

Speck Electronics X.Sum Mixer

It's encouraging to still find outboard that offers something different and this summing unit offers more than your typical hard left and right pan arrangement. **JON THORNTON** discovers a box that he wasn't sure he'd need until he used it.



THERE IS A CURIOUS category of audio equipment that seems to be determined by the needs of a few, and which when actually manufactured elicits one of two responses. Either 'nice box, can't see why I'd ever need it', or 'I've been looking for something like that for years, where do I sign?' In the case of Speck Electronics' X.Sum, you can only imagine that someone, somewhere decided that it would be exceptionally handy to have a 32-channel, 4-bus line mixer in a 1U package, and the rest is history.

Leaving aside your own determination of needs for a while, the X.Sum (UK£945 +VAT) certainly represents a tidy bit of packaging, cramming 16 dual-concentric pots onto the front panel, each of which allows adjustment of level and pan for a stereo source. Said sources interface to the rear panel via individual 1/4-inch TRS sockets, with separate balanced inputs for the left and right leg of each stereo pair. Also on the rear panel are the main mix bus outputs — again electronically balanced and appearing on TRS sockets, and an RJ45 connector that allows a number of additional output options via breakout boxes — or the ability to 'daisy-chain' more than one X.Sum together (more of this later). The power supply is an external box, but a reassuringly hefty one — always a good sign I feel.

Returning to the front panel, there are some thoughtful design features that make the unit more flexible than it might appear at first sight. Although there are 32 individual inputs, arranged as 16 stereo pairs, you have a choice about how to deal with them. In normal operation, centring the pan control (outer ring) routes left inputs to the left bus, and right inputs to the right bus. Moving the pan control to the right will progressively remove the left leg of the pair from the left bus, and vice versa. Each of the 16 channel pairs also has a mono button, and pressing this generates a mono summed signal from both inputs. Now the pan control effectively pans this mono signal between the stereo buses.

There is a choice of buses as well. A routing switch is provided for each stereo pair, and pressing this will route the signal to the main bus. Not pressing it means that the signal is actually routed to the secondary 'Mix-B' bus. This is a strictly one or the other proposition — there's no facility to send a particular channel to both sets of buses, but it does allow a degree of flexibility.

For example, using one bus to act as a monitor for a DAW while the other provides the front end.

The main stereo bus has a dedicated master level control, and the option of switching it to become a mono mix. A further level control sets headphone monitoring level, with the headphone socket located conveniently on the front panel. An associated switch allows the headphones to monitor the 'Mix-B' bus, but this somewhat curiously also makes the headphone level control act as a master fader for the Mix-B output. While this saves a little space on the front panel, there may well be occasions where you might need to have independent control over bus level and headphone monitoring.

While the main mix bus has its outputs available on the rear panel, the Mix-B outputs only appear courtesy of the 'multi' connector that appears on a RJ-45 socket. The review model was provided with a breakout box that brought Mix-B outputs onto 1/4-inch jacks. Other permutations of breakout boxes are available from Speck, or you can roll your own as a full pin-out is provided in the documentation. Another function of this connector is to allow daisy-chaining of multiple units by accessing the post-summing but pre-fader main mix outputs of one box and presenting them to the summing mixer of another unit.

In use, things are pretty straightforward. There's an indication on each level control for unity gain, but that's about it in terms of signal metering — you need to exercise your ears to determine if anything nasty is happening. Thankfully, this isn't a problem because the X.Sum seems to have huge reserves of headroom, and sounds very neutral, clean and quiet. Even with all inputs routed to the main bus at maximum level, background noise was minimal, as you'd expect with such a compact topology — certainly quieter than my mid-range analogue recording consoles. This makes it equally suitable for use as a flexible analogue summing box for DAWs (if that's your thing), or as a keyboard sub-mixer in studio or live applications, or indeed for that application you didn't realise you had until you actually see the box.

In summary, despite its unassuming appearance, this is most definitely a professional product — it's nicely built, well thought out and makes no compromises on overall audio quality and signal path. It's not without competition, certainly in the

area of dedicated summing mixers, but its additional flexibility in terms of routing and panning options gives it a definite edge. ■

PROS

Good neutral sound; bags of headroom; flexible panning and routing options; scalability with multi I-O.

CONS

Slightly strange configuration of monitoring options for second mix bus; no form of metering.

EXTRAS

Three breakout boxes are offered. Mix-B Output Breakout Box — connect



this to use the additional stereo Mix-B outputs. Combo Breakout Box has a set of 1/4-inch TRS jacks to use the additional Mix-B outputs and another set for a second set of Mix-A outputs. The External Preamp Breakout Box allows you to add your own external preamps to the X.Sum.

Contact

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