

Listening in to the future

LSi looks at how Sennheiser's new MobileConnect technology is helping the Ambassador Theatre Group connect with the future . . .



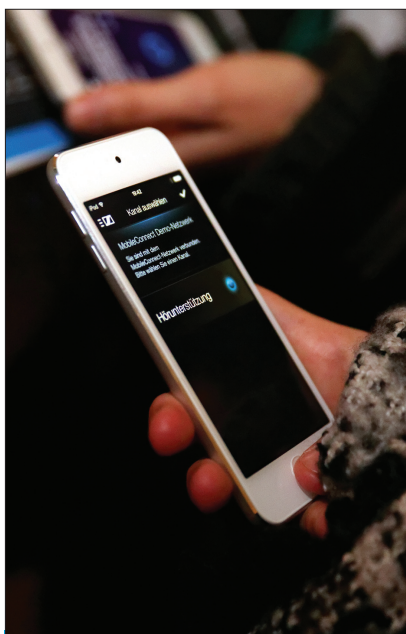
UK - Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG) is the largest owner of theatres in the world, owning and operating a total of 45 venues in the UK and abroad. The company has a policy of supporting its customers' needs and ensuring that their experience is of the highest possible quality. With that in mind, one of its most recent investments is in Sennheiser's MobileConnect technology.

Described as 'an innovative system for theatre, opera, musicals and cinema', MobileConnect streams high quality live audio to a user's smartphone via WiFi. It does this via the Personal Hearing Assistant app, which allows the user to easily adjust many parameters of the sound, according to individual hearing needs.

With so many people now carrying smartphones as a matter of course, bringing assisted hearing into the realm of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) is an obvious development, eliminating the need for a separate hearing aid, such as the headset receiver for an infrared listening system. Sennheiser's MobileConnect can be used to replace traditional infrared and induction loop systems, but its potential is far greater.

This concept was introduced to ATG in 2014, not long after Sennheiser's initial launch of the product, and the technical team at ATG quickly recognised that it could be the ideal solution to replace its existing infrared systems.

"We've always kept an eye out for what technology is available to deliver as high a quality experience to our customers as possible and we have a long relationship with Stage Electrics [UK dealer for Sennheiser equipment], mainly regarding production equipment," says ATG's head of technical operations Stuart Graham. "Stage Electrics' Davie Bell started talking to ATG about MobileConnect and how we might



"The feedback has been good, which is why we're going forward with it. We believe it's the right product and the quality is unquestionable."

Stuart Graham, ATG

support it. It was the right fit at the right time and ATG was happy to be at the beginning of the system trial."

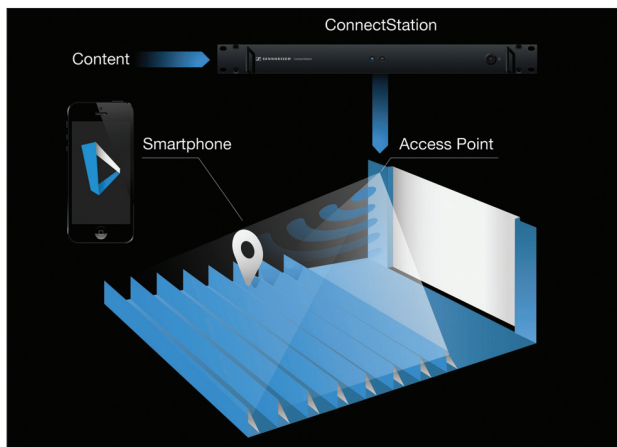
ATG chose to trial MobileConnect in five venues - Trafalgar Studios, the Duke of York's, Apollo Victoria and Harold Pinter theatres, all in London, and the New Victoria Theatre in Woking, Surrey - running alongside the existing induction loop systems. Stage Electrics supplied and installed the technology into the test venues, with Sennheiser's technical team providing initial field testing and continuing on-site support alongside Stage Electrics.

