

Guildford School of Acting takes students into the audio future
with Quantum 338

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Part of the University of Surrey and one of the most highly regarded theatre schools in the UK, Guildford School of Acting (GSA) prides itself on providing its Theatre Production course students with a rounded education in all aspects of technical production. Part of this, is ensuring the equipment they learn on is not only cutting-edge but prepares them for their professional careers. To this end, GSA has recently invested in a DiGiCo Quantum 338, purchased through Autograph Sound.

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“As a drama conservatoire, GSA is renowned for its musical theatre and actor-musician training, creating many opportunities for the Theatre Production students to support the sound needs of this diverse performance programme,” says Gareth Evans, Teaching Fellow in Sound at GSA. “When we were looking to upgrade our existing SD8, we knew we wanted a console that both represented an industry standard for our students and would support the efficient workflows needed to facilitate the quantity and quality of shows. Although we considered the current SD line as an option, it seemed we stood at the precipice of a technological change in our industry and had to make a decision; to be facing the present as educators or to be facing the future. Thanks to the generous support of the institution, the choice was clear.”

For Evans, the Quantum 338 represents a long-term investment which will keep both GSA’s training and research relevant for its students for a long time to come. “The amazing way DiGiCo has ensured backwards compatibility with its technology and a consistency in its interface design means our students can leave being trained on the 338 and be comfortable with jumping on any of the SD range on consoles in the field,” he says.

The course has an annual intake of around 30 students per year, split between the disciplines of stage management, construction and scenic arts, lighting and sound. In the first year, they cover all topics, providing them with an overall understanding of a theatre’s technical departments. In their second year, they choose a discipline to specialise in.

“That’s something that’s quite different about GSA,” says GSA sound technician, Chris Hallam. “It’s really good for our students to know about all the disciplines. If the lighting tech has been trained in sound as well, when the lighting department is asked to move a light to accommodate the PA, they understand why they’re being asked to do it. And of course, having a tool like the Quantum 338 is a big incentive for everyone to want to learn about sound.”

Furthering that aim are the Quantum 338’s three control surfaces and its display layout with individual channel strip control, which allows multiple students to get more hands-on time in a

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learning session, but also allow GSA's technical staff, or their variety of visiting freelance professionals, to support a student on their first mix without intruding on their physical space.

"This was something which seemed out of reach until this console," notes Evans. "The transparent 32-Bit preamps and output cards allow us to undertake critical listening exercises and practice with the students to a level not possible before. Hopefully this will lead to an appreciation of high-quality audio for students and a new level of clarity and dynamic range. This will also allow us to showcase our performance students in the best possible way, whether live, streamed or recorded."

The Quantum 338's Nodal processing technology, Spice Rack and Mustard channel processing will also help students to adapt to the hybrid nature of theatre performance in coming months, with Spice Rack offering exciting new and growing ways of processing audio which previously would have required additional outboard solutions. Evans is looking forward to students exploring the sonic possibilities and developing their creative and critical ears.

"Additionally, the diversity of digital connectivity is wonderful for exposing our students to as many different methods of transferring audio as possible, with the flexibility of the DMI interfaces allowing for future proof expansion," he continues. "We can now offer Optical, DANTE, Waves, DiGiGrid, USB and of course MAD1, allowing students to explore and implement these across their training and be ready for using these technologies in industry, and we look forward to being able to adapt to future technologies as they arrive with this platform."

The ability for DiGiCo consoles to integrate with the PA in GSA's Ivy Arts Centre and PATS, its studio theatre, provides more options and more scope to create soundscapes and worlds for productions which, says Hallam, would not have been possible with another brand. "It also teaches our students about networking," he adds. "If we wanted to do a simultaneous live and broadcast show, the Quantum 338 will integrate with our existing equipment - an SD8, which we could put in as a broadcast desk if we wanted to - and gives us more opportunity to get more

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students on desks.”

Both Evans and Hallam recognise that working with Autograph Sound has been invaluable for them in their choice of console and in supporting their investment.

“As a company who not only sells the equipment, but also provides complete design and facilitation solutions to a vast portfolio of productions and events across the UK, Autograph’s experience and support has already helped us to develop an integrated industry relevant platform for our sound training with clear pathways for our graduates into industry,” Evans concludes. “We all look forward to continuing to collaborate with them into the future.”