



The five buildings that comprise SAE's home

Made in China

As SAE moves from amplifiers to speakers and beyond, **Caroline Moss** visits the Foshan-based company



SAE's first factory and headquarters in 1998



Growing up - the second home of SAE



The modern home of SAE

SAE AUDIO HAS BEEN IN BUSINESS

for almost two decades, making it one of the longest-established pro audio manufacturers in China. The company was founded in 1998 by Bill Lee, who is certain of his life's major passion: music. 'I've been listening to music since I was very young, learning how to play guitar and to DJ,' he says. 'This love of music was my vision of the future.'

After leaving university, Mr Lee became a DJ, working in large nightclubs across China and in his native town of Foshan. However after several years had passed, he decided the time was right to find a 'proper' job. 'I decided to do something that had a relationship with audio, so I checked all the companies in our city and joined one that distributed JBL in China. So I progressed from the music industry into the audio industry, and started to learn about it.'

After 10 years of working for a variety of leading brands including JBL, Bose, EAW and QSC, Mr Lee had formed a lot of his own opinions about audio equipment, and decided the time was right to start his own company. 'I wanted to make good solutions, which offered great sound quality and also really good cost effectiveness, compared to many of the brands I was familiar with,' he says. 'My aim was to produce low cost, high quality audio products which were proudly manufactured in China.' And so SAE, or Science Art

Electronics, was born.

Mr Lee joined forces with an electronics engineer and set about designing his first product, an amplifier, putting the finished result into production. This proved to be a success because only a short run of around 60 units was manufactured, selling out immediately. 'I knew so many key people in the industry, so all the amplifiers sold direct, to rental companies and installation



SAE Audio VP active line array used for Melbourne's New Year's Eve city-wide party

companies,' he says. 'This first model, the Soundstandard EX1200, is still in production today, we are on the sixth generation.'

Then came SAE's first big break, manufacturing amps that were purchased by the Meyer Sound distributor in China for use with the brand's passive speakers. 'I had a good relationship with the Meyer Sound distributor in China, as well as with the Martin Audio distributor, so we made amplifiers for these two companies,' he recalls. 'It was a good

start for me and helped me grow quickly, making some money that I could reinvest in my factory.'

Today SAE is on its third factory, having outgrown the first two, and has the leading market share of amplifiers in China. The company manufactures three amplifier brands, the Soundstandard range of entry level toroidal transformer power amps, Famousound, which is mainly focused on high end toroidal models, and the Lexion Pro range of SMPS (switch-mode power supply) amps, from entry level to high end.

The company moved into its current premises in 2007, giving it plenty of room for future expansion and increased production. The purpose-built, 30,000 sq-m premises consists of five buildings: two workshops, a warehouse, an office block and an accommodation wing for employees. SAE also retains a metal factory at its former premises, where all the amplifier chassis and mechanical works are manufactured.

Around five years ago, Mr Lee decided the time was right to enter the loudspeaker market. 'I saw that this was where the future lay as the market moved towards self-powered speakers,' he says. 'It would be dangerous for the future of our company if I didn't enter the speaker business, so in 2008 I hired some really good Chinese R&D engineers to design some new loudspeaker products.'

Sold under the SAE Audio brand, the best seller has been the V Series, a compact double 8-inch line array that sold into the domestic market before moving into Latin America and then Europe. The combination of compact size, good SPL and sound characteristics, combined with affordability, has established the V Series both in the indoor installations market and with smaller rental companies. SAE then released an upgraded, active version of the same line array, the VP Series. Featuring an improved sound quality and being far more convenient for small touring and rental applications, this soon took over the market share of the passive version. It continues to sell well, and was recently used for New Years Eve celebrations in various locations across Melbourne.



SAE founder Bill Lee

'The company in charge of Melbourne's New Years Eve city-wide party discovered the VP line array at the outdoor line array demonstration during Pro Light & Sound Shanghai 2013,' explains Josep Maria Sans, market development manager of SAE Audio. 'It can fit into the most constrained spaces, and two people can easily rig the system. We had to take into consideration the fact that the structures' event towers folded inside a small container, so there was

not space for a big system. All four towers had to be set up by the same staff in four different locations in the city, so it was necessary to have a light enough system to make it easy and fast. Plus it's an active system, making it simpler to install and uninstall whilst saving on amplifier rack space.'

Today, SAE employs 300 staff at its factory and a further 50 at the metal works. Mr Lee has engaged in a process of upgrading and automating his factory and installing test

procedure, but it's really been worth it.'

Mr Lee believes that in addition to building up the business and operating at a profit, it is also important to strive to make the world a better place. 'This is my philosophy, it's very simple, and I endeavor to convey this to my employees,' he says. 'To do this, I believe we have to combine people, not only from China but also from Europe and the US. We have the same vision: to make good products that will make the world a better place. The boss should



Electronics assembly within the SAE factory



Showcasing SAE amplifiers within the HQ

equipment to ensure the best possible quality control. This came about after a visit to the Ecler factory in Barcelona

'Ecler is a very good friend of SAE and we have a good relationship,' says Mr Lee. 'I learned a lot about management techniques from their factory. Everything was under control, was very clear and the workers were very professional. So I decided I had to employ some good managers and buy some software to help me, along with equipment and tools for testing, productivity control and quality control. This has helped us to manage the entire workflow of the factory. We have also invested in equipment for research and production, including surface mounting and automatic insertion equipment. Upgrading the factory has been a step-by-step process; it didn't happen immediately and has been an expensive

have a good philosophy, and it will spread down through the company.'

Looking to the future, three new SAE amplifier series are currently being launched, the DJ, Duo and XLI series. All new portable amplifiers at an affordable price point, SAE is promising they will provide functionality transferred over from the company's touring-grade products. A multichannel amplifier series for rental applications and large installation projects is also coming soon, and more speaker products can be expected later in the year.

Apart from its array of audio products, SAE is also engaged in manufacturing the Pixtron range of LED screens. But sound and music remains the focus of what the company develops and produces in Foshan.

Mr Lee has set himself and his company the overall target of contributing to the responsible and sustainable development of China and contributing to a better future. He plans to do this by constantly improving SAE and increasing its professionalism, allowing it to offer the best quality products, services and solutions. This, he hopes, will contribute to the growth and wellbeing of society, both on his doorstep and out in the wider world.

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SAE Audio loudspeakers set-up for demonstration

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