

# A Star's Sketchbook



## Fantasia Barrino reconnects with her fans in this adroitly tailored showcase

By: Sharon Stancavage

Since winning the *American Idol* competition in 2004, Fantasia Barrino, who goes by the mononym Fantasia, has released seven albums, appeared on Broadway in the musicals *The Color Purple* and *After Midnight*, and had numerous television gigs. Of the star's new *Sketchbook Tour*—which features guest artists Robin Thicke, Tank, and Bonfyr—Michael Apostolos, the singer's creative director and production

designer, says, “It meant a lot to her to capture everything that her fans have been requesting over the years. This is an old-school show with a new-school twist, since we’re using new-school fixtures. To her, it was all about making it feel very energetic but still very real and not too choreographed. She didn’t want it to feel robotic; she wanted something natural, energetic, and soulful.

“Once we crafted the set list to cover her old material, her newer material, and anything else she felt would be

Photos: Johnny Louis/Getty Images



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## CONCERTS

liked by the audience, we went into the visual aspects,” Apostolos says. “Overall, Fantasia wanted an awards-style staging element, in the sense of multiple levels. We grew away from the awards-style look but maintained a multiple-levels aesthetic; she also wanted to incorporate a staircase and multiple levels for the band.” The latter is comprised of a drummer, keyboard player, and two guitarists. “We have two 8 x 8 risers, cut in a skewed square; the risers are 3’ high. We also have two arms that sit offstage right and left of the staircase, with the guitarists on them; they are 4.5’ high. We did a minimal front on the risers; we made sure everything was painted black, so we didn’t see a bunch of structure under the set, and now we’re lighting directly through it.”



The risers are illuminated. “Under them,” Apostolos says, “we have [GLP impression] X4 Bar 20s and [GLP] JDC1 strobes. The X4 Bars were originally going to be on the steps downstage, but we ended up putting them underneath to give us more horsepower in terms of light and color coming from there. The JDCs give a similar effect, with a smaller fixture to break it up and give it more depth.” These instruments are new to Apostolos, who says, “I like both of them. I think that they can do some pretty cool things. The white instance in the middle of the JDC1 is very bright and can really make for a nice moment.”

In addition, Apostolos notes, the star “wanted a staircase in the middle for herself to have a grand entrance; she basically wanted a center object to go to. She wanted it to have depth, dimension, and height. The staircase is 6’ tall and comes downstage approximately 7’ and then

extends left and right.”

In the initial design, Apostolos included a lift inside of the staircase. However, he says, “Our opening number changed, so now we’re using a Kabuki with front projection.” This, says tour manager Don Muzquiz, requires “a Barco F90-4K13 with a long focus 0.8–1.21: 1 lens, plus a laptop for playback and two ImagePRO-IIs.”

The scenery was fabricated by SGPS. “We had the set built in 4’ increments width-wise,” Apostolos notes, “because she’s playing smaller theatres to arenas and we wanted to make sure it is scalable, and that the carpenter on the road can go from an A rig to a B rig or a C to a D rig in terms of width.” The Kabuki—as well as video, sound, and lighting—is provided by Solotech.



### Lighting

The Barco projector is used only for the opening, and the upstage LED wall present on most shows is absent. “It’s essentially a no-video show,” Apostolos says. “Originally, we had some, but we decided to pull it back and make it about her; we’re accenting her and making her shine.” Fantasia’s longtime lighting designer, Ryan Williams, adds, “The whole video wall thing is very clichéd now. You get an upstage video wall on every show you do.”

Nevertheless, the upstage area isn’t bare, Apostolos explains. “We have a wall of [Martin by Harman VDO] Sceptrons upstage and two angular walls of them at left and right. We’re using them as lighting fixtures; we’re not running any content through them. We’re doing effects and some pixel-mapping with them.” Williams adds, “I was able to use the Sceptrons to help paint the picture in lieu of a video wall.”

Managing expectations for utilization of the Sceptrons was a challenge for Williams. “With them, everyone wants to have that gag every song, and there were moments during production rehearsals when they said, ‘Maybe we can add the Sceptrons.’ They are a special effect, and if you do it every time, it’s not special.” With 120 Sceptrons upstage in a clean linear arrangement, the natural tendency is to try and fill the space.

In terms of lighting design, Williams says, “Fantasia’s mantra is rock/soul, so she wanted to have a departure from the everyday R&B show, and make sure there were some explosive moments that matched the energy that she and the band were putting off. There is the notion that R&B music is very smooth, mellow, and there are always

Williams continues, “With that being said, I’ll admit I had an initial bias against the Scenius, but it’s growing on me. I am the co-owner of a production company out of Chicago, and we’re a Robe/Martin house, so I’m used to those fixtures. The Scenius has the footprint but was initially different in its output handling; we did some lamp swaps and got things a little more even throughout the rig.”

