



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 Lexon 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