tools from within

panLab | by Rob Halliday

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Like seeds sown a season ago and now coming into beautiful bloom, it has been wonderful watching people's various lockdown projects coming to fruition. That forced break in the usual routine gave a chance to do something different, to work on ideas long held but which there was never normally time to move forward. From that, we're benefitting from a number of powerful new tools built specifically to help with things we do. panLab is one of those tools.

The big thing in sound at the moment is spatial audio. That means having multiple speakers and using a control system to manipulate sound between them so the source of the sound seems to move around the space. You've always been able to do that by manually manipulating the levels of each speaker, but the spatial systems detach you from having to think about the actual speakers. Once set up, you just click where you want the sound to seem to come from, drag a path you want it to follow - or even use tracking devices so it all happens automatically - and the system figures the rest out.

Big shows use proprietary systems such as d&b's Soundscape, L-Acoustics' L-ISA or Meyer's Galileo (descended from the earlier LCS system), or the speaker-independent TiMax. But what about the other shows? All those hundreds and thousands of shows that run on the software that has become our industry's *de-facto* sound control system, QLab? Until now, QLab users have had to manually manipulate routing and outputs to move sounds around - do-able, but fiddly, convoluted, painful programming - particularly for complex movement paths.

panLab, created by theatre sound engineer Daniel Higgott, does that work for you. It's a tool to help with a tool: it doesn't directly manipulate the sound, but rather provides an elegant interface for you to define your sound paths, then does the work of programming QLab.

panLab thinks of all QLab cues as objects on what panLab calls a panner, and all your QLab outputs appear as loudspeakers on its space map. It can pull all of that from QLab automatically, then you drag and drop the speaker objects into their correct relative positions. Once set up, you just start dragging routes around the space. panLab figures out how the sound needs to crossfade from real speaker to real speaker to achieve that, using complex algorithms created by Higgott's brother Oscar, a physicist. Then it programmes the relevant fades into QLab for you - Higgott calls it 'printing the information into QLab'. That might be a long sequence of cues, but you can then just collapse it down to one action in QLab.

Because all the actual playback is then handled by QLab, you don't need panLab to run the show. It's a sound designer's tool: once a show's ready to go, it can just move with you to the next show - no need to licence or pay for it per production. Just as they quickly adopted QLab because of its unique strengths, designers are already adopting panLab - you might have seen it mentioned in the piece about the immersive *Secret Cinema presents: Bridgerton (see LSi June 2022)*, and it was used on *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* in the West End, at the Sydney Opera House, and elsewhere. And it's evolving rapidly, already up to version two. Like QLab, you can rent it or buy it outright. Or try it for free for a week - why wouldn't you?

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Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for almost 30 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic... or just old!