

feature

WORLD

Making the grade in live/installed sound

As the industry continues to become ever-more competitive, a consensus is increasingly emerging on the need for more comprehensive pro-audio education and training. Last month, **Jon Chapple** cornered studio and broadcast engineers for their take – this time, we're talking live and installed sound

PUTTING ASIDE the inevitable pressure to cut costs and increase margins, the 2014 edition of *PSNLive* – *PSNEurope's* annual report on the state of the European live sound market – revealed a number of other concerns expressed by live sound engineers in an otherwise positive year for the industry. The quickening pace of technological change, an increasing push for diversification and the highly competitive nature of the market – “there are a lot of people out there who will do something for nothing,” said one respondent – are pushing both experienced engineers and those just starting out towards more making the most of the specialised training options on offer.



Gavin Canaan, education manager at Meyer Sound, says today's live engineers, owing to the increasing complexity of modern live shows, are also expected to have a solid foundation in the science of sound – something not traditionally expected of the average sound tech. “The scale [...] of live productions has grown to the point where pro-audio technicians who are only trained ‘on the fly’ or ‘in the trenches’ are seeing the need to advance their understanding of sound,” Canaan explains.

“While hands-on field experience is very important, technicians are also required to have a solid foundation in the science of audio in order to optimise the sophisticated audio technology available today.”

“Today's concertgoers have

“Engineers are required to have a solid foundation in the science of audio in order to optimise the sophisticated audio technology available today”

Gavin Canaan, Meyer Sound

become much more demanding when it comes to audio quality in a live show,” he continues.

“To keep the fans coming back, promoters are expecting the audio crew to consistently deliver full sonic impact with even coverage, as well as the definition of an audio recording. To achieve this day after day with the variables of a live environment, it takes an audio practitioner who is grounded in audio science and can create solutions for any challenge thrown at them.”

However, Soulsound's Darryl de la Soul is cautious of focussing too much on ‘science’ at the expense of on-the-job training. “I believe that training, as a concept in itself, is absolutely essential, but prospective sound engineers need to choose that training

wisely,” she says. “During my time as leader of live sound education at a specialist audio college, I was astounded by the number of students we had that came to us after already completing a degree in sound, but were still not prepared for a career in pro audio. The practical side just wasn't practical enough.”

Offering a freelancer's perspective, Aston Fearon, a British FOH engineer, emphasises the importance of becoming an expert with one's own choice of equipment. “I think training is crucial in the field of sound engineering [as] technology [moves] forward and tools become more and more advanced,” says Fearon. “As a freelancer, I see it as part and parcel of my role to manage my own continual professional development and to be learning all the time. I think training offered by manufacturers is a good thing as it gives them the opportunity to interact with us as the end-users and highlight good ways to approach working with their product.”

De la Soul also echoes American sound designer and engineer Nathan Lively's comments in last month's



“All courses in audio should also focus on producing employable humans, not just getting them through exams... Work tends to go to the people who present themselves best”

Darryn de la Soul, Soulsound

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PSNEurope, in which he commented that a younger generation of prospective sound engineers “expect that the skills they have been developing [in education] should launch their career like a rocket,” finding themselves disappointed when a lack of real-world experience and failure to network means they don’t immediately land the audio job of their dreams. “Youngsters are, [...] I feel, led to have unrealistic expectations of what their degree will mean in the real world,” she says. “As an agent looking after people’s

careers, and placing them in work, I don’t really care how they learned their craft, I just want to know what they can do.

“Just saying on your CV, ‘I have a degree,’ means nothing – the standards and subjects taught in degrees vary so widely that having a pretty certificate really is no guarantee to the employer that the person is able to actually do the job. I want to know what you know, not how you learnt it, and I still have a healthy respect for the self-taught.

“All courses in audio should

TRAINING DIRECTORY

Britannia Row Productions

London-based Britannia Row, one of the world’s leading audio rental companies, has been supplying high-end audio equipment to live engineers since 1975.

