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ADELE

Live at Usher Hall, Edinburgh: 24 Sept 2011

Words & pictures by Steve Moles

The comparatives in the Music Press have already become cliché; 'Imagine Aretha channelling Dusty' is typical. Personally, I can't contradict them - the girl is a genius. Adele walked into the Usher Hall this afternoon and displayed just the characteristics that will see her talent endure: business-like, she dispatched multiple songs in two or three bars with minimum fuss, managing to run the band through their chops on one song that needed tightening. Later that evening a convivial, nay garrulous Adele revealed that since her earlier brush with on tour bronchitis and the rigours of voice strain she no longer drinks alcohol on tour; she also presents as having about as much interest in illegal drugs as she does in the goings on of the House of Lords. Her feet are so firmly planted on the ground she's taken root.

Production

Just a few brief notes on production: Adele's tour manager, Zop, is influential to the presentation, as we will see below from the discussion with LD Rob Sinclair. When I called him in the US to arrange this visit, it was in no uncertain terms he revealed the lack of video and the desire to impose a stripped-back, simplistic presentation that allowed least distraction from the artist. In short, this show appears like a modern take on an early 1960s black and white television music show. That requires a lot of restraint, holding back when the music, the emotion, the lyrics, compel you to do otherwise. One of Zop's humorous conceits is to have all crew members don brown cotton work coats and cloth caps (think Rover Car works Union Shop Steward circa 1975) for the show. Whether this affects their attitude I know not, but it certainly lent Sinclair the air of a bearded Ronnie Barker (one I think he rather enjoyed). What it certainly did do was wittily set the scene prior to curtain up; for all its eye-grabbing humour it was in the wider context less of a distraction when the stage was briefly re-arranged for the more intimate acoustic set than a bunch of roadies in assorted t-shirts and jeans would have been.

Entering the Usher Hall was odd for me: I hadn't been there in 30 years or more, but it was instantly recognisable. It has recently been given a new coat of paint and the auditorium looks splendid, though as Sinclair revealed, "they've even got some nice swivel chairs in the Box Office, but they don't appear to have done anything to the stage." Maybe there was a previous refurb': I don't recall being able to fly last time I visited.

The public areas outside the auditorium are a massive improvement on what I remember, though the labyrinthine excursion to the stalls toilets hasn't got any easier. What remains most firmly in my mind is the sound of the Hall: empty, it's lively to say the least. The room is a parabola facing stage which gives the monitor man some added input at the centre mic; more to the point, the stalls floor is a gently rising scallop shape to the auditorium rear wall, reflecting sound energy up into the cavernous void above the two balconies. Thankfully, a thousand people standing downstairs takes care of that, but it demands a cautious approach at sound-check lest the room sound spook the artist.

Lighting

Having just completed a 17-camera shoot at the Royal Albert Hall (RAH) for a live DVD, lighting designer Rob Sinclair was visibly relaxed, though to be honest, I get the impression he's not a man who's easily stressed by such things. "I spoke to Girdip Mahal, the lighting cameraman, and we put something together that worked really well," he said. Some subtle audience lighting, a little more confetti than normal and a much bigger mirror-ball (1.8m diameter) reflects the restraint mentioned earlier that is the embodiment of this show. As is happened, Adele's sound engineer Dave McDonald had whipped out his iPhone for a video clip during the mirror-ball moment at the RAH: "Look," he said, "she asks the crowd to hold up their mobile phones at the same time and it just looked amazing," as indeed it did in the vertical confines of the RAH - better even than the Robbie Williams Nikon camera ad' currently running on TV.

Adele deli . . .

- Rob Sinclair has short, mini-skirt borders for all four of his trusses. All in yellow keyed to the back drop, they match the soft borders on the riser fronts to maintain the look. The front truss also sports four-cell Molephay for audience lighting; communication visual and verbal is embedded in the Adele show.
- The front truss also has four large plastic buckets hung beneath it, "with swirl fans run off a dimmer on each. It's a more gentle and controlled dispenser of confetti, so much nicer than two kilos of confetti being hoofed out with a bang from a canon device. I first saw them with Sigur Ros, then I tried them for a snow effect on some Christmas shows I did for the Pet Shop Boys a couple of years ago. It's a more measured effect." He's not wrong.

