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Friday Night & The Lights are High for Robe and ABBA Orchestral Extravaganza

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Lighting designer Liam McCarthy utilised 100 Robe moving lights for a spectacular special performance of ABBA Orchestral at Dublin's 3 Arena, featuring the Waterloo Concert Orchestra and acclaimed conductor and arranger, Andy O'Callaghan.

Liam – who also worked on the outstanding 2020 production of this show – unexpectedly found himself again thanking his older sisters for coercing him into learning all the words and dance moves to every Abba hit when a young child back in the 1980s! He found the process suspiciously Machiavellian at the time, but all these years later the experience flooded joyously back in a moment as he foot-tapped, danced and occasionally lip-synched his way through the ABBA Orchestral set, producing another truly spectacular lightshow fitting for the occasion.

The set was a rousing fully live reprise of ABBA's numerous greatest hits, which Liam notes instinctually returned to his subconscious as he ran the show, mainly improv style, utilising presets and palettes programmed and set up to work in this fashion. "It's a very exciting and satisfying way to operate," he commented.

Liam has worked with the concert's promoters on several other projects and was delighted to be back on this one that was postponed last year due to – you know what!

Just Lites was the lighting supplier, a Dublin-based rental and technical production specialist with whom Liam works closely.

A major objective was to fill the 3 Arena with plenty of classic pop-tastic, glitzy and gloriously disco moments, so he picked Robe BMFL Spots as his power lights, Spiider LED wash beams for covering the stage and orchestra, T1 Profiles for excellent key lighting and Pointes for delivering the main effect lights.

“This selection of fixtures covered all the elements,” he stated, “Brightness to energise the audience and pull them into the show coupled with some refinement plus an endless array of cool looks!”

It was a massive production to light. The impressive set of tiered orchestra risers with set flats at the back and a large upstage LED screen created a dramatic picture onstage for the many dynamic elements – strings, brass, rhythm section, percussion, backing singers, soloists plus the band – all of which fused into a perfect ABBA musical experience.

The 28 x Spiiders were rigged on three over-stage trusses to provide the base washes for the 45-piece orchestra and the band. With so many people to cover, Liam needed a lightsource that was intense but not distracting.

He uses Robe Spiiders frequently, particularly for his television work, and often for key lighting as well as for washing different areas. “They are nice and soft with a good zoom, so you can hang them at height and get those ultra-smooth, clean, warm and cold white washes,” he commented.

A key requirement was to include the audience in the action as this was a major sing-along event, so BMFL Spots were a go-to “super-bright and highly versatile base lightsource” that could throw beams out into the audience connecting them with all the exuberance being generated onstage.

The BMFL Spots created all the massive power colour and gobos looks which worked perfectly in the cavernous interior of the Arena which has around 11 metres trim height. “They do the job brilliantly and are always reliable,” stated Liam.

The 32 x Pointes were rigged on 6 vertical truss towers upstage ... importing a bit of rock ‘n’ roll for the occasion, positioned either side of the main video screen and in between that and the side flats. Some Pointes were in the roof, with two deployed on the deck to complete a timeless mirror ball flourish during ‘Dancing Queen’, arguably Abba’s most famous and popular song.

Pointes are another ‘go-to’ fixture for Liam. He frequently uses them with the prism in and observes that this looks particularly good when layered or contrasted with the BMFL’s fat beams also dissected with gobos and prisms.

The 10 x T1 Profiles were all rigged on the front truss and used for specials and for key lighting soloists and Andy O’Callaghan. It is a luminaire that Liam thinks is “fantastic for this

job, bringing a beautiful quality of light to the faces.”

The main challenge in lighting this lively, uplifting and hugely interactive performance was to recall the massive back catalogue of Abba hits that unfolded to the delight of the audience during the two-hour show, which is why Liam was pleasantly surprised at how much had actually lodged in his head from childhood.

He built potent and intricate cues full of colour and effects on his Hog 4 console that could be seamlessly amalgamated in different combinations to give a huge and diverse range of epic looks from disco fun to power ballads.

“It was a BIG, BIG show and enormous fun to light,” he enthused. “It was party time! Everyone was having a great time ... they were all up and dancing from the off and many came in Abba related costumes.” Apart from the popular appeal of the music, ABBA orchestral was one of the first full capacity events in Ireland to go ahead without social distancing or masking as the Covid restrictions were lifted.

Mark Hanna was the systems tech and Shane Fogarty the rigger.

The show was so popular and successful that ABBA Orchestral is already scheduled to return for a show-stopping performance in March 2023, promising more innovative lighting and visuals.

This will be followed the next day by a new concert concept – IBIZA Orchestral – featuring legendary DJ Roger Sánchez and many others produced by the same team featuring stonking IBIZA anthems from the 1990s and 2000s plus assorted DJs, all of which will further energise Liam’s skills as a master of creative and hi-impact lighting design.

Photo Credit: Terry McDonagh





