



FORWARD- THINKING FOR

40 YEARS

SOLOTECH CELEBRATES A MILESTONE ANNIVERSARY

By Kevin Young

Since being founded in Montreal in 1977, Solotech has become a world-class provider of technical solutions and services for a broad range of clients, market sectors, and applications worldwide.

Since marking their 35th anniversary in 2012, the company has continued to expand and evolve with the goal of better serving its growing client base while adopting and deploying leading-edge technologies from the various tech segments it covers.

For insight into their recent efforts, operations, and future trajectory, *Professional Sound* approached Philip Giffard and Martin Chouinard, presidents of Solotech's Sales and Integration and Rental Divisions, respectively, as well as President and CEO Martin Tremblay.

Solotech announced Tremblay's appointment as president and CEO on June 1st,

2017. He boasts years of experience in entertainment and technology, having served as president and CEO of Ubisoft before moving to L.A. to fill the role of president/CEO and, ultimately, president of worldwide studios for Vivendi Games, and later as president of Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment (WBIE) and executive VP of strategy and development for the Just for Laughs Group.

Tremblay's diverse experiences in the entertainment and technology fields are a good fit for Solotech's ongoing growth and evolving vision and there's definitely a connection between his background and Solotech's expertise. In each case, he's been integral in providing support and tools to colleagues, clients, and consumers in terms of design, engineering, and ensuring that products that may not necessarily fit together at first glance, work flawlessly to realize a common vision.

Tremblay's current focus for the company is unsurprisingly forward-looking. The

question he poses is: "What is the business going to look like, say, five years from now?"

Obviously, the need for traditional production technology – audio, lighting, video, and so on, will continue. "But everything is turning to IT now," he offers. "It's extremely complex. The technology is mind blowing."

Knowledge is key, he continues, adding that he's impressed with the capabilities that Solotech brings to the table. "We're looking at the business, not as it is now, but what it's going to be, and we want to be among the enterprises and companies that exist within this space and innovate."

Solotech's insistence on innovation is a part of the reason that the company maintains so many long-term clients. It's a constant willingness to provide state-of-the-art, larger-than-life experiences for clients and their patrons, audiences, or consumers.

That's true of every facet of the business – from touring and rentals to integration and beyond. "The promise we make to them is to keep them involved, make them

look good, and be in the back," Tremblay says, laughing. "We're not the star of the show, but we're providing them quality. I admire our staff. If there's one thing they and we are, it's passionate. I relate to that. It's all about passion. You don't do what we do without that passion."

The Montreal-headquartered company has become a powerhouse over time, boasting a roster of clients that includes some of the world's most successful performers and entertainment firms – an arc rooted in Solotech Founder Denis Lefrançois' initial efforts.

reach and variety of services. In 1984, they acquired premier Quebec lighting firm Éclairage Tanguay and moved into the rental, sale, and servicing of professional lighting gear.

By 1990, they'd added video technology, bulked up on staff, and in the next five years, added multimedia and complete AV system services and established an integration division.

As it acquired more businesses, such as Audio Analysts' U.S. operations in mid-2011, Solotech continued to grow internationally. Also in 2011, they established a new Mon-

our staff in new technologies and investing in our people, we ensure our ability to realize the customer's vision within their budget."

Giffard joined Solotech in 2016 but is well acquainted with the company's trajectory and the steps they've taken, both domestically and internationally, to expand. Among them is the purchase of Toronto-based lighting and video firm Midnite Hour in 2015, which became Solotech's Toronto office. That office is bound to grow rapidly as it represents the biggest Canadian growth opportunity for Solotech.

In March 2016, Solotech opened an



In 1975, Lefrançois, then a loudspeaker designer and manufacturer, was approached by Montreal's Olympic Committee to provide and operate audio systems for the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics. Lefrançois rose to the challenge and, over the next year-and-a-half, provided the staff and inventory necessary to cover the vast audio needs of the games. Following the Olympics, Lefrançois and partner André Riendeau purchased one of the primary companies they'd worked with for the events, Audio Analysts, and launched Solotech as an audio sales house in 1977. Within a year, they'd tripled their income and soon embarked on a series of acquisitions and expansions.

Having become a major force in Quebec's audio market, Solotech extended its

treal headquarters – a 265,000-sq.-ft. facility in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve area, within sight of Olympic Stadium, which serves as a constant reminder of the opportunity that sparked their inception.

