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Taming *The Wild Party*

By: Alan Hardiman

Lectrosonics' SSM transmitter makes its stage debut

With the leads and most of the supporting cast cavorting on the stage for its two-hour duration without an intermission, the musical *The Wild Party*, by Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe, presents scant opportunity for operator intervention in the event of on-stage equipment malfunction or transmitter failure. In such circumstances, crew who adhere to worst-case-scenario practices often deploy dual-redundant systems.

When the musical was coproduced

ters end up wearing very little, if anything at all; so where do you hide not just a single transmitter pack, but a dual-redundant pair, on the show's female lead as she gets down to her unmentionables?

This was on McBoyle's mind in the weeks leading up to the show, when he happened to come across Lectrosonics' new miniature Super Slight Micro (SSM) transmitter pack at the annual Contact Distribution Tech Fair, held at the Glenn Gould Studio in

atre not just due to its size, which would allow two of them to fit, side by side, under a wig, but also because it features an all-metal housing and Lemo three-pin connector, which is much more robust than the T5F that Lectrosonics has had on their previous systems. Plus, the Lemo is entrenched in the live Broadway world," McBoyle says.

The only catch was that the SSM wasn't in production yet, and hadn't even been publicly announced. Undeterred, McBoyle there and then approached Lectrosonics' director of Canadian operations Colin Bernard with a proposition: If Lectrosonics was interested in Beta-testing the SSM on a live musical theatre production, McBoyle had a perfect opportunity for them.

"Colin said it was a good idea, but he didn't know when production units would be available. He said he'd consult with Lectrosonics' director of business development Karl Winkler, and get back to me," McBoyle recalls. Fortunately for all concerned, the folks at Lectrosonics were interested in moving forward with the project, and Bernard emailed McBoyle later that day to confirm their participation.

McBoyle says, "I was really surprised, since—almost in jest—I had asked them to lend me four systems, because the size of the packs would be perfect and would solve a problem for me, in that the budget for *The Wild Party* allowed for only 14 systems, and I needed 18. Lectrosonics made good on their promise, and delivered four SSMs that were essentially the working prototype. For our part, we thoroughly Beta-tested them, made some observations, and even managed to break one in the first couple of days—which revealed an issue with the way the battery was mounted, and which



at the Berkeley Street Theatre in Toronto this past February by Acting Up Stage Company and Obsidian Theatre Company—the professional Canadian premiere of the show 15 years after its Broadway debut—the sound designer Peter McBoyle was faced with a considerable challenge: As you might expect of a Roaring Twenties wild party unfolding more or less in real time, some of the charac-

November. "I knew that the size of the packs would come into play, and it suddenly occurred to me as I was standing there that I'd like to get my hands on the SSMs and try them out," he says.

Measuring just 2.52" x 1.48" x 0.57" and weighing in at 2.3oz, including battery, the SSM is the most compact transmitter ever to hit the market.

"I saw it as ideal for musical the-

they have rectified for the production run. We were all sworn to secrecy until April 1 when they officially launched the SSM.”

How did the SSM fare? A2 Cecilia Waszczuk, who served as RF technician on the show, recalls how a pair of SSMs was deployed on Cara Ricketts, who played Queenie, the female lead. “The two packs were taped together, side by side, with their antennas pointing in opposite directions, and then slid into a little pouch that we had sewn into her wig prep right on the top of her head,” she says. “They are so small that there was still a little room in there, and at no time did they ever get hot. We had two Sennheiser MKE-1 mics loomed together on her, and it worked out really well. There was no concern about her audio or the heat from the transmitters at any point in the show.”

William Fallon, the front-of-house mixer, adds, “The SSMs have a transparency that’s startling. We used three different microphone models in the show—MKE-1s, MKE-2s, and Countryman B3s—and you could hear the unique characteristics of each one clearly transferred through the transmitter.”

McBoyle likens the SSM to a straight microphone cable. “Over the years, Lectrosonics has made great strides in reducing the radio sound of the transmission,” he says. “It sounds like the transmitters and receivers are not in the signal path at all between the microphone and the console input. Having the Lemo connector is great, too, because of its size and also the locking collar, which works so well for musical theatre.”

