

How to pre-plan lighting cues

In the second of a series of articles on improving your use of lighting, **John Black** offers a step-by-step guide to preplanning your cues

TO CUE, OR NOT TO CUE, THAT IS the question. Besides borrowing and re-wording one of Shakespeare's most famous lines, this is a question I ask myself when preparing for any event I am supporting. No matter whether it is a standard lecture-format presentation, a music concert or a full theatrical production, my planning and implementation of cueing varies greatly as the lighting needs of each type of event is very different. What holds true in every situation, however, is that the lighting should always support what will happen on the stage, and when you are planning lighting cues, that includes planning for the unexpected.

Whether you are a new lighting designer in a house of worship, or a weekend volunteer, cueing, if used effectively, can be an excellent tool for your services. Depending on the size of your venue, the complexity of



Every lighting look on the stage can be recorded to the console memory as a cue

your worship service programme, and the quantity and types of

equipment you have to work with, cueing can take a large role in your workflow or very little. In either case, the approach to cueing, and the end



John Black, theatre manager for Seoul Foreign School

MEET THE AUTHOR

John Black serves as the theatre manager for Seoul Foreign School in Seoul, South Korea. Holding a degree in Theatre Design, he provides technical production support and design in three state-of-the-art performance venues on campus for over 40 major concerts and

productions a year in the areas of sound, lighting, video and staging. John especially enjoys sharing his passion for entertainment technology with high school students each year through his student production team, Crusader Live!, giving students the opportunity to learn and work with professional-level technologies in a demanding production environment.

goal – to support and enhance the worship experience – is the same. The following article offers four very basic steps that I would recommend when planning cues for a worship service.

Step one: understand your church style

Before spending hours programming lighting cues for your service, you first need to make



(Photo credit Stage Light-Houston)

It may be beneficial to cue certain items in the service programme and build in the flexibility to jump between different cue stacks

sure that you fully understand not only the actual plan for the service, but the general style of your church's service. It could be that you work in a large megachurch in which services are akin to professional productions. The service start and end-times are

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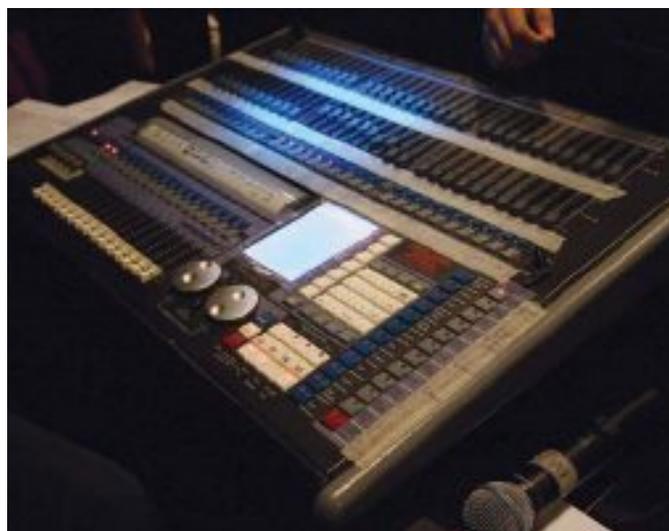
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set, the order of service is set with no room for deviation, and each service runs to exactly the same template. In this service-style, which follows a very linear flow such as a theatrical performance, there are many benefits from more extensive cueing in that there is no question about what will happen, and using volunteer technicians is straightforward when it comes to running the services.

On the other hand, it could be that you work in a smaller church in which services are more flexible with changes in the order of service happening on the fly. Planning may go into the worship songs that are chosen and other 'performance' elements in the programme, but perhaps it is acceptable for the song order to change during the service, or for the time of announcements to change from before the music set to after (as an example). In this service style, which is much more flexible, it may be beneficial to cue certain items in the service programme and build in the flexibility to jump between different cue stacks (more on this



An Avolites Pearl 2010 lighting control surface

approach later). Additionally, it may be beneficial to programme a series of sub-masters for controlling specific lights for control on the fly if a person on stage steps out of the pool of light.

