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Snow Patrol

Live at Liverpool Echo Arena

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Snow Patrol



Snow Patrol's show at Liverpool's Echo Arena was evidence of a production in which lighting and video elements work in perfect synchronicity . . .

words & pictures by Steve Moles

From production manager down, every crew member I spoke to on this visit mentioned that the band wanted to be 'more rock and roll and less pop'. They don't need to worry: Snow Patrol songs might sing about human emotion, but they're not love songs in the sense of a three-minute single; think of Leona Lewis's soaring rendition of 'Run' and acknowledge that this was no ordinary pop song, but an almost hymnal offering to lift the spirit. It's stirring stuff.

Production

I saw the show at Liverpool Echo Arena, my first visit to this relatively new member of the Arena circuit. I stopped off first with production manager Rob 'Wob' Roberts to get an end-user view of the venue. "Coming as I do from St Helens I'm thrilled that Liverpool has finally got a proper venue; after years of cramming shows into the Royal Court and The Empire, this is a fantastic building. There's a big house grid here which is good. Our show has a fair bit of weight loaded at the rear, but it's not a problem.

"There's no compromise to our show, everything fits, and easily. But there are problems: the loading dock is a joke - there isn't one. Well, there is, but it's only two meters deep, not enough to manoeuvre a large flightcase or set dolly around. This means you have to unload the trucks down a ramp as usual. That would be OK except that for some unknown reason the ground you park the truck on is sloping, making loading and unloading dangerous. We had to add stage hands to our in and out to keep to time schedules because of it."

Truck access is not too clever either, down into an awkward underground freight zone. It's not quite like backing way down to the stage at the Forêt National Brussels in the bad old days, but there are easier load bays.

"Backstage is fine," continues Roberts, "plenty of dressing rooms and space, but the Internet, it's walled-off to hell! We do a lot of work over a VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] system; I link straight into the band's management, Q Prime, in London and New York - it means we're all effectively in the same office. But here we're stuck behind a firewall and can't get out of the building. There is only one independent ADSL available and you have to book it two days in advance. That's just a bit too secure for an events venue - security needs opening up."

Then out it came: "Sheffield Arena is 17 years older and it's a hundred times better. How did they get it so wrong? And the architects are supposed to be specialists in this type of building."

Any good points? "Yes, there are positives, and to be fair, there are not many arenas that are perfect - Cardiff and the SECC are too low, Sheffield, Manchester and London are great. The new O2 Dublin,

the rebuilt Point is not too bad; parking is restricted, just enough space for four trucks and three buses, but that's just the limited amount of land around the building. The Dublin FOH snake run is bad too, it takes six men about two hours to put the multis in - and if it's a seated show then the FOH position ends up halfway up the bleachers."

This is all useful information: building owners may not like their dirty linen aired in public but frankly what's stated here is in many ways unforgivable. I'm old enough to remember when Mark Fisher and Jonathan Park were approached via Harvey Goldsmith to provide authoritative requirements to make a new sports hall - the proposed Docklands Arena - into a 21st century multipurpose entertainment venue. What happened? Despite the input from Fisher Park, they couldn't even get the truck entrance the right height. As for the new Wembley Stadium, just ask yourself why big bands now choose to stage their London shows at Twickenham and The Emirates Stadium. These are new-builds, relatively simple structures compared say, to a Barbican or Copenhagen Opera House; what's so difficult about satisfying the practical demands? Will London's new Olympic Stadium be any better? Rant over!

What about the production? "This is a six-week schlep around the UK, followed by two weeks in Germany at smaller venues, around the 6,000 seater mark. We'll take a B rig for that. The production is heavily driven by the video; where normally there'd be live to screen and stock images, we're using what Blue [Leach, camera director] is shooting, and then Rob Haddow drives through Catalyst; very little goes on screen 'as is'. We do use house Blink TV screens occasionally. In the O2, where we've sold seats 270°, we're using these screens back-firing, that is they'll be blacked-off to the main hall, but will provide Imag to those sat to the sides and rear of stage. This is the signature look we want to maintain even in Germany, but it's taking some working out."

Why will the rig prove too large for the German venues? "The back box weighs 13 tonnes as a dynamic load, it's eight tonnes of Barco O-lite from XL Video and five Pods of Vari*Lites from HSL. They all move, controlled by a Kinesis system, so we've got our own mini-grid up there. That's the problem," Roberts explains.

