

WORLD

# Paws for consideration

Pro-audio products are often intended to suit multiple market segments, but what are the implications for a business when lift-off is achieved in a less-than-premeditated way? **David Davies** explores the whys and wherefores of versatile design

➤ The headache-inducing costs that tend to be associated with R&D mean that there has always been an emphasis on extracting maximum value from the resulting products – a focus that is arguably more intense than ever in these perilous times. The benefits of the ensuing versatility can be many-fold: for manufacturers and distributors, the ability to talk to more than one market from a shared platform; for end-users like rental companies who also have interests in installation, the chance to reduce the number of systems and technologies with which they must become familiar, while simultaneously increasing their possible market reach.

Examples of this versatility abound in pro audio. Take, for example, Nexo's GEO T line array – a mainstay large concert/festival system that also has many install credits to its name, including mega-churches in Asia, thanks to factors including its compact size and high SPL voicing. Or DiGiCo's SD7, designed "with several market segments in mind", according to marketing director David Webster, with optional sector-specific configurations such as the SD7T allowing the SD7-owning rental company to orient their console towards traditional live sound or theatre mixing as required.

These multi-disciplinary characteristics are often premeditated. As Keith Watson, marketing director of Soundcraft Studer, observes, the "widespread adoption" of its consoles across applications is "no accident – we design our consoles with a variety of applications in mind. In fact, strong consideration is given to numerous potential markets before the design process on a new product begins."

But sometimes, the extent to which a product or technology achieves success in a particular market segment does come as more of a surprise: from

"Maybe if we had been able to do [market research then] we would have identified the potential [of the 4061], but we didn't see it coming at the time"

CharterOak broadcast mics that become popular for instrument miking, to Genelec studio speakers that achieve success in all manner of fixed applications; and from Meyer Sound's install-oriented Constellation acoustic system unexpectedly talking to the road for a major orchestral tour, to Royer Labs' R-121 ribbon mic crossing over from classical applications to become a popular choice for miking guitar cabinets (a development that, says Royer Labs' John Jennings, "changed people's perception of [where] a ribbon mic could and couldn't go" and led the



The hybrid VeniceF features a bus or two. Here's Hercules the hybrid liger with a bus



Morten Støve, DPA Microphones

company to "promote the use of our ribbons on higher SPL applications").

Lift-off in unexpected quarters can often have a galvanising effect, but there can also be problematic implications in terms of capacity and expertise – particularly when the company is small or still in its formative stages. With all these factors in mind, *PSNE* set out to capture some memorable 'war stories' from the

creative coalface of pro audio and, in particular, to highlight those thrilling moments when a product – and maybe its parent company too – achieves traction in a new and unexpected way.

**Branching out from broadcast** Such occurrences are bound to be particularly keenly felt when the company itself is fairly new in the world. Take, for example, Danish microphone brand DPA, which was co-founded by Morten Støve in 1992. Three years on from inception, the company had a product

range that was focused firmly on the studio and broadcast markets – but then one of its distributors suggested that they take a closer look at the theatre market. The result was the 4061 – the first in a still-expanding range of miniature microphones that helped to put DPA on the global map. Although highly popular in their intended market of theatre, the mics' burgeoning reputation for high-quality sound in a discreet package saw them cross back over into the more familiar territory of broadcast. The mics became a mainstay of live concerts.

"People were very much used to dynamic mics, but suddenly they had a condenser that was very good quality, very small and could be put anywhere on the instrument without it being noticed," says Støve, who nonetheless admits that the 4061's runaway success was decidedly unexpected: "Maybe if we had been able to do [market research then] we would have identified the potential, but we didn't see it coming at the time."

With the live market in mind, DPA developed a range of clips for the 4061 – at which point, remarks Støve, "sales went through the roof". In the short-term, the company had to boost its manufacturing capacity and add to its staffing levels, but Støve is grateful that DPA's ensuing growth has nonetheless taken place "steadily and organically". Today, he holds fast to an approach that emphasises careful examination of each new opportunity, as well as an awareness that "distribution [in whichever segment] is everything. It's safer now for us to explore new areas as we are a bigger company with a larger turnover, but when you are only four people and you have to spend 50% of your manpower on something new, it can be dangerous."

Michael Deming – the founder/CEO of another young manufacturer, ➤



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Star Wars: In Concert expanded the horizons of Meyer Sound's Constellation technology

CharterOak Acoustic Devices – can certainly attest to the growing pains of a small company. Founded in 2002, the US-based operation has focused primarily on microphones to this point, and Deming acknowledges that his compact team of five – not all of whom are full time – generally have

enough on their collective plate getting the products manufactured and out of the door; there hasn't exactly been plenty of time to lavish on market research. Consequently, there have been several notable surprises since the company debuted its first products at AES in 2005.

