

LIGHTING+**SOUND** *International*



Turbosound's recently installed TSE system at the Guildhall Portsmouth
(see second feature on cluster sound systems in this issue)

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A Siemens in the Garden

Francis Reid

Memory lighting control has come of age. Twenty-one years ago Thorn launched their Q-File and those of us who were at the launch immediately recognised that, while various experiments during the previous couple of years had demonstrated potential, here was a system that was fully developed to go on a live show.

In these early years we were prepared to accept the risk of possible system amnesia in return for the excitement of the new instant plotting, infinite presetting and simultaneous cues - although it should be said in fairness to the Thorn boards that they enjoyed a better reputation for reliability than many of their contemporaries.

Subsequent developments have tended to stress increasingly sophisticated operational facilities, and our enthusiasm for this has often overtaken our concern for engineering reliability. Lighting controls are a buyer's market and so the industry has probably not been under sufficient pressure to apply the kind of engineering philosophy that keeps aircraft flying by duplication and triplication of, for example, hydraulic systems.

This phase is over, however. Reliability has quite recently (even suddenly) become the number one factor in system choice. There is certainly every reason for reliability to override capital cost. Rehearsal failures, apart from the obvious consequences to the quality of subsequent performances, can be very expensive in terms of overtime payments. Performance failures, although rarely resulting in cancellation and refunds, can reduce the audience level of enjoyment (consciously or subconsciously) to the extent that a subsequent draught can be felt at the box office. Reliability is particularly critical in an opera house where the lighting is in continuous use for a performance and rehearsal cycle which is so tightly scheduled that there is absolutely no slack. A lost five minutes is gone for ever.

At the Royal Opera House in London, no one is more conscious of this than technical director Tom Macarthur who, looking at future schedules and past maintenance budgets, decided to search for a new system where the engineering was not only the tops but adopted that same belt and braces approach which keeps aircraft from crashing.

To initial surprise from many, including I have to admit myself, his market analysis led him to choose Siemens. Certainly Siemens have always been in the top echelon for engineering quality. However, many of us have had past doubts about the operational philosophy of their systems. Indeed both Glyndebourne (i.e. me) and Covent Garden in 1963 looked very seriously at Siemens controls, admiring the engineering but opting for Strand because they (and ADB) seemed to be the only manufacturers then willing to build desks to a particular theatre's specific requirements.

In the developmental era of memory systems, Siemens lost a considerable proportion of their own home market share, allowing MMS, Lightboard and Galaxy to become a familiar sight in German opera houses. It must, therefore, have taken our Royal Opera House considerable courage to announce that British lighting technology which led the international market in volume and price

was not the right stuff for them.

The decision was taken primarily on reliability grounds, but there was a second factor which also indicates a growing trend in an area of customer preference which is being matched by manufacturer response.

Until recently, lighting control development has been geared to mainstream theatre with its runs of a single current production with plotted lighting. Facilities for repertoire changeovers, for 'effects' sequences and for instant lighting design during performances have tended to be treated as something to be grafted on as an ancillary rather than as an integral part of the system design. Now we have desks dedicated to coping with the special needs of the popular music industry and one-night-stands of all kinds.

Opera and ballet have their special needs too. For example, the speed of the twice-daily changeovers and the tight technical time available for revivals requires a rig with fixed elements. Certain lights get permanently assigned to certain channels, and geographic mimics make a lot of sense - particularly when combined with a display system that enables groups to be quickly and clearly formed and labelled. Also, while

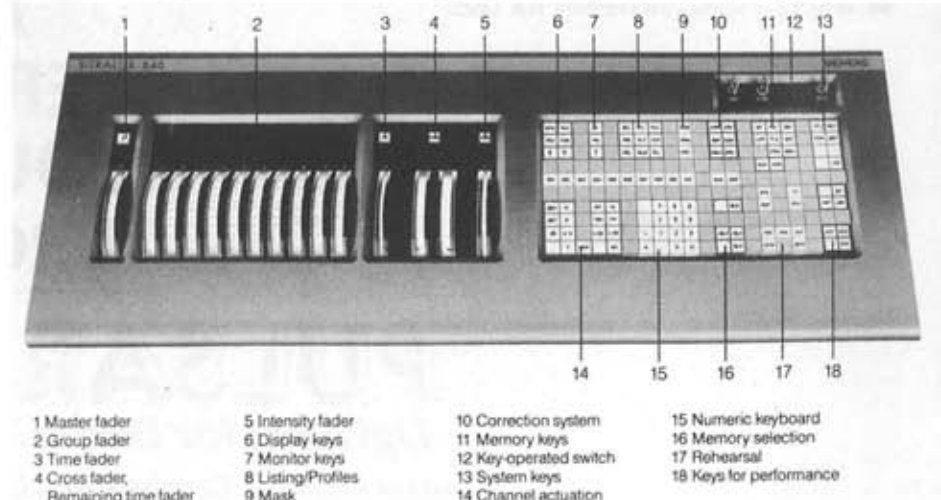
every form of lighting change is involved from time to time, the priority is for impeccably balanced sequences unfolding smoothly and often very slowly. This requires the capability for each individual channel to be given its own start time within the overall cue. But, above all, system specialisation means that a desk should have its display and its functional ergonomics laid out to reflect the priorities of the particular performance form that it is to be used for.

Much is made in every manufacturer's literature of the scope that their machines offer to the lighting designer. In my view (and experience) this is a misplaced emphasis. It is to the operator that a lighting control must appeal. Good operators can squeeze virtually anything that a lighting designer asks out of the most unpromising machine. But why should they have to?

Anyone doubting whether the Royal Opera House has made a good buy should talk to the operators. They are relaxed, confident, cheerful, enthusiastic and full of pride in their equipment. Or talk to Tom Macarthur for the rather uncommon spectacle of a technical director who is confident that neither his schedule nor his budget will be thrown by a system crash.



The Siemens computer controlled Sitalux B40 lighting control system at the Royal Opera House.



Layout of the Sitalux B40.