Fostex FM-3

Small and nicely appointed this field mixer marks a natural new product direction for Fostex. NEIL HILLMAN takes one to Portugal in search of a miracle.

The Fostex FM-3 3-channel field mixer has entered a fairly crowded arena that already contains some pretty stiff competition such as the Sonosax SX-M32, the Sound Devices 302, the AETA Mixy and Shure's FP33; and all of these challenge the Fostex on features or cost and in some cases, both.

But the FM-3 (UK£1399 + VAT) does offer the essential credentials of what has now become *de-rigeur* for this small-mixer sector: three balanced inputs and two balanced outputs on high-quality transformers, comprehensive monitoring options including MS decoding, with microphone powering selectable between 48V phantom, 12V Tonader and Dynamic, and adjustable limiting; and with a similar footprint to the Fostex FR2-LE card recorder, it's a logical marriage for a self-contained, over-the-shoulder solution...

Which is how I equipped myself for a sound-only effects recording trip to Portugal to the Marian shrine of Fatima, for the most significant day of its calendar — 13 October. Each year nearly 800,000 pilgrims descend on the town to remember and celebrate one of the Catholic Church's most documented and photographed miracles: the appearance of The Virgin Mary to more than 70,000 people on 13 October 1917. On that day, it is said that She spoke to three chosen children directly — Lucia Santos, and her young cousins Jacinta and Francisco Marto, who became known as 'the little seers' — about the rise and fall of Communism, the advent and time of the second world war and the assassination of the Pope, and put in place a heavenly spectacle that journalists at the time described as 'the day the sun danced'. Certainly the sun shone brightly on this 13 October and it created the first problem I encountered with the FM-3. While described by the manufacturer as being highly visible, I found the organic EL meters very difficult to see in sunlight, a task made impossible by wearing sunglasses. To compound this shortcoming, the meters also sit in a far too small window on the front face of the device, directly above the knurled, push-locked, rotary output faders.

The left side of this front face is dominated by the three rotary input faders, similarly knurled and pleasantly tactile; with a channel input peak LED, the Left/Centre/Right routing to the stereo bus toggle selector switch and the channel PFL pushbutton neatly arranged in a row above each fader. The peak LEDs show green at 12dB below the internal maximum level and red at 3dB below maximum level. (These internal thresholds for the tiny bargraph peak meters are adjustable, but more about this later.) Below the input faders sit two further, smaller, push-locked rotary controls: channel gain (between -30dB and -70dB for microphone level inputs and between +4dB and +20dB for Line level inputs) and alongside that, a switchable High Pass Filter; selectable continuously between 40Hz and 300Hz at 12dB/octave.

The right hand quarter of the front face is busy, given over to a ¼-inch headphone socket, with its associated selector switch directly above, offering Left, Right, Stereo, Left+Right, Left-Right, MS, Return and Aux Out options, with a headphone level control alongside; again a small, knurled, push-locked pot. Completing this bottom row of controls is the Limiter selector toggle switch, enabling the Limiter to be on, linked or off. A similarly vertically-mounted toggle switch is used for the selectable Slate Mic/1kHz oscillator, as well as for the top right hand corner Power switch, selectable between internal batteries or 10V–24V external battery/mains adapter. A LED flashes alongside the power switch when battery level falls below 8.7V, with audio muting occurring when the level falls below 7V.

And so, back to the unfortunate metering. There are five levels of brightness available, determined by direct pushing of the + and – buttons next to the meter window: hold the '–' button for 3 seconds from rest and the lighting scale shows; simply push the plus or minus buttons for more or less illumination. Let go for 8 seconds and the meter is set. holding the '+' button for 3 seconds from rest opens the meter to display a larger left only or right only VU scale, or the default, smaller, twin VU scales with tiny bargraph peak scales at the two outside edges of the window. It's this above all else that irritates about the FM-3 — the metering is inadequate. The peak scales are visually too small, the moveable, assignable metering ranges and thresholds unnecessarily fiddly and VUs are inappropriate, in my opinion, for a location recording device primarily aimed at speech. Just tell us when we're close to a peak of 0dbfs; then make it large enough so we can see it, and bright enough that we might read it in sunlight.

This meter display panel also serves as the central status indicator and, by means of the status edit pushbutton, allows such things as the microphone 'T power' to be deselected to conserve battery power, the limiter threshold to be set between +6db or +12db and the limiter ratio to be selected between 3:1 or 5:1. Shown across three pages is the input signal path (displaying the mic power selected, mic or line level input selected, HPF status, aux in status), the output signal path (displaying limiter in/out, Threshold and Ratio, main output preset level, sub mix preset output level and prefade feed and preset level), and a page showing the internal battery type selector (alkaline/ni-mh), the adjustable peak level offset with respect to 0VU, and the adjustable threshold for the peak overload LED.

Given the complexity of this front face with its status module, the two side panels are reassuringly straightforward. The left side houses the three inputs on Neutrik XLRs with the Aux in connector to the stereo bus being an XLR-5 socket. Each of the channel inputs has two toggle switches beneath it: one, a 2-way, selecting mic or line level, the other a 3-way, selecting between 12V T-power, dynamic or 48V phantom. Beneath the Aux in socket is a slider, switching the input on or off. A male 4-pin connector is available to take DC power between 10V and 24V, with a miniature 4-pin socket providing a 0.5A feed between 7.2V and 24V.

The right hand side of the FM-3 houses the main stereo outputs on XLRs with the parallel sub mix output feed on a male XLR-5 — a 4-way slider underneath each socket selects output levels of +4dB, 0dB, -20dB or -60dB. A row of four 3.5mm sockets for additional headphones, Tape Return, Tape Out and Aux out run along the bottom edge, with the Aux out rotary switching between: off, channels 1/2, 2/3, 1/3, left/right and left + right. A final slider switches the Aux output level between -10dB and -60dB. The battery cartridge houses eight AA cells and is ejected or locked by a catch.

For my miracle gig, the FM-3 performed very well, sonically at least. The mic amps were pleasingly quiet, the limiter limited, but the metering left me feeling I was working on blind faith; a pretty tall order for such a sceptic as me. Yet the recordings with my trusty Pearl MS-8CL were all clear, crisp and clean; so maybe, just maybe, I should have had more faith in the 13th day.

PROS The rugged aluminium construction is beautifully assembled; light power consumption.

CONS Poor meters; MS decoding on the main outputs would be useful.

Contact

FOSTEX, JAPAN:
Website: www.fostexinternational.com
UK, SCV London: +44 208 418 0778