The Sound of Montreux
With its unique history, populated by legends and shrouded in smoke, the Montreux Jazz Festival (MJF) holds a special place in the music calendar. Lee Baldock reports on how the official audio suppliers service the event . . .

This year’s MJF, the second since the sad loss of its colourful founder Claude Nobs, was again a huge success, attracting over 200,000 visitors to see and hear artists including Van Morrison, Chris Rea, Buddy Guy, Paloma Faith, Pharrell Williams, Ed Sheeran, Robert Plant and Stevie Wonder - in its stunning location on the shore of Lake Geneva.

This, the 48th MJF, has three main venues - the Stravinski Auditorium (capacity up to 4000), the 2000-capacity Jazz Lab (formerly the Miles Davis Hall) and the 350-capacity Jazz Club, all situated in the Montreux Music and Convention Centre (or ‘2m2c’), which provides beautiful views across the lake. Three secondary sites offer free access to performances - Music in the Park, the Rock Cave and Montreux Studio - plus there are a number of other musical happenings including jazz workshops, jazz boats, jazz trains and more.

MJF Head of Sound: David Weber

For the past six years, the management of MJF’s audio requirements has been the responsibility of David Weber, a Geneva-based studio owner and sound engineer. His job is to liaise between the Festival, the artists’ production and the equipment suppliers to ensure the seamless provision of top quality sound and technical backup which is equal to the prestige of the event itself.

Weber has a long history in pro audio, with extensive experience of studio recording, and both installed and live sound. Before Weber’s appointment, the audio coordination had been an add-on job for another member of the organisational team: he is MJF’s first dedicated head of sound.

Weber has cemented strong relationships with the event’s three key audio sponsors over the years. He says: “I have a very good relationship with Meyer, with DiGiCo and with Shure. Every year there is some little change - for example, when Meyer has a new system, as they do this year with the LYON system in the Stravinski; also when the rooms change in size or format. One of my big jobs is also to deal with the bands and all their riders, and to liaise with the suppliers to keep them all informed.”

That amounts to a lot of liaison: with almost 100 acts passing through the three main venues, plus a similar number at Music in the Park, and more than 30 in the Rock Cave - in addition to dozens of DJs playing, for example, in the Jazz Lab in its after hours club format - there is a great deal of information to process and share. “Also I have seen an evolution with the level of the production, with bigger and bigger bands, needing more things,” he says.

DiGiCo: Fernando Delgado

DiGiCo’s on-site support was provided initially by Dave Bigg and then by Fernando Delgado. “Dave came for a week and helped get the whole thing up and running. Then I came in for the rest of it,” says Delgado.

The support role was split across all six venues equipped with DiGiCo consoles, but only in the Stravinski and the Jazz Lab do artists bring their own sound engineers (all the others are manned by in-house engineers) - and only in the Stravinski do those visiting engineers have the option to bring in their own mixing consoles. Even when they do bring their own, many of those are DiGiCo anyway - as in the case of Stevie Wonder’s long-serving front-of-house engineer Danny Leake, who brought in an SD7. “I’ve been using DiGiCo since 2008,” said Leake. “The DiGiCos sound great, and I love the feel and the layout, easy to access, just like using an analogue console.”

In addition to DiGiCo’s direct presence, each of the main venues has experienced resident engineers looking after the audio requirements: the Stravinski has Bernard Natier at FOH and Alex Sarrazin on monitors; looking after FOH in the Jazz Lab is Benoit Saillet, while Meyer Sound’s Jose Gaudin looks after the Jazz Club. If a visiting engineer should have a need that can’t be dealt with by the resident engineers, or is at all unsure about using a DiGiCo, Delgado has an office space on level 2 of the 2m2c where an SD5, an SD9 and an SD11 (along with a small Meyer PA) are available for prepping, training or whatever is needed to make sure they feel comfortable with the desk. The SD5 also serves as a spare console should a last minute additional show be added to the program.

Delgado says: “I have a multitrack on my computer which I can play if that’s needed, although normally engineers will bring their own session . . . I help them in prepping their session and run them through the main features etc.

“Some of them will send us their session weeks in advance, so I can prep the console for them. They might be touring with an SD8, and now they’re going to be using an SD5, for example, so I’ll convert the session for them. That takes about 15 minutes - and then maybe an hour for them to check it through and make sure they’re happy with it.”

