

Vintage Art

Fifteen years ago RCF took the portable PA market by storm with the launch of its Art Series. **Richard Lawn** investigates how the cabinets have evolved during this time

FOR SOME 50 YEARS, RCF

quietly went about its business supplying speaker manufacturers from around the world with components. Although a number of Italian stations and airports were often adorned with 100V line PA systems, the RCF logo was usually under wraps.

But with the arrival of Arturo Vicari as RCF's new president in 1996, everything changed. The Reggio Emilia based manufacturer switched its attentions to loudspeaker cabinet production in the hope that the transition would unlock an unlimited potential in the export market. RCF's exceptionally good design team was strengthened with the capture of George Kampera and with it its foray into polypropylene designs.

Polypropylene cabinets may be a byword in loudspeaker design manufacture today, but their arrival onto the portable PA market in the mid 1990s hardly heralded a fanfare amongst audio purists at the time. But with the development of Art, RCF's heart was in the right place.

Mr Vicari is a visionary, who excels at putting together strong teams of creative personnel, whilst giving them the tools in which to excel. 'I prefer to maintain a low profile as I really don't like the spotlight,' he asserts from the grand booth at the 2012 Pro Light & Sound. Mr Vicari is hugely



RCF president Arturo Vicari with the original Art 300A speaker system from 1997

aware that it's the 15th anniversary since RCF launched the Art series of speakers to great critical acclaim.

The launch of active and passive composite-moulded cabinets was instrumental in helping RCF gain brand recognition overseas, whilst forging sales into the wider MI market. Although common today, the Art Series was one of only a few portable, plastic cabinets available on the market finding critical acclaim from users who sought a portable plug and play speaker.

'The 1997 launch was the biggest success that RCF had ever enjoyed,' says Mr Vicari. 'Not only did people like the look of the cabinets - they really were amazed with what they heard. There was a stigma against plastic speaker cabinets at the time and I think we changed the mindset of people with the new design.'

The Art 300A was probably the first portable, plastic speaker system to be taken seriously by the PA industry. Venues, production houses and musicians realised that they offered exceptional value for money together with reliability. Art speakers also offered versatility on a precedent that had rarely been witnessed before. Production houses enjoyed rarely seeing them back in the warehouse as they continually did the rounds as a rehearsal PA, a keyboard monitor, a fold-back system or a full PA system.

As a result, 1997 became a triumphal whirlwind for the Italian manufacturer who simply could not keep pace with demand. But in January 1998, Art's rise took a massive leap as a result of RCF's demonstration room neighbouring that of Mackie Designs at the Winter NAMM exhibition in Los Angeles. 'Greg Mackie came into our room as he couldn't understand why our booth was attracting such crowds,' recalls Mr Vicari. 'When he heard the speakers, the rest is history.' A shared belief in active loudspeaker technology with the American console manufacturer led to the eventual takeover of RCF in June 1998.

Although RCF and Mackie Designs, who were enveloped within Loud Technologies, separated in late 2003, the legacy of Art continued. The SRM speaker systems continue to be one of the biggest selling items in Mackie's catalogue, whilst Art series speakers have been remodelled several times to offer new features and benefits to the legions of dedicated users.

The second generation of Art Series cabinets took centre stage in 2004 shortly after RCF broke free from Loud Technologies. Seven years on, the market had changed significantly since the initial launch of the original Art series. 'You may ask what the world needed with yet

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another plastic loudspeaker cabinet. Asian competition had made life difficult in which to compete, but we knew that we could compete on quality. When people listened to the second generation cabinets, they appreciated why we made it.'

It was the incorporation of AEB into the RCF family in 2004 that significantly increased the speed of R&D development. AEB's strength in electronics coupled with RCF's platform in electro-acoustic expertise has helped to widen the RCF product catalogue at a rate which most of their competitors can only stand back from and admire.

In 2008 the launch of the light and versatile Art 7 series, including seven



Original ART 500A speakers deployed as stage monitors at this years Java Jazz Festival

enclosures right, required so much precision engineering, but we succeeded. In essence, that really was the Art challenge – to get great sound with a limited budget.'

RCF continue to re-invest 8 per cent of its turnover back into R&D every year and manufacture over

100,000 digital amplifiers every year. 'We have control over the transducer manufacturing, the digital amplifiers and the supply of components in our speaker systems. I'm not being arrogant, but we are one of the very few true manufacturers of sound. As such, we don't consider others

as being competitors unless they have control in all aspects of the manufacturing.'

Having moulded the team over the past 15 years, Mr Vicari now takes great joy witnessing new designs by Alessandro Manini, Claudio Ottani and the other many skilled engineers labours come to life. 'Ultimately, you have given joy to musicians and audiences alike, you become addicted to what you are doing.'

Mr Vicari may not like publicity, but he doesn't shut himself away in an ivory tower. 'My office door is always open and I want everyone to come to me with ideas and problems. We're a family who share the same

passionate understanding in that we want to simplify great sound.'

The RCF catalogue has expanded exponentially during the past eight years to include conferencing microphones, transducers, digital amplifiers, touring systems and scalable solutions for the fixed installation market. But Mr Vicari is honest in his assessment that none of this would have been possible without the birth of Art in 1997. In successfully applying the true appreciation of science and art, RCF changed the landscape of the portable PA market.

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Art speakers on the production line

active and three passive designs, represented a fundamental step forward for plug 'n' play speaker systems. New amplification modules and neodymium transducers were integrated into the very compact cabinets for live sound, playback, monitoring, and corporate events.

Launched in 2011, the Art 4 Series is the latest generation of portable speakers combining the audio quality and ruggedness of the Art 3 Series with digital Digipro amplification technology developed for the Art 7 Series. The latest speakers are equipped with neodymium magnets together with a powerful DSP, managing the crossover, EQ, soft limiter, compressor and dynamic boost bass. In addition, all the models feature two equalisation presets in the form of extended frequency response – which slightly emphasises the bass response for playback music and low volume applications – and linear frequency response for live music applications. Inside/outside voice coil wiring technology is used on all the transducers mounted on the 4 Series allowing the speaker to stay cooler and therefore play louder for longer.

Art has evolved over the past 15 years, but Mr Vicari still speaks passionately about the first 300A speakers that rolled off the Reggio Emilia production line. 'They contained no DSP and you couldn't equalise them, so we had to get the enclosures 100 per cent right,' he highlights. 'To get the polypropylene

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