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SIGUR RÓS

A theatrical evening with Icelandic experimentalists





SIGUR RÓS

Constantly evolving in scale and style, this latest 136-date tour from Iceland's most iconic band blends soaring musical drama with incredible visuals to create a night at the theatre like no other. This is an evening with Sigur Rós....



To anyone familiar with their work, it should come as no surprise that the Sigur Rós approach to touring is a little different to most. While many acts simply serve up the same pre-packaged song selection each night, this is a band that revels in the opportunity to explore the possibilities created by 18 months on the road.

In many ways their latest tour, which began back in May 2016, is a collaborative superstructure, within which the band, design team and crew are free to discover new sounds, push the performance experience and even engage in spin-off projects. Take Guitar Tech Dan Johnson, for example. Over the last year, he has spent his spare moments building a new guitar for frontman Jónsi Birgisson - a backup for the tour-battered, bow-scratched original he created for the singer during the 2005 *Takk* tour. Through the casual interactions of daily tour life, the pair decided to incorporate the band's name - translated into Icelandic runes - into the new fingerboard. And those same runes, transposed into a single symbol, have since been adopted into the fabric of the tour, adorning signs and passes and maybe finding a future use beyond life backstage. It's exactly the kind of evolution of an idea - often deeply rooted in Icelandic heritage - that typifies the band's creative approach.

CREATIVE EXPLORATION

Evolution, specifically the creation of a show that would evolve texturally over the course of the evening, formed a central part of the design brief put to the band's Creative Director Sarah Hopper during the conception of the tour. This, coupled with the decision to deliver a theatre-style 2-part show, neatly framed the parameters for what would come to pass: a sonically

and visually more restrained act 1, allowing space for the audience to experience newer songs, followed by a more full-on, effect-filled second half.

Having successfully collaborated on the band's 2012/13 tour, Hopper once again brought in Lighting Designer Bruno Poet and Visual Content Creator Damian Hale. Together with Stage Designer Chiara Stephenson they devised a show that would surprise the audience in the way it evolved throughout the evening, as well as being able to adapt to the range of festival stages and theatre venues visited on the 18-month tour.

In contrast to the previous Sigur Rós tour, where the band was joined on stage by a host of additional musicians on strings, brass and percussion, this latest show features just the 3 core members. In an echo of the last tour's brilliantly cluttered aesthetic, this time the band is ensconced within the lighting rig, allowing it to frame and surround them in a way that makes a virtue of the strong structural forms of the fixtures themselves.

Martin by Harman Scepton LED sticks, for example, are used to create a broken grid, angled together into a false perspective 'vanishing point' upstage. The complete structure isn't immediately obvious, as early lighting scenes only reveal sections of the framework at a time, either through the journey of slow electrical pulses or as vertical planes of light that frame each musician individually. As the show progresses, however, the audience is treated to the full flexible power of the piece, through a mix of pixel-mapped video and individual lighting effects.

The Scepton also provides the support for custom-cut sections of gauze, which are stretched between selected squares of the distorted grid. These are used as translucent surfaces that capture content projected by

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the Barco HDX-W20's placed on either side of the stage. The dance of the projector beams in mid air adds an extra layer of depth to the stage lighting, which was created alongside programmer and Co-Lighting Designer Matt Daw.

A ROE Vanish 25 wall, sitting directly behind a textured gauze curtain, hangs from a midstage truss, remaining in place for the entire first act of the show. As well as deliberately restricting the band to the front of the stage, it allows a mesmerising series of effects to be produced. Content on the semi-transparent 12 x 3.6 Vanish is at times used to complement visuals on the 12 x 6 video wall at the back of the stage. At others it mimics the Sceptron grid to create a confounding interplay between the virtual and real. The gauze curtain gives the Vanish content a diffused look and at certain points becomes a solid wall of colour when illuminated by the GLP impressions X4 Bars 20's above. For Poet, these are a particular favourite. "I love those GLP bars, they're so architectural in the look that they give and the solid wedge of light they produce, which is particularly useful," he commented.

