

Lighting & Sound international

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entertainment, presentation, installation

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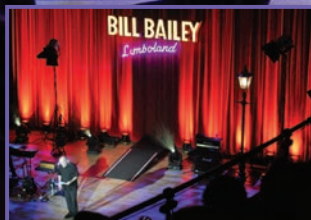
plasma media

Paris Merveilles

Franco Dragone's latest production



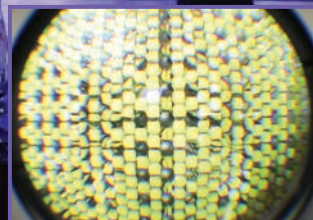
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Classic Gear: grandMA

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

Can it really be 18 years since the grandMA appeared in our lives? Memory suggests not, but memory turns out to be fallible: the web shows a debut in 1997, though a preview brochure carrying the same year does concede 'available from summer 1998'.

GrandMA was a statement of intent from MA Lighting in Germany. Founder Michael Adenau and his software sidekick Ernst Ebrecht had gained some reputation for both their big LCD120 fader-with-memory desk and their tiny but clever Scancommander moving light desk. Their aim was to make 'the first of the new generation of consoles', intended not just to be able to control big rigs of lights, conventional or moving, but to provide better tools for actually dealing with those rigs.

It owed much to other consoles of the day, but also advanced the game. The Hog 2 - the *de facto* standard at the time - had two monochrome screens flat on the console surface; the MA had three, in colour, their angle adjustable by a yellow knob labeled, helpfully and accurately (don't snigger) 'push to erect.' This same form factor can be seen in many of today's consoles, yet few have replicated the ease of jumping between screen set-ups that the MA's view buttons, lined up next to each display, allowed, 'just as if dialing to another channel on TV' as the early brochure said.

Each display had a rotary encoder too, scroll wheels that anticipated by some years the way the iPod would work. A built-in UPS kept your show safe if the power failed.

Compared to the big rock desks, it felt compact, offering just 20 faders. But they had a trick: they were motorised, so would jump around as you paged through them, a great party piece but also invaluable and, again, now standard.

Operating it was, at first, daunting. MA's aim was for a highly configurable console. Early on that meant a new show presented three blank screens; you had to set-up the layouts you wanted before you could do anything much, almost a lighting desk construction kit. Later versions came with more sensible defaults. Its programmer concept came from the Hog and Compulite desks, a new way of thinking for those coming from older theatre desks; everything operated with a rigorous logic.

Features appeared over time: group tools and modulators at launch, move-in-black, oops (undo, but with a more fun name), the stage view - a simple visualiser built right into the console, and with it the return of the x/y/z beam positioning from the Scancommander, later.

MA's real trick was to constantly offer features just ahead of the curve of increasing lighting rig



complexity, so when people hit a new challenge the grandMA was the console with a solution. Four universes of DMX became eight, distributed via Art-Net. Then came true multi-console, multi-user operation with 'worlds' for partitioned control, the external NSP processors offering up to 64 universes, and the clever MAticks selection tools, all for dealing with really big rigs. Later the layout pixel-map view arrived in time to help with the coming of the LED arrays.

That it could cope, in fact continues to cope, with all this - shows of truly Olympian proportions - isn't bad for a system that, even late in life, still had just 128MB of memory, a 15GB hard drive and a 450MHz processor.

MA Lighting: > www.malighting.com
 MA Product History: > [//plasa.me/sro2z](http://plasa.me/sro2z)
 The grandMA Forums: > [//ma-share.net](http://ma-share.net)



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