

The Omaha Update

By: David Barbour



The Holland Performing Arts Center's new lighting rig saves energy and offers new creative opportunities

Above and opposite: "High End Systems came in with the Halcyon Silent, and that was a real game changer," Arch notes. "It allowed us to do what we needed to do for the overhead positions in Symphony Hall, providing what the orchestra needs without the noise."

Opening in 2005, the Holland Performing Arts Center in Omaha was designed by Polshek Partnership (now Ennead Architects) alongside the local firm HDR, Inc., theatre consulting firm Fisher Dachs Associates, and the acoustician firm Kirkegaard Associates. Owned by Omaha Performing Arts, it is the home of the Omaha Symphony Orchestra and hosts a variety of touring acts. The symphony currently has a full schedule that includes classical programs and screenings of popular films with live musical accompaniment. The venue also has on its agenda comics like D. L. Hughley, Chevy Chase, and Tig Notaro, plus musicians such as Collin

Raye, Pat Metheny, and Boney James.

In celebration of the center's 20th anniversary this year, its owners decided it was time for a lighting upgrade in the main auditorium. That would be the Peter Kiewit Concert Hall, a shoebox-style room that seats 2,000 patrons and features a 64' by 48' stage. (The Suzanne and Walter Scott Recital Hall, a black-box space, can accommodate 350.) Ryan Murray, associate vice president of operations at Omaha Performing Arts, notes that, for the first upgrade since 2016, a key goal was achieving an all-LED rig.

"We still had quite a few conventional fixtures in the air," Murray says. These included "a few arc-light moving heads. We had some Robe MMX

Beams, which worked really well nine years ago, when we installed them. But with the lamp changes and everything else, they're not nearly as punchy as they used to be. And, really, LED technology has come a long way, across the board. We wanted to make that transition for sure."

Michael Arch, co-owner of Theatrical Media Services (TMS), the Omaha-based lighting supplier involved in the upgrade, adds, "They brought in the MMX fixtures in 2016, but they stayed with a lot of conventional gear. It was a big push to move away from that, but it gives the space more flexibility and improves its energy efficiency." Arch, who was a house electrician at the Holland Center for

several years, knows the venue well. "Mike played a big role in creating the light plot," Murray says. "He worked with me to think about different fixtures and how we might use them in the space."

Arch notes that Murray and especially the Omaha Symphony wanted the quietest moving lights possible. "When they built the space 20 years ago, the symphony was performing in the Orpheum Theatre, and they wanted something more acoustically modern. So, they went with a European horseshoe-style theatre, adding some modern touches to it. It's really a fascinating building. And, acoustically, it's a fantastic space. If you stand in the middle of the stage, you can hear a pin drop anywhere in the room." He adds, laughing, "For me, as a lighting designer, that's a horrible thing."

Therefore, he adds, "We've wanted to modernize the equipment, but there hasn't been anything punchy enough to give the orchestra what they want and still be quiet."

The process involved much research. "First," Murray says, "I went to LDI last December. Mike was there, too, with TMS. It was an introduction to what is out there in the lighting industry. From there, we talked to manufacturers."

"Then," Arch continues, "we did a shootout in January of last year, just to



start looking at new fixtures." Murray notes, "Consistency, color temperature, and ultimately, fan noise, were really important for us. So, it was nice to see them all in a row at the same time."

"High End Systems came in with the Halcyon Silent, and that was a real game-changer," Arch notes. "It allowed us to do what we needed to do for the overhead positions in Symphony Hall, providing what the orchestra needs without the noise." The Halcyon Silent is convection-cooled, obviating the need for fans,

which are usually the noisiest part of any moving light. The product's claims have been validated in a study conducted by the Munich-based acoustical firm Müller-BBM. In his review of the Halcyon range, featured in *LSA*'s September 2023 issue, Richard Cadena also noted the product's Whisper Home feature, "which means the pan and tilt motors have absolute encoders that allow them to find their home positions without having to travel to their extreme positions, making them a lot quieter, and requiring no

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CLOSE-UP: LIGHTING



Above: "The symphony is really particular about getting a good-quality white light," Arch notes. Right: The Ayrton Zonda 9 FX units add color and graphics. Far right: Both Halcyons combine with the KL Cores and Zonda 9 FX units.

movement."