"We put it in as an option a little over a year ago and it very quickly became clear that, if we could get it right, the quality of MobileConnect completely outweighs reinvesting in existing systems," says Stuart. "I give a lot of credit to Davie Bell from Stage Electrics for driving this product through. His passion for it is exceptional, his commitment to us and the product is highly commendable."

Stuart is unequivocal that the potential of MobileConnect in ATG venues is very high. However, understandably, his priority is the experience of ATG's paying customers.

"The technology is right, but we need to keep thinking about the user," he says. "For many, BYOD is a completely new way of thinking, which brings with it a considerable number of challenges. It's not just about clarity, how it links with WiFi and those kinds of technical issues. We know that the ageing population will be a large proportion of our customer base, which is reflected in the fact that we use it for hearing assistance and audio description, and how technology is embraced could be a challenge for ATG and its customers.

"There is also a need for people to get used to the fact that the system is in use



- ↑ How it works . . . a MobileConnect system diagram
- ← Some of ATG's theatres adopting Sennheiser's MobileConnect system. From left to right: Trafalgar Studios, the Apollo Victoria, the Harold Pinter and the Duke of York's

and to be prepared before they come; simple things such as making sure they have a fully charged phone - they're reliant on their device for many things, so they can't sit for three hours using it and have it run out of battery.

"This is all the sort of feedback that we send to Sennheiser, because we're very keen on knowing what our customers think. It's a learning curve for all of us. We need to ensure that we get as much information as possible out to audiences, highlighting the benefits of the technology. However, while BYOD is undoubtedly a challenge at the moment, we know it's the right way to go."

While MobileConnect is currently being used only in auditoriums, ATG has plans to use it in its cloud network, perhaps as part of a single app which brings together a number of customer-focused services. For example, it could also be a latecomers' device, allowing them to watch a monitor anywhere in the venue, or listen to the audio from the production while elsewhere in the theatre.

"The feedback has been good, which is why we're going forward with it. We believe it's

the right product and the quality is unquestionable. It's a new way of working and we need to be looking at the future for our customers," says Stuart. "I think investing in Sennheiser equipment is the right thing. During my career it has been 'the' brand for customers in live entertainment. I think they're definitely the people who can deliver this technology to a high standard."

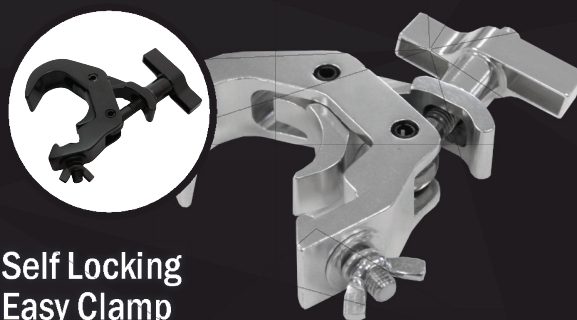
"In our continuous journey of making the future of audio tangible, we're glad to be collaborating with companies with a similar mindset such as ATG, that is striving to introduce new technologies and enhance user experiences in every possible way," says Sennheiser manager - global strategic alliances, Nick Pemberton. "We consider them to be a strategic partner, alongside existing partner Stage Electrics, whose team has understood what MobileConnect can offer, both now and in the future as it continues to develop. Working as a three-way partnership is invaluable and helps us all to develop the right solution for the end user." ☺

- www.atg.co.uk
- www.sennheiser.co.uk
- www.stage-electrics.co.uk

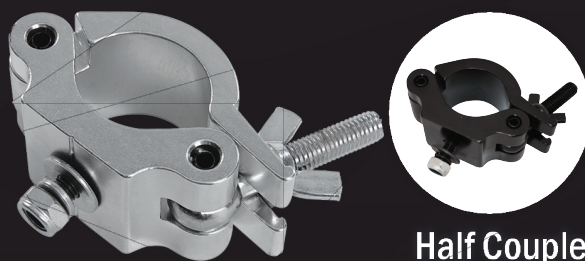
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