
Ancienne Belgique stays versatile with DiGiCO

Ancienne Belgique is steeped in musical history and is arguably Brussels' most important live music venue. A multi-application space spanning several floors and incorporating two live rooms and a recording studio, it is often the first stop on the touring calendar for most international acts, as well as a hotspot for up and coming local bands. Over the last 18 months, the venue has invested in two DiGiCO consoles in a bid to stay as flexible as possible: first, an SD5, which sits at monitor position and most recently, an SD12 which is now the venue's go-to FOH board.

Ancienne Belgique first opened its doors in 1994 and underwent a massive two-year renovation to create a multi-purpose musical hub. Today, it boasts a superbly kitted out 2,000-capacity main hall; the club, which is a great sounding 280-capacity room dedicated to bands on the circuit as well as the Brussels local scene; and a state-of-the-art recording studio.

"All of our crew are capable of doing everything, and what's nice is that we are also interchangeable between the main hall and the club," opens Ancienne Belgique's technical manager Mark Vrebos. "For example, a rock and roll show might be all-standing and full to the brim, but if we have jazz music we might choose to make it all seated, or half and half. We can also bring the capacity of the main hall down from 2,000 to 800 if needed. It's basically a very versatile space. Then we have the club, which is a fantastic place for local acts to showcase their talents."

"We knew we wouldn't be able to use our good old analogue boards forever; we keep them alive, and we still use them because it's good to have both options. But it was getting more and more difficult, and we didn't want to wait until it was too late to make a digital investment" Vrebos explains. "Today, we absolutely need digital. Sometimes we're doing festivals with five bands on stage, all of them doing a soundcheck, so that is not going to work if we're analogue! And the age of engineers is changing too, so we have found the demand for digital is way higher than it used to be at festivals and shows."

In addition to the sonic quality that comes with a DiGiCO, it was the familiarity of the brand with travelling engineers that drew Ancienne Belgique to opt for them.

"In my experience everyone knows a DiGiCO, so when they see one they're happy and everyone knows at least the basics of how a DiGiCO works," reveals Vrebos. "I also really love the analogue channel strip feel – the whole 'top down' thing. It stays with analogue logic, top to bottom, and that is extremely important to me. And then there's the flexibility of the consoles – the fact you can do anything on them, and that they're so fast to navigate."

The SD12 was chosen for its high power, functionality, and small footprint.

"All DiGiCO desks have that reliability, but the fact that the SD12 is more recent, with newer technology, was very appealing. That was the idea behind investing in it" Vrebos continues. "Also, the new 32-bit preamps are built into the SD12, which are incredible sounding; the noise floor is now so low, and you get a cleaner, better overall sonic, and a way cleaner signal to noise ratio, which is very important. And, of course, the small footprint makes them ideal."

Ancient Belgique is very important in the Belgian scene, and across Europe: think Paradiso in Amsterdam, or London's Aventura Apollo. But what is particularly impressive about the place as an organisation is its unparalleled commitment to Brussels's grassroots artists.

"Every year, we try to raise money from the local government to help some of our young bands make an inroad into the music business. That could be putting on a gig, providing a space to rehearse, or offering the use of our recording studio. We also have a full camera system, so we have helped bands with promo videos, too."

Basically, we try to adapt to whatever they need” Vrebos concludes. “Artists and engineers really enjoy playing here due to our setup and production managers also love coming here. They know that we have everything they could possibly need and that they’re going to get a great sound thanks to our great PA systems and fantastic sounding consoles. It’s quite rare that a venue like this can guarantee that.”

