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“Single-point frequencies, gnomes, elves and other strange tales”

After long years of day to day contact with the specific problems of professional sound reinforcement, from those regarding the design and manufacture of equipment, to its distribution and sale, installation, use and assistance, some time ago I reach a series of sad conclusions regarding the level of cultural training of a certain percentage of trade members, which grows increases every day.

For example, I've realized that their lack of specific culture plays a role that to describe as important would be putting it mildly: where it exists, it's very often extremely approximate and frequently it's completely inexistent.

However, there's an even more serious fact: instead of culture with a capital C, there's a widespread deeply rooted sort of subculture, based on the absolute ignorance and/or lack of understanding of the basic principles of acoustics and technical know-how in general, whose profound knowledge is a primary requisite for anybody wanting to work in this "coveted" sector.

For years, I've witnessed the ruin of the most elementary acoustic, electronic and simple electro-technical rules, in the name of contradictory and often opposing convictions, generated by this subculture which isn't written anywhere, but uses the most underhand mass communication channel: "word of mouth".

It's this subculture, this seven-headed monster, that has caused and is still causing serious damage to the results that trade members (the serious ones, obviously) try to achieve with their work.

Somebody might object, "Nothing particularly serious - it's a problem everyone has", forgetting that along with not complying with the rules, in this case there's a consequent mistreatment of the equipment that should be used according to these rules.

I've therefore seen all sorts of mistreatment carried out on potentiometers, both sliders and other types, which at the best are obliged to "work sipping Coca Cola or Gin Tonic"; amplifiers, equalizers and other electronic units also been have the job of illuminating the face and the back of the "decibel tamer", using LED displays that are the next best thing to year-round Christmas lights, and cutting down on club owners' heating (but not repair!!) costs, exploiting the mini greenhouse effect of overload warning lights. And what about the mortal acrobatics loudspeakers undergo in their enclosures, usually the loser in a murderous contest with the eardrums of those who "control" them"?

The wide variety of applications involved in professional sound reinforcement has allowed me to come up against a certain number of levels of this subculture. I've thus been able to see personally (and with the loss of a few jobs in the process), in places in where "*God will provide*" that the quality of an installation isn't judged by its intelligibility level, but according to how well it manages to highlight the parish priest's vocal characteristics and satisfy his narcissism, unless some deaf zealous parishioner, ex-alter-boy, ex-chorister, ex-electrician, exanything doesn't deliver judgement, saying something along the lines of "Minister, you're voice isn't very warm".

And what about what often happens in public places, from airports to railways stations, stadia to sports arenas, etc., where *"The State won't provide"* and therefore the *"backhander"* subculture reigns supreme - the result of an audio installation, whose main aim should be to provide the public a service in such fundamental locations, is directly proportional to the cost of the equipment installed, which in turn is the result of consistent undercutting in the bidding price, and inversely proportional to the *"expenses"* incurred by whoever *"wins"* the tender?

In my opinion, all this happens due to a culpable lack of diffusion of information at all levels, as well as the presumption (typical in Italy, but not only there) that aesthetic taste, improvisation and fantasy as an end in themselves are the only winning arms, no matter what the results. Following through on this way of thinking, I've seen installations that were excellent from the point of view of style and location, but totally inadequate for their primary purpose, which until proven otherwise, is sound diffusion.

Then, relatively recently, new work proposals brought me into physical contact with the problems of the world of sound reinforcement for live events, a world that more than any other should be overflowing with real audio culture, which industry members are expected to apply precisely, in spite of often difficult environmental conditions and time frames that are objectively very tight.

In this world too, having seen that numerous trade members seem to be more worried about how easily the gear is *"humped"* and how much truck space it takes up.... which they consider the most important aspects, due to the abovementioned *"tight times"*, the same subculture of the other sectors is unfortunately widespread, with its own (slightly different) taboos and its own virtual truths, passed on by word of mouth.

Definitions such as *"single-point frequencies"* and *"dynamic punch"*, are just a couple of the gems I've heard with my own ears, not to mention the phrases used to describe the performance of a live sound reinforcement system, where, in my opinion, the utmost expression of *"nonsense"* is to be found in the calculation of thousands of Watts.

As is inevitable when knowledge of the basics is lacking, all this leads to fortuitous results and erratic performance, even at frequently repeated events. Things get worse when these cultural shortcomings are combined with the inability to assess results from a listening point of view and take the appropriate action to achieve a worthy compromise.

It can't be said that this is a purely Italian phenomenon, since in countries like the United States, with a more widespread audio culture, someone such as Don Davis recently stated:
"If bad sound were lethal we'd all be dead".

In this sector, as in others, it therefore seems obvious once again that there's a lack of correct impartial information in circulation, or rather there's a culpable diffusion of incorrect partial information, skilfully exploited by those who benefit from it, unfortunately very widespread practice in many countries, in all environments and at all levels, often including politics.

Those who have taken time to read up to this point will have asked themselves: "Who the Hell's this guy who takes the liberty of playing the moralist and what's he done during all these years to try and improve the situation which, according to him, is so catastrophic?"

"Touché", because nobody's perfect.... but let me finish!

To help improve the status quo, I've taken every possible opportunity to try to spread a few scraps of truth, very often even giving people technical books they perhaps never even opened. Thanks to such a "clamorous" initiative, I also incurred the anger of authoritative members of the trade press world, who at a certain point felt they'd been overtaken on the inside lane.

A sorry figure on behalf of the very people who have elected themselves as the champions of the technical "word".

Neither satisfied, nor with intention of transforming the company I work for into an charitable organization, before I got chronic earache from trying to explains things over the phone or risked losing my voice from talking to brick walls, I began importing books, publications and anything else regarding this topic, to sell to anybody who was interested in them.

It's not an initiative with merely lucrative ends, I'd be happy just not throwing money out the window and at the same time showing the constructive nature of my criticisms of the "system".

In fact, I'm firmly convinced that the more correct information is circulated, the more the market in question will become clear and objective, via the assertion of a real audio culture, to the relief of all those working in the trade, mystifying more or less in good faith.

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