

Audient Sumo

The whole topic of analogue versus digital summing is one that has attracted much recent debate in the pages of this publication and elsewhere. Whatever your own personal view of whether analogue summing is inherently better than digital, or whether it is only really putting imperfections back into the mix, a host of manufacturers are now more than willing to take your cash in exchange for a box that performs this process without the expense of a large-format analogue console.

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AUDIENT'S SUMO ENTERS this particular arena (or should that be the dohyo?) in the form of a neat 1U rack unit. Capable of summing 16 analogue signals arranged as 8 stereo pairs into a single stereo output bus, the unit has been designed from the outset to offer the sort of headroom required from today's DAW users, with +28dBu available at acceptable levels of distortion (<0.003% @ 1kHz). What sets the Sumo apart though, is the sort of intelligent design and additional features that really add value to what is, at first glance, a rather mundane looking piece of kit.

Analogue inputs on the rear panel are via two 25-pin D-Sub connectors, each handling four stereo pairs of balanced audio. For those of us for whom soldering or crimping D-Sub connectors is a personal vision of hell (*Form an orderly queue. Ed*), Audient can also supply ready made looms terminating in XLRs or even more D-Subs that allow direct connection to interfaces such as Digidesign's 192. If more than 16 channels of summing are required, up to three additional Sumos can have their output buses fed into the master unit's bus via a third 25-pin D-Sub, giving up to 64 channels.

A large 26-LED stereo output meter dominates the front panel, labelled from -36 to +26dBu. With the optional digital output card installed, 0dBFS equates to +24dBu, so the last segment can serve as an overload indicator if required. Although nominally all odd numbered inputs are summed to the left bus, and all even numbered ones to the right, a couple of switches below the meter can make the first two channel pairs into mono inputs, panned dead centre.

Sumo also features its own dynamics processing, courtesy of a stereo compressor based on the bus compressor found on Audient's ASP8024 console, with the addition of a peak limiter. If this isn't to your taste, or if you feel the need for some overall EQ, provision is made on the rear panel for a pair of fully balanced insert points, which can be switched in or out and also switched to be either pre or post Sumo's own dynamics processing. A mix gain control allows the pre dynamics and insert signal to be trimmed down by up to 20dB — useful if all of those DAW tracks have been subject to a normalising frenzy.

A mix master knob gives the final gain control to the mix bus before it either leaves the unit via a pair

of XLR connectors, or hits the optional digital output card. And for its final trick, Sumo also offers a monitor output on the rear panel with its own front panel level control, the source for which can be the mix bus or an external stereo source. A neat and simple touch, and one that makes the unit even more attractive to those who are literally mixing 'in-the-box'.

If I was being picky, having the option of switching between two pairs of monitors would have been a welcome addition. Nevertheless, it's clear that Audient has provided more than just a high-quality summing amplifier here, and thought hard about its target market.

But how does it perform? To find out, Sumo was fed from the first 16 analogue outputs of a Pro Tools HD system and a mix set up. This same mix was then simultaneously output via a stereo bus send from Pro Tools via another pair of analogue outputs. An initial A/B comparison revealed some subtle differences between the two mixes. While the analogue summed version seemed to lack the absolute bass extension of the digitally summed version, there was a sense that mid-range frequencies seemed to tighten their focus considerably, making a mix that featured extensive guitar and vocal tracks breathe a lot better.

Imaging generally also seemed to be better defined, and although the Sumo's output seemed a lot less 'hyped' at the extremes of frequency range, high frequency transients seemed to be less smeared. The differences are small, but noticeable, and it's actually very hard to say that one is better than the other. At the end of the day it's a subjective call.

But the real eye-opener was Sumo's compressor and peak limiter. Strapped across the mix bus, this proved remarkably flexible and was clean sounding in all applications from gentle bus compression to a more radical approach to maximise loudness. It's not without its annoyances — most notably the switched rather than variable settings for ratio, attack and release, which I sometimes found didn't quite match the exact setting I was looking for. Nevertheless, it succeeded in generating mixes that sounded loud and modern, but in a much more satisfying and natural sounding manner than using plug-ins — the unit is almost worth the asking price just for this UK£995 (+VAT).

Sumo is an obvious extension to Audient's

outboard product line — coupled with the ASP008 mic preamp it neatly wraps a capable analogue layer around any DAW. You will have to use your own ears to decide if the effect of analogue summing is something you like or need, but when you consider the neat touches and additional features on offer, it looks like an enticing proposition. ■

PROS

Quiet; plenty of headroom; great dynamics section; doubles as a basic studio monitor controller.

CONS

Switched parameters for compressor sometimes don't quite hit the spot; do you really want to add another conversion step to your audio?

EXTRAS



Audient's ACS8024 is described as a high resolution mixing console with an integrated hardware control surface that combines the sound and feature mix of the ASP8024 with an additional Command 8 bay fitted for Pro Tools control. The worksurface has been shown with a 15-inch TFT display (17-inch is possible) and a keyboard and mouse. This model also sports black walnut side cheeks, armrest and top trim, with US-style knobs and caps.

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