

d&b's XSL makes Broadway debut with & Juliet



Picture: Matthew Murphy

Hit musical & Juliet opened at the Stephen Sondheim Theatre in November, bringing the works of one of pop's most prolific songwriters to life through d&b audiotechnik's XSL system. XSL was specified for its Broadway debut by award-winning sound designer Gareth Owen, of Gareth Owen Sound.

A vibrant, feel-good celebration of the many hits of Max Martin (written for the likes of Katy Perry, Britney Spears, Ariana Grande, Justin Timberlake, Ellie Goulding and Christina Aguilera among others) & Juliet has been called by Variety a "Shakespearean Jukebox Musical" and "the most fun you'll have in a Broadway theater right now." Directed by Luke Sheppard, with musical supervision, orchestration and arrangements by Bill Sherman and a book by renowned writer David West Read (Schitt's Creek), this musical salute is cleverly woven into the premise that Shakespeare's wife has given Romeo & Juliet a happier ending!

For Owen, working with Associate Sound Designer Matt Peploe and Head of Sound Curt Miller, this was the fourth sound design for & Juliet, following successful runs in Manchester, London, and Toronto. Having used d&b's mid-sized KSL system in his London design, he was able to trial the new, smaller XSL system in Toronto, prior to the Broadway opening.

The key to the whole show is, of course, the music of Max Martin, so the goal was to achieve a sound as close as possible to a studio acoustic. "We wanted a sound system that could deliver anything that Max wanted to throw at it," recalls Owen of

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the first production, "so we were very excited to use KSL. It's a great-sounding box, but it's also rather big to fit into many theatres. So, when the XSL came along, it was perfect for what we needed."



Picture: Gareth Owen Sound

As with the previous productions, the Broadway show is in surround sound. "As always, it's an exclusively d&b rig," says Owen. "We have XSL main left and right arrays, V-Series centre cluster, and then SL-Subs hung in a sub array across the stage, and two more SL-Subs under the front of the stage. And lots and lots of E6 and E8 delays!"

As the smallest member of d&b audiotechnik's ground-breaking SL-Series, the XSL

system presents the same innovative full broadband directivity control as its bigger SL-Series siblings, the GSL and KSL, but in a format that makes it suitable for even the tightest spaces. The renowned directivity control gives the sound designer a significant head-start in handling the room's reflections.

Owen explains, "Not having those low-mids coming off the back of the boxes certainly tightens up the low end. A line array is often designed to work effectively in free space, but what we have to do in theatre is jam it into a corner between the side wall and the proscenium - usually as tight as we possibly can, to maintain sightlines. In doing that, we create an immediate smearing of the low end and low-mids, especially if the walls are hard, which they often are."

The solution is often to EQ out the problematic frequencies, but that also subtracts from the sound quality. "That's where you really benefit from an array that puts less out the back," says Owen.

Avoiding this common 'smearing' effect pays dividends in managing the stage sound, too. "One of the major things we have to deal with in theatre is the fact that we have omni-directional microphones strapped to everyone's head," says Owen with a smile. "So the more rejection we get out of the back of these boxes, the less junk we get on stage, the cleaner the vocal sound. Often, a performer downstage left or right can be just a meter or so from the array, so anything we can do to stop unwanted reflections is a good thing."

He adds, "It's one of the reasons I'm such a big fan of d&b, because they put so much thought into what comes out of the back of the box, not just what comes out of the front."

Musical Supervisor Bill Sherman was also impressed by what Owen and the team achieved. He says, "Overall, Gareth's ability to create a pop concert atmosphere, while still being able to understand every single word, is truly an art form. Using the d&b XSL technology also assures that there is not a bad sounding seat in the entire house. Gareth's ability to fill the Sondheim with sound from a surround perspective really differentiates & Juliet from most other Broadway shows."

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