As preproduction continued, Williams found the key to making the Scenius work for him: “Trying to take the antiquated approach of lighting an R&B show, beautiful washes and pretty pictures, and applying it, the Scenius was not necessarily shining. By altering my approach and looking more into what the artist initial vision was, which was creating an edgy, depth-filled scene going from washes to bold-



moments of undeniable beauty, but she wanted this tour to be raw and edgy. Although she has a demonstrably pumped-up and exciting show, it still remains true to R&B roots through her song selection and arrangements—she is actually telling a story.

“The truss configuration is three straight sticks, and they all have the exact same fixtures: the Claypaky Scenius Profile and, lining the front fascia of each stick, the [TMB] Solaris Flare Q+ LR,” Williams says. The Scenius is a new fixture for him. “I believe that Michael used Solotech for a few of his Chance the Rapper shows,” he says, “and he just used them at the United Center, so he spec’d them for this show. I said, ‘Let’s see what the Scenius has to offer us.’ We may be doing our clients a disservice if we don’t branch out and try different products. My job isn’t just to light a show, it’s to be able to light a show effectively with the resources that I have.”

statement looks, the Scenius was more than appropriate for what we wanted to make happen. Sometimes we are an impediment to allowing our tools to show their full potential.”

Another element proved crucial for this application. “On the production end of things,” Williams says, “if you pump a little more haze than normal, it fills the space quite well. It was just getting the right ratio of haze to work for the show; that helped out with the vision that Fantasia was looking for. Once I started getting more toward a rock show and away from R&B—trying to make it a bit hazier, a little edgier, and thicker with more grunge—the Scenius was able to shine a lot better.”

After taking it on the road—he is also lighting director, and programmer—Williams now has more experience with the Scenius. “This is most definitely a worthwhile fixture,” he says. “Claypaky has been a leader in the lighting indus-



Fantasia uses a DPA 2028 mic with a Sennheiser Digital 6000 wireless system.

try for quite some time, and I don't think they're putting anything out that's bad. The Scenius has an amazing zoom on it, it's certainly bright enough and it is most definitely holding its own out on the road."

For haze, he says, "I have two of the best damn hazers that money can buy; with two MDG theONE hazers, you can fill a room—and by a room, I mean an arena—instantaneously, and those units are indispensable. Any MDG hazer I have come across has been the life source of being able to do my job; I can see beams and I can see the light." The hazers are located upstage left and right and are used consistently throughout the show.

"This is my first time using the Solaris Flare as well, and it is surprisingly amazing," Williams says. "With similar fixtures, like the X-Bar 20, you can get some movement, with subtle zoom effects making wide and narrow beams, so I initially looked at the Flare units as limited. There's no tilt and no zoom on them. It took me back to my theatrical roots in terms of being effective with fixtures that are fixed; they allow us to make that departure from subtle wash light to in-your-face rock-and-roll light; they became the unsung heroes in the show. I am surprised that I absolutely love this fixture. They are almost as bright as the sun." Apostolos adds, "There is a good number of blinder moments, but I definitely did not want to overuse them. We use them sparingly and intentionally."

Floor lighting wasn't part of the original plot. "When we started, there were no floor fixtures or side light at all," Williams says. "I struggled with that. I added some downstage left and right to sweep across the background singers, because they were doing a lot more dancing and moving than before." This package consists of "another ten Claypaky Scenius units. Two are down left, two are downstage right, and six are placed on Fantasia's set, to add another layer of depth to the rig. The possibility of losing dimensionality in the lighting is very easy. I use the floor units to add depth and dimensionality."

An MA Lighting grandMA2 console was Williams' choice for programming and controlling the show. "Fantasia is a very organic performer," he says, "so a lot of the intro hits and big moments driven by musical arrangements are time-coded, but our starts and stops are not necessarily in time code. Fantasia is not your typical pop act, who will do the same thing in every show. One show early in the run, we had a programmed time code that went into another song, and she told the band, 'Tune it again, I want to do a few more bars of it.' I immediately had to drop the time code, because I knew it would kill the look onstage and go into the next moment, which involved talking."

Williams is using between two and four house followspots, depending on the venue; there are no truss

spots. “I do a fair amount of highlighting her with the fixtures from the rig,” he says. “I’m always prepared with a mix of dedicated positions to maintain it should she feel compelled to move from one of our predetermined positions.” The singer invariably walks out of the fixed spots, he says. “She will sometimes come to me after a show to see how we can continually play off of each other. It’s the difference between a performer and an entertainer.”

