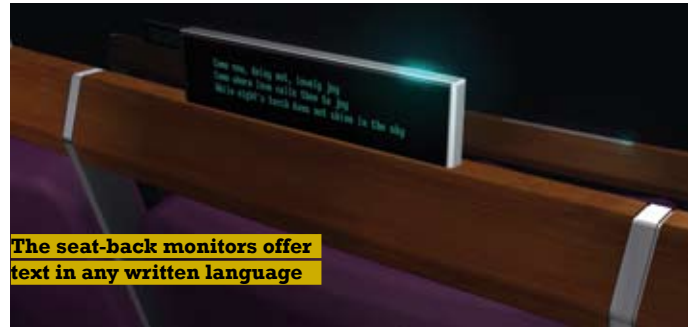


Ellie Caulkins Opera House, Denver, has 2,300 text displays



The seat-back monitors offer text in any written language

User-friendly arts: In-seat text displays that subtitle and translate

Over margaritas at Maria's in Santa Fe in 1994, two opera professionals stumbled upon a way to make the performing arts more relevant in the wired world.

Geoff Webb had flown out from the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where at the time he was a design engineer, to assist Patrick Markle with a technical challenge at the Santa Fe Opera, where Markle was a technical director. But in their effort to simply comply with the American Disabilities Act and help the hearing-impaired, a breakthrough back-of-the-napkin concept was the germ of a company – Figaro Systems – that is making performing arts more ‘user friendly’. The concept was Simultext.

Audiences worldwide were wowed by the multi-lingual text displays, at once elegant and cutting edge, with text translations,

information and even

sponsorships, available for personal use during a performance. Some purists may look down their noses, but for thousands of years, technology has played a part in theatre. From amphitheatres to acoustic modelling, from firelight to electric lights, from brute strength to computer motion control, and from thunder sheets to digital sound effects, the intention has always been to improve the experience, to deepen the suspense.

Supertitle screens were a fine innovation for subtitling, but when the understated late John Crosby of the Santa Fe Opera saw the first prototype of a handheld text display, he saw the future, and he said: “This is good.”

Over the past decade, museums have adopted technology at a rapid pace, and attendance is up worldwide. Applications such as non-linear audio tours, podcasts, and rooms of computers that allow visitors to deepen their knowledge before, during and after walking the galleries, have become the norm. All of these aids help museum

goers to gain insight and connect with art, science and history.

Technology helps audiences connect with the action on the stage in a similar way, and there is evidence that more people will attend the theatre – and more often – when they can be sure that they will understand the experience. It is well known that people of all ages, cultures and economic backgrounds have barriers stopping them from appreciating all forms of drama, dance and music. Add to this the higher barrier of language – sometimes arcane dialects that many people don't totally understand – and there is more reason to expect that theatres will adapt to the wired world by adopting information technologies that help audiences jump cultural divides and come out to the theatre.

Tech appreciation society

In 2002, La Scala's Piermarini Theatre in Milan closed its doors for two years for renovations. The Arcimboldi Theatre served as the temporary home for La Scala during the renovation, and after experiencing its Figaro technology, long-time patrons immediately clamoured for Figaro Systems' technology to be installed in Piermarini. La Scala's sophisticated opera audience's expectations had changed forever since using Simultext for those two years.



Seatback display prototypes



The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, had 800 monitors installed in 2003

"If they can embrace our advanced technology at the opera house where many of Puccini's and Verdi's operas premiered, we must be doing something right," says Markle, CEO of Figaro Systems. Certainly, the timing is right. Performing arts patrons worldwide rightly expect innovation at the theatre.

For example, anyone unfamiliar with Dvorak's 'New World Symphony' would feel more in the know after glancing at this text: "The English horn (seated to the bassoonist's right) introduces the famous melody." Simultext is being used to broadcast information that audiences appreciate.

In a survey, 84% of attendees to the Colorado Ballet said they would use the displays again. The system can be used to provide any sort of programming notes, information or sponsorships throughout any live performance, and each display is ergonomically placed just below the audience member's view of the stage, well within their comfortable viewing angle.

"We think of it as a dashboard for the performing arts and more," says Markle. But Simultext can be more than just an amenity to please patrons of the arts: 8-10% of the US population is deaf or hard of hearing – a number that is expected to double in the next 10 years. The initial idea of Figaro Systems was to provide an aid to this

very group of people, and the company is now in talks with venues to provide captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Up to seven simultaneous channels of text are available in any written language. Anyone can gain a higher level of understanding and appreciation due to this technology, as it can be used in almost any situation, from corporate conferences, to lectures and training, to the travel and cruise industry, and even sporting events.

Speak your language

If you were to re-open a newly renovated theatre with a German opera played by a Russian orchestra on a Spanish island off the coast of Africa with a global audience in attendance, it would make sense to install Simultext. Teatro Pérez Galdós in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has done just that, and many other performing arts organisations around the world are also considering it.

Figaro Systems is very forthright about the financial aspects of its client investments, which can be repaid by sponsors that are pleased to have such an interesting audience. The patented technology behind the device allows for sponsor messages and graphics – the display of text over thousands of devices simultaneously, which is critical to a live performance or presentation.

Imagine watching a comedy in Spanish – but the subtitles arrive at each member of the audience's devices at different moments, instead of simultaneously. The result would be a smattering of chuckles instead of an eruption of laughter, if not for the two very simple breakthrough ideas for which Figaro Systems now holds patents – the software and the displays.

Its first displays were vacuum fluorescent, which could only display upper case letters. After that, Figaro moved to LCD screens, with the limitation that the screens constantly glow. Now Figaro is installing OLEDs – organic light emitting diodes – which can display any written language in clear text, and can fade fully. They have an ultra-low footprint and are also ultra-low in energy consumption.

Aesthetic facilities are also critical in the performing arts, and Figaro Systems works with partners on every project. On Teatro Pérez Galdós, for example, Alis seating, Chemtrol and TDA Arquitectura Urbanismo were critical to the success. The displays are mounted into the backs of each of Alis' seats, which required close collaboration between the architect, Maria Rodger, Jordi Valverde from Alis and Francisco Revilla of Chemtrol. But it was Mayor Josefa Luzardo Romano of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria who made it happen, because of her vision of the theatre as the cultural centre of the city.

If you weren't at Teatro Pérez Galdós when Wagner's Ring opened in April to an audience that had come from many different countries, you will have many more opportunities to experience multi-lingual text displays in the future. Figaro Systems has already installed systems at Wiener Staatsoper, the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, and a dozen more theatres around the world. Figaro Systems, a company formed by true opera fanatics, has high hopes that its text displays will soon become the standard for theatres, sponsors, and audiences around the world.

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