

Console stepping stones

Continuing the 'consoles of note' concept introduced in the last issue,

KEITH SPENCER-ALLEN looks at ten mixing consoles that identify key points

in the continued development of the mixer.



ERGONOMICS AND INNOVATION USA

— From 1962 to the mid-70s Quad/Eight was a custom console designer for film and music studios. With individually tailored

consoles it could respond to changing needs and as it often handled complete studio installations it was able to take a more complete view of operator needs. This console circa 1974 at A&M Records, Hollywood visibly reflects its move to make larger consoles slightly more ergonomic. Less obvious is the fact that its 52/32 frame includes vertical light beam meters; VCAs; DC sub-grouping; simultaneous quad, stereo and mono mixing; and it's ready for fitting Compumix mix automation — all less common facilities at the time. A few years later it introduced standard product ranges and unfortunately began to lose its way.



ERGONOMICS AND INNOVATION UK

— London's Olympic Studios was one of the more independent thinking of non-record company studios. The team of Keith Grant

and Dick Swettenham opted for a wraparound console concept where the majority of controls would be within arm's reach for the then new Barnes studio location. Swettenham carried this approach forward with his Helios Electronics company, refining it for larger consoles where the original concept couldn't be fully accommodated. Largely making custom designs he was able to incorporate VCA level control and grouping, fader automation interfaces, LED column meters and quad panning on all channels. As with other custom makers, the rise of the standard console hit its business but Helios remains notable for being the first to place a video monitor within the console (Mainos TV, Finland) used for level monitoring throughout the console.



DIGITAL CONTROL US

— While most mixer makers were digitally controlling analogue audio all within the console, the idea of reducing the console to just a

compact controller of a remote rack of analogue electronics was an adventurous step. The user would have to embrace multifunction controls, a degree of assignability and the concern that digital control of analogue audio was really only a stepping stone to a fully digital end. Still, the ability to fit a lot of console in a small space had a lot of appeal to broadcasters. Orion Research of Cleveland developed a range of TV consoles of up to 32 stereo inputs and a means to access 320 sources. The small control surface was deceptively simple while the integral ReMem

automation allowed storage, recall and reset of all console parameters including EQ. First seen in 1988, it was adopted by Neve US two years later and promptly disappeared.



DIGITAL CONTROL UK

— Novation was a digitally controlled analogue console developed by the power amplifier maker

Harrison Information Technology (HIT). It featured a compact control surface and associated rack but a number of the development team were ex-Neve and had considerable experience in the practical side of assignable controls and what didn't work. Although it raised a lot of enthusiastic response business troubles at the parent company halted the project. However, it can be seen as an influence on products that followed such as early Euphonix consoles.



ANALOGUE BUT DIGITAL US

— The US Harrison company had a long history of console design but was losing ground to the big

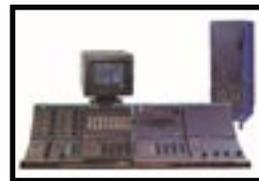
names. The SeriesTen was its magnificent statement of confidence to bring it back to the high end. Digitally controlled analogue and physically big was the total opposite in design to the rack and compact controller mentality. Each channel strip was crammed with knobs and LEDs while the frame was clad in bolsters of padded leather — a more masculine console would be hard to find. Unusually, each channel strip controlled two signal paths and a pair of microprocessors for all module operation and automation — distributed processing rather than central. The real attraction was the total dynamic control of most audio functions — ahead of everyone else in 1986 (*and a wonder to behold in full Christmas tree demo mode. Ed*) — and became the basis for its following consoles.



ANALOGUE BUT DIGITAL UK

— Trident was another company whose consoles were primarily addressing a declining middle market. The

Di-An (Digital-Analogue) was its response, a digital controlled analogue console, large with a distinctive appearance (*That was the swathes of black blank panel. Ed*), and almost all controls bar faders, mutes and solos centrally controlled. The console was fully automatable, had a number of unique features, and was virtually knobless, depending on nudge buttons for control. Many still consider this to be the easiest assignable console to use. Lengthy delays in completion in 1986 caused the marketing to be out of step with production, a few were sold but it had damaged the company which was then sold itself. The new owners developed it a little further before quietly dropping it.



CLEVER DEAD END

— In 1988, a completely new mixer concept was demonstrated by French company ABAC. It was a digitally controlled analogue desk but rather

than thinking in channel strips the control surface was made by specialised modules that clipped together, each module being one console function for a number of channels. Apparently available in up to 64 inputs, the input channels were able to be user configured. All console functions were fully automated, and with the electronics being in a cable or fibre optic connected rack it was possible to have more than one control surface for the same rack with assigned priorities (*Still rare today. Ed*)



SMALL BUT INFLUENTIAL

— As makers of their own chips, Yamaha has consistently been able to launch 'surprise' products with components

only available to them. The DMP7 Digital Mixing Processor appeared at the Autumn 1987 AES Convention — an 8x2 digital mixer with motor faders, full automation and internal effects all for a price that was in the loose-change bracket. It wasn't about to challenge the pro consoles but it did announce the MI maker's capabilities at an MI price point. A year later, the DMP7D added digital I-Os and suddenly was capable of handling a simple digital multitrack mix when multiple units were used in cascade mode. It was advance warning of the DMC1000, the O2R and everything that's come after.



BIG BUT COMPACT AND TRANSPORTABLE

— First seen in 1987, Synergy One from Florida-based Analog Digital Synergy Inc was an outwardly refined console concept. It was the first design to

have the appearance of transportability but it stuck closely to a fairly basic in-line approach with a knob-per-function and fully modular construction. The pictured version was 16-channel but 64 appeared a maximum size. Aside from a means of digital interfacing with full reset and recall it didn't appear to offer a 'digital advantage' and was last seen in 1990. To most it proved that while an analogue control surface is initially attractive most expected more for a 'digital' price tag.



DIGITAL SORTED

— Neve did much of the commercial ground work for the all-digital console with its DSP consoles in the early 1980s and hawking demo

boxes around for a couple of years previously. The first two DSP consoles were commercial products but in retrospect were very much still prototypes that experienced continuous development to make them do what was originally promised. The last few DSP consoles were sold to German broadcasters by which time they were far more refined and 'standard'. With this knowledge Neve then started afresh with music recording consoles, the result being the Capricorn which defined in 1992 much of what is now accepted as 'normal'. ■