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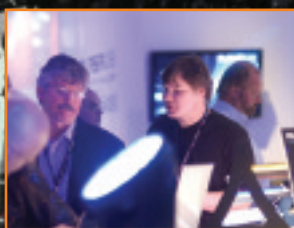
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Classic Gear: Strand System CD

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

Of course, Classic Gear does not always equal commercial triumph. Last month's Light Console, with its unique and innovative design, was unarguably a classic. But just 17 were sold over 20 years . . .

However, the Light Console's creator, Fred Benthams, was a practical man as well as an original thinker, so having made his own dream console, he set about creating a version that would better satisfy (and so sell to) others.

The problem was, while Light Console made rapid, overlapping changes possible - great for the live performances for which it was created - it left the operator to decide that an end state looked about right. It was much less good at allowing a precisely balanced state to be re-created every night by whoever was running the desk - exactly what the new generation of lighting designers sweeping into the business wanted to be able to achieve, without necessarily relying on the "artist [not necessarily an engineer] of imagination" recommended to pilot the Light Console.

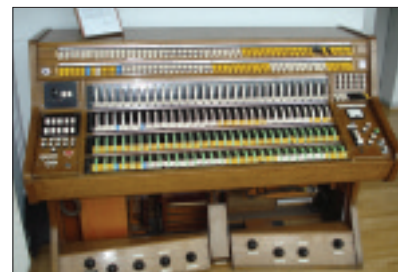
The solution was Strand's System CD. Visually it is the love-child of the organ-derived Light Console (stop keys ranked along the top, toe pistons and rocker pedal at the operator's feet) and a two preset console, with a pair of faders

(one white, one green) for each dimmer - these Strand's delicious quadrant faders, perhaps the finest device ever used for lighting control - all held within a base of mahogany or oak.

States could now be set up and precisely replayed using the two preset fader sets, fading between them at the press of a 'master push' with the fade speed determined using the balanced speed pedal. But channels could also be selected and controlled Light Console style, using the stop keys to select which were to be driven; the stop keys also governed which fader levels were used in crossfades, making complex transitions possible. The stop keys also let channel levels be shown on a meter, useful for plotting after making states using combinations of faders, manual controls and the preset masters.

The console also featured a degree of 'memory' capability - not for cues, but for combinations of stop-key selections: 14 of these channel groups could be stored using the 'presetter' toe push and recalled at the press of the appropriate group key.

As with Light Console, System CD was designed to be able to accommodate large dimmer installations by scaling up the console: 120 channels was considered standard, but in



A System CD, once of the ABC Theatre, Blackpool, now on display at Litestructures in Wakefield. (photo: PLASA Media)

some cases the consoles controlled up to 240 channels and in one case, at London's Piccadilly Theatre, a separate wing was added to give three presets instead of two.

Benthams's brochure reflected that now there was a product capable of "executing complex lighting changes in rapid succession in addition to precise presetting of dimmer levels." Theatre technology historian Jim Laws describes System CD as "the console of choice for the West End between 1956 and 1965", and it was also found in many regional theatres. But its appeal extended beyond theatre, to the new discipline (and lucrative market) of television lighting . . .



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See more pictures and links for the Strand System CD online at: www.lslionline.co.uk/Sep09

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