In April last year, it began for the first time to offer training courses in live sound practice and theory to people outside the company, and in July partnered with Alchemea College for Alchemea’s live sound course.

“Britannia Row’s Live Sound Technology Course provides a shortcut entry path into the live sound industry,” says the company. “Unlike other audio, sound or music technology courses, it focuses on all of the skills needed for professional live work. You will learn directly from sound engineers and audio technicians who are working at the highest levels in the industry.”

www.training.britanniarow.com

JBL Professional

“In the Harman Professional tour division, we have expanded our team and strengthened our commitment to training and support to help ensure that customers in the live sound and rental communities obtain optimal return from their investment in our platform,” Paul Bauman, associate director, tour sound, at JBL Professional tells *PSNEurope*, outlining the company’s training philosophy.

In addition to its regular VTX training courses at its headquarters in Northridge, California, US, the company now offers remote training at clients’ locations, and is “implementing policies to provide remote show support as well”.

“Many of the training concepts and sound design techniques that have been developed over the past 16 years have been integrated into [the] JBL HiQnet Performance Manager software,” adds Bauman. “The Performance Manager workflow has been specifically designed to steer people towards good working practices in order to get the best results, so this is complementary to our education initiatives.”

www.jblpro.com

Meyer Sound

Meyer Sound has been offering audio training since Bob McCarthy, now the company’s director of system optimisation, first began leading SIM Audio Analyzer seminars in 1984.

“We continue to see education and training as key to Meyer Sound’s philosophy,” says education manager Gavin Canaan. “While our existing seminar programme continues to be in high demand worldwide, we are also exploring new ways to offer education and product-specific training to our users.”

Canaan says that although “face-to-face interaction is always going to be uniquely valuable,” the company sees “great potential” in online resources for training and education. “Product tutorial videos are something we are putting a lot of effort into developing as well as broader webinars on a variety of topics,” he continues, “ranging from technical content to broader interests.

“For example, Buford Jones, who has mixed Pink Floyd and Eric Clapton, has been leading webinars interviewing other veteran engineers who bring a wealth of information and insights in discussing their personal experiences in the world of professional audio. As the tools in our business become increasingly complex and exact, we see a growing need to provide training and education and offer it in a variety of delivery formats.”

www.meyersound.com

TRAINING DIRECTORY

Shure Distribution

“There are several topics and products we offer training on, but currently the Wireless Mastered Series is in high demand,” says Tuomo Tolonen, manager of Shure Distribution’s pro audio group. “In this course, we talk specifically about RF technology to give participants a better idea of how these devices work. Wireless systems have become an integral part of [audio installations and productions today, yet are often misunderstood: RF is sometimes referred to as the ‘dark art’, and the Wireless Mastered sessions aim to de-mystify some of the confusion surrounding wireless equipment.

“Coinciding with the rise in wireless microphone use, we have the very real threat of losing further UHF spectrum to the mobile industry, which leaves us with less spectrum to operate these devices in. Having a clear understanding of how to set up wireless systems and troubleshoot them if something goes wrong is an extremely valuable skillset to have.”

www.shuredistribution.co.uk

SoulSound

The SoulSound agency, founded by Darryn de la Soul, specialises in “getting entry-level [live] engineers started in the business and finding opportunities for them to grow”.

Supplementing the employment agency is the SoulSound Resource Centre, an online membership scheme which focusses on “employability and continued professional development”. “We do not offer a ‘course’ as such,” explains de la Soul, “but aim to plug the ‘real-world’ gaps in formal education through online masterclasses and interviews [and] in-depth looks at how successful engineers and producers have made their way in the world – and spend quite a lot of time perusing bits of gear and finding out how the greats use them!”

SoulSound is presenting six seminars at PLASA London on 6 and 7 October focussed on “upskilling and deepening your understanding of audio”. De la Soul says previous seminars at PLASA and PLASA Focus (see www.soulsound.co.uk/getting-foot-door-full) “have been extremely popular because we concentrate on teaching skills, not flogging gear”.