These two approaches are very different, but both can implement

cueing in lighting to support their mission. Understanding your service and the amount of acceptable flexibility within it is the first step towards planning effective lighting cues.

Step two: decide how much and what to cue

The chances are, if you are working or volunteering on your church's tech team, you are a member of that church and already familiar with your church's style. The next step is then to decide how much and what to cue. Often, this will involve a meeting (or several meetings) with the team planning the service. As the lighting technician, your goal should be to leave this meeting not only with the details of the service (programme order, song choices, special performances etc), but also with a sense for the overall mood to be achieved. All of this will guide you as you create your cues.

During or after a production

meeting like this, I try to identify specific items that would benefit from programming lighting cues. I look for items that are going to have consistency, or those that involve more complicated lighting or fast transition times where manual control would be burdensome. An obvious choice would be the lighting cues used in the worship music set(s). If your service incorporates an element of drama or dance, I would also mark those items as worthy of cueing.

Again, this all depends on the service style. If every service is the same then all programme items – including the sermon, offertory and announcements – could be included in a single cue-list for playback. If there is a more flexible format, or if a different church member leads certain portions of the service each week, a cue-list or multiple cue-lists could be utilised with the addition of manually controlled groupings of lights via sub-masters.

Personally, in both situations, I would recommend a blended approach – programme cues and programme sub-masters for the ability to quickly control groups of certain fixtures should the need arise. There's nothing worse than needing a lot of time figuring out how to control certain fixtures as opposed to having pre-planned various control options in a logical, organised manner.

Step three: cue structure

Once you know what to expect in your service programme, you can begin planning out your cue structure. There are two main ways to structure the cues, of course depending on the capabilities of your lighting console. The first method is to plan



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out your cues in a single list that runs numerically from top to bottom. Most lighting consoles allow you to link cues, so it could be possible to jump between cues in your cue-stack, but for the most part, the expectation would be that you are playing back the cues in the same order every time. This is common in the theatrical world, where cues are played back in order without deviation.

The second method is to plan out your cues by item and record to more than one cue list. This is common in the concert world. For example, let's say that each song your praise team is planning will consist of 10 lighting cues. In a single cue list, if four songs are being played, you would record 40 cues and play them back in numerical order. In this second method, you would record four cue-lists of 10 cues each – one list for each song. If the praise team leader comes up to you immediately prior to service with a new song order, you simply play back the cue-lists in the new song order instead of skipping around a larger quantity of cues in a single list (and having to remember that a particular song begins with, for example, cue 62).

I personally would lean towards this second method as it gives the operator a very fast, easy method for dealing with quick changes. When adding the use of well-planned sub-masters to this cue structure, the result can be very effective and efficient when dealing with last-minute changes or on-the-fly fixes in a manner that is not distracting to the congregation.

Step four: planning the cues

Every lighting look on the stage can be recorded to the console memory as a cue for playback. As you look through the order of service

from your production meeting and think through designed looks that need to be recalled, you can plan every lighting change as a new cue. Obvious looks can include the prelude, postlude, announcements, sermon, offering collection and more. These service items will typically consist of no more than one lighting cue each, with the possibility of manually making adjustments if required.

The more time-consuming cue planning will most likely revolve

around the worship music set, drama presentation, or other creative items in the service. When approaching the worship songs, start by viewing the structure of each song as natural places for lighting cues. Within a single song, lighting changes may not be that noticeable (again, depending on the style of your church), but simple changes can help drive the emotion of the music and lyrics. For example, you may plan a cue for the introduction, each verse, each chorus, the bridge, an instrumental

section, and the end of the song. For a drama presentation, you will look through the script and, working with the director, decide on points in the script in which a lighting change will support the congregations' understanding of what is being presented.

