

Audient ASP008

If eight mic channels in a 1U box sounds familiar, Audient has gone some way to adding value and originality to the now popular formula. Thorough, objective, at times poetic but often late — now that's what I call **JON THORNTON**



WAS RECENTLY INTRODUCED to the record company executive credited with creating the 'Now...that's what I call music' brand. An extremely nice man, but not at all bothered that his brainchild was now up to its 58th incarnation, together with spawning a mass of imitations, which invite comment along the lines of quantity versus quality. I mention this, because my first reaction on receiving the Audient ASP008 was something along the lines of 'Now... that's what I call an 8-channel mic preamplifier with digital output option 43'. OK, that's a bit of an exaggeration but there's no doubt that the market for this kind of device is getting increasingly crowded. I was curious as to what would make Audient's device stand out from the crowd.

Audient is, of course, a company set up by the two 'Ds' of DDA fame — Gareth Davies and David Dearden. They've had great success with the mid-range analogue recording console, the ASP8024, and increasingly with the Aztec live sound board. The guts of the ASP008 are the mic preamps designs that can be found in the ASP8024. These are based around a discrete (eight transistor) Class A front end, with component choice said to deliver extremely low noise and distortion.

Packaged in a 1U, the ASP008 is a rhapsody in silver — brushed aluminium faceplate and bright metal knobs. Legending is black on silver, but quite easy to read despite the small size (*A rhapsody in legibility? Ed*). Each of the eight channels features a Gain control and a continuously variable high pass filter that ranges from 25Hz to 250Hz with a slope of 12dB/octave. Illuminated pushbuttons select HPF in or out, phase reverse and line/mic input selection.

Gain range is 0 to 60dB with mic selected, or -20dB to 40dB with line selected. Phantom power (48V) can be applied to any of the mic channels with another pushbutton, fetchingly illuminated in blue. The phantom circuitry includes a 'soft-start' feature in the event of phantom being applied while a channel is open. While this doesn't make it silent, it does minimise any loudspeaker threatening transients. Finally, each channel also has a three-position toggle switch that allows the impedance of the mic input to be switched between 200, 1200 and 5000 Ohms.

If this wasn't enough, the first two channels also feature a front panel mounted DI input, which can be selected via an additional pushbutton, and an

associated -20dB pad switch for this input. Signal metering is rudimentary, but sensible — with a signal present LED for each channel illuminating at signals in excess of -25dBu, and a peak LED that illuminates at +16dBu. Given that most people will be using the unit as a front end to a DAW or digital multitrack recorder, this indication seems sufficient, and with well thought out threshold levels.

As you might expect, this leads to a fairly crowded front panel. While the rotary controls have a nice level of resistance to them, users with the larger variety of finger might find them getting caught between the gain and filter pots when making adjustments.

Turning to the back panel, and we find microphone level inputs on eight XLR sockets. The eight line level inputs and line outputs (all electronically balanced) are available on two 25-pin D-Sub connectors. The space that this saves enables either one or both of the two optional digital interface cards to be fitted. The first is an ADAT option, giving 8 channels of digital output down a single light-pipe connector. The second is an AES/SPDIF card that provides four digital output pairs on a 9-pin D-Sub connector. A switch on the rear panel determines whether the signal is in AES or SPDIF format. An external TTL Word clock input is also provided on a BNC connector, with a rear panel switch for selecting external or internal clock.

Sample rates for the digital cards, if using the internal clock, are selected via a front panel

pushbutton, which toggles through the available rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96kHz (although only rates up to 48kHz are supported via the ADAT interface). In addition, the output of the ADAT interface can also be toggled between bit depths of 16, 20 or 24 — while the AES output is always 24-bit. A small thing, but one that I am eternally grateful for, is that the selected sample rate/bit-depth is retained in memory even when the unit is powered down.

A nicely featured digital option then, and in use it sounds very capable. With line level inputs only, the converters sound the equal of those employed in Tascam's MX2424, which I've always considered to be a good balance of price/performance. But what about the all-important analogue front end?

With a variety of microphones and sources, the preamps have a very open sound, which remains pleasantly neutral. Even when really adding gain to signals with a lot of HF transients, which can sometimes give a fairly brittle sound, they remained very detailed and never strained. Comparisons are difficult to make — they don't quite have the edginess of something like an Amek 9098, or the slightly larger than life HF of a Focusrite design — instead they just sound quiet, clean and ever so slightly warm.

The switchable impedance function seems to be flavour of the month at the moment and in truth on the usual modern studio capacitor mic standards, I found it hard to discern any significant tonal change between the three positions. On a venerable old Electrovoice RE20 though, switching to the lowest input impedance did seem to give a slight shift in tonality, lifting the low mid response and generally gaining the timbre slightly.

The DI inputs on the first two channels also did a commendable job in recording bass guitar, giving a nice full bottom end with almost too much HF detail — but nothing that a little EQ can't solve.

In summary, the ASP008 (UK£795 + VAT) does exactly what it says on the tin. I can't think of a single feature that has been omitted, and it performs extremely well. The provision of line inputs and a very capable digital output option makes it attractive simply as an 8 channel A-D converter for the money. Added to this are preamps that are up there with some of the best in the field, variable impedance and DI inputs. Now that's what I call a great unit. ■

Contact

AUDIENT, UK:
Tel: +44 1256 381944
Website: www.audient.co.uk

PROS Preamps sound very open, detailed and quiet; excellent digital output option; occasionally useful variable input impedance feature.

CONS Pots may be a little too close together for some fingers; I hate wiring D-Sub connectors.

EXTRAS Audient's Sumo summing amp has a large scale console format, fully differential, expandable stereo summing bus, a stereo mix bus compressor and peak limiter, and balanced bus insert points. A 192kHz analogue-to-digital converter is an option.



It features eight balanced stereo inputs with >24dB headroom, a mono function for Channels 1/2 and 3/4, variable gain fully differential mix amp with >27dB headroom, and balanced analogue stereo outputs.

The unit has high resolution metering and expander input for up to four additional Sumos.