"About two or three years ago we brought out a front-address condenser mic, the S700, for voiceover and other broadcast applications," recalls Deming, a producer/engineer by background. "Then, one day, a guy who works at CharterOak part-time and plays guitar experimented with the mic during a recording session and found that it sounds incredible when used on bass and guitar amps. Primarily through word of mouth, we've probably gone on to sell more of those for instrument

miking than for broadcast." By a neat reverse, the SA538 condenser was developed with an eye to vocal and instrument miking, but has started to take off in the lucrative LA voiceover market, where it is providing an alternative to the traditionally extensive use of shotgun mics.

If the company's development to this point has been less than entirely premeditated, its next significant move will be more calculated. While production of existing microphone models will continue, CharterOak is turning its R&D focus to onboard rack gear for the foreseeable future. The PEQ-1 active EQ and SCL1 signal processor are already available, while at time of writing, a new microphone preamp – MPA-1 – was expected to debut at Prolight + Sound.

"The intention has always been to develop products for every aspect of pro audio, hence the current shift in our R&D," says Deming.

### Dreams and schemes

An abiding theme of many manufacturers' stories over the past decade or so has been the increasing importance of other install applications – not least because of the increased unpredictability of the traditional studio market. Up until the mid '90s, Genelec was largely focused on the studio and broadcasting worlds – until, that is, the 1029A biamplified speaker began to be specified for installs in restaurants, bars and other public spaces. The live market, too, came calling to the offices of the Finnish manufacturer.

"I think it was primarily the ease of use; the amplifier was in the box, so you just needed signal and power, bang it on the wall and that was it," says Genelec's international sales manager, Lars-Olof Janflod.

Organisationally, Genelec went on to "invest more effort into install"; technically, they started to implement install-friendly features, such as the replacement of XLR connectors with Phoenix connectors, enabling the speakers to be connected without specialist audio knowledge. More recently, with the 8040A, bass response was limited in favour of increased SPL – a change that was "greatly appreciated by installers".

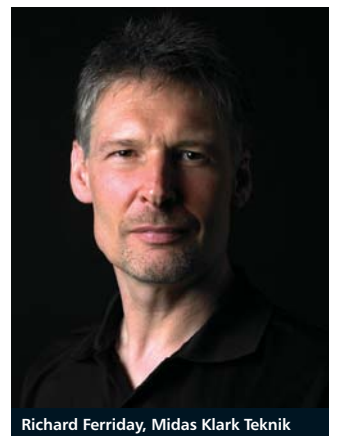
Then there are the occasions where a product may have been developed primarily for one audience but with half an eye on other opportunities. This certainly seems to have been the case with BlackBox Recorder, a 24-track/24-bit/96kHz multichannel recorder from JoeCo, the company established in 2009 by former SADI chief Joe Bull.

"When I first formulated the idea of the BlackBox I saw a hole in the live market that I felt we could fill, but my knowledge of the broadcast and post industries, in particular, led me to believe that by incorporating a few other unique features we would be able to find traction in these other markets as well," says Bull, who believes the compact footprint and instant importation of files are among the factors to have made the device relevant across segments.

### V is for Venice – and versatility

Midas has also been innovating in the area of live recording, and has even underlined the versatile nature of one of its latest launches – the VeniceF 'digi-log' ultra-compact mixing console – by describing it as the first product in a new genre of 'hybrid' live audio consoles.

Midas Klark Teknik brand development manager Richard Ferriday explains:



Richard Ferriday, Midas Klark Teknik

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“The VeniceF isn’t the first analogue mixer to feature a FireWire interface; however, this is the first time that a FireWire interface has been implemented in a way that makes it appropriate for applications other than just recording. The way in which the FireWire interfaces with the console’s buses as well as direct outputs means that any laptop-based plug-in effects can be easily used with the console in a live situation.

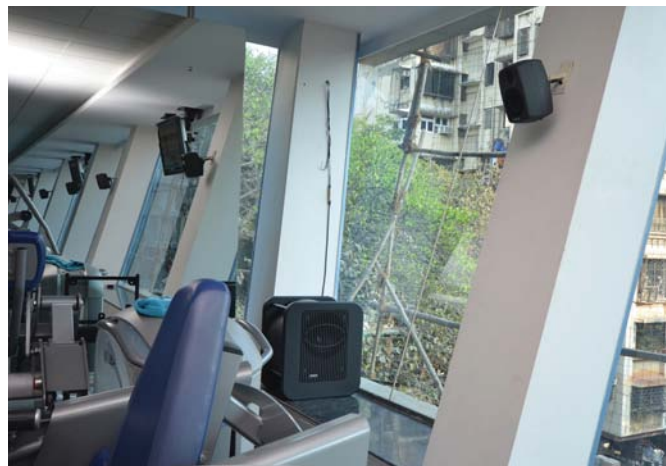
Also, because the FireWire channel direct outputs are always active, these can be used in conjunction with the FireWire inputs to create a FireWire insert point, permitting any third-party plug-ins to be used as digital inserts on an analogue mixer.”

The VeniceF’s adoption for live recording and virtual sound-checking was anticipated, as was its specification for fixed installs. “However, we have been delightfully surprised by the recording industry’s response to [this product],” says Ferriday. “It is a modest little mixer, but it would appear that there is a demand for high-quality A-D D-A interfaces and summing mixers, which the VeniceF satisfies perfectly. It has found considerable favour among the home/project recording studio community.”

