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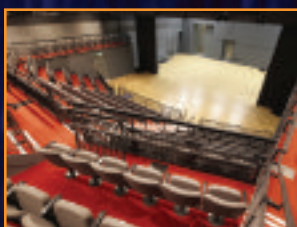
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Snow Patrol: Building Empires

My own natural exuberance for a live concert is rarely disappointed. As a former practitioner, I nearly always find it possible to unearth some clever technical ploy or artistic innovation to redeem an otherwise lackluster performer - or vice versa. John Broderick, the long-time designer for Metallica, once gently upbraided me for being too enthusiastic about rock shows. "Do you always have to find something positive in every show?" he asked. Broderick is a talented designer who knows just how to cast a big picture to match the bombast of one of 'rock's' great live acts - and once more I'm going to have to scratch his itch. This latest outing by Snow Patrol is one of the most coherent and enchanting interpretations of music, lights and video I've seen in a while. Want to know why?

Some shows are renowned for their technical achievements - the last tours by Take That and U2 being prime examples of how science and engineering enabled the creative team to render something truly spectacular, as befits the Stadium context: transport Es Devlin, Mark Fisher, Willie Williams, Patrick Woodroffe *et al* back two thousand years and they would probably be gainfully employed at the Circus Maximus in Rome.

The Snow Patrol show has some of that about it. The technology employed is, without question, amongst the best available, but there's no jaw-dropping Big Man or Claw here: everything is 'off the shelf' equipment that any of us can access, and that makes it very

significant. What's interesting for me, and I hope for you, dear readers, is that this feast of delight is a product of a moment in time. What do I mean by that? Well, Marc Carolan, Davy Sherwin, Robin Haddow and Blue Leach have all been collaborating on Snow Patrol tours for many years, but they've never achieved this level of harmony before; that's about opportunity, familiarity, and the fact that the band and their management are in a similar head-space at the same time. Luck, in a word. It's my belief that people make their own luck, and once you start to dig into the process of this tour you can see how efforts here have conspired to produce the unexpected . . .

Lighting & Video

As with the last time Snow Patrol appeared in these pages, the visual element is very much a tripartite undertaking led by LD Davy Sherwin, with Blue Leach making video contribution and Robin Haddow as the Catalyst programmer - although that title is to under-sell his role, as we'll see.

The physical design is defined by six flown 'flake' elements, each about five meters long and three wide, shaped rather like a bird's footprint. Flown horizontally together in a circle they look like the hexagram form of a snow flake, hence the name. Parallel paired horizontal trusses to the side and a chevron truss to front carry most of the lighting. To the rear of stage hangs a 60ft by 30ft Stealth screen, gauze in front, cyclorama behind. There is no stage set to speak of, just a smattering of keyboard and drum risers.



Live from Sheffield's Motorpoint Arena, February 2012

Words and pictures by Steve Moles

I started by talking to Rob Haddow, who made a typical comment: "Nobody is quite sure of my job description." The fact remains, he is the conduit through which flows the creative element from Leach - and as Leach himself said: "It's Robin who has the knowledge to enable us to run the video without the usual Kayak Switcher, subordinating that role to the Catalyst."

Why would anyone want to do that? "The video has two main elements," explained Haddow, "60% appears on the Stealth screen at the rear; 40% on the snowflake parts of the lighting rig. These are populated with Barco FLX-24, the custom pixel fit stuff used for the U2 screen." (All the video equipment hails from the good offices of XL Video, including the two Catalysts, though the Hog PCs used to control them are Haddow's.) "The flakes are relatively easy to map - I send the screen guys six identically-mapped bits. Like most Barco stuff it is easy, considering the shape. The show comprises about half made content, half camera feeds. Davy [Sherwin] commissioned the content. It came from two sources, Atticus Finch - they did a lot for us last time, but we were a bit short of time for this tour so added content came from Knifedge. It's all been designed so we can bounce between Stealth and flakes."

What that means in reality requires explanation. The flakes are each suspended on three hoists and, under Kinesys control, reposition from time to time - though the moves are measured (Sherwin is not one for over-egging the pudding). The first two flakes descend

somewhere around song five; like two figurative jet airliners they hang at an angle behind and above the band. When Haddow says, 'bounce between,' what that means in visual terms is that animated content can stream outward from say, an explosive centre point of the Stealth screen, and that image will also carry forward onto the flakes as if front-projected. Because the flakes, whether just one or many, hang physically at points downstage of the Stealth, the 3D effect is either disturbing or magical, depending on the content - often a mix of the two sources, camera feed and content.

