Martin Audio MLA used at the BST Hyde Park



Following significant upgrades to the Great Oak Stage in 2022, American Express presents BST Hyde Park relaxed comfortably into its new setting this year. The iconic stage dominates the Royal Park - now firmly established, after once being considered ‘unworkable’ as a concert site, surrounded as it is by the well-heeled residents of Mayfair and Knightsbridge. Much of this is because Martin Audio’s tightly controllable MLA PA array - the result of its advanced DISPLAY optimisation software - has been ever-present since AEG Presents took over the Park lease in 2013, making offsite noise pollution largely a thing of the past.

With system engineering back in the capable hands of Toby Donovan, who aside from last year has worked every BST, the site sound provided its usual exemplary experience for audiences. This time the tech team presided over a 9-day festival that saw acts like Pink, Guns N’ Roses, Take That, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band and Billy Joel headlining. Other than slightly raising the main stage side hang to avoid it obscuring the screen, Solotech UK account manager, Martin Connolly, confirmed that “everything else was exactly the same as last year.”

Nonetheless, prior to the event another BST stalwart - freelance sound consultant (and former Martin Audio R&D Director) - Jason Baird was drafted in for propagation checks, particularly with regard to the 11 delays positions, which comprised many

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of Martin Audio's larger format WPL. Working with acoustic consultants Vanguardia, he patrolled the field with a walkie-talkie, providing data to Donovan to ensure the delay levels were set correctly, and that Martin Audio's DISPLAY optimisation and predictive software was accurate and ready for showtime. "As a result," said Baird, "all headliners enjoyed good gigs, and were able to achieve their levels. There were many compliments from visiting engineers, but the main thing was a reduction in complaints." This despite offsite levels being set at a challenging 75dB (LAeq5).

Two such sound engineers who were voted to have produced memorable sound quality were Gary Bradshaw (Take That) and Simon Thomas (Sabrina Carpenter). Bradshaw has a long history working with Martin Audio and Solotech UK (then Capital Sound), mixing through many generations of the manufacturer's frontline PA before moving over to Take That in the early 90s and becoming synonymous with the band's sound ever since. At Hyde Park, MLA was able to help him solve an unforeseen problem. Loading in during the night, for an anticipated 9am soundcheck, he was alarmed to discover that a sound curfew was in place until 10am. However, he was equally relieved to find Donovan, who system teched the last Take That tour with Bradshaw, in position.

"The (44) dancers were onstage at 9.00am, there was a band call at 9.30am and the three Take That lads appeared at 10am," he reports. "Fortunately, we didn't need to make any changes to the system. We listened to Gary Barlow's vocal on A stage and then B stage … and couldn't get his mic to feed back even when pushed way louder than needed. "I knew Pink had safely done an A stage and B stage show and so realised I was safe to really push it without the risk of feedback. But that showed the PA was perfectly set up, aligned, and in phase. It was the perfect test of the PA, and there were no EQ changes from me." In the end the band was able to do almost a full set run through and the result was "the gig went without a hitch," he said, paying tribute not only to Toby Donovan but Dave Roden, supervising FOH.

Simon Thomas, who only joined American singer-actress Sabrina Carpenter in April, was another who earned plaudits. Supporting Blackpink, he described the Martin Audio system as "amazing" and the FOH support team as "fantastic". The combination of his SSL-based control /outboard package and MLA paid dividends. "The only thing to worry about on the day was to ensure the shape of my transfer function matched that of the system engineer's and as it happens Toby's transfer function was exactly what I was after, so it worked perfectly."

Commending the system engineer, he said, "All we had to do was a bit of shaping on the high mids, notching a bit of 3K out for when she stepped off the platform and onto the floor." He added, "I've worked through MLA a handful of times and have always liked its evenness. It's got that defined 'signature' in the low-mids which a lot of other PAs don't have - Martin Audio has always had a '500Hz' signature, and with MLA they have managed to make that sound really nice. Those low-mid frequencies are the power band of a mix - the thump off your kick and snare drum and so on comes from your low-mid and not just the subs."

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But it wasn’t all about the Great Oak Stage as far as Martin Audio was concerned. Elsewhere, Solotech UK account manager, David Preston supervised three other stages around the site that carried Martin Audio: Rainbow Stage (MLA Compact, eight boxes per side with 12 SX218 subs and five MLA Compact front fill); Birdcage Stage (WPS, six per side, driven in 1-box resolution with six SX218 and XD12 front fills); and Cuban Garage Stage (WPS, six per side, driven in 2-box resolution, with four SX218 subs).



Summarising the deployment, he said, “MLA Compact on Stage 2 worked well, covering an area of around 35m deep by 30m wide. We really needed to contain audio to that space only as we were right on the edge of the site, and we achieved this really successfully thanks to the use of ‘Hard Avoid’ [in the DISPLAY software] towards the rear of the audience area.” The other stages saw DJs and new acts play through ground stack systems. “But even in 2-box resolution the WPS is very impressive with its SPL output, and its optimisation and coverage.”

This positive assessment was shared by venue director and co-CEO of management company, LS Events, Dave Grindle. He praised the efforts of BST's technical production director Mark Ward (Proper Productions) and the teams at Solotech [who

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also provided video and lighting] and Martin Audio “The considerable amount of work they put in previously redesigning the stage PA hangs really paid off, with the result that no further redesigns were required this year.

“I personally walk the site - particularly when the headline act comes on stage - to satisfy myself that we are achieving the best sound coverage possible, and I have no doubt that we delivered an amazing audio experience for our audiences.” He concluded, “Given that we're working in an urban environment which is surrounded by densely populated residential areas, the numbers of complaints have been remarkably low since AEG first won the contract for the BST series 10 years ago. That said the tech teams and Vanguardia work hard to achieve a balance of an incredible experience for the fans while remaining within the licence conditions and minimising the impact on our neighbours.

“LS Events and AEG will always strive to ensure we're working with the absolute best technology available for this festival. The MLA system together with tech teams from Martin Audio, Solotech and Proper Productions continue to deliver that for us.” After 10 years can the sound get any better than this? It was left to Martin Connolly to try and answer that. “I couldn’t honestly see any improvement this year … but that’s because I think that would have been an impossibility! It’s always just been so consistent.”

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