“We are building a community of audiophiles!”

www.soulsound.co.uk

www.soulsound.co.uk/agency

also focus on producing employable humans, not just getting them through exams. CV writing, how to approach employers and the importance of attitude, timekeeping and being likeable (days are too long in our business to be spent with unlikeable characters) don’t seem to be taught. I get sent many CVs and the vast majority of them are poorly written. Work tends to go to the people who present themselves best.”

This emphasis on not being an “unlikeable character” is also touched upon by Tuomo Tolonen, manager of the pro audio group at Shure Distribution. “It’s not easy to get into or advance within the industry, as it’s a demanding career on many levels,” he comments, “but I believe that if you are hardworking, honest and fun to be around, and put your heart into what you enjoy, you will enjoy a successful career in pro audio.”

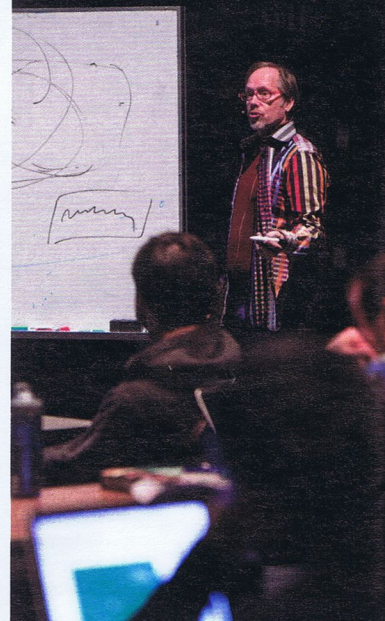
Although Paul Bauman, associate director, tour sound, at JBL Professional believes that “it’s becoming easier in some ways [to break into live sound] since there are more educational programmes and [...] training resources available,” he sees these as complementary to gaining experience and being willing to work one’s way up

the ladder. “Pro audio is a relatively conservative industry, and the old career path model of working your way up through the warehouse and paying your dues while gaining real world experience still applies,” he says.

“In most cases, this means maintaining gear, loading trucks and gradually working your way onto shows [...] in order to gain experience while learning from more experienced engineers along the way. It’s sort of how professional sports teams have a farm team system to develop up-and-coming talent.”

“Breaking into the audio industry is still very much about word of mouth,” agrees de la Soul, before touching on that most controversial type of on-the-job training: the internship. “A newbie needs to impress an oldie enough to be taken along for the ride. I agree that the intern/working for

Meyer Sound’s Bob McCarthy leads a SIM 3 training class in Banff, Alberta, Canada



free system is cruel, especially after spunking thousands on a degree, but that is still the best way to prove your worth and get the experience you need to progress. People need to trust you, and trust needs to be earned. Just choose wisely when working for free!”

“What I personally see is [that] relationships are most important in terms of career advancement,” Canaan adds, “but that is not new or unique to the pro audio industry. The Meyer Sound man also points to the increasing availability of a number of “significant and varied job opportunities that weren’t quite as available in the past,” including “touring, corporate work, amusement park resorts and numerous other avenues where high-quality audio is required”.

The industry is as competitive as ever – and that’s a good thing,” concludes Paul Bauman. “There are a lot of high-quality sound systems [on] the market, but at the end of the day it’s the people installing and operating these systems that make the difference... and that’s where training comes in.” ■

PSNTRAINING

PSNEurope launched PSNTraining, our dedicated online training section, editorial page and fortnightly newsletter, in June.

As our three-way vehicle to bring you the latest dispatches from the pro-audio training world, PSNTraining highlights courses, projects, online packages, demo days and teaching seminars and hosts videos, white papers and a diary to keep you up to date with training days and events.

If you think you can contribute, drop *PSNEurope* editor Dave Robinson a line on david.robinson@intentmedia.co.uk.

www.psneurope.com/training