classic gear

MA Lighting Scancommander | by Rob Halliday . . .

→ As new technology comes along, we first learn how to deal with it using the systems we already have and know. Then we wait for new, better systems to come along. Lighting's currently going through this with monster rigs of LEDs. Three decades ago we were going through it with moving lights as they became more democratically available.

Looking back through the products that appeared over time to help with that challenge, it's fascinating to see how each problem was solved in turn. And sometimes to find products with functionality so clever the world sometimes wasn't quite ready for it, so it faded away only to return years later.

That's particularly true of Scancommander, the product that MA Lighting's Michael Adenau and Ernst Ebrecht created in 1992, effectively the bridge between traditional fader-plus-memory consoles designed to control simple lights (their Lightcommander and bigger LDC120) and the complex, powerful grandMA products that came a few years later.

Physically, Scancommander was a compact, almost square-shaped device, self-contained, easy to carry. There was what now feels like a tiny monochrome LCD display surrounded by soft keys, a central set of faders, then those very clicky keys that would later re-appear on the original grandMA for commands and selecting lights. There seemed to be three rotary encoders below the display, but each had an additional control ring around the central rotating portion, much as the grandMA3 has now. A QWERTY keyboard was hidden away in a sliding drawer beneath the main control surface. There was a memory card for show storage. And you could plug in a trackball - which could be really useful for reasons you'll see.

Judged on specifications alone, Scancommander seems hopelessly underpowered now - able to control just 16 moving fixtures plus 96 extra single-channel devices. But a dive through the manual -

which MA still has online - shows all the problems it was trying to solve for its users. There's a detailed fixture library, for example, which continued to be updated until 2009 (though by then MA had also realised they'd never keep up with all the new lights, so had added a fixture editor). There was data presented on-screen with real parameter names. There was the ability to store presets and cues ('store' another command that has passed down through generations of MA consoles), to have lights circle automatically, even to respond to timecode and MIDI. Ultimately, there was an expansion unit to increase the number of lights that could be controlled.

There was also the ability to choose whether to position your lights using traditional pan/tilt control, or using X/Y positioning. To set this up, you focused all of the lights to the four corners of the stage; the console would then give you across/up-downstage control regardless of whether you had moving head or moving mirror lights. Plus, there was what MA called 'followspot mode' - grab the lights onto that trackball and use them to follow a performer around the stage. In a big survey of lighting consoles in the March 1994 issue of this magazine, lighting designer Dave Byars cited this feature as "very impressive".

It wasn't quite the complete solution some consoles now offer for this - there was no dynamic adjustment over the 'Z' axis, the height the beams were aimed at, for example. But in this, and in many other ways, Scancommander pointed clearly to the future, in a very MA-way of giving us things we'd usefully need before we even knew we needed them . . . ⊗

Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for more than 25 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic... or just old!

Scancommander on the MA website:
↗ www.malighting.com/downloads/prod-ucts/scancommander
Scancommander in LSi March 1994, p46:
↗ www.lsionline.com/downloads/magazine-vault-issues/lsi-issue99.pdf