The Halcyon Silent, Arch adds, "is the backbone of the system, and we complemented it with the Halcyon Platinum." Explaining the uses of each unit, Arch says that with the Halcyon Silent, "We measured the decibels during the shootout, and the number was something like ten. It was basically just room noise, which was great. But they had to make the unit fairly bulky because the heat sink is massive. The Platinum is a big, high-output fixture, putting out 54,000 lumens, while the Silent delivers 18,400." The Silents are intended for the orchestra's use, but, as Arch notes, "It is still a roadhouse. They have rock-and-roll coming through, a lot of jazz, and comedians, too. They needed something that could provide punch when they need it." Thus, the Halcyon Platinums.

"ETC did a great job in designing this family of fixtures," Arch says. "They complement each other really well, especially in terms of quality of light, quality of color, all that stuff. They paid attention to the details." And, in a pinch, he says, "You can even take the Platinums and put them into silent mode, which turns off the fans and cuts their intensity by half. So, they can provide a little extra when the symphony needs it. The rest of the time, you've got the punch you need

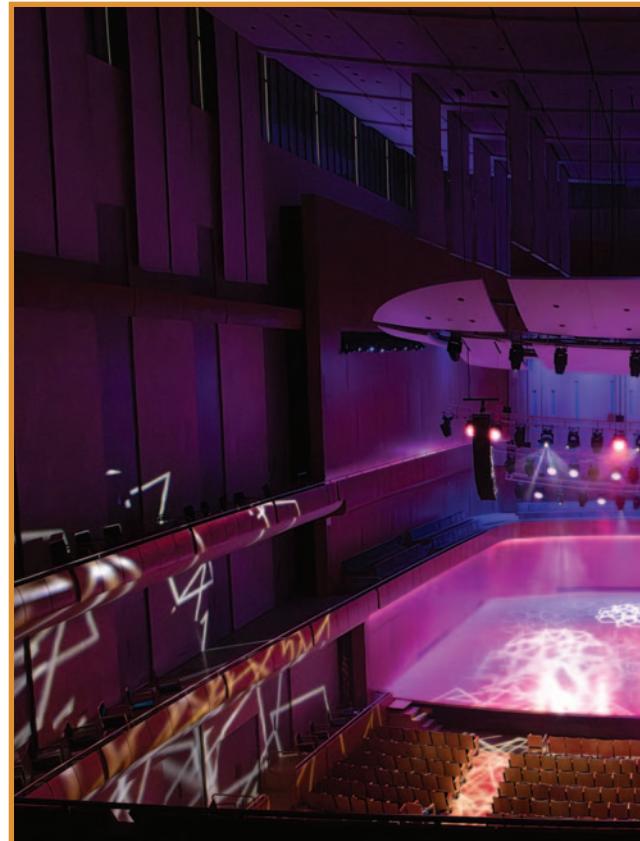
for rock shows or other events."

In addition, ETC Source Fours, placed in high cove positions and on a front-of-house pipe, have been replaced with Elation KL Core IPs, part of that company's ever-growing line of non-automated units. Each KL Core features a 400W RGBMA LED that can deliver more than 15,000 lumens. It also accepts third-party ellipsoidal shutter barrels. So, Arch says, "We took all the existing barrel assemblies from the Source Fours and put them on the KL Cores. It was a great option for us. Before, there were 72 conventional Lekos in there. And trying to gel them for each show was a real pain. The KL Core has astoundingly good color mixing, especially for getting the 3,200 Kelvin white light that we need onstage. The symphony is really particular about getting a good-quality white light. It also matches really well with the Halcyons."

