

Re-Sounding Success for the University of Pretoria



The University of Pretoria's flagship performance venue, the Aula Theatre, recently underwent an extensive upgrade of its sound system. **Nicole Barnes from ETECH takes a look at the Aula Theatre's brand-new sound upgrade.**

Lebo Makwane, the Aula Theatre's sound technician, explains that "the sound in the Aula Theatre was quite old. The previous system was installed in the early 2000s, and we, therefore, decided that upgrading the sound was a priority."

He goes on to say that the University of Pretoria decided to opt for a new L-Acoustics system because of the brand's worldwide reputation. Phuti Matuba – the theatre's head of lighting – expands on this point, adding that it is a central feature of the University's mission to underpin its world-class research practices with leading technologies on all of its campuses.

"Technology is progressing every day," he says. "And we need to stay at the front of the curve."

The L-Acoustics ARCS Wide and Focus(WiFo) system packs the famous L-Acoustics Wavefront Sculpture Technology(WST)line sources into a compact, constant curvature enclosure ideal for medium-throw applications. The company describes ARCS WiFo as "the workhorse of sound providers, going from single enclosure fill all the way up to 360° in-the-round coverage."

ARCS WiFo line sources provide high SPL with perfect acoustic coupling, a solid LF performance and constant tonal balance over medium-throw ranges. In the coupling plane, ARCS WiFo yields a razor-sharp directivity pattern, while in the other plane, the wide and focus systems provide a 90° smooth symmetric directivity pattern.

The theatre required the installation of four SB18 subwoofers, six 5XT front fills and four X8 as delays – and the sleek speaker design is unobtrusive, the units blending naturally with the highly impressive interior of the Aula Theatre.



The system is currently being operated via an Allen & Heath dLive C1500, which Makwane says, “Gives us the functionality of a digital desk but at an affordable price-tag.”

The installation was undertaken by Eddie de Jager and Dirk Knoetze from MVC5 Production Equipment, with the support of Richard Smith and the team at DWRDistribution.

As Waldo Viljoen, one of the founders of MVC5, explains: “The University of Pretoria, particularly the Facilities Management Department, were looking for a company that would deliver the design for the Aula, as well as being able to provide the professional engineering services required – as the University wanted to ensure that the design was well-backed by a professional company. This was a great match for MVC5, as this was exactly what we have to offer.”

He continues, “MVC5 started the relationship by providing an overview of the sound and acoustics, how the system will work and what should be expected from the quality of the upgraded sound.”

Although any upgrade of this magnitude is significant, De Jager explains that this job was especially challenging because apart from its architectural significance the Aula theatre is 60 years old and therefore protected by the National Heritage Act. We had to work closely with the university’s architects to make sure the installation did not impose on the aesthetics of the interior. The curved array of the L-Acoustics speaker clusters complements the interior, rather than seeming out of place.”

Speaking to the parties involved, it is clear that strong working relationships were key to the success of the upgrade.

Regarding MVC5’s relationship with DWR Distribution, Viljoen says: “DWR were very supportive with the configuration and design of the correct system for the Aula. Richard and his team are always available to give advice and direction. Duncan Riley took the project to heart and really supported us from procurement to delivery to installation. We can always partner with DWR and know we are in good hands.”

Meanwhile, Makwane and Matuba only have positive reports about the working relationship that they were able to establish with both DWR and MVC5.

According to them, it was vital that the programming of the Aula – as one of the premier university theatres in the country -be interrupted to as little as possible. Not only this, but they were seeking an intuitive rig that could adapt to a variety of needs, and thus allow the University of Pretoria to deliver an international-standard experience in a wide range of contexts: from performances to conferences, symposia and other ceremonial events.

Makwane says: “The guys were really great to work with. Before we even took out the old equipment, Richard was here to give us advice. Then, as soon as they installed the new system, they invited us for training. They always wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page.”



Moses Rakau, who has managed the Aula Theatre for 37 years, says that the process of upgrading the sound system was both efficient and effective: “When the installers said they were going to do something on the day – they did it. My team got good training on the new digital system, and everything has been running smoothly since then.”

Makwane says that although the new system required “a bit of a shift from analogue to digital” in terms of its operability, he has experienced “no issues at all” since debuting the new ARCS WiFo system at the recent World Choir Games – an exacting test of the new system, which it passed with flying colours.

“We also had great feedback on a play [*Mother Goose’s Children*] we hosted here about a month ago. It was the second time we did the play: the first time was on the old system, and the audience members who saw both

performances were blown away by the new system.”

Matuba adds that “the play was a piece of industrial theatre based on the theme of *Ubuntu*. It had some sonic elements and effects, and playing those sonics from the L-Acoustics system came out brilliantly. In fact, after the play, the director invited the audience to give feedback on the performance – and many of the positive responses given were about the amazing sound quality.”

The University of Pretoria prides itself on being a world-class learning institution – and, for its students, exposure and access to leading technology such as the Aula Theatre’s new L-Acoustics system is an invaluable part of the educational experience. Makwana shares that “a few students have already put in requests to shadow us on the L-Acoustics system.”



Makwane and Matuba are also clearly excited about the kinds of shows and events the Aula Theatre will be able to book in the future, thanks to their new sound set up.

Makwane explains that the theatre recently hosted an event for the Embassy of South Korea. The embassy’s representatives specifically requested an L-Acoustics system in their technical rider – and Matuba expresses satisfaction about the fact that going forward, the Aula’s international guests and artists don’t have to worry about bringing anything in, we can immediately roll out an international-level event for them.”

He concludes that “having a venue like this shows everyone our standards of excellence, and reflects what the university is all about.”

Photos: Eddie de Jager