Content for both the Vanish and back video screen forms a crucial element of the show's aesthetic, particularly in the second half of the night, when the gauze curtain drops, the midstage Vanish becomes kinetic and the energy on stage ramps up a level. Following discussions with Hopper, Hale and his team at Third Company

created a variety of 2D and 3D content that dance between the 2 screens. At one point, for example, clouds flow towards the audience as the screens display parallel slices of the same 3D model.

Another key element in the video design toolkit was suggested by Third Company Technical Director Dave Shepherd during rehearsals: lighting 3D content with a live feed from a judiciously placed camera pointed at the stage. Using the Notch plugin on a d3 Technologies server, the feed is spliced into pixel-thin strips and applied in real time to solid linear elements within the virtual content. As the stage lighting changes, the virtual content follows – seamlessly tying together the 2 elements as one. "I don't think anyone in the audience would really twig, but you can definitely feel the connection between what you see on screen and what's happening on stage," commented Hale. "It's a really elegant solution - and it was especially nice because we knew it was something that hadn't been done before."

The creation of the 3D models themselves also had an imperceptibly organic genesis. Photogrammetry expert Alex Eckford (who along with Animator Susana Yamamoto and Producer Sam Pattinson completed the Third Company team) took hundreds of photos of the band members' heads and used them to create virtual models that could then be fragmented into abstract forms that briefly resolve and break apart again on the big screen. A similar process

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Alan Fotheringhame,
Lighting Operator

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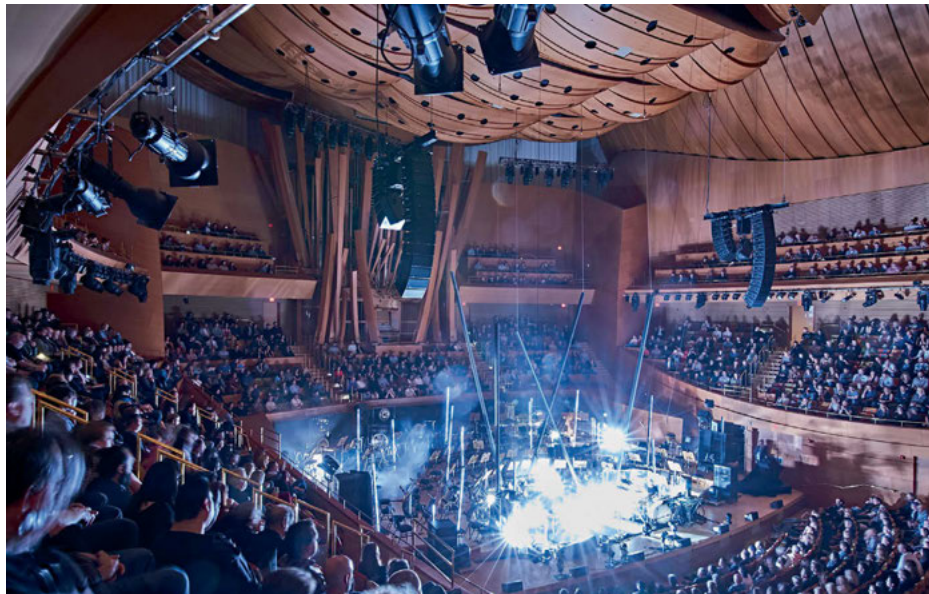
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Above: Tour Assistant Alice Martin sets up the band's backstage bar; Sigur Rós performed 3 nights with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA.

was used to subtly incorporate Icelandic landscapes into the piece.

According to Poet, the willingness of the band to invest time and money in workshoping the various visuals - a week at Fly By Nite's studios before the festival run and another in Canada before the headline tour - enabled the team to create something truly unique. "Having the creative team in the room and having it all set up there to work on gave us the opportunity to try everything out and it meant we could program lights and video in sync, discuss it as a group together and really hone everything," he said. "That production rehearsal time was really invaluable for making a show that's as delicate as this one."

PACKED WITH LIGHT

Due to the organic nature of the show - in particular the joy the band take in playing with the wax and wane of various songs - time coding the lighting cues wasn't an option. Instead, Lighting Operator Alan Fotheringhame (who took over the reins from Matt Daw earlier in the year) controls most of the show manually from an MA Lighting grandMA2 Lite.