The extra color possibilities afforded are important because the symphony, like so many other classical musical institutions, is adding variety to its programming. "Last year, they did a major show with [visual artist] Doug Fitch, who hung a bunch of gauze-like fabrics over the stage." At the time, the local radio station, KVNO, wrote, "As Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* plays, the concert hall will be transformed by

the work of theatrical artist Doug Fitch. His design includes banners suspended above the stage, with lighting creating a dynamic interplay of color, light, and shadow on the orchestra below. Fitch says his goal is to create an artistic backdrop that enhances, rather than distracts from, the music."

For this event, which took place before the rig was updated, Arch says, "We cross-lit the fabric with a bunch of [ETC] Lustr2s, and we were very limited. We had the barrels chopped down, about as small as you can get, and were getting very little output from



them." An upcoming event, he says, will be very different. "The symphony is going to do [Béla Bartók's one-act piece] *Bluebeard's Castle* with Opera Omaha, in this space, in April. I'm very excited to see the possibilities. I don't think they would have been able to handle a production like that with the old rig."

Also likely to contribute to *Bluebeard's Castle* is a set of newly

installed Ayrton Zonda 9 FX units. "One of the space's drawbacks is the air-handling system, which is very good, making it difficult to keep haze in there," Arch says. "So, we looked for something that can get color in there when we don't need to be silent. Again, this is a touring house, so we wanted a good-sized unit that can wash the stage. We landed on the Zonda FX because of the liquid color feature on the unit's base." He's referring to the company's trademark LiquidEffect feature, which is fitted between the unit's main lenses, creat-



ing complex graphic effects. The 6mm space between pixels provides diffusion of the effect. With it, he adds, "We can get some movement and visual interest; it's a bit different from what you normally see in that space."

The auditorium's previous control console, an ETC Cobalt, was replaced a year before the upgrade with an MA Lighting grandMA3 console, which is currently running MA2 software,

although that is likely to change at some point. "We're trying to decide the right time for that," Arch says. Murray adds that the grandMA is much more rider-friendly among touring acts than the Cobalt, making it a rather more popular choice among the shows appearing there.

The installation, led by Arch, went smoothly, Murray says. "Everything was well planned out. It took maybe four hours to get everything taken down and put away. All our battens are painted white, and they haven't been redone since the building opened, so we stripped them, powder-coated them, and generally cleaned them up. Hanging the new fixtures went very quickly. We played around with the gear to make sure everything was dialed in. And we brought in the symphony to make sure they were happy and comfortable with the setup, and that the color temperature met their requirements for brightness. They were super-happy."

Murray notes that the previous rig, including the Robe MMX units, was moved to the smaller recital hall. "It's really a flexible space," he adds. "We do private events, including weddings, corporate events, and general meetings. We also program it as a kind of club for jazz and blues series, as well as some comedy."

Even as the Holland Center celebrated its 20th anniversary, Arch took

over TMS on January 1, along with two other longtime employees, John Hansen and Jamie Hurst. All three began their careers with TMS. The company has a foot in many market sectors, serving concert acts like Dave Matthews Band, Bob Dylan, The Flaming Lips, Modest Mouse, Switchfoot, Ray Lamontagne, and institutions like the University of Nebraska, Mutual of Omaha, Berkshire Hathaway, and Omaha Performing Arts. The latter is the umbrella organization for the Holland Center, the Orpheum Theatre (which hosts Broadway tours and major music acts), Steelhouse Omaha, which partners with Live Nation on music and comedy shows, and the Tenaska Center for Arts Engagement, scheduled to open in 2026, which will offer classes, workshops, and camps for all ages and skill levels

"We didn't step into this role to change the company," said Arch at the time of the purchase. "We stepped in to protect what makes it special. This is about taking care of the team that built this company, honoring the relationships that keep us working, and positioning TMS for the growth that will carry us into the future. We're a family, and we're proud to lead with that." It looks as if its relationship to the community, including the Holland Center, is likely to remain strong. ☰