Despite Zop's rejection of video, there are two Barco projectors from XL Video parked behind the FOH enclosure. A white cloth screen masks the stage for the two opening acts; both acoustic, they play in front and have their logos projected upon it. More significantly, before Adele appears the screen hosts topical images of band and crew from the tour, interspersed with snaps of fans taken locally. Quite an expensive indulgence in equipment for something that doesn't contribute directly to the performance, but it does inject a certain chummy atmosphere.

- A Soundcraft Vi1 sits alongside McDonald's A&H desk: it's there for the support acts, but with just six inputs from two opening acts, and three of those are voices, it would be fair to say the desk is ticking over; tour system tech Chris Courtney un-mutes, pushes up the faders, and then keeps a watchful ear on proceedings.



I was also interested to learn that Sinclair will shortly be off to South America with Peter Gabriel and as such, some re-scheduled 'bronchitis' Adele shows in November will see my old friend John Barker at the lighting controls. Readers might recall Barker is LD for Scouting for Girls and has also been working with Noah & the Whale more recently. "He took over while I was doing shows with Pulp in the summer and does an excellent job," says Sinclair. Rose Bruford College can give themselves a pat on the back for nurturing Barker's particular talent.

Sinclair was first called to design for Adele back in November 2010. "I'd worked with Zop on Goldfrapp previously and he asked if I could fill in some stuff for another act he had. It sounded like it was going to be a bus and trailer tour back then; little did we know she was about to sell ten million records." If ever there was a compelling argument for taking a chance on working up a design for little money on a relatively unknown act, this is it.

"The first show I actually did with her was the BRITs in the new year. We'd already decided on the simplicity guidelines. Of course, for the BRITs they wanted to apply the typical TV production - lots of dry ice, for example - but we quickly binned that. It was then we thought of the monochrome look and it worked amazingly." And became one of the most watched clips on YouTube for weeks on end . . .

"When Zop and I discussed this we had decided the whole thing is to be in the mood of

a 'blue note jazz club'. My brief was to be really classic, but at all costs to avoid making her look like Barbara Dickson; to be redolent of the '50s and '60s yet not showy; to just present her." And what did the artist think about this idea? "She was very receptive to not using coloured lights, in fact no moving lights and no flash. I've kind of stuck to it since then."

Sinclair admitted there are one or two movers (he's got some Robe 2500 Spots up in the truss), but a sweep in onto the band and star as the kabuki drops at the opening of the show is barely gratuitous. The lights didn't visibly move (not lit, that is) for the next 60 minutes.

"She showed me a video of the Oscars and said she wanted lampshades," Sinclair continued. Lampshades is a look in danger of becoming seriously over-played - Lily Allen, Florence & the Machine - they're everywhere, though Sinclair's look is decidedly John Lewis high street. "Lotus Lampshades did a fabulous job; the shades are 80% polyester and 20% something else that makes them incredibly durable, as well as fire-proof. We do have to give the crew white gloves each night to pack them away, but otherwise they're no trouble." There are 96 shades in total, rigged vertically in columns of eight each with a 40W GLS bulb. "Specialz dipped the bulbs for us, so there's no danger of broken glass all over the place. Neg Earth, who provided all the lighting and crew, devised simple IWBs that clip together to support them, and more importantly, keep each one perfectly vertical. When I first showed them to Julian Lavender at Neg Earth he jokingly said,



'I suppose you want these individually dimmed?', to which I said 'yes, of course'. Between them and the PARs we've got two 72 ETC racks backstage." Not something you see much of on tour these days. Something else you don't often see is his collection of Jands' smallest desks, two M1 and one S1: "It's a combination I really like, they're compact and cheap to freight - no-one could refuse to fly these around the world. Yes, some LDs look at me as if I'm mad, but the M1 is great for playback and the S1 for a bit of programming. I have busked shows on it and it's entirely possible. Their software is fabulous, it works just the way I think." I asked him to explain his thinking, "I don't like numbers, so I create a simple graphic of my lights on the touchscreen, then just select and do with them what I want. If the desk could think it would think like I do."

Sinclair continues: "We have gold drapes behind the shades; I wanted to avoid the cliché of red velvet, more importantly with a monochrome look the contrast in quality of light between different bulb types becomes really important; the gold backdrop flatters that."

Sinclair's rig is modest but dare we say it, well chosen. "I'm using ETC Source Four profiles for keylight, with a Straw gel. The moving lights are Robe 2500 Spots . . . I do some pastel shades with them, and use the colour correction shades." He didn't mention it at the time but he also has four bars of PARs on the truss just downstage of the shades, and on the floor some Martin MAC 700s to uplight the shades and backdrop. "When the newspapers reviewed the show and said things like, 'this is all about her without a fancy light show', I thought to myself, 'we've succeeded'. Even a snap from CTO to CTB says all you need to say; on this scale with this sort of music that's quite unusual."

