Audient Centro

As consoles have been replaced by DAWs it's their master sections that have been missed most. ROB JAMES takes a journey to the centre of his studio's monitoring environment.

IT IS OBVIOUS that the workstation is now invading many traditional recording territories and as audio professionals become more adventurous in their DAW activities so the need for a new breed of peripherals has become more urgent. Now along comes the Centro with the aim of providing DAW recordists with the facilities they would find in the centre section of a 'conventional' console. Audient is well placed to attempt this feat since it already has an established analogue console, the ASP 8024, and a successful surround monitor controller in the ASP 510.

Centro is a two-box device. All the audio connections and power can be found on the 2U rack unit along with +/-12dB trims for the three stereo analogue inputs, the single D-A convertor, Record Out and Foldback Mix. The trims become active when the associated Uncal buttons are lit. Two further buttons allow for selecting the Rec output between the Record Input or the output of the Source selector and determining whether selecting Mono results in Left only or both Left and Right. A small Screw trimmer to adjust the gain of the second Talkback Mic Input completes the panel.

On the rear of the neat, low profile remote there is just a 9-pin D-Sub male socket for the mothership connection, a phones jack and two buttons that determine whether the Alt 2 Output is to be sent to a Sub and if it is to be Mono. Audient supplies a 3m cable but, even in my modestly proportioned studio, this is not really long enough by the time you've routed it out of the back of the rack to the operating position.

The remote is small but beautifully formed with a curvaceous brushed panel, clear legends and some of the nicest sculpted alloy knobs I've seen in a long time. All the buttons are small and oval, positive in action and internally illuminated. Operationally, Audient has followed its earlier designs in that there are three possible button modes. Press is the most commonly used, just a quick press and release, as you would expect. Press and Hold is self-explanatory. This has two uses, first to access set-up functions and second there are times when you hold the button down while you do something else. For example, a quick press on Talkback toggles it on and off while press and hold opens the Talkback only while the button is held down. Double Tap, two presses in quick succession, is used for hiding and recalling Source Selection groups.

The remote control surface is divided into functional areas. Thus, on the left the first column of six buttons determines which of the digital inputs is routed to the D-A convertor for monitoring. The following column selects the analogue sources and the next the Record and Foldback outputs (both with a mono option). Then comes the Cue section with send level pots for each of the two Cue feeds. Cue 1 has a button to change its source from Record Out to Source Select Out and Cue 2 has a button to select between Foldback Out and Source Select Out. A further button allows Cue 1 to be routed to Cue 2 and each Cue feed has a Listen button to enable the Cue mix to be checked on the Control room monitors or headphones.

The Monitors section has level pots for Alt outputs 1 and 2 and Phones and the main Volume control. There are buttons for Dim, Mute, Left and Right individual Mute, Invert Left phase and Mono with a column of Output select buttons for Main, Alt 1, Alt 2 and headphones plus two indicator LEDs reflecting the state of the Alt 2 mode buttons on the rear panel, Mono and Sub. The last section is dedicated to Talkback with a Gain pot, microphone and the Talkback button. Dim is invoked along with Talkback to help prevent howl round. Dim level is set by pressing and holding the Dim key until it flashes and then setting the required level with the main volume knob; another press stores the level setting.

There is a considerable difference between intuitive and easily learned. To be described as truly intuitive a device should be operable without recourse to the manual. Centro can sum sources for monitoring and perhaps the least intuitive aspect of it is the manner in which source selection groups are constructed and recalled. To create groups you have to press and hold a source select button then press a second or subsequent button to add a source to the monitor mix. To listen to another individual source you have to double-tap its key. Then, if you want to listen to the group you created you have to double-tap one of its members, a single press just activates that source. It is simpler than the description sounds and in everyday use will be rapidly learned. The same applies to the method of setting the output gain to suit amplifier sensitivity.

Although everyone will have their own idea of what should be found in a desk centre section the (£995+VAT) Centro covers a lot of the bases. Desk space is always at a premium and Audient has managed to provide a lot of functionality within a very small footprint without the surface feeling crowded. You can route any digital source to the digital output but since there is no A-D convertor you cannot route an analogue source to the digital output.

The User Manual is written in a light, slightly jokey style, with a definite British accent. This style of writing can really help to enhance the immediate 'feel good factor' of a new piece of equipment, so full marks to Audient for this one.

I've been using an Audient 510 as my monitor controller for some six years now, but I use it with a console. With the Centro, for most stereo applications, the console is rendered redundant. ■

It's socket science

The rear panel is a busy place. Beginning upper left with the Remote Link D-Sub 9-pin socket, next up is a ¼-inch jack to connect an extra Talkback Switch. The six digital inputs comprise three XLRs for AES-EBU stereo pairs at up to 192kHz 24-bit, two coax SPDIF and one TOSlink optical. Eight more XLRs deal with stereo Record Input, Foldback Mix Input, Mix Input and Stereo Input 1. Completing the top row are Stereo Inputs 2 and 3 on pairs of phonos. Underneath, the row starts with IEC mains and, unusually, a 230V/115V power selector. The rest of the row is XLR: stereo pairs for Main Speaker output, Alternate Speaker 1 Output, Alternate Speaker 2 Output, Record Output, FoldBack Mix Through, Cue 1 Output, Cue 2 Output and a final, single Talkback Mic XLR.
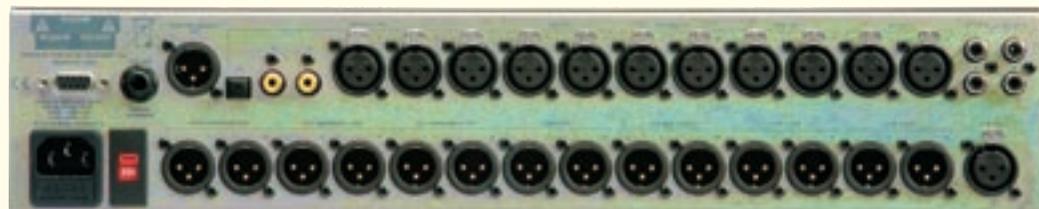
PROS	Premium audio performance; good mix of features; very stylish.
CONS	Only one digital input at a time; no Digital output from analogue sources; not totally intuitive but easy to learn.

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