

Studer Vista 7

Digital mixing console worksurfaces have frequently taken a lower priority in the quest for bigger and better feature and function lists. Users can gain comfort from the fact that some are choosing to address operational aspects as a priority. **ZENON SCHOEPE**



THE POINT TO REMEMBER about Studer's new Vista 7 production console is that this is a worksurface redesign and not, by definition, a new desk. Under the bonnet, or rather in the rack, this is a D950 processing engine and what we are talking about here is a new way of controlling it.

This doesn't disappoint me because it is the business of a how a worksurface interacts and communicates with its processing and its user that makes digital desks different. It's also important to acknowledge the importance of the worksurface within console design because it *is* the console for all intents and purposes. It is perfectly possible to run a processing engine from a good interface or from a bad one. Both will get the job done, unless the bad one is really bad, but it is the ease with which the job is accomplished that makes a good one great.

Unlike computer based-MIDI sequencers or DAWs, digital consoles can be judged successful according to how close to the limits you can consistently drive them. A good design will allow you to run them full, and full on, with fairly immediate physical access to absolutely every single parameter on every single channel and output, all the time. It's what they are supposed to do and it's the design of the worksurface that decides whether this is going to happen or not.

Studer has come at it from a new direction with the Vista 7 and while we're not about to be talking about virtual gloves and head-up displays, it's enough to stir the usually restrained Swiss in to proclaiming the return of the human interface.

Describing a worksurface is actually quite difficult. As already said, the processing rack is the well-known D950, and the Vista 7 release coincides with a fairly major upgrade to both desks' automation system. I'll

not attempt to cover these common areas but I'll concentrate instead on what is different on the Vista 7 and encourage you to get in front of one when you can.

Design of the worksurface has involved an all-new team. Studer does not hide the fact that the driving force behind it was the screen technology, which it calls Vistonics and describes it as the integration of rotary encoders and switches with a TFT flat screen display. The technology was spotted some five years ago, it's potential was assessed and then all they needed to do was find a way of using it on a desk. The decision was made to combine this worksurface technology with the processing power of the D950, which, incidentally, remains current.

Vistonics was highlighted as a means of getting more control, and for that matter added value, on to the worksurface without going the traditional route of more knobs and buttons. It has to be said that the Vistonics approach does give the best of the knob-per-function and screen based/driven systems because it combines the two in one. The knobs and switches are fixed and relate to a changing 'underlay' of a

display, which changes according to what you are adjusting and can illustrate things like parameter values in a more informative way.

How it works is not entirely clear and Studer was not about to tell me (there's a patent pending), but the bars that run horizontally across the screens and support the rotaries and the switches are clearly crucial to the system.

The worksurface has been redesigned from the legs upwards and the whole thing is slimmer and slicker than a D950. However, it is not as modular as a D950 and the Vista 7 comes with a central control bay and a minimum of two 10-fader channel bays, rising to a maximum of seven. The D950 is a completely different proposition in this respect, and enables a mix'n'match approach to centre section panels and expansion in 4-fader channel blocks. Options on the Vista 7 centre section revolve around whether you want joysticks or not.

Cost against a comparable D950, size for size, is about 15% cheaper and this is as a direct result of the fixed nature of the Vista 7's panels, although I was informed that the panels are not actually cheaper to manufacture.

Worksurface control is focused at a local level, just like on an analogue desk, rather than majoring on the entire desk being controlled from a super strip in the centre section. You'll find no Vistonics in the centre section, just a screen for the automation and housekeeping routines, a keyboard and all the usual monitoring and routing functionality.

Global functions are also repeated locally, which further explains why the desk doesn't have as much control as some in the centre section. You can scroll channels along bays, jump to bays, lock bays in



position, lock channels in position within a bay, and 'drag and drop' channels in to bays all quickly and easily. Fader designation as channel, aux master, group master, control master, and output allows the configuration of the desk to its application. Like the D950, DSP resources are allocated, for such things as full-blown channels, as part of the configuration and set-up routine. The desk comes with standard configurations of stereo, surround, surround with Studer's VSP enhanced surround processing, and one that facilitates operation with stem-based working.

The desk can come with four different core sizes with choices on the analogue and digital I-O racks. It is possible to opt for a fully stacked D950-style core with bags of I-O, but this would make for a very expensive Vista 7. Studer is expecting users to appreciate its own choices of core and I-O.

