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Classic Gear: The Light Console

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

I suspect that the best products in our - perhaps any - market are those developed in the first instance to satisfy a need of their creator. But can there ever have been a lighting product created so specifically to satisfy one particular personal whim as Fred Bentham's Light Console? Manufactured by the Strand Electric and Engineering Company between 1935 and 1955, its appearance was all the more surprising given that at its inception, Bentham was still a relatively new employee of the company . . .

In summary: this was a lighting control that looked like a cinema organ, complete with keys, stop tabs and foot pedals. The similarity was unsurprising for two reasons. Firstly, there was the design philosophy: Bentham didn't want a lighting control, but rather a lighting instrument that could be played, lighting performed by the operator much as a musician would perform a tune, albeit that in both cases the player might be working under the control of another (the show's director, the orchestra's conductor). The driving goal was his fascination with Colour Music, lighting performed to music in a manner that is a clear forerunner of today's son-et-lumière spectacles - except that Bentham wanted to perform it live, not play back pre-programmed

sequences (something not, in any case, really possible); he wanted the controls wrapped around him, able to be selected with "the sweep of a hand"; and in a position where he could see the stage, not hidden away in the wings as was then standard.

Then there was the practical: there were no electronic dimmers to harness his control to, rather electro-mechanical resistance dimmers coupled by clutches to motorised drive shafts. And there would be no money to develop a tactile, remotely-located control surface from scratch (Strand's directors were doubtful that the project had any viability at all).

So, Bentham turned to others - in this case, the John Compton Organ Company of Acton, rival to America's Wurlitzer as a maker of pipe organs for cinemas. The Light Console looks like an organ because it *is* an organ - albeit one connected to lights via cross-bar relays controlling dimmers, rather than air via solenoids controlling pistons feeding pipes . . .

And it was performed like an organ, with multiple fingers and both feet, rather than the index finger and 'Go' button of today. Stop-tabs selected channels, master keys - coloured to indicate different groups - chose whether the group would get brighter or dimmer through a



soft or firm push, the balanced footpedal set movement speed from choice of seven, toe-pistons controlled blackouts and more.

It sounds crackpot, but it worked. The biggest consoles gave a single operator control over more than 200 dimmers and (this in the 1930s) integrated control for colour changers, the function of the black note keys. There were perhaps 17 Light Consoles installed over 20 years, from 1940s S'Carlos Opera House in Lisbon through the Palladium and Drury Lane in London; each slightly different, customised to suit the installation size, control room space available or to work around parts shortages caused by the bombing of the Compton's factory during the war, but all were beloved by their operators and some were still in active duty until the early 1980s. The sense of a lighting person being directly involved in a performance is missed, particularly in theatrical consoles, to this day . . .



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