"The show itself is very good. I'm very proud of what Blue and LD Dave Sherwin have achieved; the animation for the encore is outstanding, though that was the band's idea. It's a three-part song, Lightning Strikes, and is accompanied by 16 minutes of commissioned film. The film is projected from front-of-house onto a Trevira scrim released across the front of stage from a Kabuki. It's a big finish and required some experimentation; we have to thank Acre Jean for finding the right material for us, the first gauzes we tried just didn't work. Splinter, friends of Blue's, produced the animation."



From top:

Rob 'Wob' Roberts, PM.

FOH engineer Mark Carolan (L).

Catalyst operator Robin Haddow (R).

Lighting designer Dave Sherwin.

Skan PA system tech Paddy Hockem (L).

Tristan Farrow, monitor engineer (R).

Sound

There has been a change front-of-house since the band last featured here. Mark Carolan has taken over the faders from Snake Newton, and he's brought Skan PA with him. I mention this as Roberts singled out Skan's system tech, Paddy Hockem, for special mention: "I'm very impressed with him, his attitude is outstanding. Mark lets him set the rig each day, leaving him free to focus on front-of-house."

So I spoke to Hockem first: "It's a V-Dosc system," he began, "and we have the new SB28 Subs and LA8 amps, though not in the L-Acoustic racks." Let's talk subs first, I ventured.

"We have four on centre on the floor, one reversed for cardioid mode" (this centre floor group are all stood on their narrow ends, side by side), "with three stacked on their sides each side beneath the main rig, and six flown each side. The old 218 was a disaster, these are much better, the combination of flown and floor array makes it really easy for me to get smooth coverage. I'm surprised how well the flown stuff evens it all out."

There is a small centre hung line array of dV-Dosc - a vocal lift perhaps? "No, it's there to fill the front rows specifically, though of course we have front-fills on the stage, but they never get beyond the first two rows. The cabinets alternate with the left and right part of the full mix, so Mark can still get some spatial panning effects across. It gives that part of the crowd a better sound image too."

Hockem adds: "I forgot to mention, there's a slight curve to the flown SB28s, it's something Skan developed. It's achieved with ratchet straps at the moment so it looks

a bit ugly, but we travel the boxes in two blocks of three, ready-rigged, so it's not too time-consuming to put up." Hockem didn't quantify the gain of this configuration, but it was possible to experience the evenness of low-end coverage he alluded to earlier - presumably this curvature was part of it.

You mentioned not using the L-Acoustic LA8 racks? "We put six amps in a rack instead of their three; it means I cover a whole arena with just four racks a side. Skan also star out the Cat 5 data between amps, instead of daisy-chaining, so if you loose an amp you don't necessarily loose the whole system. Signal comes out the desk, Apogee Rosetta converts A to D, then it goes to Dolby Lakes which, to be honest, we use as a graphical system EQ. I do have XTAs on the PA which I use for setting time delays and house EQ."

How did you come to take over the reins with Snow Patrol? "It's largely to do with management. Q Prime, who look after Snow Patrol, also represent Muse in North America." Carolan has been Muse's house engineer for many years. "Some of the band had seen Muse so it kind of came from them." Now that's good to learn. "Yes, apart from the fact I've just installed an SSL at my studio in Dublin." Carolan has Suite Studios in Dublin to think about these days, "but I have an engineer, Danny Conway to look after it for me while I'm away."

Did the FOH transfer push up any unexpected encounters? "First thing, the band had already been in rehearsal. I did a lot of promo' shows with them and took their existing structure; I used that period to learn their dynamics. Tristan (Farrow) their monitor man was already in place when I arrived. Since then I've adapted things to my point of view; Nathan [Connolly]'s guitar

has a wide range, so I put a Royer microphone on him - on all the guitars in fact. It's just great for catching those difficult timbres."

You can tell immediately Carolan is a studio man: where else have you heard such an adjective used about guitars? He does seek out the detail.

"The Royer is a ribbon mic. I use it for Muse, I'm a fan of their mics in general. For guitars, the response is much silkier than a Condenser, and much more tolerant of high SPLs. Gary [Lightbody] on vocals now has a Neumann 104 to get the richness of his voice. I had to be sensitive to Tristan's needs [monitor engineer Tristan Farrow] on that decision; there's an issue with the wedges up there, but he deals with the increased HF sensitivity. As a matter of personal taste I've put a Neumann 105 on the snare bottom: it replaces an SM57 - nothing wrong with them, just a matter of taste."

