

Soundtracs On-board FX

In these times of the plug-in, manufacturers of hardware digital products are beginning to tap in to the potential by reapplying the processing they already have. Soundtracs now offers effects for its digital desks.

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ADDING EFFECTS TO MIXING consoles is an idea that predates the digital age and takes in such fine examples as Soundtracs digitally controlled analogue dynamics processing, which was available on its excellent Jade and Solitaire analogue desks. There is an argument that says the console is a good place to house effects although many DAW manufacturers would probably disagree. Undeterred, Soundtracs has added on-board effects processing to its digital D series of desks and extended the remit beyond just dynamics to time domain effects and sensibly implemented multichannel dynamics.

The package is available with new desks or as retrofit to existing models and essentially re-applies the console's DSP to perform effects functions. How this manifests itself depends on which desk you have. On a DPC and D4, the only thing you have to add is the software and you reduce the channel count from 160 of full processing down to 128. On a DPC it adds about £3500 to the package price. On a DS-3, DS-M, and DS-3B you have to add a DSP card to run the effects.

What's on offer is four stereo and two surround effects but you can run all six as stereos. Dynamics can run to 7.1 and all effects data is stored as part of the automation. The design is in-house and has not involved any external 'effects brand' input.

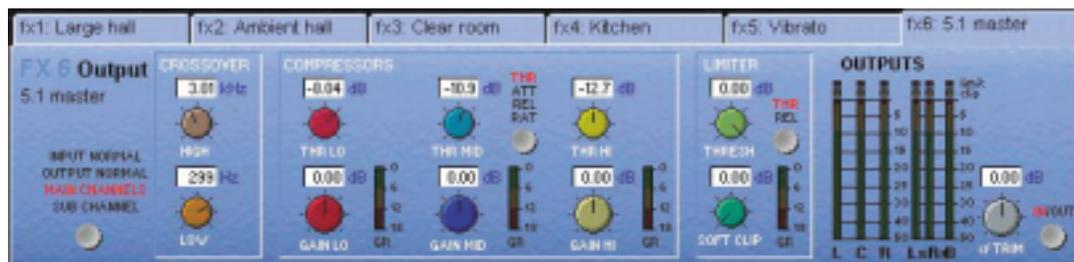
Precisely how the effects are presented to the operator depends on the desk being used. On the D4 you get to use the rotaries on the worksurface master section, while on the DS3 and DPC control is performed with the trackerball.

I looked at a D4 and the desk's master section offers up a Configure Effects page that presents you with six effects slots which appear in the routing pool, making allocation and assignment pretty straightforward. You can sit effects slots on an aux, channel insert or bus inserts. The first effects slot is always dedicated to reverb and the screen's associated rotaries supply control of parameters from the 30 algorithms. Reverbs have control of decay, pre-delay, filter and dry/wet mix and algorithms cover room types and, what Soundtracs terms, 'environments' for post work.

Effects slots 2, 3 and 4 can also be used as reverbs but have less processing available to them than the higher quality reverbs available exclusively for slot 1. While the desk is 96kHz capable, the effects run at 48kHz currently. Aside from the multichannel dynamics, the remainder only work in stereo.

You can choose from delays, vocoder, pitch shifter, autopan, chorus, flange, phase, plus the aforementioned 'environments'. These include 'Through the wall' (for replicating a 'party next door' ambience), public address, comms, telephone, and many others. Presets like the stereo 4-tap have a significant number of controllable parameters, others are deceptively simple. Interestingly the screen even mimics flashing timing LEDs for such things as flange modulation rate and panning speed, plus indicators for the depth, or width, of the process. This is good and better than your average rackmount unit.

The really big feature is the multichannel output



dynamics package that can run to 7.1. This links the main channels together and has a separate compressor for the independent sub. You get an input gain control for all the channels, a phase switch for each input, output gains, and the main dynamics section, which offers ganged control across the permanently linked channels. You introduce an offset in to this linked arrangement by trimming individual input or output levels.

The dynamics are 3-band with variable crossover points, individual threshold for the low, mid and high, make up gains, plus attack, release and ratio for each band. There's also an output limiter across the lot with a soft clip to determine the point at which the signal will start its journey to the brickwall. You can also trim the non-compressed signal for comparison purposes.

Four bands of fully parametric EQ sit across the output buses as well. The two mids are set as bell with upper and lower bands adjustable between shelf, bell and high/low pass. This equates to Soundtracs' channel EQ without the extra high and low filters. The sub has trims plus threshold, attack, release, ratio and gain and the linked EQ works on this signal too.

There are 60 effects presets of all types in total plus the output dynamics. There are no user configurable presets although changes to settings can be saved and fired back in a snapshot. Effects parameters are not dynamically automated. It's worth remembering that the desks' MIDI ports can send patch change commands to external devices to supplement what's on-board.

It amounts to a nicely integrated package that looks and behaves like it was always meant to be part of the desk. Effects quality is good and well on a par with a lot of outboard units, although super-fine control and programming of effects from the ground up is lacking in comparison to top-flight external devices. However, that's not what these on-board stereo effects are about. Multichannel dynamics control and variability is exemplary and up there with the best available elsewhere. D series desk users who work regularly in multichannel should consider this a 'must have'.

Best of all, Soundtracs desk users get a free two-week trial of the effects for the own desks. That's got to be the best way to appraise this package's value. ■

PROS

Adds value; good selection of presets with a strong post bias; class leading multichannel dynamics control.

CONS

Can reduce channel count or require extra DSP according to desk model; limited control in reverbs

EXTRAS

Soundtracs' latest arrival, the DS-3B digital broadcast console, has 32-bit floating-point architecture with each of its 64 or 96 channels having 4-band EQ and dynamics



sections. The worksurface is available in 24 or 32 fader versions and incorporates touch screen technology in conjunction with motorised faders. Operating at 96kHz or 48kHz with 24-bit conversion, it is equipped with 40 output buses each with limiters for stereo, LCRS and 5.1 formatting. It includes subtractive mix minus GPO, GPI and fully redundant PSUs.

Based on the DS-3 digital desk, the DS-3B is available with two DSP racking options depending on installation requirements.

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