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Musing with Degrees of Speed

"Actually Skan (Skan PA Hire) make it incredibly easy for me. Before the tour started we focused on how the PA would be packaged," says production manager Chris Vaughan as he outlines his approach to mounting the current tour by Muse. "We knew in advance that we'd overnight between three to four hundred miles of back-to-back shows." There wasn't even time to work up efficiencies; the tour opened with Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen on three consecutive days, so the in's and out's had to be fast. Very fast. We have 17 trucks in all, two-and-a-half truck-loads of PA. Our first 'out' took just over two hours; now we regularly load out in one-and-three-quarter hours." That might not sound too impressive until Vaughan points out, "that's in-the-round lights and LED system, with the main stereo PA, flown subs, side hangs, and rear PA system. While playing 360° has its own problems, what Skan have put together for us is very quick and very neat."

The system in question is the J-Series from d&b audiotechnik. For Marc Carolan, Muse's house engineer for many years, the choice of PA system is a significant change. "My first impression was the sub arc actually worked." This is an audio array developed by d&b for their J-SUB that exploits time alignment and physical spacing to provide optimum even coverage in the low end, while avoiding the unwanted back lobes on stage. "We used it on Snow Patrol earlier this year," said Carolan. "It worked very consistently for us and it didn't take a lot of time to set up."

But there's much more to Muse than low end. "Because we're playing 360° I wanted a single enclosure solution; I wanted that consistency all round. The boxes really need to work in harmony and having the same enclosure goes a long way towards that. How do I like it now we're well into the tour? Sonically it's a fantastic system; headroom for days and it's so precise."

Muse are renowned for recordings rich in musical detail; not an easy thing to manage in the live environment. "I like to use the dynamics of the music. With Muse the information can get quite dense, yet the J-Series line handles that well. I'm using lots of layers of sound and the J can get that across effortlessly. And Skan have put a great system package together for us. That speed of set up I experienced with the subwoofer array I have also found applies to the system in general."

It is Skan's Chris Fitch (MD) and Matt Vickers, with support from crew chief for the tour Paddy Hocken, who devised the system packaging. "Paddy came to see Take That in the summer," explained Vaughan. "We used similar amplifier carts on that, but as is Paddy's way, he's improved on them. What Skan has built for the stage subwoofers is fantastic: J-SUBs, amplifiers and cables all in a unit that fits to the stage."

Hocken revealed the details. "The sub arrays are two high J-SUBs in a custom built cart with amplifiers and the cabling riding within the cart behind the cabinets. There are two master carts that have staggered cable looms that ensure it's just not possible to miss-wire the array each gig. It's the same with the flown front, side, and rear J loudspeakers. A basic cart is four loudspeakers high, and then we have mother carts with a flying frame on top. Mother carts have four multi-pin Socapex break-outs tailored to staggered harnesses of EP5s; again you can't miss-wire an array."

As if that were not enough of a challenge, Hocken has just graduated with a degree in Business Enterprise from the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol. "Not the sort of degree you'd immediately associate with an audio crew chief touring a large system," he said, "but Chris's approach of involving key personnel at the planning stage, at the heart of his project strategy, is straight out of the textbook." Not an easy undertaking for someone frequently on tour.

"Skan supported me throughout; it is a four year course and I split the six modules of the last year over two, so it took five in total. It is a reflection of Skan's investment in their crew that they supported me throughout, and it was tough at times for them as well as me." Hocken was also supported by Vaughan, who allowed him to fly back to the UK mid-tour, to attend his degree presentation ceremony.

The Muse tour is currently in Europe, with visits to the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand in the New Year. Vaughan's advance planning obviously brings the benefits of speed to a pretty intense touring schedule, so much so he's taking Skan's system and crew to the USA. But is there anything else that in his opinion makes the show shine? "The band is just peaking; it's a real high energy show and they are delivering 120% every night. With an engineer like Marc Carolan and the d&b system I always knew it was going to sound amazing, but even I'm astonished at just how good he makes them sound."

photo Patrick Hocken

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