

Afrikaans is Groot keeps getting better!

Posted on April 10, 2024



Afrikaans is Groot (AIG) celebrates the deep connection and love that people have for Afrikaans music, whether it's enjoying it around a braai, rugby game or singing along in church, and just when you think the show couldn't get any better, it surprises you. The production held at Time Square in Pretoria at the close of 2023 pulled out all the stops. For the first time DiGiCo, incorporating two Quantum 338 Digital Mixing Consoles, a Quantum 225 and an SD10 was integrated into the show. Additionally, there was an extensive lighting setup boasting close to 600 Robe lighting and Claypaky fixtures, all controlled on the grandMA3 platform.



Ian Vos, alongside Brendon Hargroves (CFO) and Arnold Coleske (MD), serves as the technical director at Coleske Group, a subsidiary of Warner Music Africa, ultimately owned by Warner Music Group in the United States. "Coleske Artists Management is a record label that represents their own artists in South Africa. Afrikaans is Groot is also owned by Coleske Group and the best Afrikaans platform in the music industry worldwide," he clarifies. "I oversee AIG for Coleske Group under Warner Music in South Africa, managing all technical aspects of the shows from design to execution, including budgeting."



One of the main challenges with AIG is that it stands alone in its genre. "AIG has consistently been our company's flagship, and enhancing the production each year requires a great deal of brainstorming, equipment sourcing, and idea generation," Ian explains. Thanks to reliable partnerships with various technical and service providers, the production is a finely tuned operation.

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MGG has been the go-to for all technical needs, providing lighting, sound, and rigging for AIG for the past eight years. AV & Beyond handled this year's AV and design. Hayley Bennett-Freidin (AV & Beyond) and Barry Pretorius were appointed Creative Directors with AV / Watchout in the capable hands of Walter Pretorius. Key roles in lighting design were taken on by Joshua Cutts and Andre Siebrits from Visual Frontier, while Murray Lubbe served as the sound engineer alongside Gert Watson on monitors.



"The technical team are amazing," says Ian. "And coming to the Sun Arena improved the show. We hit a bit of a ceiling, literally, in our previous church auditorium because that ceiling couldn't handle any rigging, so it was a nice way to improve the show, especially in the arena. We never expected it to be this big. If you look at Afrikaans as a language and the demographics of the people who listen to Afrikaans music, it's quite small compared to other genres. But the nice thing is that this is something to be proud of and it's close to home to everyone who attends the show. The patrons sit here because it's their show, not ours, and that's how Afrikaans people work! It's actually so cool. They've taken ownership, they give us advice on what they like and don't like and they're very honest, like Afrikaans people are. We enjoy it and it's something to be proud of."



When it came to selecting DiGiCo for AIG, it's worth noting that Ian has always been deeply invested in exploring new technologies—it was a deliberate choice. As a seasoned music producer having worked at three of the biggest music labels namely EMI, Universal, and BMG, his passion lies in music and the pursuit of sonic excellence. "I've always kept up with the times, researching, going overseas often, engaging with developers and asking the right questions to get ideas that can work and ideas that you know cannot work, which is more important."



"I can sonically hear the difference with DiGiCo. There is a massive combination from the 32-bit preamps on the SD-Rack to the full integration of DiGiCo mixing consoles in the digital network."



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He says that DiGiCo has truly made a huge impact this year, saying it's not just about the sound source or dynamics; it's also about how seamlessly the platform integrates all components, making the work smoother and faster. Accomplished Audio Engineer, Murray Lubbe, took the leap of faith by jumping on the DiGiCo platform and grasped the workflow in a very short time despite being new to the platform.

The audio system comprised a Quantum 338 Digital Mixing Console and a Quantum 225 at front of house, a second Quantum 338 and SD10 at monitors all connected via Optocore with multiple SD-Racks. "Usually, we would spend two or three days to load in audio with all the various consoles and protocols that have to talk to each other, but this year we spent a morning setting up the DiGiCo network," explains Günther Müller, Project Manager at MGG. "We spent a few days at the office to make sure the network worked, so there was a lot of pre-prep, but once on site, it was seamless to get everything in and working. It made a huge difference, not just in the setup time for us as technicians, but the operators having peace of mind with a system less complicated and extremely stable. Support was incredible not only from our internal experts but also from DWR Distribution's Kyle Robson and Jaco Beukes."



Murray Lubbe has been with AIG since day one, from his initial role on pre-production for the very first show and ever since in his current position as an audio engineer at FOH, and says music is his life. He plays, sings and is a freelance music producer, regularly working with Coleske artists which means he knows the artists performing at AIG and works with them almost on a daily basis. They also trust him so that synergy helps when putting on a big show like AIG.



