Emotional Sound Design Checklist for Live venues

ask What should the audience feel?

If you're not clear on the emotional brief, you'll struggle to make sound choices (pun intended). A stirring orchestral performance needs a vastly different approach than a panel discussion or a stand-up set. Yet many systems are designed with no reference to the type of emotional experience they need to support.

do

Start by defining the emotional goal. Without a defined emotional goal, sound choices become guesswork.

- Awe? Prioritise low-frequency extension and room gain.
- Intimacy? Focus on warmth and intelligibility at low levels.

Each decision—from speaker voicing to system tuning—should support the emotional brief.

ask Where should the sound disappear?

We've all been in rooms where the sound feels like it's coming at you instead of from the performance. That disconnect ruins immersion. And students, here's the kicker—most of the audience won't know what's wrong, they'll just say the room feels "cold" or "distant."

do

Use directional arrays and delay stacks to create transparent coverage. Tools like L-Acoustics' Kiva II or A15 let us build systems that throw power without ever pulling attention away from the performer. When the system disappears, the audience connects.

ask Are you chasing symmetry at the expense of experience?

Symmetrical coverage maps look great in simulation software—but they don't account for real-world variables. Humans don't hear perfectly symmetrically, and venues rarely accommodate a mathematically perfect layout.

do

Focus on perceptual balance. Ensure consistent tonal quality and intelligibility across the space, especially in critical listening areas. That may mean accepting small trade-offs in symmetry to improve the subjective experience.

ask Are you using reverb with intention?

One of the most misunderstood tools in the emotional toolbox. Too much reverb and everything sounds muddy. Too little and the space feels sterile. New engineers often either overcorrect or ignore it entirely.

do

Use immersive platforms like L-ISA to deepen spatial realism when the content demands it. Resist the urge to over-process. Focus on clarity and communication. Sometimes the most emotional system is the simplest one.

ask Is your tech supporting the experience—or stealing the show?

It's tempting to load in the latest gear and surround options—but that doesn't always serve the performance. Emotional design isn't about tech for tech's sake. It's about how tech translates intent.

do

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