



A QSC system has been installed in the auditorium



L to R: Didier Weiss and Olivier Litvine

La vie Française

Sound Wizard has upgraded the Alliance Française auditorium in Pondicherry with a new acoustic design and QSC system. **Caroline Moss** visits

THE BUSTLING CITY OF PONDICHERRY IN TAMIL NADU,

Southern India, continues to attract people with its unique blend of French and Indian traditions. The former French territory, today a tier 2 Indian city, is still home to around 6,000 French citizens, most of whom live in the White Town heritage quarter.

Established in 1889, the Alliance Française de Pondicherry is a good example of how French culture is thriving in the town. Based at Maison Bellocq, a well-preserved colonial building in a quiet, tree-lined street, the organisation is keeping Indo-French relations alive, promoting French culture and language and developing exchanges between both countries.

To coincide with the 125th anniversary of the organisation, a decision was taken to renovate its 182-seat auditorium, designed in 1990 by local French architect Pierre Elouard. The venue was built at a time when audio engineering was almost non-existent in India, and it had long suffered from poor acoustical quality, much to the inconvenience of sound engineers, performers and audience members alike. In addition to its own programme of performing arts, classes, exhibitions and workshops, the Alliance Française is often requested to host cultural or intellectual activities organised by the city, so the stakes were high when redesigning the space for today's applications.

Fortunately, an established acoustic consultancy was to hand, just 10km up the road. Sound Wizard's Didier Weiss, originally from France, settled in nearby Auroville in 2000 and has built a reputation as a go-to acoustic designer.

'The requirements from the Alliance Française team here, as well as the original French architect, were that the look should remain as close as possible to the original auditorium,' says Mr Weiss. 'It was really just a concrete shell with plastic chairs, creating an echo chamber with a reverberation time of close to 3s.'

One of the main requirements of the client was that the auditorium should work with natural acoustics, and not be wholly dependent on a large sound system to relay audio. 'They wanted to have an unplugged, acoustic venue for some theatre, traditional Indian music and chanting, with good natural transmission from the stage to the audience,' continues Mr Weiss. 'The whole design process was based around that.'

Mr Weiss carried out room simulations using EASE, and constructed an elaborate array of ceiling and wall panels with different layers of acoustic materials depending on where there needed to be reflection or absorption, or a combination of both. All the panels were designed and built in Sound Wizard's workshop using recycled wood, wood wool boards and polyester fibres.

'The panels have been placed to enhance the sound from stage to audience directly, without a sound system,' continues Mr Weiss. 'When there's an event here with people talking on stage, you can hear clearly up to the back seat because the room has been designed to bring acoustic energy, on time, to the proper place.' This design has also reduced the need for monitoring on the large stage.

Sound Wizard's acoustic design was just one part of the



Maison Bellocq is the home of the organisation



The organisation hosts a variety of cultural events



On stage at the Alliance Française de Pondicherry



The venue has been completely refurbished and acoustically treated

renovation process. The other was the installation of a small QSC line array system. The system has been configured with an L-R array at either side of the stage, each consisting of four QSC WL2082-i installation line array speakers, with a centre cluster of two QSC WL118-sw subwoofers.

In addition to providing sound reinforcement for live events, the system also functions in 5.1 for the cinema screenings. For this purpose, a total of 14 QSC AD-S82 surround speakers have been installed. 'We've created a virtual central channel using the L-R system, and the rest of the room has been calibrated according to Dolby 5.1 requirements,' says Mr Weiss. 'The auditorium can now function as a cinema, a theatre for unplugged performances and as a venue for amplified shows.'

The system is driven by a combination of CMX800, CMX 2000 and CX168 amps, with processing provided by an SC28 DSP unit and an Extron SSP 7.1 surround decoder.

As part of the renovation, the plastic seats were replaced with cinema seating constructed from fabric designed to replicate the human body's absorption qualities. Seating has been removed from the sides of the balcony to leave space for emergency exits

as per contemporary health and safety requirements, and the balcony has also been acoustically treated. 'It now functions as a bass trap so there's no build up of low frequencies at the back seats,' says Mr Weiss.

Alliance Française director, Olivier Litvine, is happy with the improved functionality the revamped auditorium brings to the organisation. 'We held 124 cultural events between April 2015 and March 2016, including films, exhibitions, government seminars, lectures, conferences, concerts, dance and drama performances,' he says. 'We are also expanding into new areas such as our Digital Concert Hall series of classical concerts which are being streamed into the hall.'

The most recent of these was a live streaming from the Berliner Philharmoniker, offering not just a taste of France, but also of a wider European culture. The auditorium upgrade at Alliance Française de Pondicherry is opening up new possibilities in this unique Indian city.

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