"It's a truly live show every night," he explained. "If you had it time coded you wouldn't necessarily have the right thing being fired at the right time. As much as there's a full structure to what they're playing, it needs that human interaction to ride the tracks and the levels as they go through it."

A lot of the key light on the band is done manually instead of being built into the cue stacks. "They can sometimes move around a bit, so you've got to be very aware of what's happening on stage, as well as looking at everything else to make sure it's doing what it should do night after night," said Fotheringhame.

Each band member is lit from the floor by 1 or 2 fresnel key footlights, 2 backlights mounted on the Scepton frames and a 4 lamp bar positioned behind them. Among all this are 5 Martin by Harman MAC Aura XBs and 3 Atomic 3000 Strobes per person.

A floor truss upstage comprises more Aura XBs, 4 lamp bars and Atomics, plus 8 Claypaky Mythos. There are 2 trusses overhead, both on Kinesys. As well as carrying the ROE Vanish 25 and textured gauze screen, the midstage truss includes Auras, Atomics and a line of GLP Impression X4

ICELANDIC WAVES



Sigur Rós on tour

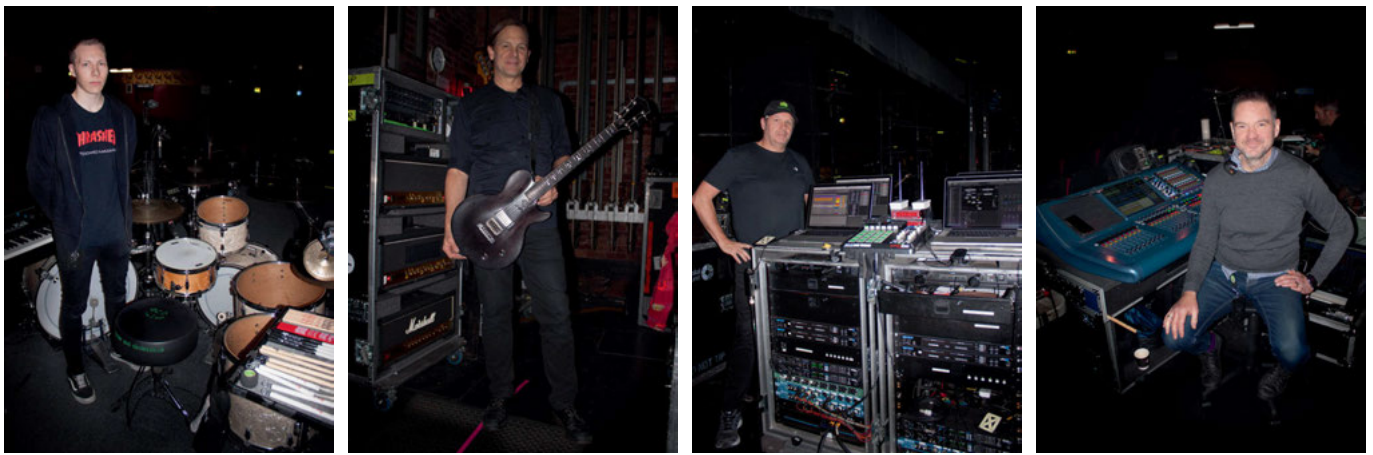
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Above: Playback / MIDI Tech Paul Beckett; FOH Engineer Ingvar Jónsson; Drum Tech Valgeir Skorri Vernharðsson; Guitar Tech Dan Johnson.

Bar 20's, while the back truss carries additional Mythos. "They're all really good units, especially in the applications we use them; there are a lot more low intensities, so its a touch more delicate compared to other concerts," noted Fotheringham. "The low end of the Aura's dimming curve is very good and each unit is exactly the same as the next, which is key when there are that many all being used in quite a specific way."

The lighting rig has remained largely consistent throughout the tour, with a slight tweak made to the strobes being the exception. "We originally had all LED strobes, but went back to the more old fashioned Xenon 3K look on the floor, because on those lower levels you can see the filament on the strobe a little more, which gives a little more dynamic between overheads and your floor lights."