"The camera stuff is generally mixed to the content," Haddow confirmed. "It was Blue's idea to get rid of the Kayak and turn the Catalyst into a vision mixer to manage the content and cameras. Using MIDI to trigger the Hog PCs that in turn control the Catalyst, Blue has 15 cameras, and he cuts to six primary feeds to the Cats. I programmed where to take each of those six camera feeds and place them."

The pre-programming has been quite intense. The content has deliberate holes left in it for live material - pale, transparent areas where camera image can be blended over. These 'hole' destinations vary from song to song and are mobile, so there's a lot of predetermination going on in the programming of the Catalysts. As Leach cuts, he has to consider carefully which of the six possible feeds he cuts to, and where that will appear in the overall visual matrix.



From top:

Video director Blue Leach with the 'Tank Cam'.

Lighting designer Davy Sherwin.

Robin Haddow, Catalyst programmer.

Facing page:

Left: A once familiar sight - Marc Carolan's Midas XL4 at FOH surrounded by outboard racks . . .

Right: Hog PC and Playback Wing at FOH.

How does the Catalyst cope with this unconventional additional burden? "It manages quite well actually, even with the HD content. Richard Bleasdale has increased the amount of video inputs it can handle to 20, though we're actually using 15." I learned from Haddow that the wizard Bleasdale, creator of Catalyst, became a father during the production build-up: as an old colleague, I'd like to send my congratulations. "With the destinations programmed, there is a stable side to the show, but Blue can still busk on top of his feeds, adding colours or whatever. He uses MIDI notes mapped to flash buttons on my Hog PCs . . ." At which point Leach interrupted with, "So I have a tablet of buttons from which I can trigger various whizz-bangery." I have checked the BBC technical glossary and have yet to find whizz-bangery - but I like it.

"The video is chapterised," (another handy Leach'ism) "much like the lighting, with predetermined cue points - verse, chorus etc. So there is empathy between the two media. Within the holes I can swap the camera that feeds them instantly, though the hole remains the same, so it is possible to respond to the performance while maintaining the structure. I use a couple of Launchpads from Novation for the MIDI controllers to the Hog PCs. What's interesting is that this control format has cut down the latency to maybe a couple of frames - so for that drum riff, I don't have to anticipate the end and maybe fade off early, I can cut it to the wire."

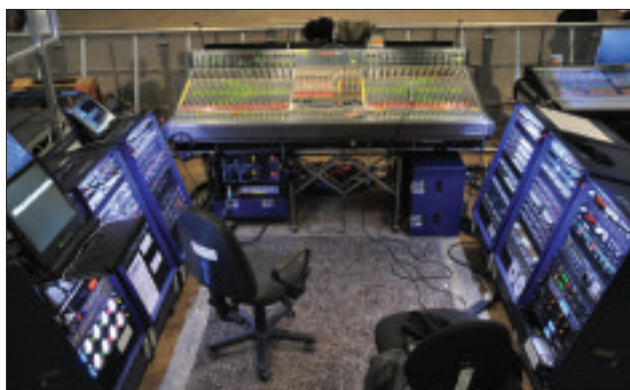
Most of the 15 cameras are fixed: bullet cams on mic stands, Robocams up in the rig or beneath the feet of the drummer. Just three are manned - a pole cam, one FOH and the XL crew chief uses a hand-held from the pit or onstage. "I have grouped them as you would with moving heads in a light rig, stage left

group, stage right, or all the Robos, all the Bullets. It means I can quickly grab cameras that are all of a look."

The looks are quite distinct, like the camera beneath the drummer. Leach has several that peer up the nostrils of the artist (figuratively speaking) or are in very close proximity to the face and extreme wide angle for a slightly surreal, distorted image. "The point is," he explains, "they're not standard shots from left and right that you typically see from IMAG. If I want to focus on a single member of the band, I can get them from a myriad of different and unusual angles, through perhaps five or six different lenses. Images can be sent direct to screen, unaffected, and still look attractive."

