



Virginia Theatre Celebrates its Centennial with New L-Acoustics Kara II System | 1



Specified by Threshold Acoustics and installed by Knox-Array, the new rig was funded by the State of Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Museum Capital Grant program

CHAMPAIGN, Illinois - June 2021 - Champaign, Illinois is one of those magical spots in rock music's geography. Almost every touring band in the last 50 years—as well as beloved local talent, including Alison Krauss, REO Speedwagon, Dan Fogelberg and Michael McDonald—has passed through this heartland University town, situated midway between Indianapolis and Peoria. Naturally, many of them have performed at the beautiful Virginia Theatre, the town's vintage venue that turns 100 years old this year.



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The Virginia recently got a very appropriate birthday gift in the form of an L-Acoustics Kara II sound system, designed by Threshold Acoustics, purchased through L-Acoustics Certified Provider Distributor Mid-America Sound, and installed by Knox-Array Event Production. Steadily renovated over the past 20 years by nearly \$10 million in state grants, private contributions, commercial sponsorships, and large donations, the venue now sports completely updated power, infrastructure, and trim that extends to its ornate plaster and the classic 700-pipe Wurlitzer organ originally installed in 1921 to live-score silent movies. Reopening this summer, following the pandemic downtime, the Virginia Theatre will soon be silent no more.



“It was big undertaking,” says Stephen White, Technical Manager of the Virginia Theatre, which is now landmarked and operated by the Champaign Park District. “It wasn’t just putting in racks and stacks but also infrastructure like a new catwalk and bringing the house power up to date with new conduit, cabling, and even a K-rated transformer, which gives us incredibly clean, quiet power. We had had to add more steel and I-beams to make everything work, but that’s because the sound system is really the centerpiece of it all for a music venue like this.”

The theater now has 20 L-Acoustics Kara II line source array enclosures, flown ten per side, with four SB28 subs stacked in the orchestra pit. The coverage is extended by two X12 coaxial speakers per side, wall-mounted far left and right under the PA hangs, keeping the first three rows of seats on either side of the fan-shaped 1,463-seat auditorium well-covered. A dozen short-throw X8 enclosures are used as fills—eight across the front of the stage and four more to fill in areas under the theater’s dome—while eight compact 5XT are used to cover the underbalcony seating. Everything is powered and processed by one LA12X and eight LA4X amplified controllers.



“The back corners of the balcony were always the ‘problem children’ of the house; it was impossible to get clean sound in there consistently,” White says. “The L-Acoustics fill speakers, which are now covering the last six rows up there, have solved that problem for good. With all the decorative plaster and the odd seating shape, it was a tough room to conquer, but Threshold Acoustics and L-



Acoustics did it.”

And if L-Acoustics shone upstairs, it did equally well down below. “The SB28 are in the orchestra pit, which is lined with concrete and stone,” he says. “When we put some Boz Scaggs on high-res Spotify through the system to test it out”—the track of choice was “Thanks To You”—“we found that the pit really amps the low end up beautifully. It also revealed that we had to reinforce the decorative stained glass lighting fixtures in there because the low end was so powerful that it made them rattle.”

The installation of the Kara II arrays benefited from the manufacturer’s wide range of integration solutions. He appreciates the speakers’ light weight and compact size, and loves how they sound, but Brian Knox, owner of Knox Array Event Production, says the real trick from an integrator’s perspective was finding exactly the bracket he needed for some of the delay speakers.

“You know, you’ll have a great design for a system on paper, but when you actually get into the room, you inevitably will discover spots where there’s a beam or another obstacle where a speaker is supposed to go,” he says. “That’s especially the case in an older theater like this. We needed to adapt to work around not only the structure but all of the ornamental plaster decor to find both an aesthetic placement and a functional location for the best distribution of the sound. While climbing around in the venue’s nooks and crannies to run wiring, we found that we needed to change the brackets spec’d for the outfills so that we could aim them appropriately because we couldn’t mount them in their original locations. Fortunately, L-Acoustics has multiple rigging accessories that we could choose from to find the exact one that fit perfectly.”

Knox also found that the design of Kara II’s rigging connections made it easy to hang and adjust. “Each of the main speaker hangs was pinned together with a one-point hang using a Polar Focus system and one chain motor per side. That allowed us to easily adjust it left and right and up and down to more accurately aim the speakers to effectively cover the room,” he explains. “Also, the way that the amplifiers and processing network together with the integration software makes the entire process so much easier. The system sounded really good right out of the box using the factory presets and Autofilter results from Soundvision, and with some fine tuning, it’s now perfect. All of the speakers work so well together with the processing; they make the sound come alive precisely the way it was supposed to in this wonderful old theater.”

The new Kara II system will soon be used for everything from the legacy rock shows the venue specializes in to performances by the Champaign-Urbana Theatre Company, which appeared at the theater from 1992 to 2019 and is slated to start up again once the Covid restrictions that have kept the theater dark since last year are lifted and shows resume in August.



“This is a true community theater, and it hosts a wide variety of shows and events, as well as music and spoken word performances,” says White. “The Kara II will cover all of that, with power and clarity.”

In the meantime, though, he’s happy to be there while he waits for more normal times to return, pumping his own playlists, featuring lots of classic P-Funk and Bootsy Collins bass lines, through the powerful Kara II boxes and SB28 subs. “It’s my own personal stereo system for the time being,” he laughs. “And it is *awesome!*”

For more info on the Virginia Theatre, visit www.thevirginia.org. Threshold Acoustics, Mid-America Sound, and Knox-Array can be found at www.thresholdacoustics.com, www.midamericasound.com, and www.knoxarray.com, respectively.