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classic gear

Siemens Sitralux B40 | Rob Halliday . . .



Talking about the National Theatre's Lightboard as we just were at PLASA (missed it? Don't worry; the video is available now at theatrecrafts.com) provided a reminder not just that a Lightboard then went into London's Royal Opera House, but also of the control system which quite quickly replaced it: the Sitralux B40, from Siemens.

Siemens are a big deal company, of course, their product lines covering everything from electric trains to the high-voltage transformers that power those trains. That diverse range used to include entertainment lighting control, back in the previous cycle of big corporations thinking entertainment lighting was a big enough market to pay attention to. The Bordon-style transformer dimmers in many European theatres were made by Siemens. Later, when memory presented the problem of what to do with fader levers as cues were played back, Siemens just took the obvious (if expensive!) step of motorising them all. Unsurprisingly, this took their products out of the reach of most British installations.

At the Royal Opera House, dissatisfaction with the reliability of Lightboard (in part, one suspects, because their system had been Strand's demonstrator, at one point quite literally falling out of the back of a moving car) led to a search for a powerful yet, above all, reliable replacement. Against competition from Strand, with Galaxy, and AVAB, with Viking, they chose Siemens.

This was late 1985, a time when lighting consoles were generally becoming powered by standard microprocessors. But unlike the lighting companies who had to rely on computer technology made by others, Siemens had divisions producing everything they required. The B40 was powered by their own SiComp R30 mini-computer, created for process control and so with the reliability that running



traffic lights demands. Still, just to be sure, the Opera House bought two as main and backup systems.

By the time of the B40, even Siemens had moved from motorised-fader-per-channel to keypad for channel selection plus twin colour VDUs for channel and cue information (these duplicated down on the production desk for the lighting designer). Like Lightboard, the B40's main control panel had a bank of wheels, allowing multiple channels or groups to be easily mixed together, and also offered the

functionality for colour changer and moving light control, although these were not used by the ROH. They did, however, request a push-button geographic mimic, allowing direct channel selection if required. All of this was shoe-horned into the building's compact control room, literally carved into an old ventilation shaft.

One trick, unusual for the time, showed the power of the B40's brain: as well as setting fade times per cue, the console allowed each channel to have its own fade time within a cue, enabling really complex transitions to be constructed.

Perhaps keen to emphasise a German takeover of a British institution, or just to show that the company was involved in cultural endeavours as well as heavy industry, Siemens celebrated their first performance at the Opera House in a way perhaps not seen since in the entertainment industry: with a full-page ad in *The Times*.

They also pledged long-term support, guaranteeing parts availability for 10 years after the console went out of production.

Nonetheless, just a few years later, the Opera House changed again, to Galaxy, then later again, to Obsession.

Siemens still make lighting controls, but now for buildings rather than for the quirky world of stages. ☹

Siemens at the ROH in *The Times*:

▶ <http://plasa.me/ef4b1>

Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for more than 25 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic... or just old!

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