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Classic Gear: Strand Cantata

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

1987. In the world of theatrical spotlights, the end of an era was fast approaching . . . we just didn't know it yet.

Eras end when revolutions happen. Between revolutions, the incumbents tend to iterate, to improve incrementally. Which isn't necessarily a bad approach, and can lead to some great products, judged by the standards of the day. In 1987, that product was Strand's Cantata, a newly designed range of profile spotlights in three overlapping zoom ranges (11/26°, 18/32°, 26/44°), plus Fresnel and Prism-Convex wash variants, all launched with much hoopla as part of a 'Strand Spectacular' of new products held at the Bristol Old Vic theatre.

In physical form, the Cantatas were clearly descendents of the ranges that preceded them, the T-Spot (I think most would agree, not Strand's finest hour) and then the very much better Harmony - which is to say chunky rectangular shapes that always felt subconsciously at odds with the circular beams of light they generated. From Harmony, Strand carried over the construction, a combination of diecast and extruded aluminium panels complete with sliding top plates giving access to the lenses for cleaning - albeit with a more open front face, better able to accommodate colour changers. They also retained the cable feed whereby opening the lamp housing safely

disconnected the power cable, and the slots in the side of the case that allowed the trunion arm to slide anywhere to balance the light or help with awkward rigging positions.

There were three significant changes, though. Firstly, Cantata was conceived as a system rather than just a range of fixtures: all the same width and height (so same colour size), and with the profiles made up of a lamphouse to which you then attached a lenstube - twisting it into position before tightening two locking bolts - rather than as individual fixtures. The tilt-lock handle was a new, asymmetric shape and considerably better. And in the interest, I suspect, of reliability, Harmony's complex geared rotary zoom/focus controls were replaced by simpler lens slider/lock knobs, as a bonus making it easier to match the focus from light to light by feel.

As is often the case, the new fixture was designed around a new light-bulb, in this case the T29 1.2kW lamp that improved the brightness over the established 1kW lamps (which the fixture could also accommodate). A bonus was that this offered the potential to maximise the capacity of the common 2.4kW dimmers.

None of these were really the key feature, though. That was the gate mechanism which could be continuously rotated to easily adjust



the angle of a shuttered shape or to rotate a gobo without having to lift it out and risk burning your fingers (though, of course, you needed to invest in new gobo holders that would lock into place, so staying put even when you spun the gate upside down). Stories tell that this feature came after Strand engineers took part in a focusing exercise led by a real lighting designer in a real theatre and realised what a pain this had all been on earlier lanterns. Their solution was neatly done.

They were nice lights, the Cantatas, well made, good optics, easy to handle and look after, versatile; with that cunning gate, classics of their day. But also really the last of an era, since five years later came the Source Four. It turns out that in lighting, smaller, lighter, brighter and rounder, tends to win the day.

Introducing The Cantata:

- > //plasa.me/194qa
- > //plasa.me/7a39u

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