

Martin Audio & Menno Smit's Stairway to Heaven



The first time Stairway Productions' Menno Smit heard a full-bore Martin Audio concert system was at Grace Jones' Lowlands Festival appearance in Holland, back in 2009. "I was just blown away by this wall of sound. In fact I was so impressed by the throw of the Wavefront [W8L] Longbow speakers that I decided to pursue a career in live audio," he said. This was after a background first as a singer before switching to technical production, attending including Codarts University for the Arts in Rotterdam and learning about music production and creative producing. He then set out in the studio world, working with bands like the now popular Chef'Special, before transitioning to live sound.

Parallel to his academic work he had also set up Stairway Productions as far back as 2007 to service small gigs from his base in Delft, located between Rotterdam and the Hague. But 2014 was the year that proved the turning point. "I was looking to upgrade my PA system from a budget brand to a more professional system," he said. "I went to TM Audio and they demo'd some different brands, but it was Martin Audio that stood out. I eventually went for the Blackline X12+ ... which I still use it as a multipurpose speaker.

"What I like about Martin Audio, apart from the very direct and clear sound," he continued, "is that they offer solutions for every situation. When I was starting out with small events there was a system available that suited my needs and budget. But as the events became more demanding, I didn't have to change brands to get better results." This is exemplified by the systematic evolution of his inventory. This

reached a pinnacle last month when he placed an order for 24 WPC, which he will run on his own productions (and as dry hire), along with his existing SX218 subs, once it's delivered next year.

How he got to this point makes fascinating reading. Menno initially pursued the Blackline catalogue. "The H3+ with the S218 sub I was able to use on quite big events - for up to 1500 people outside. But then I needed a system with a bit more range. At that time [Martin Audio distributors] Ampco Flashlight were selling their W8LM, so I bought this second hand from them, which took me to another level and bigger shows. I also bought 12 of the new LE100 monitors when they came out and grew the inventory further with [Blackline] S218+ subs." Every move was aimed to improve performance, he said. "I then wanted more volume, higher SPL," he said. "When I demoed the SX218 it showed what I was missing so I upgraded to 12 of these."

With an eye to the future, he also notes that municipalities in Holland are getting stricter with sound control rules year on year, requiring cardioid subs and the more tapered control solution that Wavefront Precision offers. He already has experience of WPC, having joined forces with fellow Dutch production company DSL on festivals. "We share the same vision as to what a system should sound like, though of course DSL are bigger and have 30 years more experience."

He already has his own portfolio of regular festival work in Delft, including the Jazz and Blues Festivals, and Knapsack Festival, (a carnival of small boats featuring Martin Audio sound systems), as well as all the outdoor events for 'het Brouwhuis Delft' such as 'Koningsdag op het Brouwplein' (Kings Day Festival). Therefore, his upgrade to the WPC became axiomatic -facilitated by Ampco Flashlight's, Martijn de Jong. "I heard the Wavefront Precision systems on a Martin Audio Experience day in Leiden [at the venue Gebr. De Nobel]. I was really impressed by WPC, and knew this was what I wanted." And later, when his 12 Blackline X8 went out to a theatre on long-term rental, he replaced them in inventory with the new FlexPoint FP8. "I signed the order without even hearing them," he says.

"What I like is the clarity of FlexPoint at high SPLs. For corporate clients requiring speakers on poles the FP8 offers a nice solution because it sounds good, and you don't have to do a lot with it. "Also when you use the [smaller] FP4 with a small subwoofer it sounds just like a HiFi system. I was really blown away by the quality and it's also a bit more directional than CDD Live which I've worked with for some years. Sometimes if you have a room that's a bit narrow, having speakers that are not as wide dispersion gives you a bit more control." Although Martin Audio is not Stairway's sole speaker brand, Menno insists, "Whenever a client wants a nice sound I suggest Martin Audio - and I only ever use that brand on my own productions."

Menno Smit is now looking to 2025 with positivity, relishing the future once he has taken possession of his WPC. "I hope this will enable me to expand a bit more although mainly it's to do the work I am already doing but on a higher level." The

future certainly looks bright. "After the coronavirus there was an explosion with events and the market changed a lot. My turnover was suddenly double compared with 2019 - a really big jump - and that level has been maintained in 2023-24."

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