In rare cases, Delgado has spent two or three hours with an engineer, but generally, even if they are not a regular user, they will already be familiar with DiGiCo to some extent. Delgado says: “Most of them know how to use the consoles, but they don’t know all the tricks - they don’t
know how truly flexible and dynamic the console is... That’s what I like, when they go all wide-eyed and say ‘Wow, I didn’t know you could do that!’ There’s always a chance of surprising them, and that’s when we’re really helping.”

Delgado says: “I spend a higher percentage of my time in the Stravinski and the Jazz Lab, but I do try to spend at least 10 minutes with every engineer in every venue - even if it’s just to have a chat, say hello, give them my card and let them know that I’m there if they need me. A majority of those bringing in their own desk bring a DiGiCo anyway.”

DiGiCo also provided its new DiGiGrid tools this year. The MGBs were supplied in both Stravinsky and Jazz Lab as a virtual sound-check tool for all visiting engineers, providing 64 channels of record and playback at 96kHz back to the Stravinski’s SD7 and the Jazz Lab’s SD5 (show recording was not an option due to performance rights). MGB units were also made available to the broadcast trucks: both HD1 and Voyager were using MGBs in conjunction with Waves SoundGrid Servers, providing familiar Waves real-time plugin processing on their MADI-enabled consoles.

Overall, thanks in part to the professionalism of the organisation, and the calibre of the visiting engineers and artists, it has proved a painless experience. “It’s been very smooth, and last year was the same - we hardly had any issues,” says Delgado. “Everybody’s on time, you ask for something, you get it - no messing about. It’s probably the most organised festival I’ve been to in my life.”

Weber comments: “DiGiCo and I started with this festival at the same time, and in the first few years it was sometimes difficult to ‘sell’ DiGiCo to the bands because it was not so well known. Now it’s much more the norm - it’s the first or second choice on every rider. It’s a big change in a few years.”

He adds: “They have become my friends. They have very, very good support... We always have somebody from DiGiCo around checking if everything is okay; if I have a question, they answer really quick. It’s an easy relationship.”

Meyer Sound: Miguel Lourtie
Meyer Sound’s official partnership with Montreux stretches back 28 years, but the connection pre-dates even Meyer Sound: John and Helen Meyer first befriended Claude Nobs in the 1970s when John worked at the Institute for Advanced Musical Studies in Montreux.

Meyer Sound’s Miguel Lourtie, who is again heading the on-site technical support effort, gives an overview of Meyer’s presence this year, which includes the first Montreux appearance of the new LYON system: “In the Stravinski we’re using LYON with LFCs, and some MICAs and M’elodies as centres and front-fills. There are a few other speakers - some UPAs, UPQs and some UPMs as console monitors.

“For the Lab, the second largest venue, the system has a dual purpose: it hosts concerts during the early evening and then later it becomes a disco/club-style venue. So we have two systems - a conventional left and right, which is a MILO and 700HPs, with just a UPQ as a centre-fill and some UP Juniors as under-balcony fills, plus M’elodies as front-fills. Then you have a disco system, a four-sided dance-floor set-up, with four JMs
per position and four LFCs flown just above the DJ booth.

“The third venue, the Jazz Club, was only introduced last year. It used to be the offices where they did all the passes. So from a technical point of view it’s an interesting challenge because it has a very low ceiling, and it’s very long . . . so we have a left and right, and then four lines of delays, each consisting of four UP Juniors.

“Of the other three venues, the Rock Cave is what used to be the Jazz Café, but substantially reduced in size, so that has just three UPAs per side, and two 600HPs. Outside of the building you have Music In The Park, which is also a free venue; that has 11 M’elodies each side with 700HPs for the low end. Then there’s the Studio, which hosts DJs until the early hours. It has a dance floor with eight M’elodies per side and some UPQs to fill in the bar area. Low-end again is from 700HPs.”

Meyer Sound provides the system designs for each venue, which this year included new designs for the Stravinski, as it was using the new system, and for the Rock Cave, the new smaller space within 2m2c. All of the Meyer inventory is supplied by local rental company Skynight. “Skynight supply and do all of the hanging and cabling, and then system tuning will be done directly by Meyer, usually in the two days before the festival opens,” explains Lourtie. “This year that work was done by myself, Jose Gaudin and Chris Mead.”