Fader labelling is particularly good as it not only names the signal path but also tells you where it is coming from. This is vital as the channel blocks of ten faders represents the operational heart of this desk. After the near horizontal flat of the fader panel, the surface rises in a gentle rake across the Vistonics panel and top-of-strip switching, and then inclines in a near-vertical meter bridge. Reach is excellent, legibility up towards the meter bridge is superb, and the meter panel height is surprisingly low. You could almost describe the worksurface as low-profile. Metering is also provided for the compressor/limiter and expander/gate.

Top of the strip is a rotary for input gain that can also be used for pan and aux control. A channel has two inputs available plus a tone generator. A cluster of switches allows selection and activation of such things as the high and low cut filters, insert, delay, compressor/limiter, expander/gate, EQ, and pan.

Colour plays an important part in this desk and you need to fix three in your head. Green means dynamics, red is EQ, and yellow is pan. You'll get blasts of one or other of these colours from the Vistonics screen as you play around, and you very quickly grasp what is going on. This colour-coding is reflected subtly elsewhere on the desk. For example, the pertinent top-of-the strip selectors glow with these colours.

It's important to explain the geography of the Vistonics display. It is arranged according to the ten strips of a channel bay and at the top of each strip's display live four rotaries with associated buttons. Below

them are three stacked, colour-coded blocks corresponding to the aforementioned three processing blocks. These blocks are touch screens – the screen with the rotaries is not and sits beneath a thin plastic layer.

Touching a channel's relevant processing block display flips the screen beneath the rotaries to a representation of the parameters that can be adjusted. For example, pressing the EQ block immediately calls up the multiple bands of fully parametric equalisation available to it complete with buttons that do things like switch between bell and shelf characteristics. The same applies for the other processing blocks, but what is really neat is that each channel's three processing block touch displays contain miniaturisations of the channel's EQ curve, pan position (stereo or surround), and dynamics activity.

The number of rotaries employed to display and control parameters varies according to the processing block – the dynamics use 20, the EQ 14 – and you can have two displayed at the same time from the same channel or two different channels. You can also show all three blocks simultaneously for a channel, although the number of pan parameters is reduced.

Common sense suggests that you should also be able to adjust things like aux sends and input gains from here. You can, and you can get a general reduced parameter-count overview of a complete channel.

So far, so excellent but the display beneath the rotaries deserves mentioning. Studer has gone pretty radical here with its choice of icons for parameter value. These vary from heavily segmented circles, bargraphs, and X-Y-style graphical plots, to pseudo timeline/soundfield approximations. You get clear, absolute numerical indication of all adjustments in a small window next to the rotary, but you rely a lot on the graphical depiction. There's a logic to it that's simple, there is no lag between rotary and display, and, perhaps strangest of all, you can see the display even when your fingers are turning the knob.

When individual blocks of processing have not been selected, then the four rotaries per channel strip can be defaulted to represent whatever cluster of parameters you'd like to have to hand. You can select these on preset keys.

You can gang channels by touch and then change, say, the EQ for the entire gang from one set of controls, albeit with any offsets that exist. You can copy settings, processor blocks settings or complete channel settings, between channels on single button pushes. An interesting point is the use of half-lit buttons throughout; instigating the copy function causes the lights on all target channel buttons to dim, selecting one completes the action. Simple? Yes and there are no dual function buttons on the surface. Switches also have a momentary/latching feature – press and hold keeps the function open while a quick jab will flip the status – but you can also do the same with the touchscreens.

You're conscious of getting a lot of information back from this desk in its latent state, and there's even more if you ask for it. It is incredibly simple to operate at mix level. Given the fact that it essentially has the same functions and features as the D950, it is only how they are controlled that is different, I would be interested to learn what the accessibility of the different worksurface does for the appeal of Studer DSP.

Some may dismiss Vistonics as a gimmick and a re-application of existing approaches and I'm quite prepared to believe that not everyone will love it. However, I defy anyone who has sat behind the Vista 7 to say that its worksurface isn't a bit special and very different. You have to try it for yourself. ■



PROS

A decidedly different take on the desk worksurface principle; proven core processing – it's a D950 back at the rack.

CONS

Vistonics is only available on the Studer Vista 7; you have to use it to appreciate it; not everyone will like it

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