

A HIGH-QUALITY SOUND SYSTEM

It has been said that most listening spaces go through three sound systems. The first is installed by a member or friend of the organization who owns the space. The second is an upgrade installed by the local music store or burglar alarm company. The third is the one installed by a competent sound-system contractor.

It is not necessary to go through all three stages; the first installation can be done correctly and competently. There are basically two different approaches to getting a good system on the first try (or a good system on the second or third try, for that matter). One is to select a “design-build” contractor based upon previous successful designs and installations, then negotiate with that company to design and install what you need. The second approach is to engage a consultant who will design the system and provide construction/installation documents on which contractors may bid. This approach is often used for major new construction projects or for re-fits where preceding systems have had significant problems. In either case, it is essential for the owner to check out previous work by the contractor or consultant before making a selection.

What does a good system do?

A good sound system provides pretty much the same sound level at all seats, provides clear, intelligible speech, and reinforces the music at appropriate levels with a natural sound, and without extraneous noises and distortion. It should also be unobtrusive aesthetically and be capable of being properly operated by the personnel available in the organization.

What does a good system look like?

There is no component of a sound system that is best for every venue. Several manufacturers make excellent speakers, for example, but no one manufacturer – let alone one speaker model – is appropriate for every application. The mixer will vary, depending upon many factors: there are analog mixers, digital mixers, and automatic mixers. These range from six to over 100 inputs (Channels). The same principles apply to microphones, signal processors, and all other components. Part of the value of a good contractor or consultant is his/her knowledge of the available products.

How about brand names?

The only general rule is that the best brands of professional sound equipment are not likely to be known by the public at large. There’s a certain amount of value in reputation, but even that can be misleading, with the multiple corporate acquisitions and ubiquitous outsourcing of recent years. Again, the best policy is to trust your contractor or consultant. Neither of these is likely to have a display room full of equipment that he/she needs to sell; the consultant does not sell equipment, and the contractor normally orders what is needed for each job.

What about those of us who already have problematic systems?

You would be well advised to engage a good consultant who can evaluate how much of your present equipment is suitable for your needs, how much needs to be replaced, and whether, in fact, the problem is with the sound system or with the acoustics of the room. Based upon the consultant’s report, you can choose a company or companies to make the necessary changes, and

the consultant should also make sure the equipment is installed and adjusted correctly, then train your system operators.