

# SSL XL9000 K Series

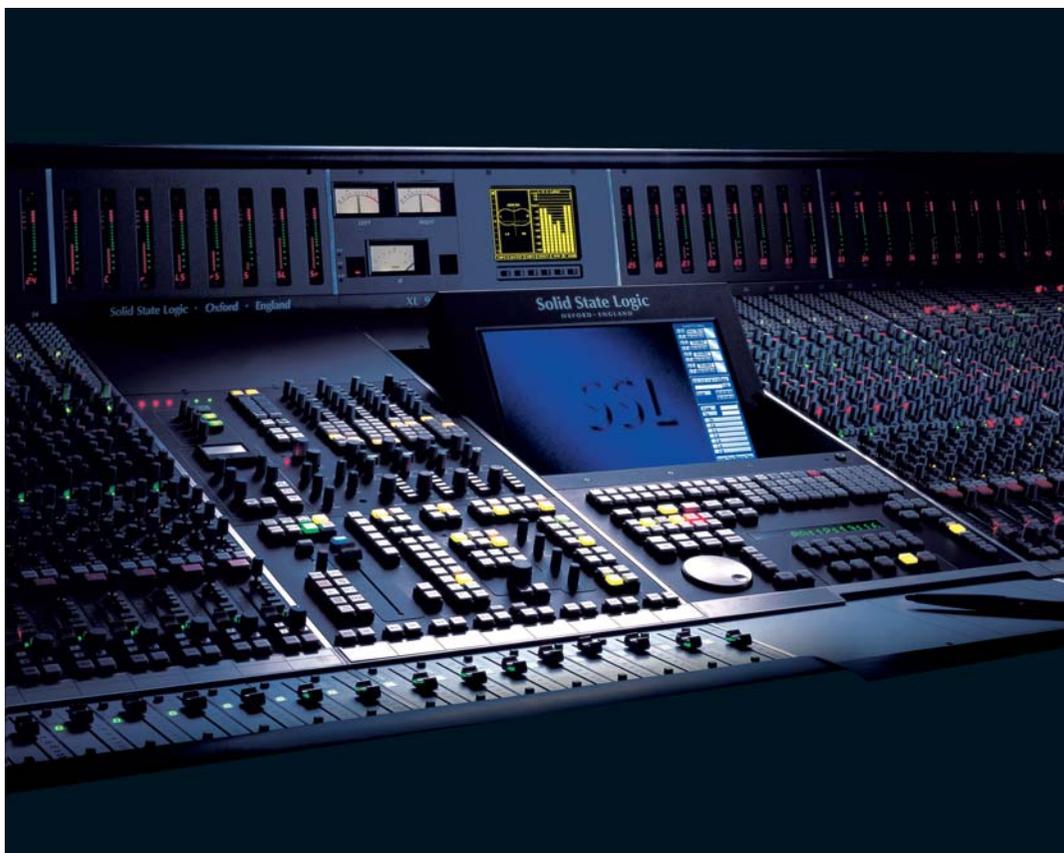
Proving that there is clearly substantial life left in large-scale analogue desks, SSL has upgraded and uprated its SuperAnalogue concept.

GEORGE SHILLING

**R**EMARKABLY, SSL'S **XL9000 J** Series flagship analogue console has been in production since 1994. Back then, the future seemed digital, and SSL cautiously promoted it as the last great analogue console. However, the model has exceeded all sales expectations, with over 200 installations. During this time a number of incremental changes have been made, such as improvements to the microphone amplifiers. Not least, the requirements and expectations of customers have seen significant shifts in a number of directions. Some of these improvements were available as upgrades to early Js but it was deemed timely to introduce a new model that encompasses these improvements together with other significant changes. Most notably, these offer increased capabilities for 5.1 surround mixing and a new computer.

On the surface, cosmetic enhancements are immediately apparent and the new 'Raven Sparkle' finish looks smarter. The end cheeks have a two-tone effect giving the console a less bulky look from end-on, and the black vinyl armrest along the front is now nicely padded. On top of the meter bridge, the rather industrial unfinished look of the J Series is now hidden beneath a vinyl covered top panel. A rather mouse-like object has appeared on the worksurface where once was a pen and tablet. The latter remain, but the alternative cordless mouse behaves similarly to the pen over the tablet area (and is therefore named a 'puck') and is now far less likely to disappear down the back of the sofa. Studio and maintenance engineers will be delighted to discover that the new console features no filament lamps whatsoever. All indicators are now LEDs and SSL has overcome the challenge of making them light at half brightness for certain statuses.

Under the bonnet, a number of improvements to the J Series were implemented in the audio circuitry over the years in pursuit of 'SuperAnalogue' and all these improvements are, of course, consolidated in the new desk. While the J Series was essentially still a Quad desk, it has found uses in 5.1 surround production. To this end SSL introduced an optional multichannel monitoring system, the 959 Panel, in 1997. Since then, SSL has seen these specified on an



increasing number of orders - in the last year over 60% of J Series consoles were supplied with this option fitted. It's no surprise, therefore, that a major change to the XL is the implementation of LCR panning and much improved bussing and routing for multichannel operation.

The K Series computer adopts the new HS CPU and LCD screen of the Plus series digital consoles and SSL says it spent two years writing the code to make the new unit perform the functions of the J Series computer as invisibly as possible. Having achieved that, some neat improvements were implemented in the computer interface. The new processor is many times more powerful than the old one, so functions which took the old computer 30 seconds to process now happen in about four seconds. The recall screens are more photo-realistic and closer to the graphics one has come to expect from Pro Tools plug-ins. Some sensible additions and subtractions have been made to the menus, and, for example, the OK and Quit buttons now always appear in expected positions on screen.

