

11 / 02 / 2025

Adding Nuance to Hikaru Utada Science Fiction Tour Design

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ESPRITE® **MegaPointe®** **TetraX™** **BMFL™ WashBeam EV** **RoboSpot™**

Creative studio FragmentNine (F9) led by Jeremy Lechterman was asked by creative director / production designer Jason Ardizzone-West of JAW Studio to collaborate on the lighting elements of an impressive production design for J-pop singer/songwriter and superstar Hikaru Utada's 2024 tour, as the artist returned to live performance after a six-year hiatus for an extensive tour of Japan and Asia, supporting a new album project, Science Fiction.

The lighting design included large amounts of Robe fixtures including 81 x ESPRITES, 72 x MegaPointes, 26 x TetraXs and three Robe BMFL Wash Beam EVs running on a 3-way RoboSpot system, all supplied in Japan by lighting vendor Kyoritz.

Jason's initial discussions with the artist started a year prior to the tour. "We talked about wormholes, portals, Kubrick's monoliths, Emma McEvoy's sand dune photographs, and how we wanted to challenge the expectations and perceptions of how a J-Pop arena concert should look and feel," he explained.

Their goal was to imagine an operatic-like space that was both familiar and alien, ancient and modern, "a mysterious landscape that is initially a sleeping machine - a portal to another level of consciousness which is slowly awakened by the energy of the audience activated by Utada's music."

From this alien desert landscape, nine large monolithic sculptures emerged to assist a highly imaginative journey. These were built with a skin of Roe Vanish 8S LED video tiles and internally lit and juxtaposed with three luminous plinths on which the musicians were positioned.

Jeremy and Jason have been wanting to work together for some time, and this presented a perfect opportunity. Together with video designer Jackson Gallagher of F9, this creative triumvirate pooled ideas and forged creative mixed-media treatments that worked

harmoniously, transforming the space into a series of emotionally charged environmental settings unique to each song.

A major challenge for lighting was capturing and integrating the scale of the 100ft wide landscape design, and another starting point was that 75% of the lighting fixtures needed to be floor-based to ensure the integrity and impact of the scenography.

The Robe ESPRITES and MegaPointes constituted all the spot and beam fixtures on the plot, and they were on F9's specification right from the start.

This was due to their reliability, excellent color rendering, and a number of other refinements, noted Jeremy, "ESPRITES and MegaPointes were a quick and easy choice, and Kyoritz had them in stock, so everything worked out."

The ESPRITES were deployed in two long lines, one below the stage at the back, similar to a horizon, with another row above the main upstage video wall, with the balance deployed on the overhead rig.

They were used to assist in creating shadows against the monolith video sculptures, and to help push and radiate the energy and movement of the video content that was also at the core of the design.

"The nature and precision of the scenography required the artists to be lit very specifically, to enhance the spatiality of Jason's original concept," said Jeremy, adding that the ESPRITES' zoom is excellent and the brightness through the full zoom range and the clean beam field were characteristics needed to light in this style.

Jeremy has been using MegaPointes since the fixture was launched in 2017. Like many, he still finds them to be essential tools today as they're his "hybrid fixture of choice" finding their way onto almost every design he creates.

For superstar Hikaru Utada, they were rigged in the over-stage grid and used for pulling visuals away from the floor and adding height and layers of complexity to the design.

The BMFL EVs on the RoboSpots were used in rear and two high side positions for key lighting and low lighting as there was no front lighting on the show apart from in the B-stage area. Jeremy is equally as enthusiastic about these fixtures, noting that they "worked flawlessly" every night.

Hikaru Utada is one of the most influential and successful Japanese singers and voices of all time. The tour was also a retrospective and a mercurial mix of her music spanning 25 years, a vast back catalog embracing multiple genres all presented with her own highly individual style and flourish.

“The goal of lighting was to always try to enhance but not overpower,” underlined Jeremy. “We had this gorgeous landscape and content for this show, so for light to be reinforcing those choices was a decision we made collectively,” as well as an illustration of the strength of his relationship with video designer Jackson Gallagher.

Jeremy concluded that lighting video and scenography all working together as “one source of truth” presented a strong vision for the production and it also made lighting the show relatively easy.

Jeremy and his team, including lighting programmer Erin Anderson and associate designers Sydney Asselin and Alex Talbot, really enjoyed working on the tour and having to think out of the box to help realize this ambitious and provocative designed environment. F9’s project manager was Rob Kuhn.

Kyoritz’s head of lighting was Tomokazu Takahashi, and the lighting Interpreter was Michiko Rowson.

The collaboration between JAW Studio and F9 was so productive, successful, and enjoyable that they have subsequently announced a new joint project – loudbox – a live entertainment design collective that aims to blur the lines between concerts, theater, and architecture through creative direction, production, lighting, and video design.

Photo Credits: Jeremy Lechterman & Jason Ardizzone-West



