NAMM 2019: New Haven visits the Anaheim Convention Center

THE POPULATION OF NEW HAVEN, CT visited the 2019 NAMM Show in Anaheim, CA, January 24 – 27. Okay, not actually the people of New Haven, but a crowd of people equal to 88% of the population of New Haven, more than 115,000. That’s a lot of people. As I traveled to and from the show through Los Angeles International Airport, I was struck by how many people I overheard talking about the show—a surprising experience, given the immense number of people who travel through America’s second busiest airport every day.

As a trade show for the National Association of Music Merchants, the show has been mostly about musical instruments and sound equipment. (Over 2,000 exhibiting “member companies,” representing 7,000 brands, says the wrap-up press release.) However, NAMM is working to expand the show to include staging, lighting, and special effects companies—ESTA members—the companies I will cover in this show report.

The staging/lighting/effects part of the NAMM show was mostly in one end of Hall A—an area larger than occupied in last year’s show—with a few ESTA members in the new ACC North on Level 2. There were about the same number of ESTA members showing this year, but more dealer members, making it easier this year for a buyer to place an order on the spot. I had a booth-sorted list of ESTA members to guide me as I went to each to see what ESTA members were showing for this market. I asked, “What are you showing for the people here?” or “What’s new?” when I could, but the staff in some booths were too busy with people who might actually buy something to entertain my questions. In those cases, I stepped back, listened, and watched. I paid particular attention to what interested this audience—the NAMM crowd is not the same as the crowd at LDI, Prolight + Sound, or USITT Stage Expo. Below is what I can assemble from my scribbled notes to create something coherent in the space allotted.

Lex Products won an ESTA Members Choice Award at the show for its EverGrip powerCON Adapter, a short piece of cable
that allows the interconnection of devices with powerCON and powerCON TRUE1 connectors. That’s clearly something useful for ESTA members in the lighting rental business, but, when I visited the Lex booth, a music educator from Yorba Linda was much more interested in the PowerRAMP CableGuard Single Channel Cable Cover, which Lex also had nominated. It’s a simple cable cover, made of UV-stabilized polyurethane that drops over a cable or small group of cables. It comes in two widths, with cable channels 38 mm x 12 mm or 45 mm x 20 mm, and in red and black. The music educator said he does a weekly outdoor concert, and this looked ideal for protecting mic cables.

Apollo Design featured the GoboPro+ LED Outdoor Profile gobo projector. It’s IP65 rated, suitable for outdoor use, with impressive optics. Scores of lines of text were projected on the wall in the booth—tiny type but clear. However, most of the talk I heard from prospective customers in the booth—mobile DJs and wedding event planners—was interest in Apollo’s custom gobo service and quick turn-around. If a monochrome order comes in on Monday before 3:00 p.m., it ships Tuesday; if the order is polychrome, it ships Wednesday. Apollo showed the Wedd vGobo App for iPad or iPhone, designed to help these people in the wedding industry work with their clients. The app allows adding date and names to an Apollo wedding template, and then overlaying it on a venue photo to create an image on the iPad or iPhone showing how the gobo will look on the wall, ceiling, or floor at the event. Once the client makes a decision, the gobo order can be emailed from the app to the local dealer.

The eye-catching thing for NAMM attendees in the Applied Electronics booth was an unnamed LED mic stand. It was simply a mic stand with an internally illuminated column wrapping the vertical shaft. It is battery powered and changes colors. Applied Electronics is working on wireless control, so it can be part of the light show—be that at a concert, wedding reception, or birthday bash—and maybe pixel-mapping it, too. However, Applied Electronics was using the mic stand to draw attention to its line-array towers: the LA12-18, LA12-25, and LA35. The last number in each model name gives the maximum height, although the LA12-18 goes to 19’. The two larger models, with payloads of 1,500 and 2,200 lb., are available with optional decks for subwoofers and tower lifting arms. A lifting arm is really not needed for the LA12-18; it’s a human-scaled tower that comes with a hand-crank winch.