A great deal of what appears on screen arrives with a sense of urgency. That's not to say it's ENG style - like Andrew Marr reporting from outside 10 Downing Street - but there is a palpable sense of immediacy. And style-wise the delivery is never less than unexpected, monochrome cut-outs in stretched polygonal frames redolent of some 1960s album cover, for example.

"Thanks to Davy Sherwin, I've been encouraged to think outside the box," says Leach - who then picks up a Nintendo Wii hand control, shakes it like a maraca and the jumbled camera images on the Stealth screen start to jerk in time to his shakes. (The Wii motion control is linked via Bluetooth receiver in a laptop running Lightjams DMX lighting control software to the Catalyst). "I have also taken some GoPro cameras - the self-recording, wristband-mounted sports units favoured by skydivers and the like - stuck them on, say, the bass players' wrists, and then play it back live at the same point in the



song as when we recorded it. It looks the part." It certainly provides some unexpected shots.

Leach had already alluded to the freedoms granted by Sherwin: it was time to discover what his plan was. Sherwin is a softly spoken man who quietly gets on with his job. When I've reviewed Snow Patrol's shows in the past, I have to my shame left Sherwin somewhat in the shadows, allowing louder voices to harness my attention. "We wanted to get away from anything that resembled what we'd done before," he told me. "I also wanted a three-dimensional feel to the show as far as video was concerned - a sense of realism. That was what led to the flakes as flown shapes; something that comes through towards the audience. What we didn't want was some big, flat, solid landscape screen

across the back, though of course that's what we have with the Stealth, but you'd never know it."

I cannot emphasise enough how true that is: if nothing else, this is the most ephemeral use of rear screen I've encountered. Sherwin continues: "The flake is the band's logo; we had previously used the shape in truss form, but only as finger trusses without the little fins to the sides. These are much more solid, well-developed versions."

Tour lighting supplier HSL made the flake forms from standard truss with custom-built joints for the side fins. "They also made the special brackets that hold the [Clay Paky] Alpha Beam 700s at the tip of each part of the flake," says Sherwin. "It's a lovely bit of engineering. XL then cut the PCBs to suit,

inserted the FLX LEDs to populate the frame and we were done."

Sherwin did admit the flakes were a touch space hungry: "The side fins flip up and over, and two flakes ride together, but at five metres long, four fill one truck - and they are quite heavy." If the tour were any longer at this its full arena scale, then I'm sure production manager Robin Scott would address this issue. "The flakes are also edged with 30 Chroma-Q DB4 MK2s to make a strong light source LED marker to the edge; I run them off my Catalyst. I did think to do their job just with the Barco LEDs, but these make a strong contrasting light source."

"Originally, it was to be a single-piece, six-pointed snow flake that would raise and







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lower, but we soon realised this way would be much more flexible. In terms of lighting the show, I've worked back-to-front. Normally, I'd do what we all do, and program in basic looks for each song, then build. This time I looked at the content - I had already given the designers what colour palette would be appropriate for each song - and then looked at how I might light the stage around the imagery. With the content, I didn't want a movie for each song, though some is quite literal, some is CGI, but having a lot of the songs set to a definite colour leaves me to determine tone and intensity. Then I'd animate the lighting to move with the visual. That has allowed me to avoid that 'lighting show / video show' separation. With no predetermined looks I've been able to blend the emotion of light and video, and having done that I attend to the more theatrical demands of applying band wash where required, or lighting focus to a specific musician."

"Moving on from the content - playing arenas means you do need IMAG of some sort, so once content had a determined style song-to-song, the second requirement was for it to provide space to blend live image. The choice to not be IMAG-heavy - to provide live images of the band but not in any way a conventional context - was my idea. Yes, I like to see them clearly for the occasional pop number where the audience will expect that close-up of singer Gary's face, but not every song."

That said, when it does occur there is a noticeable lift in the audience, though a song like *Run* is pretty uplifting in itself. "When that happens, I raise the moment. I have a mix of i-Pix BB 4s and four-cell linear Moles to light the audience," says Sherwin. Some conventionals cannot be ignored.

