

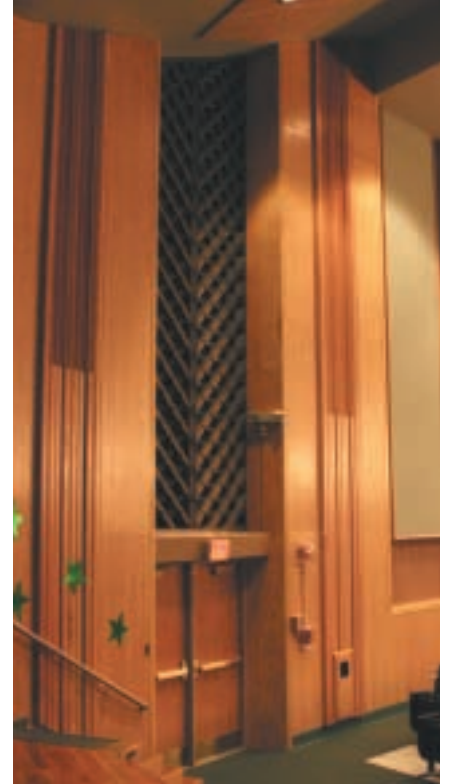
A Dramatic Improvement

by Travis McGee

With a reputation for excellence in the performing arts, Long Island, NY's Farmingdale High School opened its doors to a redesigned auditorium in the fall of 2002. The Ken Ulric Auditorium, named after the school's current and long-



▲ The newly redesigned Ken Ulric Auditorium at Farmingdale High School on Long Island, NY.



▲ Modified architectural grilles conceal sound effects loudspeakers.



▲ A Renkus-Heinz cluster provides coverage for the auditorium.

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standing theater director, features an acoustic environment fit for Ulric's elaborate productions, which have become as ingrained in Farmingdale's tradition as the senior prom.

The project, orchestrated by Brightwaters,

systems go to school

NY-based designer Richard Riedel of Riedel Audio and Acoustical Consulting, and AV contractor Advance Sound of North Bay Shore, NY, was borne out of the need for an up-to-date sound system to satisfy performers and audiences alike. "General problems we had were difficulty in hearing," Riedel, who was brought in on the project by architect John Grillo, said. "I ran acoustical tests and found several problems. There was flutter echo between side walls, rear-wall reflections, and exterior noise intrusion. There was actually good imaging in the center section, but most of the problems were on the outer sections. They had a pair of old column speakers on the side walls that were giving them poor coverage and poor gain before feedback. So the intent there was to take care of the acoustical problems and then also take care of the sound system problems."

The acoustical makeover began with the incorporation of some existing parts into the new design. "The school had existing ornate plaster grilles towards the front of the auditorium that they actually wanted us to remove," Riedel said. "But we took the grille, painted it with a bronze-finished paint, and I put acoustical treatment behind it and used that for the area for our sound effects speakers, making it a nice design element. Everybody was pleased that we left it, because it was a nice structure."

From there, Riedel moved on to the side walls, adding various acoustical treatments including the Omnifusor, BAD Panel and Flutter-Free products from RPG Diffusor Systems, later covering it with NovaWall fabric. According to Riedel, the school entrusted him with all decisions regarding the acoustics. "A lot of good

acoustical products these days may or may not fit in with a particular venue's style, and we have a lot of input as far as the styling goes," he explained. "In fact, we not only designed the acoustics, but we laid out the aesthetic elements as well, as far as the trim and color palette for all the elements that went in."

Although not a left-center-right configuration in the classic sense, the speaker arrangement provides more than adequate coverage, thanks to the ingenuity of Riedel and Advance Sound. The center cluster is comprised of a Renkus-Heinz CT7215/94 speaker flanked on each side by a Renkus-Heinz SR81. The SR81 speakers are also used as the aforementioned effects speakers on the outer edges of the stage. "We chose the Renkus-Heinz speakers because of the transparency of the sound," said Gerard Verdi, project manager for Advance Sound. "You're able to hear every little nuance, and I think they're incredible speakers for this application and many other applications. It enables you to hear on many levels."

Also on stage are eight JBL Control speakers, which can be used as monitors or sound effects. "There are receptacles around the stage area, both in the pit, and backstage, for sound effects," Riedel said. "So it allows for routing, and they're able to take portable speakers, plug them in anywhere backstage and create a sound effect offstage. That also gives them the ability to use that as a monitor system onstage."

The system is run on an Allen & Heath ML3000 console—a decision Verdi did not take lightly. "I have to keep the end-user in mind, and with any one of the Allen & Heath boards, the EQs are pretty much the same as far as functionality goes, and I think it's a lot easier for a client to use who's not familiar with a mixing console," he said. "We have the matrix and the aux/sends which you can use for the stage monitoring in the back. We have a dressing

room, and a backstage area, and we also have one of the auxes going to the projector booth, so they know their cues up there and don't need to use their headphones all the time. It's very simple stuff."

If a cutting-edge sound system for a high school auditorium seems a little extreme, consider the growing popularity of the arts among the youth. "Now, more than ever, schools are doing this type of thing," Verdi said. "More kids seem to be joining the drama departments, the choirs and even the jazz bands in the schools. You're seeing a real resurgence in students joining these types of programs. A lot of people are coming into these auditoriums and saying, 'Wow, this is great. I wish I had this when I was a student.'"

"In a lot of the school projects we've been working on, we're trying to elevate the level of the acoustics," Riedel added. "Clients will generally tell me they can't afford Carnegie Hall, but the bottom line is they're always hoping to get the acoustics of Carnegie Hall, not only for music but also for spoken word. That's very difficult in an area that has poor acoustics. A lot of times, people equate school acoustics with poor acoustics, and we're trying to change that."

Travis McGee is a freelance writer based in New York, NY.

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