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George Mason University Upgrades Rigging System



FAIRFAX, VA — George Mason University (GMU) upgraded an outdated rigging system for its 2,000-seat concert hall with 45 of J.R. Clancy's PowerLift automated line sets and the company's SceneControl 500. The upgrade gives the venue the ability to mount more elaborate productions and simultaneously addresses safety concerns.

The former system consisted of fixed speed drum winches with a limited lifting capacity, controlled by a basic computerized console. Installed in the late 1980s, the rigging system could raise several battens at a time or lower them, but it could not raise one batten while lowering another.

"We had gone through a software upgrade with the old system, but it never really worked or supported what we needed to do here," said James Antrim, facility manager for the venue. Antrim worked for decades as a production manager before making the move to facility manager, so he had hands-on working knowledge of the system and its limitations.

"We support productions by the Virginia Opera — usually four productions each year — and we didn't have the capacity to lift the kind of weight and make the transitions their productions required."

Because of his long experience in theatrical production management, choosing a rigging supplier was easy for Antrim. "I was familiar with all of the systems out there, and J. R. Clancy had exactly what we needed," he said.

The concert hall installation required some specialized engineering to achieve the level of capability GMU desired, however. To make the transition from fixed-speed winches to PowerLift automated line sets, engineers and theatre management had to face a particularly tricky situation: The theatre has no grid, so the PowerLifts needed to be installed in a vertical orientation in the stage right gallery.

Clancy designers worked closely with Shawn Nolan, P.E. of Nolan Engineering Services in Cincinnati, Ohio to create a large, structural, freestanding frame for the PowerLifts. The resulting frame holds 43

PowerLifts with space to add more as needed, and it will withstand the total load capacity of the lifts — each of which is rated to lift 1,250 pounds at a speed of up to 180 feet per minute.

The installation team solved another issue: the obstacle caused by the amount of lateral bracing in the existing roof structure. “Each of the custom head and loft blocks required special attention to the mounting, to ensure a safe, functional attachment,” said Anthony Seifritz, project manager for J. R. Clancy.

J.R. Clancy provided the equipment as a subcontractor to Pook, Diemont & Ohl, Inc. (PDO), the company that managed the project and performed the installation of all of the rigging equipment.

In addition to the PowerLifts hoists, Clancy supplied a SceneControl 500 automated control system. SceneControl motion control has the ability to raise and lower up to 12 battens at the same time.

Equally important for GMU, the SceneControl three-dimensional display capability allows users to select the sets they want to control, develop simple or elaborate cues, and group hoists for synchronized operation.

“Our old system was fixed speed, so we were limited in what we could do with it,” said Antrim. “Now we can run up and down at the same time, something we couldn’t do with the old system. We can support our clients in a much easier and more professional manner than before.”

Safety features provided by the PowerLifts and the SceneControl 500 serve as another key benefit. “This really lets us know where our sets are in the space,” said Antrim. “Even more important, we have instant notification if something is out of balance. This is weight over people’s heads, and we need to know what’s going on with it. Now we have a nice overhead system that’s extremely safe.”

The concert hall crew also needed to be able to move the orchestra shell in the multi-use performance space, and to be able to control the electrics and front-of-house winches. J.R. Clancy provided two fixed-speed PowerLifts with 2,000-pound capacity for the orchestra shell, as well as a house curtain drum winch with 1,250-pound capacity at 250 feet per minute. The SceneControl 500 also interfaces with the existing counterweight system to assist with the orchestra shell, electrics and front-of-house winches.

With the entire system in place, GMU now has the ability to provide whatever its clients need for their productions, whether they involve the elaborate sets of grand opera or basic staging for a chorale, lecture or orchestra concert.

“I’m very pleased with the way Clancy has been involved in getting us upgrades and tweaking the system,” said Antrim. “In fact, they’ll be back here during winter break to make some upgrades. This is exactly the kind of service I expected, and it’s why I chose Clancy.”

For more information, please contact J. R. Clancy at www.jrclancy.com.