Once you know what cues you need to programme, you can begin thinking about what each of those will look like. What lights will you use? What colours will be used? Where will any front light come from? Will the whole stage be lit, or a focused area? Depending on



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your church facility, and the time you have available, some of this will be done in the venue with the ability to make these decisions while using the rig. Some, however, will require cues to be planned on paper or computer as the time you have for actually programming is very short.

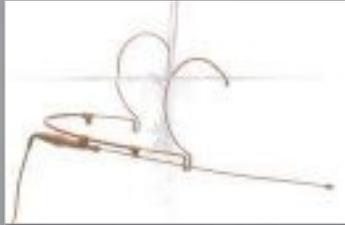
If you have gone through these steps and can stand in front of your console knowing exactly what you have to programme and how you are going to programme it, then the actual programming process can be fairly quick. Larger churches may hold multiple production meetings prior to a service or series of services that allow the lighting technicians to have a very clear end-goal in mind. Many smaller churches may depend on the church technician or volunteer (who may or may not be in charge of all of the technical elements of the service) to support services on the fly every week. In either case, cueing is a wonderful tool and feature of modern lighting consoles. But it is just a tool. If it's not right for your service and the way your service's flow, then there are other programming tools and methods for providing lighting support to your church service. What's important is that your method and design enhance your congregations' worship experience.

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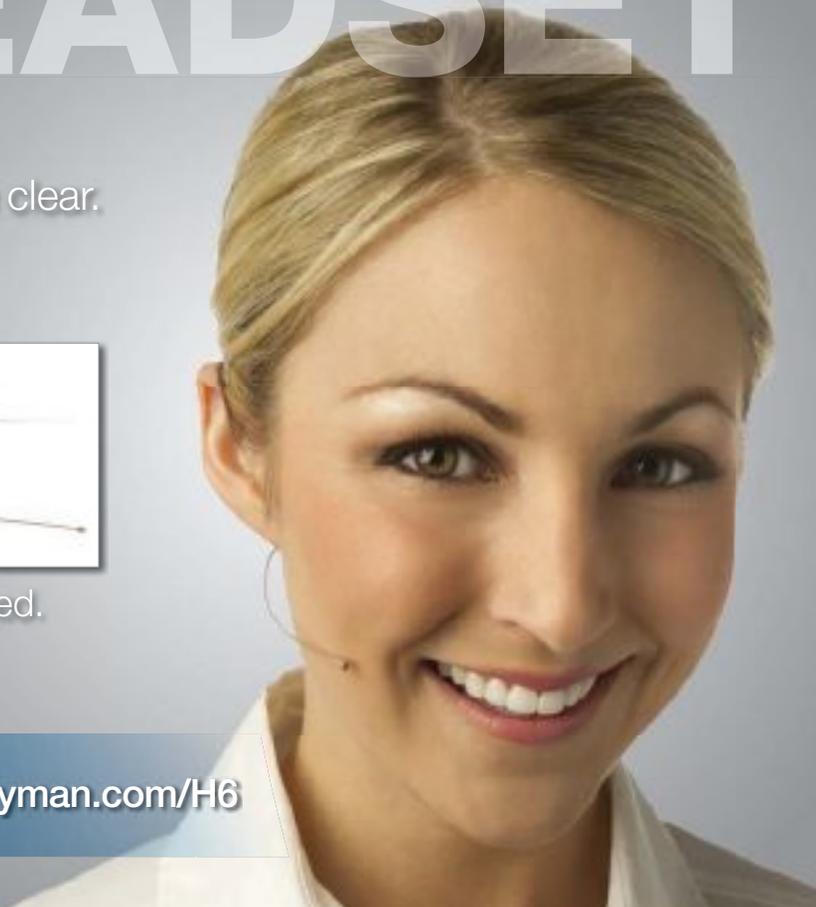


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