Ultimately, the company was sold in 2013 to a trio of stakeholders: Claridge Inc., Capital régional and coopératif Desjardins, and Investissement Québec (IQ). That said, Solotech's approach and core values remain, as ever, on an innovative, inspiration-fuelled, client-based approach to growth.

"Our main goal is to be able to execute our customer's end vision and what they want the experience to be," Giffard says. "Through innovation and inspiration, we're able to provide the best technology, and by training

office in Nashville, marking the beginning of additional U.S. expansion – an effort on which they doubled down in October 2016 with the establishment of their DeKalb, IL office. Although, for now, those two locations are used mainly by the Rental Division, in the near future, Solotech plans on using the expertise of the teams in place to accelerate its growth in the U.S. market.

Giffard's main focus, integration, has also grown apace. "We recently finished the Park Theatre in Las Vegas at the Monte Carlo. We've also done most of the work at Montreal's Bell Centre and Quebec City's Videotron Centre, and at The Colosseum at Caesar's Palace, where Celine performed." Other major integration projects include various sports venues, educational institutions, hospitals, and airports, including the provision of digital

signage for applications including public, retail, and residential spaces. "So everything from an AV perspective, that's where we play now," Giffard says.

Solotech is now a one-stop shop for virtually any application that involves lighting, sound, video, and related infrastructure and, additionally, the provision of security systems for clients across the board.

Integration has long been part of Solotech's offerings, Giffard says, "But in the last 10 years, as more sports venues are built, more AV components are included in shopping centres, hotels, and residential developments, we've grown our integration division."

At this point, integration accounts for approximately 40 per cent of Solotech's overall revenue, but sales and rentals – given their expertise and purchasing power – are also integral to Solotech's growth overall, and to the integration division's ongoing success. In every case, Solotech "evaluates and understands the customer's need, finds the right product, network, application, and ensures we're able to use it to the end of its capabilities to fulfill our client's needs on the integration side." So, too, do the company's complementing divisions.

Now, Solotech offers 360-degree services: lighting, AV, videoconferencing, video encoding, digital signage, paging, intelligent transportation systems, and more, plus integration, installation, custom fabrication, maintenance, and service for applications in the broadcast, corporate, cultural, educational, government, health, hospitality, retail, sporting, and transport sectors.

"We've moved into the growing video side of the business," Giffard adds about the company's recent developments, and given that lighting and video are increasingly intertwined, that deepens penetration into the lighting market.

While they continue to expand globally, their Montreal headquarters is key in ensuring continuity in terms of resources and staff. And, although Solotech has purchased various companies over time to deepen their presence in specific sectors, currently the focus is on purchasing equipment and being a part of the R&D process of that gear. "We're not just buying gear off the shelf. We do have our own LED screens, brand new and made by SACO in Montreal – the S6, S12, and S28 – but we're not building them, we're part of their development, so that gives us an edge on that side."

It's a culture of shared innovation, which benefits Solotech and its clients regardless of the market sector they play in. Again, Tremblay poses a question: "What about the gear that we haven't heard of – what we believe will be trending in a year, or two, or more from now? We're also working on that."

Providing what their clients have come to expect is fine, he says, but it's critical to look down the pipe to

anticipate, see, and develop the systems, equipment, and technologies that will be the future game changers for both their traditional clients and the growing range of sectors that depend on technologies that, previously, were the purview of large-scale performances, events, and facilities. "The question," Tremblay offers, "is how can we create value?"

While a company can survive and even thrive by staying the course, offering more – by looking forward and relentlessly innovating – is a preferable model. Innovation was key to the products with which Tremblay worked in the gaming industry, and the same holds true in this job. Shared innovation is key going forward.

"I would say that most of our clients are pushing the envelope, so we have to challenge ourselves," says the CEO, and that's integral to Solotech's growth in every area. "It's not about how much it costs; it's a question of perception. Artists want to be different. They want to push the envelope."

Doing so with existing products is fine, but unless you consider what may be – in terms of products and services that are either becoming relevant now, or test the imagination in terms of VR, AR, and real-time interactions on multiple platforms – you will not progress. Solotech is determined to progress.

Solotech has been involved in projects running the gamut of applications, including the biggest entertainment brands and artists in the world.

"As you know, Solotech was doing many A-list tours for a number of years," Chouinard says. "Cirque du Soleil and Celine, obviously, but we're now working with Bruno Mars, Paul McCartney, and The Rolling Stones. We've also upgraded on major corporate events with the likes of Amazon, Ali Baba, and Walmart."