"The direction of this production at the end of 2023 was wonderful," Murray comments. "DiGiCo proved to be fantastic. It's a bit more modern than what I'm used to and adjusting to the workflow took a little getting used to. The end result is that it sounds great, I can hear a difference, it's just fantastic. We've opted to go for a Dante solution on wireless microphones for vocals, the idea was to keep the signal chain digital as much as possible with little conversions which played a big part towards a better end sound. All other wired microphones pass through

the 32-bit preamps on the SD-Rack which I was really happy with as they sounded great. Kyle Freemantle, a senior freelance audio and system engineer, was responsible for setting up the PA, he is truly the PA whisperer and gets it running just the way I want it. The pressure of all the elements running together is crucial to a successful show and hopefully, they trust me enough to make sure it sounds good up front live. It's a big band with brass and strings in addition to whatever we had in the studio. There are a lot of track elements so building the audio picture that sounds good live has its own challenges compared to a studio environment. I want live sound to sound as good as a production built in the studio and that's the end goal for me. Having control over the entire production of what people hear, both in the studio and live, makes me tick."

Günther Müller faced several challenges, including time constraints, the scale of AIG, and the exodus of freelancers to international markets like Dubai and Saudi Arabia. "But for me, this event is a passion," he says with a smile. "It's one of the most technically demanding locally produced shows, and because of its complexity, it pushes us to be creative and stay ahead of the game. We've introduced many new elements. It's the largest deployment of grandMA3 consoles in the country so far, with 72 universes running for full control of all fixtures in the rig. We have individual pixel control over most of the lights."

The system includes MGG's grandMA3 full-size, grandMA3 light and Command Wing XT consoles, along with a large network processor, a medium network processor, and a collection of MA 8Port and 4Port nodes. "Marlene Riley from DWR actually flew in four new nodes for us that arrived just in time for the show," Günther adds.



A significant improvement was the creation of a "Monster computer" running Depence, a potent offline visualization software. This allowed lighting designer Andre Siebrits to program most of the show with exceptional accuracy and real-time precision offline. "Andre's programming is incredibly detailed, and the effects he produced are absolutely phenomenal," said Günther. "The grandMA3 platform has given him the opportunity to explore new techniques, and the effects engine on the phaser allowed him to create extraordinary effects. I attended all of the shows, and each time, Andre managed to surprise us with something new. There were lots of hidden 'easter eggs' or gems he included in the design. Joshua and Andre truly created a stunning lighting show."



Each year, AIG has to have a distinct look. How do you make it grander? How do you make it better? At the 2023 finale, there's a flying rocket that ascends into the roof, aerial acts, and props complimenting the line-up of well-loved artists including Bok van Blerk, Demi Lee Moore, Riaan Benadé, Riana Nel, Jay, Ricus Nel, Appel, Jo Black, Karlien van Jaarsveld, Dodo Nyoka, Ruhan du Toit and Corlea.

This year the set design was by the AV and Beyond team who were responsible for the stage and LED layout. The brief was to let LED screens drive the base of the design, and for that reason, there are LED panel fingers in the roof and a substantial LED screen on stage, with moving LEDs on the left and right. It truly looked amazing. Additionally, it's worth noting that Tailormade Group, the sister company of AV and Beyond, brought magic to the stage with their dance performances, significantly enhancing the show.

MGG integrated their Jolt fixtures, all 120 of them! "We have 60 Jolt bars and 60 Jolt panels, used to create fantastic patterned effects that traverse the rig. "But the star of the show was our chandelier, consisting of three rings in the middle of the stage, suspended by 16 ProLyft motors controlled by a Kinesys system," Günther adds. "They move during the performance. Every song has multiple cues in Kinesys, resulting in close to 84 different positions that the truss moves through. We also incorporated all 84 Robe LEDbeam 150s into the show, so the combination of all those lights with the movement is absolutely beautiful."



The show included close to 600 lighting fixtures and featured four RoboSpots, two of which were recently acquired by MGG. "Initially, we had four followspot operators, but we doubled that," Günther elaborates. "This comprised of four traditional followspot operators and four others handling the RoboSpots. We positioned followspots at the back of the stage for the first time, offering both front and back light. There are some tender moments in the show, and we were able to create amazing effects, especially for the camera. We could tone down the front and back light wash and make it more intimate because we had the front and back light followspots on the artists."



Joshua Cutts has been with AIG since 2015, working as a lighting designer. He comments, "It's

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one of those shows where we have the freedom to choose the best lights available. The team has been incredibly supportive, providing whatever fixtures we need. This year, we're managing one of the largest setups yet, with 575 lights controlled across 72 universes and over 31,000 parameters on the MA3. The MA3 performed flawlessly." Joshua and Andre also made sure that they ran every single light at its maximum parameter count and tried to use every feature of each light at least once.



"We really nailed it with the grandMA3, and Andre's programming of effects and timing added a whole new dimension," Josh adds. "For me, and I hate saying this because every year is fantastic, but from a lighting point of view I enjoyed the show more than I have any other in years. The energy and focus of the entire team made working on AIG a joy. When all the departments come together, the final result is truly spectacular. It was a lot of fun!"

Photos courtesy Anriette Van Wyk