Sinclair makes it sound like the guiding maxim of the least effort principal; I watched his show closely and it's far from it. Even if the scene changes are infrequent, they're all carefully considered. Take the third song in tonight's set 'Don't you remember': 12kW of PARs stripe the stage vertically through smoke from above and behind; three Robes in CTO provide focussed backlight to Adele and two key

musicians, changing later to CTB which provides a subtle lift to a dynamic change in the song's emphasis. In the absence of the 'big look' and abundant colour to which we've all become accustomed, this nuanced change is greater than it sounds on paper, and to the eye appears far more coloured than you might imagine. As the evening progresses and through the careful use of the Martins on the floor up-lighting the backdrop or the air in front of it, the contrast between light sources appears even more coloured. Often it's nothing more than that retina delay effect: look at a bright source and when you look away you see it's chimera in yellow; ergo, you see cold blue/white projected in the vertical space downstage of the backdrop, and when they go out an illusory hint of pink appears.

Sinclair says: "It's been really interesting to develop; yes, it can look samey at times, but rules are there to be broken," even his own 'monochrome' one, "the point is, I can get over all I need to convey with what I have. Yes, I do move the lights in the last song, and of course there is some re-focussing while blacked out between songs; but there are also quite a lot of one cue songs."

This leaves Sinclair with a slightly thorny question when the inevitable happens and Adele's stratospheric rise forces an arena tour upon her. "Yes we will have to step up a bit; for me, that decision is centred on how we deal with it at the time and keep what's good about where we are now. When you are lucky enough to be asked back to design for bands there are two things to consider; rules that developed from what you did for that act before; and in contrast the things you changed from show to show." An interesting observation that demonstrates Sinclair's objectivity to his art.

Watching Sinclair's show was like reading a good book: it had that reassuring feel of paper - very textural, very satisfying, and the content had me fully engaged.

Sound

In many ways the efforts of Dave McDonald mixing front-of-house mimic those of LD Rob Sinclair: both are committed to letting the



From top:

Chris Courtney at the Soundcraft desk.

Dave McDonald at the Allen & Heath iLive console.

Joe Campbell, monitors

Lighting designer Rob Sinclair.

artist shine with minimal intervention by themselves. I commented to McDonald how powerfully Adele projects her voice, even during sound-check. "Yes, it makes such a nice change after working with vocalists who don't know how to," he said. McDonald had the PA turned well down at this time, but there was more than enough to hear not only the power but also the character; Adele varies her style according to the emotion she wishes to convey; sometimes her voice is quite nasal, sometimes coloured by a slight honk from the back of the throat; the rasp of her larynx is a frequent effect when she moves it deeper, and the transitions between them appear effortless. The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention. What a lucky chap McDonald is - he smiled the widest of grins.

A quick look reveals that sound company SSE has supplied him with an Allen & Heath iLive 112 and an L-Acoustics Kara PA. "She takes an interest in all the technology out here and learns all the time," he began, "you can't get away with anything. Not only does she know what's possible, she also knows what's too expensive to be a reasonable cost on the tour." This time we both smiled. McDonald has been out front for Adele essentially from the beginning of her career. "I've done the opening act mixes in shit-holes; even then there was no doubt in my mind she'd be successful: she could magnetise a room easily, it was just a matter of when."

I asked about the Kara: this would be my first time to hear L-Acoustics' little baby since I attended the UK launch event at SEE months earlier. "I've always been an L-Acoustics fan," says McDonald. "This system wasn't actually presented to me as ideal for the venue size we'd be visiting, I'd just heard that it was very good for vocal sound and to me the size/weight factor made it a natural choice. In fact, I didn't hear it till the first venue. It was the same with K1, which SSE put in for the Albert Hall show, with Kara

covering the sides: when I listened to the K1 on its own in the afternoon I started to fill up."

How refreshing to encounter an engineer who is unafraid to express an emotional response to a PA: I'd say that's one characteristic that makes him eminently qualified to mix Adele. "Of course, K1 does need a building to suit, it is a Howitzer of a PA," he adds. I'm not sure how Dr Heil would respond to that description, but we're sure it was well intended. "In the US we have been using pick-up PAs local to each venue; that has meant quite a lot of [JBL] Vertech of various sizes. While I can't say I've had a lot of good things to say about that system in the past, they do now, at least, seem to have got it sorted out and I was able to get some excellent results."