Having already discussed the PA system with Hockem, Carolan was happy to move straight to the FOH set-up, and his desk of choice: "I like the Midas XL4 for various reasons. I've had a play with an XL8, and a PRO6 for that matter. I'm not averse to digital mixing, I have developed a Digidesign Profile set-up for when we take the tour to Australia later in the year, though I'll still be taking most of my house racks. But I love the sound of the XL4 and with six racks out here the extra room it takes doesn't make much difference."

Roberts had commented on the 87 seat-kills he'd needed for the show at Cardiff previously, but only to say that management were behind the band in indulging their preference for Mark's handiwork - which is refreshing to hear in a business increasingly dominated by bean-counters. And we should note, when a band makes such indulgences, the audience shares the benefit, even if there are a few less seats for sale. A potent weapon against the paucity of the MP3

experience, we trust? Besides, there was also a ton of video and lighting kit taking up valuable real estate out front.

As for the content of those racks: "For my main system EQ I use a Massenburg GML 8200, a 5-band parametric, just the sweetest EQ; I can add shades to the HF. It's subtle, the sort of thing you'd only notice in the absence - it's not a 'chisel EQ'. Then the signal passes to the Lakes - that's where I do the room stuff - then into the Apogee Rosetta. Directly on channels I have a Tube-Tech LCA 2B in tandem with a BSS901 for the bass guitar. Vocals also have 901s with [Empirical Labs] Distressors. I'm also using a dbx120 sub harmonic boom box." The same thing I toured with 30 years ago? "Yes, it hasn't been replaced. I use it to add a taste to the Kick drum and floor Toms; it just extends the reach. Everything acoustic has a Distressor; the DIs are Avalons. My aim is to take a true image of all the instruments - and then assemble the mix."

And how is your attention focussed during the show? "Awareness of the Master Fader is critical - a lot of the time my hand is there. You have to watch how you use your SPL, be sectional about songs. It's a theatrical show in its emotions, it's important to amplify those moments. Some songs I'm turning it down, I'll watch the audience, seeing them go quiet in anticipation of a particular passage; I'll turn it down then for even greater dramatic impact. Another thing I'm aware of is the density of the music." You'll have experience of that from Muse. "Here, there can be seven people on stage, the question is how to achieve placement. I use the stereo width to layer in the detail. The other thing is the band's stated desire to be a 'rock band', so you have to keep the balls of it when demanded."

No shrinking violets in this performance, and true to his word, Carolan rides the emotional rollercoaster with strong variations in level. Some of his volume reductions are breathtaking. Like

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a lighting designer who's unafraid of darkness, Carolan provides a texture of contrasts.

Monitors

Tristan Farrow, sat behind a Yamaha PM5D desk, has the full Monty when it comes to monitors: "The band are all on the Sennheiser G2 in-ear system and they all have d&b M2 wedges. The wedges are for a bit of weight, they're amazing - I used them on Therapy in 2004 and they're just the best."

When you say weight, do you mean that you keep the voice in the Sennheiser system and just put the fatter end of the music through the wedges? "No, I think you do need the voice in there as well, the M2 gives the pressure and vibration of the voice, it's a tangible sensation. The ear pieces are all UE11s, they isolate very effectively, though I've had to modify the Bass player's because he sweats so much."

Farrow showed how he cuts tiny strips of Boots Waterproof sticking plasters and tapes the edge of the silicone ear-mould, "just enough friction to hold them in place. Everybody's mix is in stereo and quite wide - no compression, no EQ, no filtering or anything else. There are 24 mixes, with three wedges per person, and so the PM5D is full, ins and outs. When I joined last September I wanted an H3000 but this does the job and they like the rawness."

Does Mark's choice of a Neumann 104 for lead vocals present any problem? "No, it's a natural sound so it's fine. Whatever mic wouldn't be a problem, I don't have a stage that's really loud, there's even enough space between the drum kit and the vocal mic that spill is generally OK, so sensitivity issues are just not there. Mix-wise, however, it all has to be there, and it has to be mixed song by song, so I do need scene recall for every song. The band are very reflective in what they play, I mean they think about what

they're playing and how it sounds, so they need to hear what it is they're trying to achieve."

Lighting & Video

As Wob Roberts indicated, this is very much an integrated whole. Were I to make a general observation it would be to say that for most of the performance video imagery exists only at a subliminal level, something you're aware of, but only in an abstract sense, its presence no more or less intrusive than the beam of a moving light. It's a bit like walking down a busy street: yes, you see people all around you, but could you describe one of their faces? Thus the triumvirate of Blue Leach, Rob Haddow and Dave Sherwin have managed to pull off quite a feat; and the fact they recreate this feat each show, on the fly, makes it all the better.

