

Universal Audio DCS Remote Pre

You would expect Universal Audio to be good at analogue and it has proved it can also do digital with confidence, yet the move to digitally controlled analogue may puzzle some. **ROB JAMES** gets in the box and interprets the thinking.



AS A LOGICAL extension to its activity in analogue and digital technologies, Universal Audio has launched a series of DAW 'expansion and enhancement' products under the name of Desktop Console System (DCS). Designed in partnership with Euphonix founders Scott and Rob Silfvast, DCS aims to combine the UA pedigree with the utility of a DCA (Digitally Controlled Analogue) console in a convenient 'micro-console' desktop format. The first product is the Remote Preamp and it will be followed by a monitor controller, the Monitor

Master. Both follow the model of a base unit with a desktop remote controller connected by DCS-Link.

The UK£699 (+ VAT) DCS Remote Preamp brings together two mic pres with low cut filters and DI capability, monitoring including EQ and reverb, metering and talkback. All the audio connections are on the Base Unit including headphones. The mic preamps use a completely different technology to other UA products. In this case the inputs are a transformerless so-called 'transimpedance' design. According to Scott and Rob Silfvast, 'Fundamentally,

a "transimpedance" circuit is one that converts current to voltage. The term applies to the DCS Remote Preamp design because a transimpedance gain stage lies at the heart of the current-feedback instrumentation amplifier employed in our design.' Whatever the technology, these mic pres are no slouch as they're quiet and unobtrusive. Low cut filters at 30Hz, 70Hz or 100Hz and -18dB/octave work in conjunction with the preamps rather than after them and are thus able to provide a valuable 5dB extra LF headroom. DI input uses a special high-impedance and high-voltage amplifier stage capable of accepting +/-18V swings.

The remote controller connects to the mainframe via a single Cat-5 Ethernet cable. This can be up to 90m long. The meter section can be parallel with the rest of the controller surface or tilted up for easier viewing by removing four Allen screws and replacing them in different holes. Positioning of the RJ45 socket on the underside of the meter unit means that when the meters are in the flat position the cable is permanently under strain.

On powering up the unit, the meters are backlit and the three character alpha display immediately below shows a single horizontal bar at the top of the middle digit. Moving any control brings its value to the alpha, this is very slick and completely intuitive. This display uses bright and clear orange LEDs, considerably preferable to the red variety.

Operational button logic is well suited to people with the 'quick prod' approach because in normal operation the switch action occurs when the button is released not, as is more usual, when it is pressed.

Reverb is 48kHz 20-bit with 9 presets. This is primarily intended to sweeten the raw mic signal(s) for cue purposes but can equally well be recorded if desired.

It's a doddle to set up a couple of mics for recording and to provide a decent monitor mix. It all feels very natural and drama free.

The DCS Remote Preamp should have a lot going for it as a recording front-end. However, the gain controls move in 1dB increments so zipper noise is a possibility and I was sorry not to have the option of limiters to tame the more unruly transients. I'm more than a little surprised that the designers didn't see fit to include A-D conversion to complete the picture. This means that it cannot be a one-stop solution and brings all the potential problems of level matching with someone else's convertor. At the very least I hope UA finishes the job with a matching convertor unit.

Despite these omissions this is a very likeable unit. The Remote Preamp feels like a proper piece of kit and its design antecedents are evident in both audio quality and ingenious control. ■

PROS Clean and anonymous sound; clever control system; versatility thanks to remote control.

CONS No A-D conversion; no headphone output on the Remote; no limiter.

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Bricking it The Base Unit is about the size and weight of a large brick and, unusually, the power supply is a fixed voltage type. Eleven ¼-inch jacks deal with stereo cue in and out (headphones), secondary unbalanced preamp outputs for splits or amplifier feeds, and balanced pre outputs and secondary Speaker outputs, Instrument/Line inputs, cue inputs and continuous or switched talkback mic out. Two XLRs provide the mic inputs and an RJ45 is the DCS-Link to the remote.

The surface is neatly divided into logical sections. Each input channel is identical with DI, phantom, phase reverse, dB/Lock, two Lo Cut buttons and two Peak LEDs.

When the dB button is lit, input gain is permanently displayed except when another control is moved. Holding the dB button for a couple of seconds lights the Lock LED and locks the input Channel controls. Between the input channels lie six buttons. The top two increment/decrement parameter values and the LEDs flash to indicate that they are available. The other four buttons are for invoking output gain trim, routing the cue mix to the meters and for engaging stereo and A+B modes or M/S decoding when both are pressed.

Two knobs below the Input sections determine the level of each sent to the cue mix and the centre knob switches the reverb on and controls the amount sent to the cue mix. The button below allows one of the nine reverb presets to be chosen and, when held, switches the reverb between A, B and A+B. At the bottom, the Talk button is on the left. Pressing the decrement button while pressing Talk locks the talkback on. Cue Input level to cue mix pot, Lo (85Hz) and Hi (14kHz) EQ buttons, Cue mix Volume, Cue Input Mute (also Cue Input level Trim when held) and Speaker Mute buttons complete the control count.

A small talkback mic is mounted in the panel. Monitor Lo and Hi EQ can be set at flat or +/-3, 6, 9 or 12dB.