Columbus McKinnon showed a 1/2 ton Lodestar VS, a variable speed hoist (1 – 16 fpm) with limits electronically programmable “to within a millimeter,” that would work nicely with the LA12-18 if a person doesn’t want the exercise of cranking up 750 lb. of speaker-stack. When the Lodestar VS winch senses no load, it automatically runs at full speed, making dropping the hook to pick up the stack quick and easy. The only negative attribute mentioned was “it does
not plug into a motor control system now,” although “now” means that is a future feature. For picking up a line array with a single hoist, this is not a problem.

Link USA showed its PDlink line, which includes a range of fixed speed chain motor control products, up on Level 2 of ACC North, in a hall with Pioneer Pro Audio, Tascam, Roland, and other audio companies, including ESTA member Meyer Sound. When I visited LINK USA, there was a crowd in the stage-right side of the booth looking at Link’s analog and digital microphone cables, speaker cables, audio snakes, and Eurocable hybrid cables that combine multiple Cat6 UTP lines and RG6 coaxial lines in one jacket “for live entertainment and broadcast applications, with MADI digital audio and HD-SDI video in mind.” I looked at the power distribution and fixed-speed chain hoist control equipment on the relatively vacant stage-left. An interesting feature of the PD-Link fixed-speed controllers is the ability to reverse the phase order remotely from the remote pendant, thus quickly dealing with a hoist that goes down when you push the up button.

Mountain Productions showed a personnel ascender that also can be used as a rope winch: the Ronin Lift. The Ronin product literature shows its use with a tree service crew, which should give you an idea of its easy handling; you need something fairly small and not heavy to move around branches. I’d seen other powered ascenders, but they were much bulkier and I was much less impressed. The specs: maximum load 400 lb., variable ascent speed from 0.5 – 1.7 fps (fast enough to take me to the highest grid I’ve ever worked in a minute), maximum descent speed with a 400 lb. load of 4 fps. With a 200 lb. load the battery has enough energy to run through a 1,000’ of rope, half that with a 400 lb. load. The 28 V lithium ion battery can be swapped out quickly.

Back to pretty stuff for weddings: the F34 DNA Truss shown in the German Light Products booth is a nominally 12” box truss that twists along its length. As I write this, load data is not available, but it should be by the time you read this. It’s pretty, and the entwined chords would be apropos for a wedding—as long as no one notices there are four entwined chords, not two, a ménage à quatre.

Mega Systems won an ESTA Members Choice Award for the Mega-Lite Circa Scoop LED. I’ve seen luminaires with a similar shape, but usually with a single source at the center. The Circa Scoop instead has a complex arrangement of LEDs in the center and the periphery: 45 warm-white and amber LEDs in the unit’s “Center Engine,” a “Reflective Pattern Ring” has an additional 87 warm-white LEDs, an “Inner Ring” has 144 RGB LEDs and eight-segment control, and an “Outer Ring” has 192 RGB LEDs in eight segments. What’s the Circa Scoop’s purpose? “Eye-candy” is what I was told. It is indeed pretty, but it puts out a significant amount of light—6,335 lumens total, and IES files exist for it—so it could be used as a
luminaire, even if illumination is not its designed purpose.

For beautiful illumination, A.C. Lighting showed the ProLights ECLIPSEFS, “a full color LED ellipsoidal,” really a profile spotlight. (It doesn't have an ellipsoidal reflector, but it does have framing shutters and a gobo slot.) The marketing words touting the “full range of bold saturates, soft pastels, and stunning whites” and the 82 CRI rating don’t do the luminaire justice. To my eye, the white looked much better than that, and the pastels were lovely. When I threw it out of focus with a gobo, the homogeneity of the color across the beam was very good, and without a gobo, the soft fall-off looked excellent for blending acting area lighting. If I have a complaint, it’s about its sales spec sheet. It gives CRI for color rendering, which is poor measure with LED sources. People ask for CRI, but the IES TM-30-18 Fidelity Index is far more accurate. The output specifications are given at “Full,” which is 5,400 K CCT—about the color temperature of daylight. I’d like to see printed specs for what it does around 3,200 K, which is what would be needed to mix with incandescent sources—but trade shows exist so people can see what a luminaire does rather than read about it.

