

The Italian job

Phil Ward reflects on 75 years of RCF - and counting . . .

[Italy] It's worth bearing in mind what a remarkable thing a transducer is. To be able to convert naturally occurring energies into electrical signals, and back again, is one thing. But to sculpt those signals into sophisticated tools is something else. It's like breathing in nature and breathing out a city.

If then, you have enough expertise in this primal alchemy, you will probably build a hugely successful global business and use this core prowess to ride out decades of change. And if you've been doing exactly this in the context of audio for the last 75 years, you're probably RCF.

INITIAL PROOF

These three letters tell two stories. The first is the story of three pioneers of electroacoustic transducers and their surnames: Rossi; Campari; and Ferrari. Their 1949 ribbon microphone was an instant hit, and straight away other microphone manufacturers wanted to license the secret sauce that made it so effective and versatile. The second is a neat side-step that was prompted by the addition of loudspeaker drivers to the RCF portfolio a little later - reversing the transducer paradigm into output as well as input. As the first big market was cinema, it was possible to spell out Radio Cine Furniture: Radio & Cinema Supplies.

This OEM business grew with the concert industry throughout the 1970s and '80s, and few famous brands were untouched by RCF's 12", 15" and 18" woofers and HF compression drivers. By 1995 the stage was set for huge changes: firstly, Arturo Vicari took control of the company, bringing extensive knowledge of the MI market; and, secondly, a range of injection-moulded, active two-way loudspeakers was launched with the blue RCF logo proudly emblazoned on the outside of the chassis - it was called the Art range and began with the groundbreaking 300-A.

Emerging a decade later from a period of seismic



corporate shifts throughout the industry, these elements were still intact. RCF was rebooted and reclaimed for Italian ownership, enthusiastically supported by partners around the world who had not forgotten the quality and integrity of those transducers and their creators. And once the new TT+ (Touring and Theatre) line arrays were established, the company was secure enough to go public, generating the capital for a spate of acquisitions. The RCF Group now consists of RCF, TT+ Audio, dBTechnologies, Montarbo and EAW.

But seven-and-a-half decades is a length of time that requires judicious legacy management. The previous shareholders ceded smoothly to Vicari and his colleagues, and later Vicari was able to nurture dBTechnologies while RCF was temporarily under American ownership, and then reunite them. And today, the next phase appears to have been secured by capital investment from Investindustrial, a European hedge fund with stated preferences for family-style businesses with highly specialised skills - like pro audio and, of course, like RCF. Arturo Vicari remains CEO.

GENERALISSIMO

General manager Fausto Incerti has been with the company for



↑ RCF's Logistics Hub in Bagnolo In Piano, Italy

Fausto Incerti, general manager of RCF

more than 30 years, and has observed all these changes from close quarters. The latest deal, he says, is the best. "The RCF Group is very strong, so there have been several offers over the years. In this case, Mr Vicari and his shareholders found a financial partner that was in step with our journey. Investindustrial is a group of financial companies that concentrate on strong players in their field with a long tradition and history, to work with them on a continuation of that history. The support they can provide is created by an international network that can assist the whole group in moving forward as other opportunities in the market become possible. It makes us a good platform to fit together more brands. We can certainly step up our international presence.

"The value of a company lies very much in its culture, and this is what the people inside Investindustrial found at RCF - a similar competence, a similar attitude. They also recognised that Arturo and his partners have no intention to stop in any way and want to go on enjoying themselves! This, of course, is even more possible than ever because they feel comfortable and able to look ahead."

Retirement is not a word that you'll find in Vicari's vocabulary, according to Incerti,

and it's a feeling many share. "This industry is very special, and I am even more sure about this after all these years. I've spent all my professional life in the industry and, especially, in this company, and it's a community in which people are driven by their passion. The friendships also extend to competitors, and there is a lot of mutual respect. This makes the work easier, and we all enjoy it."

The last 20 years have been the most significant of the whole 75, Incerti insists, as he describes what he calls "the latest chapter". "Starting in 2004, there was a complete re-start with more products and solutions that led quickly to more market share. We grew steadily and carefully, building a new business that has gained strength not only in Europe but also in the US."

Naturally, the addition of EAW in 2018 has boosted the Group's presence over there but, as Incerti points out, RCF has built its own reputation across that territory. "The US is the leading market," he says, "so to become an important and well-known reference there is a great achievement. At the same time, we are always working to improve our position day-by-day, year-by-year."

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- Fausto Incerti

Indeed, the whole Group has made gains in the US, while the association between RCF and EAW goes back a long way. "EAW became famous around the world many decades ago, and a big contribution to that was the use of RCF's transducers," Incerti explains. "It was an arrangement that also made us famous as the supplier to EAW. So, the two companies have always been very close, and the opportunity that arose in 2018 was related to this strong connection."

THE HISTORY CHANNEL

Many will remember that they had been grouped together before, during the spell of US ownership. It lasted six years. "When RCF was chosen by Mackie Designs," Incerti recounts, "it brought a great knowledge of transducers into that group. I believe every part of our history - including this part - has proven that RCF has a strong value, even if it is not always taken full advantage of. There was a know-how of transducers, of making speakers, that helped Mackie at that time, but since then developments have shown that greater strength lies in preserving these values within the RCF brand. The experience we have had since then shows this and has established RCF as one of the finest manufacturers of complete loudspeaker systems in the world."

The positive emphasis that pervades RCF's values shines

through in Incerti's assertion that "everything in the past can help today". History has its own value, provided you use it wisely. "All our experience still brings great advantages," he continues. "In the history of the company there are acquisitions, changes . . . a lot of adjustments. But in all this time RCF has maintained core values. With the proper strategies, you can exploit the value of history, and that has been clearer than ever during the last 20 years - during which we have been growing very, very fast. The closer you get to today, the quicker that potential has been shown in the market and growth has quickened. This is not out of the blue: it has been created by understanding everything that has happened before and by constantly modifying our strategies."

Just before COVID, RCF introduced a new line called Business Music that took the company, in some ways, back to its Public Address days - except that, now, that business is a world of IP-addressable networking and multiple zones configured by systems that look push-button simple but, under the hood, are anything but. As pro audio values of sound quality and mixing flexibility spread throughout the realms of commercial audio and installation, RCF is one of the companies able to offer the most modern, complete systems of the day while still retaining the original core craft of transducer technology that ensures the



delivery of the best possible audio.

"The point is you take from every experience something that can be useful," Incerti concludes, "and that can contribute to better decisions, regardless of organisational changes. Having a long history in our industry is a big advantage, because you learn every day. The results are cumulative, and they stay with you."

Throughout the changes, RCF has maintained this know-how and nurtured it within a vertical organisation that can do this better than anyone else. This may be the very secret of survival in a world of mergers, sales and acquisitions often led by the bottom line and nothing else. It makes a business a bit like natural energy: if you can't transduce it backwards and forwards into healthy, usable signals, you're not doing it the RCF way. 🎧

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