Because of the physical form of Sherwin's rig, and his lamp selection, his lighting is almost never flat on - lots of side or back, often asymmetric - this in itself adding to the sense of 3D engendered by the Stealth and flake combination. "Out of six days

production rehearsal, I had just three with the band and ended up with a lot to do towards the end because of the backwards approach to the lighting. Watching what the cameras are doing and how that blends with the content, and how you might then apply lighting on top, takes time and attention."

Sherwin programs his own Roadhog Full Boar (HSL supply a back-up), and his own laptop Catalyst, so he was indeed a busy chap. "I'm really happy with the desk, and I have had great support from HSL. When I'm designing a show on this scale visiting their shop is like going to the PLASA Show - they have a really good selection of everything."

Listening to Sherwin speak now, it's apparent he's broken some rules and responded instinctively to the approach he set himself. That it works is because he involved the skills of others to support him, principally Haddow and Leach, though by his own admission, "this did start as a bit of a monster," - but the effort was well worth it.

Sound

I don't know what it is about me and monitor men - Adam Taylor left the tour the day

before I arrived. "He's gone to get married," production manager Robin Scott told me, "something he arranged before the tour was announced, so the band couldn't really refuse." One of Taylor's good friends, Risteard Cassidy, took his place, though for obvious reasons he was in no position to discourse on the virtues or otherwise of Taylor's monitor rig - a Sennheiser ew300 G3 Series IEM system.

Front-of-house engineer Marc Carolan almost slipped my grip as well by catching a lengthy nap prior to the show, so I interviewed him a couple of days later over the phone during their three-day sell-out stint at London's O2. I took a structured approach and asked him to run through his rationale from stage to desk to PA, starting with microphone choices - but he had the O2 on his mind . . .

"What was good was, having played the big arenas in the US quite a bit now with Muse, the O2 has comparable character - it has big low end tail, you might call it. The efficiency of the way we do the lows now as opposed to how we might have done it in the past, handles it well. You don't get the swimming pool effect."

We will get to the lows in due course, but let's start at the artist end of the snake. Most of Carolan's mic choices are typical, but one or two stand out: "The Royer R-122L is basically a live version of the R-122, a more durable version with the same sensitivity. We did a lot of work on the last Muse tour with Royer. It worked for Muse and it does for Snow Patrol for kind of the same reason. Nathan [Connolly] has a lot of extremity from his guitar; it's not the normal rock sound. His guitars are standard but his effects sound has a lot of HF going on. Those brittle bits at the top, the Royer smoothes them out - I don't have to hack at it. That's my approach, rather than ask the artist to tone something down. I prefer to let them do what they want to do, and find a way to manage it. I use two DIs, the Radial J48 and the Avalon U5. It's interesting: the Radial is a workhorse





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and very dependable; the Avalon on the guitars gives me more tonality. I used them on the piano for Muse but it can add colouration not suited to this band, but for guitars it has proved ideal. Chas Cole acoustic sounds just beautiful and full of lovely character."

I reminded Carolan about a slightly non-conformist approach to snare drums he uses on Muse. "Oh, I'm still doing that thing with the Neumann 105 vocal mic on the snare bottom, coupled with the 57 on top, I find I don't have to overly EQ. I get a quick dynamic response from the Neumann that works well with the 57 and I still get it nice and bright with less EQ."

Out front, Carolan has what used to be a familiar sight - a huge desk surrounded by no less than three tall racks each side. I always feel quite nostalgic when I see this - there's something about all the twinkly lights. "The Midas XL4 is still the best desk ever made for live rock bands. I always use them for my two main clients, in fact I've put my money where my mouth is and bought one."

With eyes firmly fixed on earnings from ticket revenues these days, is he never on the receiving end of management pressure to downscale and go digital to reduce his real-estate holding? "Snow Patrol hired me because of the sound I got for Muse, and I find there is no argument with management or promoters about real-estate out front. When you work in the arena domain, that argument doesn't really hold water, especially if the floor audience is standing. Go and visit a show with digital desks and it's not that much smaller. Add in the fact of the ever-growing domain of lights and video and I just don't buy it."

He continues: "That said, I'm happy to work in digital. I've recently done some shows for The Cure with a Midas PRO6. Robert [Smith] likes things to be repeatable - he's very ears-on. But, look at it this way, in the studio world everyone switched to Euphonix when they came along and threw out all their Neves: looks what's happened there. There's no doubt that something like the XL4 will never be built again - it's a completely over-engineered piece of kit - but I'll use one as long as I can, it's just perfect."