In larger venues, IMAG either side of the stage is used to expand out the visual aesthetic of the show. Rather than a traditional big-screen blow-up, the feed is run through a Notch plugin on the d3 Technologies server, applying rich, song-specific effects in real time so that it matches the lighting design on stage. Thus, instead of the usual clean visuals, the feed becomes an extension of the main show.

d3 Operator Gareth Manicom and Video Director Ant Barrett originally joined the team as camera operators, brought on by the tour's then media server Programmer and Video Director, Ray Gwilliams. Gwilliams was instrumental in spec'ing a live content kit that comprises a highly

customised, remotely controlled camera system.

Eight cameras are used: 4 fixed and 4 robotic pan-tilt-zoom Camera Corp Q-Balls, 2 of which are mounted on custom-built sliders. Two people (Manicom and Spectron tech Jake Black) operate the cameras from a backstage desk that has been adapted with M-Audio keyboard pedals to control the right-to-left sliders, leaving hands free for pan-tilt-zooming.

"I think the Camera Corps Q-Balls that we're using, combined with the custom sliders, look as good as a manned track and dolly," said Barrett. "You wouldn't know that it wasn't a traditional manned broadcast camera - they look that good."

First used during the tour's initial run of festivals as a stylish way of taking over the stage side screens, the IMAG has been used less during the European leg of more confined theatre shows, but will form a major element of the South American tour. Nonetheless live recordings made in these smaller venues have proved very useful to the design team as they gauge ways in which footage might be incorporated into a potential full record of the show towards the end of the run.

SONIC FLEXIBILITY

An ability to faithfully convey the band's dynamic sound, coupled with superior flexibility led to the adoption of a Meyer Sound PA for the entire tour. Supplied on the European leg by Capital Sound (and by VER in North

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Above: Production Manager Thomas Stone; Tour Manager Alan Sullivan; Stage Manager James Gould; Creative Director Sarah Hopper; Lighting Operator Alan Fotheringham; Monitor Engineer Garðar Eiðsson; d3 Operator Gareth Manicom and Video Director Ant Barrett.

America), a mix of Lyon and Leopard cabinets are flown in 1 of 6 different configuration, chosen to best suit each venue by maximising use of the available load points.

Each motor has a 1 tonne load limit, within which the team flies a system that can provide the optimum coverage for both the balcony and downstairs audiences. “The Lyon has really good sub reference so we don’t need to put subs in the air,” explained Production Manager Thomas Stone. “We want sub up in the balcony, but we also want power and we’ve got to maximise what we can do with a 1 tonne point. We run the Lyon at full range to utilise the speaker cabinets’ sub capability and then work out what’s the longest array we can get within the point loading. It’s really flexible, because we can chop and change and if we’ve got more than a tonne we can add more Lyon and take Leopard out.”

FOH Engineer Ingvar Jónsson agrees: “We can build almost whatever we need for any situation, without needing a truck full of equipment,” he said, adding that the sonic quality of the Meyer system has also proved a perfect match for the band. “With this new line, I think Meyer have achieved something that nobody else is doing at the moment, it’s a completely new level of box,” he said. “The clarity in the mids and mid-high ranges makes it easy to get clean, full-power vocals and guitars, which is ideally suited to the sounds of Sigur Rós.”

In addition to the 2 flown arrays, the theatre PA includes a stack of 3 Meyer 1100-LFC subs per side, with further Leopard cabinets providing fill along the front.

A Midas DL431 - a 24 input box with 2 preamps behind each - acts as a splitter, providing input for both FOH and monitors. There’s no gain sharing, rather a Midas PRO2 console in both positions controls a preamp each. “I really like the sound of Midas,” noted Jónsson of the PRO2. “It sounds more like an analogue console than any other digital console on the market. It’s similar to the old Heritage in that you can really crank up the preamp with out getting an ugly distortion or the feeling of hitting a brick wall limiter. The sound range is really dynamic from the preamps, which for this band works

really well. You can go really soft and delicate and then just hit it all up to get something really powerful.”