One aisle away from A.C. Lighting, Altman Lighting showed the AP-150 RGBW LED PAR, a unit that also impressed me with its beam homogeneity from nine LED sources under micro-lenses, with a spot flood range from 12º to 65º. Although the multiple sources mean you can’t barndoor it well, it gives a smooth, fresnel-like beam—concentrated but with a nice blending edge—in just about any color you want, with white to help color rendering and create pastels. Simple—but the user manual goes on for 39 pages past the boiler-plate warnings, warranty information, and accessories list. There are oodles of options, giving you fine control of parameters, or presets that offer a choice of well-known features. For example, in one mode channel 12 at a value of 179 calls up Lee 179, Chrome Orange. The luminaire offers 16 manufacturer-defined RDM PIDs, including “TECH Identify,” which flashes the display on the back of the instrument, rather than the beam, to avoid disturbing whatever is happening on stage, while helping the technician find the instrument.

RDM (ANSI E1.20) is extremely useful but difficult to get right. Goddard Design Company showed products designed to help product developers get it right, or to help technicians figure out what is wrong when it’s not right. New software for the DMXter and the MiniDMXter adds several features: a dynamic RDM User Interface, the ability to insert RDM into a DMX512 stream, an interface for RDM Integrity software, support for E1.37-2 Network Management PIDs, and measurement of the receive baud rate.

RDM Integrity software is a Windows application that tests RDM responders for compliance with ANSI E1.20-2010.

Doug Fleenor Design showed a more basic product, the DMXdoohickey. It reports the level of DMX512 channel 512. That’s
all, but often that channel has been parked at a level to indicate the number of the universe it’s on, which helps when sorting out a bundle of DMX512 cables. The device is powered from a replaceable CR1225 cell, and wakes up when you plug it into a line with a valid DMX signal. It also tells you if there is a signal that is not DMX. The readout is set for decimal from 000 to 255 from the factory, but if you would prefer percentage, there is a clearly marked PCB trace you can cut to change it to 00 to FL. If you decide to change it back again, you’ll need your soldering pencil.

“What’s new?” at the Ultratec Special Effects booth elicited, “the Swivel Bracket,” but that was shown last year. However, there was news there. The DMX controls on all the products have been updated to membrane keyboards: no push buttons sticking out to be broken and fewer openings to catch spilled beer or fog fluid. Furthermore, the G300 and 9D now have an option to change how fast the fog output goes to full. Normally these fog machines ramp up their output to avoid the noise of popping to full immediately. For some applications that noise is just not an issue, and getting immediate to full, is now you can have that . . . and you could mount a G300 on a Swivel Bracket for a panning plume of fog. A little imagination can open up lots of possibilities.

“What’s new?” at the Meyer Sound booth first got a mention of a loudspeaker that wasn’t there—its sound quality being too subtle to show in a noisy trade show environment—but on the stage right side of the booth Meyer Sound had a small immersive sound system. The system shown featured the Amie Precision Studio Monitor in a 7.1.4 surround system: seven monitors arrayed laterally with three in front and two on each side, one subwoofer, and four overhead speakers in a square. The small size and sonic accuracy of the monitors makes it possible to develop a good sound mix for a multi-track cinema production. But, as Meyer’s Miles Rogers talked to me about cinema sound, I remembered the sound for Miller, Mississippi, a show I’d experienced the week before NAMM at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven. It’s a disturbing play in which a racist, sexually abusive, bully rises to state-wide power. The final scene was a televised political rally in which the cheers of the crowd spread from the on-stage television into a wave of noise that engulfed the Long Wharf audience. Powerful, and easier to do if a sound designer can work it out in a studio before moving into the theatre.

I’ve been reporting on ESTA members here, but they were not all the staging, lighting, and special effects companies at the show. That is, our community was not an island in a sea of musical instruments, but NAMM is indeed an immense event with educational tracks (ESTA provided four), concerts, awards ceremonies, and lots of street theatre—some planned and some not—way more than I can stuff into 2,500 words. The 2020 NAMM Show will return to the Anaheim Convention Center, January 16 – 19. Be there and experience it live to know more than words can say. ■
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