Many of the company's recent purchases came through its American corporation, Chouinard adds. "So we're becoming more of a global touring company. We're on tour now with Lady Gaga. We're just finishing the world tour with The Weeknd, and so now we have a lot more of those major acts all over the globe."

The consistent growth and success, Chouinard says, isn't just based on resources, but on the level of creativity and quality behind any delivered job, which is a product of Solotech's talented team. While they've expanded into other markets, the work done within the company and with close collaborators – particularly in terms of R&D – is integral to fulfilling clients' needs and allowing those clients to push the boundaries of what's possible for their own patrons, clients, and stakeholders.

"We're just seeking really good, talented people for our staff. That's the most important thing," Chouinard offers. The company's growth in scale and revenue – including the 100 per cent increase in



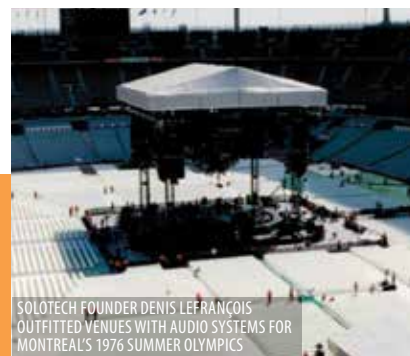
CELINE DION LIVE IN PARIS

PHOTO: RALPH LARMANN



MAISON SYMPHONIQUE DE MONTREAL

PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHIE PATATONIC



SOLOTECH FOUNDER DENIS LEFRANÇOIS OUTFITTED VENUES WITH AUDIO SYSTEMS FOR MONTREAL'S 1976 SUMMER OLYMPICS



THE WEEKND'S STARBOY: LEGEND OF THE FALL TOUR

PHOTO: RALPH LARMANN



METALLICA IN-THE-ROUND AT QUEBEC CITY'S VIDEOTRON CENTRE

rental revenue over a period of five years – has largely been achieved by “finding good people and bringing them into the team. It’s not all about gear,” he sums up; “It’s about people.”

Their efforts remain, at every level, client-driven. Cirque du Soleil and Celine Dion are global household names, but in the beginning, they were known only in Quebec. Similarly, other clients such as the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival and Montreal International Jazz Festival have grown exponentially over the years. Cyclically, the revenue generated by these high-profile brands allows Solotech to continue to support other, lesser-known artists and projects at the ground level.

Put bluntly, Solotech has thrived as long as it has not only through the evolution of its technologies and services, but by establishing and maintaining close relationships – in many cases, friendships – with their clients, which says something about the culture of the company.

“That’s right,” Chouinard says, referencing Dutch violinist André Rieu, who’s often listed in *Pollstar*’s annual top 20 highest-generating

touring artists, as an example. “He’s going all over the world and we’ve worked with him for 20 years. There are many clients who’ve been really close and happy to work with us and, again, using our experience and the knowledge of our people, we’re trying to take this to the next level.”

In short, their efforts involve delivering a turnkey solution to save their clients money and time, while reducing the hassles of dealing with multiple providers.

It’s a focus that continues to inform their approach as they work to incorporate new technologies in new applications and markets. Giffard explains: “A lot of technologies are being commoditized, so we constantly have to reinvent ourselves, and reinvest in and retrain our people. But, for example, on the video side, there’s been a lot more applications – digital signage on billboards, in smart cities, in parking lots and everything transit-related, high-end AV in hotels, shopping centres, and condominium developments. Where we used to play much more in the sports and entertainment venues, now we’ve really diversified. A whole new world has opened up for us.”

As the average consumer becomes more sophisticated and the technology that

was previously only installed in specialized environments becomes more ubiquitous and touches every part of our lives, that new world will become increasingly important.

“Again, that’s why Solotech’s capabilities are crucial,” Giffard reinforces – “because we have the means to invest in our employees, in research, in areas that are going to be good prospects for us in the future and to train our staff accordingly. That’s a key differentiator for us.”

As far as physical expansion overseas goes, Tremblay says: “We’re always looking at this. The thing is that we’re going to find the right way to do it. Rather than looking at it from an ego perspective, being global and everywhere, I’m looking at this from a market segment perspective, and we’re trying to nail down market segments we’re excited about and good at.”

If the past 40 years have been any indication, it won’t take them long to do it.

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