Chris Courtney from SSE is system tech. McDonald admitted: "I barely knew him before the tour - we'd briefly worked together on a couple of Mark Ronson shows, but I knew enough to see we both worked from pretty much the same page. With Kara, I found there were a couple of things to adjust, nothing significant. This is a small box system in quite large venues; the super highs and high-mids are great, the low-mids suffer a bit. I'm really missing the fifteens so he's boosted that." The muscle in the low end comes from SB218s, so no lack of cone size there, and Courtney has flown a pair of Kara SB18 Subs at the top of the line array, "but you do have to use two bumpers to do it," he informed. "you can't just hang the Kara boxes straight off the Subs. That said, it's small and it's light - I think each box weighs just 27kg - so at 15 cabinets a side in here with two flown subs we are hanging just 450kg a point. That and the new system manager software make this a nice easy package."

To capture that lovely voice, McDonald has selected a Sennheiser 965 on an SKM200, "a glorious mic for anyone, just so well

behaved, and the pure Nickel body looks the part. I'm using 935s for the BVs; in fact, we've Sennheiser mics on everything - well, maybe the odd Neumann here and there. Probably the most interesting thing I'm using on stage is a couple of Avalon DIs for the acoustic instruments, which sound stunning."

The five-piece band play variously a lap steel guitar, Republic Dobro, banjo and even a Melodica, besides their more conventional instruments. "The piano is a mock-up; inside are two Yamaha Motifs, which certainly sound the part, "but we still have a real Wurliitzer piano, we needed that more authentic hiss and spit. The band are excellent, everyone very controlled, so stage levels are not a big problem, even with all the wedges up there." Though it's hard to imagine even they get too loud.

"The A&H I've been using for three years now, I had it for Florence, then Air and now Adele; it's just easy to use. Anyone who knows a little bit of audio engineering can approach this desk and within a few minutes they're off and running."

I'd seen McDonald quoted as saying, "the biggest challenge is keeping Adele's voice under control because it's so big and powerful; the iLive's compressors are of a quality that holds things down and keeps the sound together." He reinforced that tonight, adding: "The effects and dynamics are the best I've tried; the gates and compressors are spot-on, and the desk is really reliable. The EQ on her vocal is minimal; the compressor is at 2:1 ratio. I use a little touch of EMT plate reverb, a nice mono delay, the EQ and compressor does all the rest and it sounds great."

Monitors

On stage sound is a mix of in-ears and wedges: d&b M4 wedges and a Sennheiser G3 Ear system. "Some of the wedges are just there for weight," began monitor man Joe Campbell. "It's not loud

on stage at all, although here there's loads back from the room." Campbell also uses an iLive 112: "It's my first tour with the desk, it wouldn't have been my first choice because I've never used it before and she's a new artist for me, but it took me 10 minutes to learn to use it and the way it's set out is so simple." He did see one drawback, "there's no link between the scenes in Scene Manager; there's a lot of changes going on up here; lots of mutes and level changes, pan reversal for stereo mixes when musicians shift position on stage, too many to manage manually, and there's no link between scenes, so I'm having to edit each one manually." Just a matter of finding the time then? "Yes, and it still sounds great, the effects are brilliant. I'm using eight different reverbs and they all sound great. The A&H has its really good points." And he didn't seem short of editing time either.

"I'm making 24 mixes, some of the wedges are stereo, and all of the Ears are. I also have a bumper in the drum kit. The mix number builds from the acoustic slot - the keyboard player, for example, sits facing completely the opposite way when he shifts to the more intimate centre stage position; between his hard-wired Ears at the keyboard position, his wedges, and his radio ears for the central huddle, he has six mixes to himself. It's a very dynamic set, some very quiet numbers and some real thumpers, the d&b M4 handles it all very well and the acoustic instruments sound beautiful through them, just ideal."

Campbell is in full agreement with McDonald on the mic' choice for Adele: "Nice pattern control and her technique around the mic is excellent. As with all condensers if you have too much gain you're bound to pick up the stage at some point; she provides so much output that just doesn't happen. What we find is, even at the top of the show, she gets louder. For her mixes I use no EQ and no processing at all, just a high pass filter and a very gentle compressor; with this mic and her voice it couldn't be simpler."

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