If the VeniceF recognises a more recent demand, Duran Audio’s vital point of inspiration nearly 20 years ago was the desire to address an historical problem within the world of electro-acoustics. “In the early 1990s Duran Audio realised that the quality of PA systems in large reverberant buildings had not improved much since the ‘60s. People had come to accept that when you were in a large railway station, cathedral or airport that the sound would be bad,” says Duran Audio’s international business development manager, Nick Screen. Determined to right this wrong, the company



Duran Audio’s Intellivox beam-steering array is proving popular in shopping malls



Genelec studio speakers have achieved success in all manner of fixed applications

phone system to handle the TBU function required in a phone system.

“G711 was originally present in our ISDN modules to allow a POTS telephone to dial into the ISDN line, so using it in a phone system was a secondary function not originally intended,” says Wilson. “Most of what we do at Glensound is bespoke design, but if something has a [wider application], then great.”

CueStation software and various Meyer Sound speakers, allows orchestral musicians to benefit from an improved mix and an increased awareness of a performance space’s individual “energy”.

“I’d love to say we saw it coming, but it wasn’t an application we had envisaged,” says McMahon, adding that the *Star Wars: In Concert* tour has contributed to “an expanding of the horizons of this technology. More and more people are using it – including on scoring stages for movie soundtrack recording – and it could be that there are even more applications for the technology we haven’t thought about yet!” (And *Star Wars/Constellation* is by no means Meyer Sound’s only such experience of an unintended application. Since 2006, says Luke Jenks, the company has registered a steady stream of interest in using its largest line array loudspeaker, the M3D, for delay purposes due to its full-range specification, long-throw capabilities and “very effective” cardioid pattern.)

While versatility is undoubtedly the name of the game in pro audio these days, the market still has a funny way of prompting manufacturers in unexpected and often rewarding directions. And for smaller or newer companies, in particular, such developments can prove to be real game-changers, pushing them into a higher league and confirming their maturity as businesses with something distinctive to offer the industry. ♣

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## “It could be that there are even more applications for the [Constellation] technology we haven’t thought about yet!”

embarked upon extensive research that ultimately yielded the Intellivox beam-steering array – “the beauty” of which, says Screen, “is that you can have a very narrow vertical beam and aim the sound where you want it at the listener, making it the ultimate message delivery system in large spaces.”

Initially, cathedrals, train stations and churches were the primary target markets, but now Intellivox is sold into “almost any type of environment” involving large spaces and high RTs – from lecture theatres and concert halls to museums and malls. The validity of the technical approach is underlined by “how many ‘steerable columns’ there are on the market now”, while beam-steering is also moving more firmly into touring – “something that we first launched with our Target range back in 2000”.

Some solutions, of course, begin from an even more specialist standpoint. Glensound’s sales & marketing manager, Marc Wilson, says that several standalone products have spun out of creating bespoke solutions for projects. There have also been several examples of unexpected versatility, such as Irish broadcaster RTE’s use of the G711 and G722-sporting ISDN module in Glensound’s Call Classic talk show

### Fresh Constellations

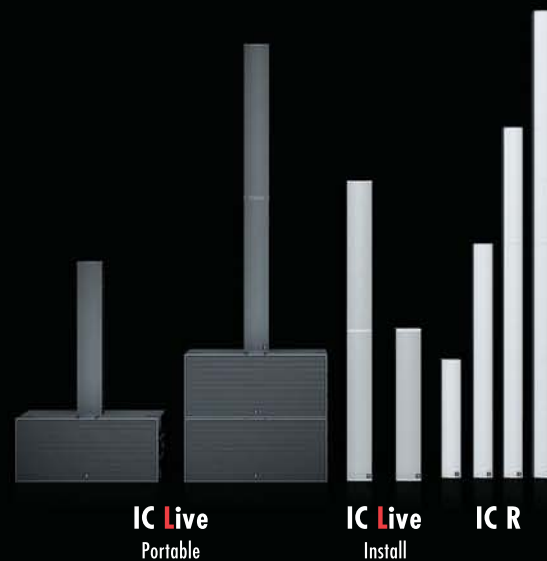
Finally, there are those delightful bolts from the blue – moments when a technology devised very specifically for one market begins to take off another in a totally unexpected way. That description certainly applies to Meyer Sound’s Constellation acoustic system, originally developed to bring a new quality of live sound to permanent venue installations. And that was the way it started to roll out worldwide, until the day it came into the orbit of sound designer Fred Vogler, then in the early stages of work on a symphonic tour of music from the *Star Wars* films.

“Fred came to the factory and experienced a test of the Constellation system,” recalls Meyer Sound’s executive director, digital products, John McMahon. “The next morning he contacted Helen Meyer and said that he hadn’t been able to sleep the previous night as he was thinking about recreating the Constellation [effect] for a live stage tour!” The result, several months on, was a portable deployment that exchanged the “regeneration of a room’s natural acoustic” in fixed installs that, via 30 sub-mixes and the use of

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