

## TRYING TIMES

For Masaaki Azuma, establishing a rental company provided the introduction to the loudspeakers that changed his life. Now running Try Audio and Funktion-One Japan, he is a man with a mission



Try Audio and Funktion-One Japan owner and founder, Masaaki Azuma.

IN MAY 2001, OSAKA-BASED rental outfit Try Audio became the first company in the Asia-Pacific region to take delivery of a full Funktion-One Resolution touring system. Try Audio's Japanese owner and founder, Masaaki Azuma, struck up a good rapport with the English manufacturer, and their decision to form Funktion-One Japan was almost immediate. Try Audio immersed itself in the box-shifting world of product distribution, and Funktion-One had at long last found a partner in Asia that it was confident could

represent its much-respected brand. It was a perfect marriage and one which is enjoying its honeymoon.

Along with four friends, Azuma formed Try Audio in August 1984 while studying at University. Maintaining a small but significant stock of PA hire equipment for small events and venues, Try Audio filled a niche in the local rental market in Osaka. Azuma fills in the gaps between August 1984 and May 2001: 'When the five of us founded Try Audio, we were still University students. However, with



A Funktion-One Resolution speaker cluster being hoisted for a Jamiroquai's concert in Osaka.

the exception of myself, everyone left the company upon graduating, returning to their hometowns or being offered professional jobs in different industries, and I was the only one who stayed in the company. I bought some Bose 802 speakers, and worked on small-scale events in front of train stations, shopping malls and such like. Then in 1988 I bought four Turbosound TMS-3 speakers, and a Yamaha PM3000-40c console, and this led me to acquiring work as a PA engineer for small bands. In 1994 I upgraded to a Turbosound

Flashlight system and that allowed me to tender for overseas touring acts that were playing in Japan. However, in December 2000, I came across the Funktion-One Resolution system which sounded stunning. Having made the purchase of 32 Res 5s and 32 218 subs in May 2001, I managed to introduce them in Japan at the Fuji Rock Festival two months later.'

In January 2002, the largest Funktion-One touring system assembled to date was used at the Jamiroquai concert in the enormous 43,000-seat Tokyo Dome indoor arena. Funktion-One's Tony and Ann Andrews flew to Japan to oversee the tour with co-founder John Newsham. As well as the massive indoor dome, the tour also played in smaller venues around Japan and, as such, the flexibility of the Resolution system was really understood and appreciated. The tour also witnessed the debut of an additional flying system to fly the Res 9s above a six-wide Res 5 cluster. FOH engineer Rick Pope comments: 'This is the way of the future - it's the best sound experience. When the security guy tells you it sounds brilliant that's a big leap forward.' Lead singer Jay Kay himself commented: 'It's stunning. As a PA, it honestly has the best sound I've ever heard.'

To Azuma, the tour marked a significant watershed in the fortunes of Funktion-One Japan: 'It was exciting and fun, and I gained a lot of experience from working

with John and Tony,' he says.

Azuma has continued to supply the famous Fuji Rock Festival, and was lauded with praise after the 2003 event from FOH engineer, Sean 'Big Red' Johnson: 'I recently had the pleasure of using the Resolution series at the Mount Fuji Festival in Japan, while working FOH for the band Anthrax,' he said at the time. 'I hadn't come across Funktion-One. Upon seeing the boxes, Turbosound immediately came to mind, but with a crazy twist. I honestly did not know what to expect for the show, especially because it was a "throw and go" with no soundcheck. To my amazement, my mix came together by the first chorus of the first song and I can honestly say that it was one of the best shows that I had done in years. The system was seamless and I didn't touch the EQ. It had the cleanest, and most even response that I have heard in a long while. I also could not believe that only a one ton motor was flying each cluster, in addition to the minimal amount of amplifiers used for the whole rig.'

Azuma has certainly put Funktion-One on the map in a relatively short space of time but, like Funktion-One's founders, he is happiest when he sees audiences looking happy and excited. 'That's the goal for me,' he confirms.

'When you introduce these loudspeakers to an act or an audience that hasn't heard them before, and you see their faces light up, it's a special feeling,' Tony



The Jamiroquai sound system live in Osaka.



Andrews himself describes the Japanese market as 'the most critical in the world', and Azuma has no shortage of competitors. 'There are some big, established rental companies in Japan,' he says. 'All of them are buddies and competitors at the same time.'

Azuma takes his time when asked what obstacles there currently were in Japan, but eventually opens up: 'My main headache is that customers easily change their mind with passing popularity – we seem to be very fashion conscious in Japan. As we currently don't try to make better quality products ourselves, as we have in the past, we generally believe in the manufacturer's controlled sound quality. These factors, I believe, are crippling the development of the professional audio market here in Japan. When working with foreign artists, I realise that we also have a language barrier and problems with our electricity and voltages.'

Azuma isn't dispirited however, and despite only possessing a

limited English vocabulary, is a regular face at Funktion-One's headquarters in Beare Green in the UK. 'I also visit the Frankfurt Pro Light & Sound exhibition each year to keep abreast of developments and new products. It's good to see people and keep in touch. I recently bought a DiGiCo D5 console with Digitracks for Try Audio, as this is becoming increasingly popular among overseas touring acts and on riders, although Japanese engineers still haven't used the console yet. Line arrays are still very popular, but I feel that the buyers of such systems are more interested in making profit for themselves rather than making the best possible audio reproduction. They are losing the real purpose of engineering.'

Now an established brand in Japan, Azuma is philosophical about where Funktion-One fits in the domestic market: 'Of course, everyone has different opinions about sound and the sound comes from the actual loudspeakers. But with Funktion-One you also have



The mixing desk and stage set for Jamiroquai at the Tokyo Dome.

the simplicity of the setup – a lightweight, scalable system and a unique design with which our customers are more than satisfied. Even those who don't like the sound of Funktion-One speakers like the simplicity of setup, the low weight and the design.'

Today, Try Audio is an established rental company in Osaka and Yokohama, with 30 employees incorporating sales,

servicing, administration, accounting, installation, development, rental, and engineering, while Funktion-One Japan grows in stature with every major Japanese tour it caters to. Like many others, Azuma may have founded Try Audio for kicks and loose change while studying, but the hobby has subsequently evolved into a fully mature international class act with the

birth and growth of Funktion-One Japan. Azuma is also planning to develop Try Audio as an international network and hopes to establish offices in both Korea and China in the near future. While Azuma has stuck to his task manfully of successfully developing the premium loudspeaker brand, the Asia-Pacific market has taken note and charted the rising stature of the Resolutions. Today, he is joined by Funktion-One Australia, Funktion-One Korea, Funktion-One China and Hawko in Singapore and Malaysia, and supports and liaises with his fellow subsidiaries on a regular basis. Whatever his old four University colleagues are doing now, they must surely be questioning their own judgement, having followed their academic career paths. If only they'd tried.

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