill hosted the tribute.

So if you get the gig to provide audio for an event like this, it's gotta be "on," right? No mistakes, no technical glitches. You go with something safe and proven, right? Something rock-solid and well known so at least if it does fail no one can blame you for bringing in unknown gear.

Not "Most People"

That's the way most people would deal with it, but Lee Pepper of RSS Audio and Bob Lentini, who served, respectively, as FOH and monitor mixer for this event, are not "most people." First, Pepper designed a system using speakers that are very highly regarded but that he had not worked with before. But it's hard to find fault with a d&b audiotechnik J-Series rig. Pepper designed a house system with a main left, right and center, an "outer" left and right, plus subs and front fills (inner and outer) using 12 tops and four subs a side in the air augmented by four more subs on the deck. He also added a bunch of d&b Qs for outer left and right, plus the center cluster and front fills.

Okay, so far so good. But Lee and Bob wanted to push things even further, so they opted — instead of a traditional mixing console — to go with Lentini's creation, the all-virtual Software Audio Console (SAC).

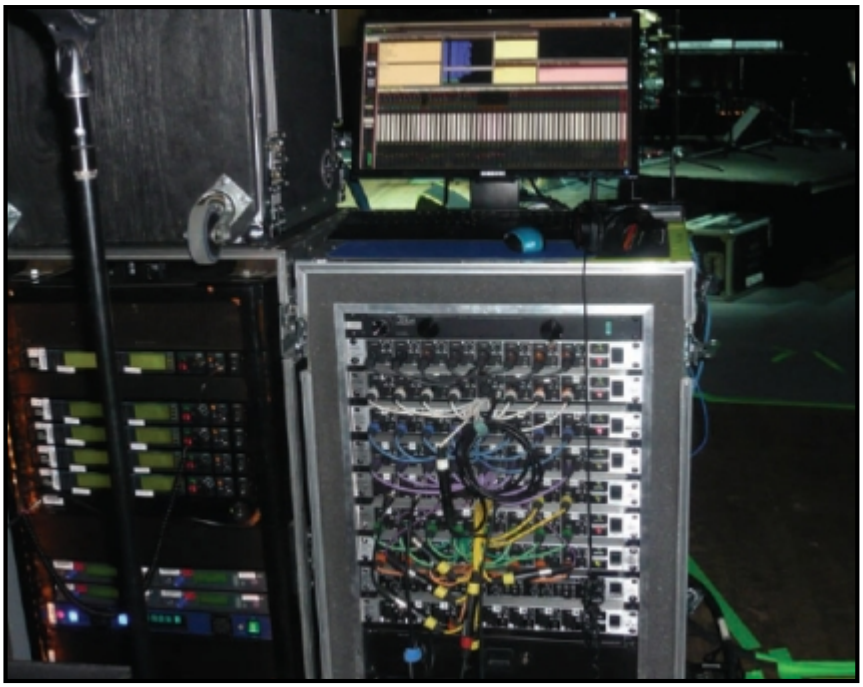
Sure, there was a console — a Midas Legend 3K — but it was backstage and used only to submix the strings and bring the 112 inputs down to 72 inputs available on the SAC rig. The SAC virtual mixing software-based system was in a host computer located backstage. This provided the engine for the monitor mix position as well as FOH, which was controlled via a remote computer. The FOH position also used a small 16-channel fader "surface" for hands-on adjustments.

In addition to the myriad zones, mixes and feeds from FOH and monitors, SAC also facilitated easy 62-track recording of rehearsals. This gave the show producers two important-yet-disparate tools that proved invaluable.

First, the ability to play back rehearsal recordings as a virtual orchestra allowed Lee and Lentini to walk the room with a wireless netbook and tweak the house mix after the orchestra and other performers were gone.

Second, Lentini was able to quickly mix down a rehearsal segment and provide an accurate audio mix, which was then used for the show's opening video segment.

Constant Changes



Given the demands of a 10-camera shoot and audio splits to a broadcast and recording truck, not to mention many instrument and star performer staging changes made to please the video director, it fell on Lentini to constantly adjust for the changes, make Legrand's on-stage sound studio-like and give the composer a high level of comfort. Using a small netbook computer during rehearsals, Lentini was able to sit next to Legrand at his piano and make real-time adjustments to the monitors per his suggestions and needs.

Seven onstage stereo mixes were used — not as many as one might think, given the scope of the show. Lentini took advantage of SAC's ability to split into FOH and 24 monitor consoles and created an environment on stage that felt more like the control room (*sans* couches) of a recording studio than an arena stage. Lentini said, "Being able to freely roam the stage with my netbook was a great advantage in setting the monitors. Standing side by side with the stars of the show was awesome for me."

Lee Pepper concludes, "I have had 35 years of experience in this business and, to my mind, the SAC mixing system is one that puts it all together. It's got a small footprint, near-unlimited routing capabilities, and most importantly, a dramatic improvement in sound. These high-profile symphony shows have a ton of dynamic range, and we aimed high in terms of audio performance. I think we achieved it."

Jay Cline, director of operations at the MGM Grand Garden, summed it up with, "That night, the sound in the arena was right up there with the best that we've ever had."