Beta testing leads to 50% longer battery life

Initially, miniaturization came at a slight cost of shorter battery life. The 3.7V lithium-ion flat pack battery used in McBoyle’s units provided “reasonable run time,” according to Lectrosonics, which translated to a

little over four hours.

“That wasn’t a problem with *The Wild Party* as long as the RF tech and I were diligent about it,” says Fallon.

“She would do a primary check of all the radios and then power them down before delivering them to the front of house. Right before I did the final go/no check of all the radios, I would power up the 14 Lectrosonics LMA transmitters, and then power up the SSMs last, which meant that they were on for only about 15 minutes before being distributed to the dressing rooms. This left us with a further 45 – 60 minutes of play time on the far end of our two-hour show for curtain calls and so on.”

According to McBoyle, if battery life could be extended to five hours or more, the SSM would be ideal for longer shows, such as this summer’s productions of *Carousel* and *The Sound of Music* at the Stratford Festival, for which he is sound designer. “Those shows run three hours, so

by the time you fire up your batteries and distribute them to the dressing rooms, they end up cooking for longer than four hours for sure.”

Lectrosonics took this recommendation to heart and went to work immediately to optimize the power supply circuitry and develop a longer-lasting battery. “Peter was concerned that four hours run time might not be enough for some shows, although it worked fine for *The Wild Party*,” Bernard says. “Based on this input, our engineering team did some additional work on the transmitter and increased the run time by 50% to six hours.”

Battery life can be further extended by the operator via the LectroRM remote control app, available for iOS and Android phones, which allows the operator to initiate and exit sleep mode on all SM Series and SSM transmitters. In sleep mode, battery consumption is reduced by about 80%. The app works by emitting an

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audio sequence of DTMF tones that are interpreted by the transmitter as a configuration change. The tones can also be replayed from a CD or MP3 player. In addition to sleep mode, the tones can be used to control audio level, transmission frequency, lock mode, and power output level. When a configuration tone is activated, any remote control-enabled SM transmitters within a range of about 12" will adopt the setting change.



Fallon suggests that “the SSM has a really good chance of dominating the market, because it’s significantly less expensive and lighter than other packs. The actors really loved how light it was. The fact that it was small was great, but the fact that it was so light made it barely perceptible. I can

only imagine that when it gets deployed on dancers for the first time, they are going to be ecstatic that they don’t have half a pound of aluminum hanging on their lower backs or waists.”

Sound system

The 244-seat Berkeley Street Theatre “is not a huge venue, but there’s a certain power to the music in the show, so we anchored the sound-reinforcement system around a center line array of eight Meyer Mina cabinets,” McBoyle explains. “For a small theatre it was quite a large array, but it provided coverage for almost the entire orchestra and balcony. We augmented that with a left and

right upper pair of Meyer UPJ-1Ps and a left and right lower pair of Meyer UPA-1P cabinets, to achieve some width in the vocals and to spread out the five-piece band a little bit, and a pair of the house’s Apogee AE-3s for side fill and Meyer UPM-1Ps, which were hung for overhead

monitoring. Loudspeaker processing was via a Meyer Galileo 616.

“We built a pair of Meyer USW-1 subwoofers into a passerelle separating the upstage area, where the band is located, from the downstage area, since there is no formal proscenium in the theatre,” McBoyle adds.

“Incorporating the subs into the set design is a trick I had used on the musical *Caroline, or Change*, which I did at the Berkeley in 2012. The passerelle also created a little bit of baffling for the band, allowing us to control their acoustic level.”

Having the band upstage helped the actors with the onstage monitoring, which was supplemented by two EM Acoustics EMS-61s, facing downstage in the passerelle, that were also used to replay sound effects from the QLab system. The band, consisting of piano, bass, drums, and two woodwinds, mixed their own in-ear monitors on an Aviom system from stems provided by Fallon from the Midas PRO2C front-of-house console.

“The show is almost non-stop music,” McBoyle says. “It’s a pressure cooker. It literally is a wild party”—one that he was able to tame, fortunately, by a good deal of forethought, planning, and partnership with Lectrosonics and their new SSM micro transmitters. 📶



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