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Baltzell Audio Design and Maryland Sound (MSI) Elect JBL VERTeC® Line Arrays For Inauguration Of President Barack Obama

NORTHRIDGE, California – In one of the most widely viewed and celebrated civic events in history, Baltimore-based audio systems provider Maryland Sound (MSI) deployed JBL VERTeC® line arrays as the main PA system for the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20. The ceremony took place at the United States Capitol in Washington D.C., with a crowd of more than 1.5 million onlookers extending two miles from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial on the Potomac River, and along Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, with a total audience “in the streets” surrounding the event site estimated to have exceeded two million. With past inaugural crowds officially logged for George W. Bush at 400,000 persons, Bill Clinton at 800,000 and the previous record being Lyndon B. Johnson at 1.2 million, the inauguration of President Barack Obama set a new benchmark for massive outdoor public assemblies, and defined a new standard for large-scale distributed outdoor sound reinforcement systems.

With equal attention being paid to clear sound quality and open sightlines, MSI, in collaboration with sound designer and front of house engineer Pat Baltzell of Baltzell Audio Design, configured an audio system that relied largely on the high output and easy setup of JBL VERTeC VT4889 large-format line array elements. In total, 15 of MSI's custom-built, ground-stacked line array towers, ranging from four to 14 VT4889 loudspeakers each, were dispersed throughout the Mall area, beginning with two 14-box clusters at the main stage (one per side). With respect to sightlines, six towers were arranged on the outside perimeter of the main lawn (which measured approximately 550 feet deep by 1,000 feet wide), to provide delays without obstructing the view of the seated audience. Beyond the 305-meter (1,000-foot) mark, an additional five delay towers were set up from left to right in the audience area, providing audio reinforcement for the rest of the crowd. To cover various VIP seating sections along with choir and band areas, the primary VT4889 system was supplemented by JBL VP7315DP powered loudspeakers, VRX932 portable line array loudspeakers and Control 25AV pole-mounted speakers. Crown I-Tech amplifiers, configured with Harman HiQnet™ System Architect™ software for remote control and monitoring, powered the system.

“We are extremely pleased with the assortment of tools that Harman brands offer, from the superb JBL VERTeC line arrays to Crown amplifiers and Studer and Soundcraft consoles and other products. We are able to achieve the highest sound fidelity possible, vastly superior to that which was available only a few years ago. Given the harsh environmental conditions we were working in, which has brought sub-zero temperatures and lots of precipitation, the equipment worked flawlessly with no failures,” stated Bob Goldstein, President of MSI.

In addition to very large-area coverage considerations, Baltzell and the MSI audio support team had to prepare for and deal with serious weather and security contingencies, while designing and deploying a failsafe sound system to support sound reinforcement for both speech and music. Besides the address by the new President, the diverse ceremonial program included music from the San Francisco Boys and Girls' choirs, Aretha Franklin singing the national anthem, the U.S. Marine Corps band playing "Hail to the Chief" and a 21-gun salute.

According to Baltzell, the VERTeC line arrays were an ideal choice for this high-profile outdoor application. “JBL VERTeC simply has more overall acoustical power output than the competitors,” Baltzell said. “The VT4889 boxes have three compression drivers instead of two as normally found in other products. The distance between the main line array tower and the first delay tower was about 580 feet (177 meters), so that's quite a challenge. Although the line arrays are pointing downhill, which helps, the difference in output with VERTeC is crucial, especially considering the weather conditions of Washington D.C. in January.”

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