In terms of color choices, Williams says, “I’m all over the place. I don’t shy away from being controversial and I am not a designer who fits into a box. You will never see two different artists of mine painted using the same brush strokes. Many, seeing an African American artist on stage, are afraid to use anything in the green palette. I’m okay with green; it’s my favorite color. No color in this was off limits. Depending on the mood of her song, we use one, two, or maybe a third color for each palette.” Williams also took the star’s choices into consideration: “Her favorite color is purple, and, in some of the intimate moments, when Fantasia is alone, talking to her audience, I lean toward purple and magenta hues. Congo is used for some of her talking moments, and once we get toward the end of the show, we do more intimate purple and magenta hues, as it’s her personal testimony.”

The opening of the show came from Fantasia. “She really wanted to have a back spot that wipes out everything else out onstage,” Apostolos says. “That look was really specific.” Williams adds, “The top of the show starts off dark, transitioning to no-color; it’s a cold steel look and, in the lulls of that moment, we go into some reds. At the very opening, there is an animation of the cover of her new album: It’s a plain sketch on white paper and she’s wearing a red hat. We incorporate that into that opening number, where the only color you see besides white is that red. It’s those subtle choices that tie the entire production together.”

## Audio

At the front of house, audio engineer Gordon Mack is on a DiGiCo SD5. “It’s been my console of choice lately, coming from Lionel Richie and Maxwell,” he says. “It’s an incredibly good-sounding console in terms of what it can do and it’s incredibly diverse. Those two things alone make it a winner for me.”

In terms of plug-ins, Mack says, “I don’t build a show around Waves; the console is cake and Waves is the frosting on top of it. If I don’t have the frosting, I can still eat the cake.” In this case, he’s working without outboard gear. “My theory for mixing is what the band is giving you is what the audience wants to hear, so trying to color or paint or fix it is not really what I’m supposed to do. I’m just supposed to turn it up, make sure it’s nice and loud, and make sure everything is playing nicely in terms of the frequencies. I don’t believe in a lot of processing; either we

fix it in preproduction or during rehearsals, or there is a problem.” Working this way has another advantage, especially when traveling overseas, he notes. “The most horrible feeling is when you’re used to something and you don’t have it; you wonder, How am I going to pull it off? I start from there and fix it, so I don’t have that problem later.”

In terms of mics, Mack says, “I have a [Sennheiser] e906 on the toms, some [Shure SM] 57as on the snare and a [Shure Beta] 98A on the inside of the snare drum for the rim shot. For the kick, there’s a [Shure Beta] 91A and a [Shure Beta] 52A.” The bass is a DI, “and a regular 57,” he adds. “We have two keys that are direct and an organ stereo and mono; we have a 57 on top of the cabinet for the organ and [Shure] Beta 52 for the low.” Muzquiz, who is also an audio engineer, notes that Fantasia uses “a Sennheiser Digital 6000 handheld with a DPA 2028 supercardioid capsule; the background vocalists are using Shure UHD handhelds with SM58s.”

In terms of mixing the singer, Mack says, “She is incredibly dynamic, and goes from talking incredibly softly to literally redlining the channel. The challenge is getting the right input volume; you have to ride her on the lower stuff to keep the louder stuff from crunching the channel. And, honestly, I would rather ride the vocals than artificially squash it.”

Solotech has provided a CODA Audio line array. The main hang consists of ten AiRAY and four ViRAY cabinets per side while the side hang features four AiRAYs and eight ViRAYs. Six Coda APS cabinets are used as front fills.

The AiRAYs are Coda’s high-range, full-output series, which includes DDP-Driver (Dual Diaphragm Planar-wave-driver) technology. The compact ViRAY series also features the DDP-Driver. The company says that, discarding the traditional dome diaphragm compression driver design, it uses a two-way coaxial system employing two concentric annular ring diaphragms, each of which covers a smaller frequency range for increased power handling, high dynamics, and extremely low distortion. Among its billed advantages, the diaphragms move in phase, creating far less audible and measurable intermodulation distortion than speakers equipped with traditional drives, especially at high frequencies. Also, the drivers are said to be more efficient, offer 3dB–5dB higher sensitivity than the competition.

The sub system consists of 15 Coda SCP-F SUB cabinets; these are extreme high-excursion woofers with integrated velocity sensors to measure the voice coil movement and features ultra-low distortion. “I do like the Coda system,” notes Muzquiz.

Fantasia’s *Sketchbook Tour* concluded earlier this month. 🎧