Project management handling is improved with the addition of Restore and Backup options, avoiding the sometimes slightly unintuitive file data menus. Offline trim is now available online, and Mix Compare enables you to switch easily between two mixes. Some of the automation statuses have been 'rationalised', or rather renamed, and I initially found

this slightly confusing. However, you can see the logic and Overwrite, for example, is now called Mix End.

The fader display has undergone radical change, having been redesigned completely to resemble the old G Series computer bargraphs, although in much higher resolution. When a channel is muted, the fader level is still faintly visible, and you can click here to change fader statuses. The other benefit of the improved screen is the implementation of an external input enabling instant switching to the screen display for Pro Tools or any similar workstation screen. Furthermore, the puck and keyboard are able to interface with just about any other operating system via USB, so you can operate the workstation using the controls at hand. A wonderfully convenient system.

Although the centre section will look familiar to any J Series operator, below the surface this part of the desk has undergone a ground-up redesign. This all new section has enabled sonic improvements to be made, such as the removal of VCAs from the ABCD buses and the aux sends, and was undoubtedly necessary to implement the many wonderful new routing and monitoring features associated with the surround capabilities of the console. There is a flexible Stereo Downmix section enabling the 5.1 mix to be folded down for a simultaneous stereo version, and of course the main compressor and master fader are now 5.1 compatible. There are 5.1 injection patches - effectively these are effects returns with no controls - and external 5.1 machine inputs are provided.

The channel strips are in many ways similar to their J Series forerunners, although the two types are not interchangeable. The EQ and Dynamics sections look similar, and the aux sends and pan pots remain in the same positions, albeit with enhanced functionality. The much-vaunted automated pan feature of the J Series is much improved. This uses the small fader as pan pot and the K Series now usefully sums the faders' signals to the aux sends in this mode. Additionally, you can access any of the buses. The large fader pan pots now include a switch: by pushing the knob you can enable LCR panning on a channel-by-channel basis for surround work. You can then assign the

small fader to access the LR buses for divergence.

The other major change to the channel surface is perhaps the most significant one: the four stereo ABCD buses are now simultaneously available to both large and small fader paths. The usefulness of this becomes more apparent when you examine the new centre section routing system for these buses as this allows each side of each bus to be separately routed to the L, C, R, LS, RS and LFE buses. The LFE path includes a switchable HP filter at 120Hz or 80Hz, matching the Dolby and DTS standards. Switchable prefade inserts are now provided for the ABCD buses. The exciting new Ultipan software surround panner provides automated panning with the use of a joystick.

The XL represents a very useful set of improvements over its predecessor. The surround routing and panning features provide potential purchasers with a huge degree of future-proofing, while the sonic improvements and vastly improved computer give SSL plenty to boast about. And yet, little retraining is required for the J Series engineer. Having recently recorded and mixed on the Js of London's Olympic and Sony Studios, I would envisage jumping straight in on any XL session with ease. □



### Ultipan

To complement the new surround capabilities of the console, SSL has designed an automatable software controlled surround panning system comprising two completely separate types of surround panner. Up to six of these panners are available in any combination of the two types. First, you assign up to five small faders for the signal paths to be panned. You then route these faders appropriately, but the faders themselves have no effect on output levels. All panning is done using the Puck, clicking and dragging a ball around the 2D representation of the listening space.

Right-clicking anywhere on the display causes the image to jump to a corresponding location, and glide times can be set for dropping out of automation write. In X-Y mode, movement can be constrained to different axes between speakers. An on-screen divergence fader has a separate automation control to enable changes to the frontal spread to be controlled

separately from the main panning actions. Speaker outputs can be muted as necessary and this function is recorded in automation. Bargraphs indicate the 'power level' of each speaker.

The second panner type (ThetaPan) is a circular pan mode where the signal can be rotated around the edge of an imaginary circle for creative musical applications. Here the divergence fader controls the width of the signal from a point source on the edge of the circle all the way up to a full circle where the signal emanates equally from all speakers. In between, it is easy to spread a point source between any adjacent speakers.

### Super-Pre

An option introduced with the XL is the Super-Pre external microphone amplifier unit. This provides greater signal integrity by placing the business end of the mic amps out in the studio for shorter cable runs. The console retains its onboard mic amps, but on each equipped channel the mic gain knob controls either input - there are servo-driven pots on the unit. Selecting the Super-Pre input switches to the line out of the Super-Pre mic amp and a green LED lights on the channel. On the Super-Pre unit itself, a switchable headphone output is provided to enable monitoring and aid the placement of microphones in the studio. Units accommodate up to 24 channels in banks of eight.

**PROS** 5.1 Routing enhancements provide true surround bussing and compression; external LCD input and USB interface are great for Pro Tools edits mid-mix; Ultipan is a powerful yet intuitive automated surround panner; puck is better than pen

**CONS** No touch screen; centre section still large, not many channels reachable from the sweet spot; no 'Mix Review' mode - mix computer requires a decision when the tape stops; only six mix passes kept in RAM

### Contact:

SSL, UK:  
Tel: +44 1865 842300  
Email: [www.solid-state-logic.com](http://www.solid-state-logic.com)