A Bricasti M7 and 2 TC Electronics M3000’s complete the output, with Galileo Galaxy processors on stage providing system drive and alignment. For Monitor Engineer Garðar Eiðsson the D431 offers other benefits, such as easy access to isolated recording outs, while the PRO2 console wins out by being phase coherent - it’s fixed internal delay meaning that, no matter how hard he pushes it, the outputs all come out of the console at the same time.

“For me that’s important for in-ears and also because I have a rack of analogue inserts here: the UREI Teletronix LA2A for Jonsi’s vocals, the Summit TLA 100-A for bass and a Summit DCL-200 as an insert on Jonsi’s monitor mix, just to juice it up a bit,” said Eiðsson. Typical of the band’s spirit of experimentation, Eiðsson also uses a Distressor on drummer Orri Páll Dýrason’s hi-hat - which is set up using 2 16-inch crash cymbals. “He’s a pretty interesting drummer; he uses a lot of foot pedal on the hi-hat. I’m not pushing it that hard, just enough to spike it up a little bit. It’s something we’re trying out at the moment.”

Further experimentation has led to a switch from Shure Beta 87A vocal mic to the new Shure KSM8 (“We’re loving that at the moment,” said Eiðsson) and playing around with the in-ears sound to ensure the band is kept engaged during each performance.

The performers like to use their Ultimate Ears in-ears with the ambience holes open so as not to lose the visceral feel of performing together as a band. This provides an additional challenge for Eiðsson: “We get pretty affected by venue changes, so the hard part with my job is trying to figure out how to adjust what they’re hearing onstage compared to the in-ear sound.”

To counter this, 2 AKG 414 ambience mics are mounted among the onstage Scepton frames to pick up the band internally, with 2 shotgun mics on the side to feed in crowd reactions. Three d&b audiotechnik M2 wedges and a d&b V-SUBs on stage are used to add bass and drum fills.

With 2 LED screens and a forest of Scepton frames surrounding the

Opposite: Igor the squirrel, at home in the touring bar, flies the flag for Iceland.

performers, the stage is a difficult RF environment to wrangle. By sweeping the stage with a handheld scanner during set-up, and working with the Shure Wireless Workbench programme (mainly on the American leg, where the 600 range is being taken over by the TV networks), Eiðsson is able to maintain steady contact with the Sennheiser SR 2050 IEM used.

Rack-mounted and ready to go after just 90 minutes charge time, 50 Fischer Amp rechargeable batteries are carried to power the in ears for the entire tour, dramatically reducing waste over the course of a year. "I really love it," commented Eiðsson. "I hate throwing out half-used batteries all the time - it's not good. In this industry we should all be using rechargables."

THE LONG ROAD HOME

While support from all the vendors - Neg Earth for automation and lighting, Capital Sound for audio, PRG XL Video for video and All Access Staging & Productions for its staging skills - has been an essential part of the tour's success, it's the dedication and enthusiasm of the crew themselves that deserves the greatest credit.

Fly By Nite, Beat the Street and Popcorn Catering - providers of wheels and meals, respectively - all come in for high praise, and as Stage Manager James Gould notes, the team's ability to hit 40-minute festival changeovers and master 90-minute load outs has been particularly impressive given the complexity of the show. "The guys are very tight, a very close knit group of people - as you would be when you spend that amount of time with other people - but it's their ability to welcome new crew in and continue to do the same thing every day, and have it go so smoothly, that's particularly great," he said.

For Stone, the crew's dedication to delivering the best possible show every single night has been second to none. "They've been really outstanding," he said. "We're not just a put-in to an arena, sometimes it can be quite tricky and we'll have to make adjustments, but every one of the team is really passionate about what we're trying to achieve and will always push to get the best out of every show. We pride ourselves that, wherever we go, we always try and deliver 100% - and I think that's been rewarded by the amazing audience response."

After so many months on the road, the tour is set to end with one final act of collaboration: a homecoming take-over of the Harpa theatre complex in Reykjavik. Alongside their last 4 shows, visitors will be able to explore the band's creative work as well as enjoy one-off gigs by their favourite performers. Held between Christmas and New Year, it is a festive jewel to crown off a momentous run, both reprise and coda to the tour that precedes it, one last invitation into the creative world of Sigur Rós. TPI



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