Dave Sherwin is LD, and comes across as arguably the lead body in all this. His rig, supplied by HSL, comprises five finger-trusses fanning out towards the audience (hinged at the upstage end, they are claw-like in appearance) and five pods,

vertical frames of Vari*Lite 3500 Washlights behind. "For the smaller German venues I'm reducing the length of the fingers, we'll cut the back hinge but just rig all the lights closer together. The pods I'll fly just three - pods one, three and five, with pods two and four stood on the stage. I can't say enough good things about the light from the VL3500s - I'm particularly pleased with the ACL look I can achieve from behind. The fingers have VL3000 Spots and Robe 2500 washes. I chose the Spots for sheer brightness; I needed that strength against the O-Lite behind, which is extremely bright. They also have the best optics for colour and gobos.

"The Robes? To be honest, it's what HSL has. The colour range is reasonable, they're very reliable and they are bright, though not as bright as the VL3500 obviously. But they do what I need. I've got the I-Pix BB16 on the end of each finger for audience light, and the four-cell strip BB4 in lines along the length of the fingers pointing down on stage. These down lights look especially good when used alone with say, just the VL Spots - you get a flat shaft of light and it's quite punchy, even at 30 feet, and they have great colours - a good dark Congo and nice pastels."

Sherwin also has Atomic 3000s with scrollers on the fingers, four each; the physical presence of the fingers is obviously an evocation of the band's new album, *A Hundred Million Suns*. This simple motif is repeated with beams up from the floor behind the back line. "That's another reason for choosing the VL3000 Spot - the great zoom range, so the ones on the floor behind can give a really wide beam."

So what of all that Barco O-Lite at the rear? "The video all goes through Catalyst operated by Rob Haddow; we've been working together now for four years and he has a good understanding of what I'm working to achieve. In essence, I want the





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O-Lite to be treated as a lighting surface. Blue Leach cuts from the live cameras and outputs to Rob, he controls the Catalyst from his own Hog 3. He also has the four Barco DML1200s to control. I wasn't that convinced about them at first, but we now have them positioned off the stage, two on the floor in front of the PA, and two at front-of-house. From these positions we can project onto the PA, the ceiling of the venue - in fact any surface we can get a fix on we'll use."

There was a noticeable lift in his voice as he said this, the freedom of action obviously invigorating. "Wherever we find a place to point them it always seems to raise a crowd reaction, we can 'walk' an image right round a room."

All the video equipment - cameras, PPU, O-Lite and DMLs - comes from XL Video. "They've been very good, so too HSL - great back-up, and HSL support me behind the scenes, doing things like providing my rigging plots for me."

Sherwin, like Haddow, operates from a Hog 3: "I find it fast to edit and with this show I'm constantly updating - I find that really straightforward."

The lighting looks follow the mood swings that are so powerfully reinforced by Carolan's mix. Sherwin often holds off from major lighting states, leaving the stage generally stark and lit with some garish, often dirty colours from the VL Spots, but he will soak a heavy wash. Soft-edge is the order of the day; beam work is restricted. It's a setting that allows the O-Lite to function as he intended, as another lighting surface. The fact the Kinesys system has pods and screen sections moving up and down, constantly reformatting the band environment, serves to distance the viewer from becoming accustomed to the imagery; it's all of a fluid state.

Haddow has been doing more and more work for XL directly since the last time Snow Patrol graced these pages: "I do a lot of Catalyst work for them, including Dancing on Ice recently. For me, it's just such a useful tool, it does so many things that would require expensive processing. For example, in this show we have the moving screens, thin vertical sections rising and falling. I can separate one output into eight outputs and apply different offsets to each of them: So, as eight slices of the screen move into a variety of positions I can maintain the image placement across all of them - if I choose to. The O-lite is superb - unbelievable colours - which supports me in keeping with Dave's lighting."

How much of your work is tightly scripted? "It's a complete collaboration. Blue does bits and pieces to the camera images before I even get them; he's got analogue effects he applies, things like having a camera to vision monitor feedback loop. I'm doing the digital effects. It was the DML that forced me to move from Hog 2 to 3, and it's proved a good decision. The thing I like is being able to load and edit a cue easily - there are multiple ways of accessing and doing it; there is always a work round. And there's capacity, I'm running the DMLs without using their on-board media server, even so they take 51 channels apiece."

What does he think of the DML as a touring tool? "It's impressive, it can't reach the light levels of lamps in the rig unless used in Light Mode, then it's punchy enough, but of course that's restrictive. But projecting from the downstage position to the room's back wall is more than bright enough."

Haddow puts images on the audience and wall behind when singer Gary Lightbody goes out into the crowd for 'How to be dead': the images are of the crowd themselves and it provides an audible lift to crowd reaction. It works at another level, for Gary has a followspot



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on him as well (the only house spot cue of the night). Normally he'd be lit in isolation from the audience, but the DML projection makes for a blending and blurring of lines between performer and audience that proves endearing.

Blue Leach is, in his usual fashion, highly animated about the whole video package: "Dave has always wanted to use O-Lite with a few strips taken out - broken up like that it makes for a bit of city skyline." And what of the Barco DMLs? "I must admit I'd been dying to use one for ages and I'm really glad Dave wrote them into the show. They're ideally placed now, I was really keen to see them used as well as they could be, and this is it."

Blue continues: "In this application I'm using artwork produced for the tour, and footage of the venue to use in the show context; that makes it a distinct Snow Patrol show and puts their footprint on the venue. The animation for 'The Lightning Strike' was Gary's initial idea; he saw the three stages to the story. The nucleus of his idea was very clear; he invited me to expand upon it. That's typical of the attitude to the whole show, there's great scope for applying your imagination. "The animation is produced by Splinter who do all my TV and DVD work, with input from those clever bastards at Atticus Finch [www.atticusfinch.tv] with references to the album cover." Which looks like what? "An enormous origami star births the universe," he begins, but having heard it, I won't spoil it for you. "It's loose and open so the audience can make their own personal interpretation," says Blue. It is however, preceded by a written narrative, so the audience is gently guided. "Unique," says Blue, "for me it's perfect, art into live music."

If nothing else it's good to see performers spending their cash to give the video dimension some content, and here it's money well spent.

How does this all work in operation? "The way Rob applies the colours to match or contrast Dave's lighting is mood enhancing, and that energy helps the song along. The lights are thought about in an emotional way and that's what I apply to the cameras." Leach has four manned cameras, five lipstick and two robocams up in the rig.

"I really enjoy this sense of collaboration. Last year I had a system where I triggered Catalyst myself using a touch-screen interface, that allowed me to riff with the band. Now I welcome the relationship with Rob and Dave - Rob takes my feed, he has access to Dave's cues and uses Catalyst to work with them; then I can look at what's being done on stage and adapt what I'm doing."

There's no mistaking the sense of motivation Leach is experiencing. "Overall, the combination has greater impact," he says. He's operating from front-of-house as well - impossible not to, under the circumstances - and arguably FOH real-estate should always be allowed for the video director: I just don't understand why so many perch backstage, excluding themselves from the zeitgeist.

"Yes, finally I'm out front and can see, good old XL have come up with a solution that doesn't take up huge amounts of space. I see this happening more and more, it's the perfect place - no second guessing, you know immediately if something works or not."

The funny thing about all this is that to watch them you'd think all three men are working to their own agenda. It looks so easy: 'synchronicity' is the word, I believe, and there's a lot of that to be found in Snow Patrol's mystical musical imagery . . .

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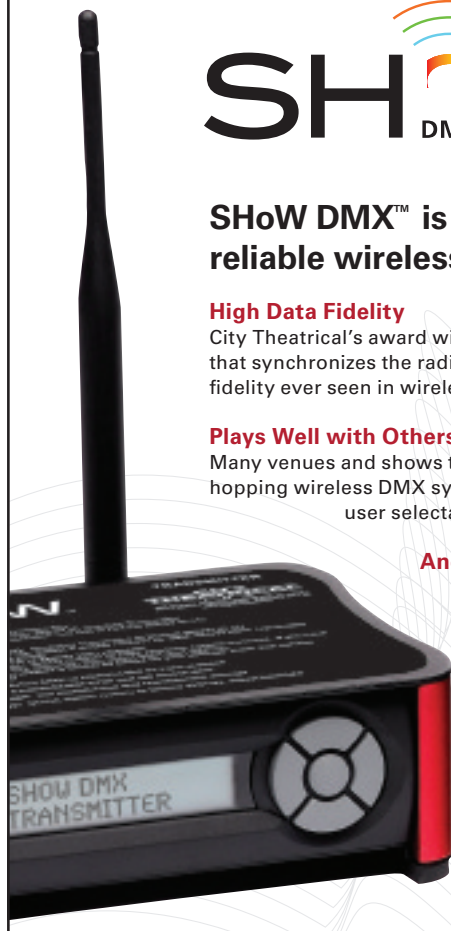
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