





# UPPING YOUR GAME: LIGHTING AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

by Rachel Clevenger

Brett Carroll, Director of Burbank High School's Vocal Music Program, is known throughout the show choir world for his outstanding shows, including their innovative special effects and lighting techniques. Carroll notes, "The most cutting-edge technologies on the market all pretty much involve LED low-power lighting instruments." He adds that it is important for directors or boosters purchasing

lighting equipment for any venue to recognize there are two very important sides of this decision: the lighting itself and whatever will be used to control the lighting. He shares, "That's always the difficult part. It isn't hard to go out and buy a bunch of affordable LED lighting instruments, but having the hardware (lighting board/computer) to control it is the most difficult part of the equation."

Because there are many ways to control lighting, Carroll stresses the importance of verifying that the equipment is all compatible and able to communicate electronically, and it's just as relevant that your program has someone who is knowledgeable about lighting device programming.

He adds, "The old days of a light just coming on/dimming, flashing etc. are gone." Today's lighting instruments, he explains, are incredibly flexible—which is excellent for planning and performance—but a lighting programmer is necessary to input those parameters of light, such as color and consistency, as well as movement. Not only is this time-consuming for the programmer, he notes, but this is a craft that requires skill.

Because of this, Carroll strongly suggests consulting with a professional lighting designer to ensure you do not obtain equipment that is too difficult to control or too complex—and to ensure you don't overbuy. He recommends speaking to at least three consultants about your choir's needs and how those needs can best be met.

Because he's learned over the years that many directors are overwhelmed by the choices and unsure of what they need, it is crucial to consult the right people.

### On the Cutting-Edge

Robert Mentele, Lighting Products Specialist for Full Compass Systems, holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Technical Theatre/Theatre Design and Technology from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Mentele suggests that some of the most exciting products on today's market aren't really new—but they are reemerging for a new type of user.

He notes that many groups are refreshing their moving mirrors/scanners to make room for fast-moving beams that can cover the stage, which offers an intense effect for audience members. He adds, "Similarly, laser generators were once too high-powered and expensive for anything other than nationally touring shows, and required special licensing and approval. Now, companies offer lower-powered lasers that can be completely controlled and programmed by an operator."

Rich Anders, National Sales Manager of Mega Systems, Inc., holds an A.S. in Sound Video and Lighting from the Art Institute of Houston. Anders believes that one of the cutting-edge tools in show choir right now is the integration of LED video panels, which are used for video, graphics, or just a backdrop of color.

Anders adds, "They are used as set pieces to convey mood, or background video for the performance. The panels are able to be spread out across a stage in sections and still show one image across all of them—creating some very dynamic effects. We are seeing the video or graphics element more and more as these products become tools for lighting designers today."

### Effects on a Tighter Budget

When it comes to lighting and special effects, there are the high-level competitors with tens of thousands of dollars in their annual production budgets, groups constantly looking to "up their game" with high-end tools. Then, there are choirs that also compete but may need more affordable methods for adding visually striking effects.

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When considering long-term auditorium upgrades for adding special effects to any type of production in your school's venue, Mentele suggests you keep in mind LED lighting fixtures, which are an excellent investment. Mentele adds, "They offer a lot of color flexibility, extensive cost savings in energy consumption, reduce labor of replacing lamps and help cooling systems because they generate less heat."

For choirs that may be on a tighter budget, Mentele shares that LED fixtures are beginning to drop in price fairly drastically. He praises the flexibility of color options that LEDs make possible, which can create opportunities for including "drastic visual elements" to your shows.

He mentions, as well, that if purchasing LED lights is too expensive for your choir, many times the same items are rentable from local companies, so you can have access to the best technology for a fraction of the cost.

Anders mentions that an affordable option for performers who want to augment their show with special effects is to incorporate moving heads into the production—with just one pair of units really adding to the overall effect. He adds, "These moving heads give you the ability to project gobos and do aerial type effects, as well as cover ceilings, crowds, etc."

Furthermore, Anders explains, these features have the benefit of not requiring installation in terms of being hung; instead,

they can just rest on the stage, which means the set-up is both easy and fast. These types of fixtures, he adds, need to be controlled with a lighting controller or software. For moving head fixtures, Natalie Wiesnet of Mega Systems Inc. recommends the MEGA-LITE Axis Grid and the PR XRLED Series.

### Updating Home Staging

Anders notes that any performance space can benefit from "a simple color changing fixture for set pieces, wall wash, stage wash, up lighting, or anything else." Luckily, for choirs on a tight budget, these small wash fixtures are not only brighter—but they have also become more affordable over time.

Just as importantly, they have a variety of uses, and these color-changing fixtures can often even be pre-set, rather than controlled, which means setup and subsequent use can be incredibly simple, even as the effect creates "space, mood, or even depth of field." For color-changing fixtures, Wiesnet recommends the MEGA-LITE Baby Color series or the MEGA-LITE Mass.



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Not every show choir is on the competition track, and many primarily perform for their schools and local communities. They share their stages with drama clubs and general choral events, but they too want the "cool factor" in their performances. In short, whatever your budget, there are lighting and special effects options that can add production value to your shows.

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Dr. Rachel James Clevenger, editor of *Productions*, earned her B.A and M.Ed. degrees from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham.



Photo by Irene Soule of Los Alamitos, SoundFX

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