Does lighting require a softer touch?

Is software the best way forward when it comes to total control of HOW lighting or are some things better left unchanged? **John Leonidou** gets enlightened

IN TODAY'S WORLD, SOFTWARE IS embedded in almost every aspect of our lives and a lot of people are not even aware it's there. It is used in hospitals, offices, malls, stadia and airports, and is even entrusted in matters of national security. So why is there an air of hesitancy when it comes to using software for something as simple as deploying lights in a house of worship?

The emergence of lighting solutions like the Vista M1 in mid-2000 coincided with a rise in the number of worship venues around the world making the transition from analogue to more digital, software-based lighting systems. Most software packages could operate with just a DMX output adapter and, being a more cost-effective solution for worship venues on slimmer budgets, the trend was established.

But it is not just about affordable pricing. Lighting software packages allow production or lighting teams at worship venues to take advantage of newer lighting setups as well as to incorporate lighting automation. There are other benefits too, particularly for portable or mobile churches that are constantly on the move. A laptop, PC or a tablet together with a USB interface is much easier to get from A to B than a fully fledged console, and so a software solution provides an ideal way to cut down on bulk.

But can a software package take over completely, effectively leaving

Nathan Durnan

behind more conventional gear like consoles stranded in a church or mosque closet?

As in most cases, that argument is subject to debate depending on the HOW in question and its specific needs or requirements. Some say that software can potentially take full control, even though larger houses of worship tend to still enjoy the best of both worlds, essentially merging the software with external hardware equipment.

One such place is The West Valley Church of the Nazarene in Yakima, Washington where it runs a merged DMX system that allows control from any of its three different light sources, namely the lighting controller software, the older NSI console or a wall control panel.

'Having the presence of a physical fader would be nice but I don't think it's needed,' explains Nathan Durnan, who is the volunteer technical

Matthias Thömel

coordinator at West Valley Church of the Nazarene. 'Most lighting software can interface with various MIDI controllers so it's still possible to add physical faders if desired. For the most part, though, I find that pre-programmed scenes and transitions

(especially for more complicated events) lead to a more repeatable lighting result. Levels always come up to the exact place you saved them, while transition fade times are always exactly what you programmed them to be. And there are still options for manually overriding things and getting "custom" looks easily.'

But some things are just too hard to let go, according to Mr Durnan. Even though the software is the main port-of-call for the church's lighting operations during major events, the NSI controller remains close by and still has an important part to play. 'The software and console are merged HTP [highest-takes-precedence], so either can control the lights at any time. We primarily use the NSI controller as a backup in case of computer failure or an
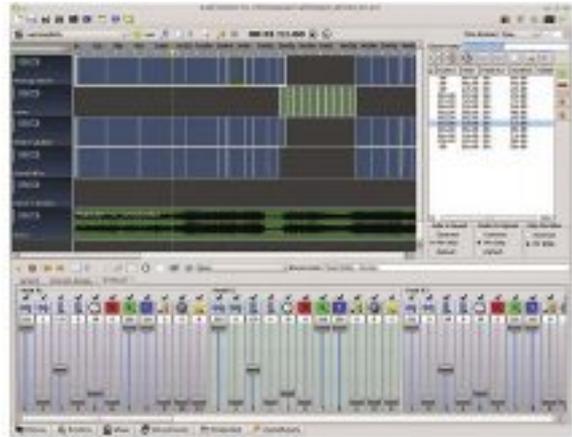
QLC+ is the preferred software for Nathan Durnan

unexpected software crash, but there are times where an event is easier just to run from the physical console rather than the software. As much as I love the software solution, I think I'd miss having that physical console as a backup.'

Others, however, argue that mixing desks or lighting consoles are still the most reliable controllers for lighting. According to Matthias Thömel of Thömel Consulting, lighting controller software still has some way to go to topple more conventional machines in the pro lighting industry. 'Anybody can manage a mixing desk provided a technician pre-programmes it according to a worship venue's specifications. For example, somebody could preset some faders or buttons on the surface and label them so that anybody can operate a service or sermon.

'But operating the lighting purely on software is too unreliable. There are just far too many dependencies on other external sources and systems such as DMX converters, the computer itself, power and keyboards. Then there is also the kind of software that is being used. A mixing desk has it all, including one power switch.'

But Mr Thömel does concede that software controllers can offer
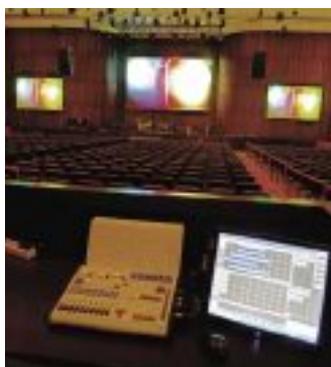
An Avolites Titan Mobile control surface and software manages the lighting at GBI Gilgal

a superior solution to the noise problems that can come about from lighting systems. Nearly every light system, not just in worship venues but also in theatres, has one or more fans that emanate purring or buzzing sounds. 'The cheaper the lighting equipment, the louder the noise. A light mixing desk can help by reducing the consumed power of, for example, a moving head but intelligent software systems will reduce the noise of the fan by lowering the fan speed because the system will not get so hot.'

The demands on the lighting systems during special sermons and services over the holiday season are

another strain. General changeovers that involve the repositioning of lights and the creation of lighting cues pose obstacles but lighting software once again offers a helping hand.

'Our software-based solution has helped with this since the work of programming the lighting can be taken care of well ahead of time and stored in a separate file,' adds Mr Durnan. 'Fixtures can be re-mapped quickly and easily in the software and, since it's all based on the file

Lighting rigs can even be controlled by remote devices

that's loaded, changing back and forth between setups is simple. The software solution isn't limited by the number of scenes or physical faders since it is all created dynamically within the software.'

Finding the right kind of software solution is also crucial but, once again, will depend on the needs of the venue as well as the operator or lighting technician's personal preference. For Mr Thömel, the

Martin M-PC is a clear favourite as 'it is free for five DMX universes and really fast on mid-sized PCs'.

Yet others have different preferences. 'We are using QLC+ and, with the exception of some of the behind-the-scenes automation tricks I've set up in our implementation, our volunteer operators picked up on the operation pretty easily,' comments Mr Durnan, who is also a software developer. 'I value flexibility and power in my lighting software. I checked out several other free or low-cost software options before settling on QLC+. It had the expandability I was looking for, as well as being open-source.

'In my opinion, lighting software either needs to be powerful enough to meet all my needs when I buy it, or be actively supported by a development team (professional or open-source) to address any issues. In the case of QLC+, both of these stipulations are met.'

Worship venues seeking to use lighting software solutions have plenty of options in terms of what packages they prefer. But whether that software is ready to go totally solo remains an entirely different question.

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