“Once the system is set up, the engineers in the house can manage. Every day they’ll create a session for each band that’s playing, and make whatever changes they need, in terms of correcting the frequency response of the system - more or less sub, more or less HF - and that’s pretty much it. The one person that stays behind during the festival - in this case, me - is really there in case there is a problem. You don’t have to sit through all the sound-checks!”

Meeting and talking to the visiting engineers is also an important part of Lourtie’s role, as much as it is for DiGiCo’s or Shure’s support personnel. Like any flagship event, Montreux is a great place for networking and gathering market feedback. Lourtie says: “The guys who were looking after Stevie Wonder’s PA were asking about the new system; in those cases it’s valuable to have someone here from the manufacturer who can chat about it with them and answer their questions.”

How has LYON performed in the Stravinski? “It’s made it easier, for sure,” says Lourtie.

“One of the things we’ve been trying to achieve with LEO and now LYON is to create systems that work straight out of the box, as far as possible. We’ve built in system pre-sets, which is something we hadn’t done with MILO, for instance. That makes life easier, because it gives you a starting point; often, you’ll just need to make minor adjustments from there. With LEO and LYON, it’s really a no-brainer because the pre-sets get you so close to what you’ll be using in the end.”

“Last year we used LEO, and LYON is really a downsized version of LEO, which is much better suited to the venue. It has allowed us to hang more boxes per side [12 LYON per side, compared with 7 LEO per side in 2013], which gives more possibilities in actually configuring the system to the shape of the
venue. It's a better match from that perspective. In terms of sound signature, it's exactly the same as LEO - which is a lack of signature, let's put it that way!"

Comment on LYON from visiting engineers has been very positive. Danny Leake, for example, was full of praise after Stevie Wonder’s show, saying it was “a beautiful system, really responsive, like being in the studio.” Others, Lourtie says, have been equally complimentary. “The responsiveness of the system is what people have noticed the most - the fact that when they do something to the mix, it translates - they can hear it. They may find they have to be less extreme in making a correction.”

David Weber says: “I think the LYON is the best sound we’ve ever had in the Stravinski, which is not an easy place. A lot of engineers said ‘This is the new one? Wow’ . . . Also, the 1100-LFC sub is a big jump forward. I love this sub, because it’s so precise, but never obtrusive. It’s amazing.”

Shure:
Michael Wolf
For Shure, this is the 20th year as MJF’s official technical partner, providing microphones, in-ear monitoring and wireless systems across all of the festival’s venues. Michael Wolf, technical support manager at Shure Europe, was leading Shure’s on-site support for the 18th consecutive year. Equipment is supplied directly from Shure Europe, with all cases/racks prepared at Shure’s EMEA Headquarters in Eppingen, Germany.

Wolf’s role began several weeks before the festival, liaising with David Weber over the requirements of a total of 15 venues - as well as for the Montreux Jazz Voice competition, sponsored by Shure. Wolf is responsible for the pre-programming, on-site adjustment and coordination of over 100 channels of wireless, in addition to all the other equipment demands. Weber says: “About two months before the festival I check in with Michael Wolf, and we make a list of the rooms and equipment, including spares. Based on the previous year’s experience, we may add some more IEM here, or less there. Michael does a fantastic job of managing all the wireless frequencies, ensuring that we have no interference with anything else going on in the area . . . we never have big issues.”

Wolf says: “The RF spectrum gets busier every year. Even on the so-called ‘smaller’ stages and venues, more wireless is requested, or carried by the incoming productions. There is also wireless used by the production team and Radio Television Swiss, which has a little broadcast studio in the main entrance hall. A lot of preparation is done prior to festival, but there are always adjustments necessary during the setup on-site, as more information becomes available.

“A lot of bands arrive with full production and carrying their own wireless: I contact their crew during the setup to coordinate the frequencies, and to see if they need any additional support or equipment for their show. There are several cases where bands have special requests, like extra wireless for guitar, bass, percussion, vocals, brass and horns, etc. I supply the extra gear and coordinate the frequency setup accordingly.”

Needless to say, with these requirements the Shure equipment list is vast, with microphones of all flavours, both wired and wireless and personal monitors. Of course, the intelligent Axient Wireless Management system is in use once again, this its third year at Montreux. Wolf says: “The quantity of equipment has been quite consistent over the last couple years: the venues stay pretty much the same, usually with only minor changes. Of course, we like to present our new products whenever and wherever possible, and we update the equipment list accordingly.”

The biggest challenge for Wolf is to be prepared for the unexpected. He says: