

Close Up



Pulsar Get It Right

It was only a matter of time before someone produced a program which would enable an off-the-shelf microcomputer to become a stage lighting control system.

As with many other exciting developments in stage lighting recently, this has come not from the big-name boys—but from one of the industry's leading smaller high technology companies—PULSAR.

In a sense of course their "Intelligent Interface" is not the first. Many such programs exist in the U.S. for the Apple IIe and our own early biggies were all based on standard computer hardware. However with all of these some kind of dedicated keyboard was required and the absence of this is where Pulsar will score.

The "Intelligent Interface" comprises a rack mounting interface box and three-way master fader unit. Currently the program is based on the BBC micro but it will talk to other systems once the software is available. Since the BBC is a best seller this appears to be a sound start; especially for the educational market.

So if you own a BBC then £495 plus vat (retail) will buy you a 36 channel memory desk. Beat that! And larger systems will follow. If you don't own a BBC then the total system purchase comes to £1150 retail excluding VAT, but don't forget that part of your system comprises a standard micro so when it isn't controlling stage lighting it can write the scripts and do the accounts.

And already Pulsar report that one disco owner is doing just that.

O.K. but does it work?

"Intelligent Interface" could have fallen flat on its face if the gain of memory was only achievable through a cockpit drill second to that on Concorde. But there are fewer buttons to press for each function than on many dedicated systems and since the format is standard QWERTY then we all know where they are. Furthermore the operational logic

isn't a thousand miles from that in current practice. This is a refreshing change by comparison with some other systems launched.

Of course the only way to test a control system is to plot a show on one—something I have not yet been able to arrange. However the showroom demonstration satisfied my curiosity.

At first glance some functions appear slower than on conventional desks—channels cannot be selected numerically by tapping in the number but by moving the cursor—faster in fact than you think but obviously slower for 72 channels than for 36. Extra cues can be inserted anywhere without limitation because all subsequent memories jump up one number to make room each time although this could become a drawback in straight theatre if the stage manager's cue number happens also to be the memory number. However there is a facility to name each cue or memory so the board doesn't need to be worked purely by numbers. Circuits can also be named and this is especially helpful on specials and one-night-stands.

I liked the bar-graph display of the channel levels—this moves as the cue moves—because it provides the operator/designer with an instant visual readout of the balance—individual circuit levels are also displayed on an 100% scale.

My only criticism so far is that auto or timed fades should be started by push button not by a slight movement of the adjacent master fader (which then has to be reset before another function can be selected) but I have to say that Pulsar answered all my other criticisms fairly and appeared ready to listen to more so maybe this will be dealt with too.

So the memory revolution continues and the "Intelligent Interface" promises to go where no memory has ever gone before. Well done Pulsar.

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