In my part of Yorkshire there is a robust society of steam engine restoration enthusiasts; maybe in the not-too-distant future we'll see retired sound men clubbing together to rebuild old analogue desks?

Carolan's racks are filled with many tried-and-trusted tools - BSS 901s abound, so too dbx 160A and 166XLs, plus half-a-dozen XTA D2s, but there are also faceplates less well-known. "The SPL Transient Designer - that's been around a while now but I've only recently started using it. It's an analogue device with just two controls, attack and sustain. I like simple controls - the less the better. I use it for kick, snare and the toms. In an arena it can shorten the tail of the kick and tighten it up. The toms I have heavily gated to stop the cymbals flying in, so when I add sustain after the gate I find I can be precise and use as little as I need. But watch out - especially with attack - I find if

I overdo the attack on the snare then you get ear fatigue because it's hitting that same frequency every time. I use the KuSH Fatso for the acoustic; the original Fatso replicates that classic tape distortion/saturation. Tape does it at around 16-18kHz, the Fatso does it slightly lower. So if you find when they play the acoustic so hard that the tops starts to sound a little broken, then the Fatso tones it down; it also has a good compression function. I still like to have lots of 901s and I'm using more Distressors [Empirical Labs EL8s]. With the new band member as well I'm getting more block harmonies."

Up in the air Carolan has his familiar d&b J System, all his kit, I should mention, is supplied by Skan PA Hire. Their tours are easy to spot and Snow Patrol was no exception: each side of stage sits one huge rolling rack dolly with a wall of D12 amps and power distro within. A hopper on top is home to the entire signal cable and motor power harness that runs up to the flown system. It always reminds me of the huge PAR can light rigs I used to run in the 80s - fast and efficient - for arena touring I often wonder why more sound companies don't do it? "We still do the basic flown array with J-Subs flown behind, but Skan have been experimenting with poke out."

Poke out? "Rather than flying the subs straight behind the J Array so it follows the direct path of the mains, you poke it slightly out so it's covering most of the mains and a shade of the side hang as well. Matt is achieving fantastically even coverage - walk up and down the floor and you'll notice no variation." I did and he was right. "We have J-Infra on the floor. The mix between the Infra and the flown J-Subs is more about letting each box do what it is designed to do; the Infra from a musical point of view reaches deeper, it feels like I'm getting an extra octave, but what's important is I'm not reaching to boost frequencies so the tonality of the Infra isn't forced - it's doing what it's supposed to. That keeps the Subs in the air much cleaner."

It was my observation that this is a quiet show, or rather that Carolan takes every opportunity to rein things back if the song allows. This dynamic range in the performance allows a lot of hearing space, an important factor with a band that can build very dense musical landscapes for some of their more anthemic numbers. Personally, I often find it hard to differentiate the extra 5Hz of reach that takes the Infras down to 27Hz, but here the rewards were abundantly clear.

Despite missing Carolan on show day, I did manage half an eye on his band sound-check. Gary Lightbody was running the band through a song, two other band members contributing ideas on how they might properly fill a perceived void in the rhythm envelope. "They'll probably never perform it on this tour," Carolan was equivocal, "well, maybe in London".

With his established reputation as both live and studio mixer, I asked if he brings the more directive element of studio work to this band? "I do get pulled in. The band knows I have a musical studio background, so they will ask how something affects the sound, especially when dealing with density, 'is it the right sounding density?' I find the best policy is to answer as honestly as you can - though sometimes you might hold back a little for political reasons. Muse have a minimalist approach to such things, Snow Patrol a maximalist approach - that makes it interesting for me."

I'd not considered that before, but he's right - Muse create a massive sound from little, Snow Patrol are more layered. "With Snow Patrol there are lots of elements going on and I'm making sense of that and determining what is relevant. The band are good musicians - Gary especially has a clear picture in his head of how it should sound."

Seems to me there's a clear picture in everyone's head on this tour. As I said at the beginning, all the best technology is in use here, as is the case on most productions at this level - and though there was no gee-whizz element to make it stand out technologically, that didn't stop it being special. I've read several newspaper reviews that also noticed - sound, lights, video, band - they all seemed to be in the midst of an incredibly creative spurt. Enjoy it while you can.



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