



## Audient Zen

**GEORGE SHILLING** meditates on the art of external recording and mixing with a DAW using the power of Audient's Zen console. Time for an appropriate proverb, perhaps?



It's not often you get the chance to review equipment that is named after the editor of the magazine, so the email with the subject 'Zen for review' initially led me to some mistaken assumptions! After a period of a particular kind of meditation, however, a large heavy packing case arrived, and within it I found enlightenment.

But first, a little background. At a time when industry gossip was all about the future of digital consoles, Audient somewhat surprisingly and bravely launched the ASP8024 as a brand-new analogue console, with terrific sound quality at a rather more affordable price than some traditional big-name big-desks. It has become extremely popular in mid-range commercial studios and private facilities requiring a reliable and excellent-sounding analogue console and has consequently also been taken up strongly in the education sector. Audient also has a broad range of analogue outboard and monitoring controller products.

Available in 16- or 32-frame sizes, costs have been reduced in Zen by eliminating standard features common on traditional analogue consoles, such as onboard EQ and modular channel strips. However, a closer look at the Zen reveals a number of interesting and some unique features, many of which are lacking on larger, more expensive consoles — even the ASP. The centre section is comprehensive, and even includes a bus compressor.

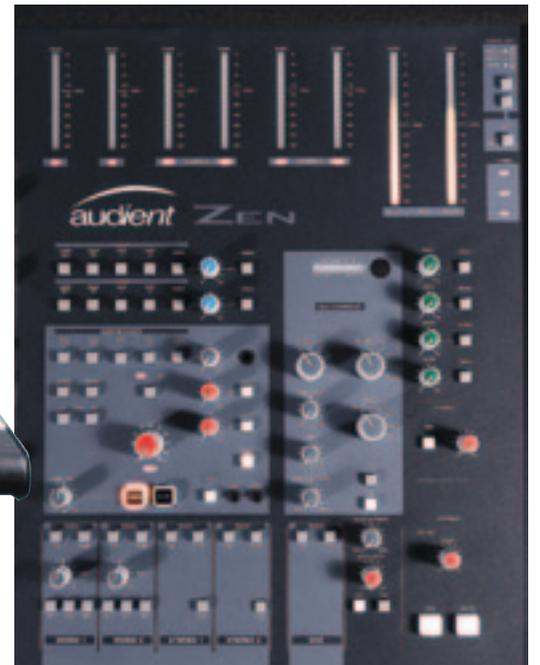
This is a desk designed to be used with a DAW (where you will have plenty of possibilities of plug-in EQ). It is worth noting that all rear panel audio

connections are on high-quality individual XLRs, with only inserts and external connection to the bus compressor relegated to TRS jacks, but all of these connections feature separate balanced send and return connections.

The physicality of the console is impressive, with high-quality construction. The metal case is a smart sparkly black, with a proper wooden armrest below the faders. This overhangs whatever surface the console is placed on by a few inches, although Audient's claim that this creates space for your computer keyboard might be over-egging the feature list a little!

Power supply is integral, so there are no noisy or hot racking boxes to install, although some warmth emanates from the slats above the meters. Above the faders the case is steeply raked, creating an easily reachable control surface and a large enough rear panel to include excellent connectivity (more later). The Alps 100mm faders are optionally touch-sensitive and motorised in a panel with a pleasing brushed aluminium surface and big illuminating Solo, Mute and Safe soft buttons. The included LED meters at the top are bright and clear, and the main panel is finished with an under-surface printed polycarbonate overlay, so there is no chance of the legending rubbing off. Indication LEDs shine through from behind this.

The 16-channel review unit was extremely heavy, yet built robustly and with precision. All knobs are smoothly damped, with no scraping or play, and buttons operate positively. Although many of the latching centre section buttons are accompanied by



illuminating LED indicators, this is not the case with the grey and white buttons employed on the channels. Nor is their travel particularly deep, so you must keep a close eye on their statuses. Let's explore the channel strip features and functions...

At the top is the extremely clear 20-segment yellow LED peak meter, which is legended in digital-stylee, with zero at the top (and a red 'over' indicator) but a 0VU mark at -14dB, which is equivalent to +4dBu, allowing good headroom. Main Mix meters are similar, but gain a few more LEDs for extra clarity. Under the meter, a small illuminated channel number helps locate which strip you are staring at. The microphone preamps are taken from the ASP and comprise Gain from 6 to 60dB, individual 48V phantom power, High Pass at 75Hz, and Polarity Reverse. There are two further alternative channel inputs: Line and DAW.

The chosen path is routed through a +/-15dB centre-detented Trim pot. Using a bit of jiggery-pokery, there is a similar wheeze to that of the SSL X-Desk: with the Stereo Cue Alt Input you can use both of these line inputs on mixdown, thus doubling the number of summed channels, although, of course, only the large faders will benefit from automation.

Working down from the input section, next is a useful meter button to choose whether you are viewing channel input or direct output. Alongside this is a pair of buttons to determine the choice of no less than four different possible Direct Out configurations, and here you must refer to the manual as the legending does not entirely explain what is happening. These comprise Post Fader/Post Mute, Pre Insert/Pre Fader (post Trim), Post Insert/Pre Fader, and Channel (Pre everything!). That certainly covers all eventualities, and gives plenty of flexibility for different working methods.

The channel Insert button is just below the Channel/DAW selector, but this merely switches the Return into circuit — usefully, the Send jack is always active, providing possibilities such as parallel compression.

Next along the strip is the routing; five buttons provide routing to two mono buses, two stereo buses, and the main stereo mix. The four buses are all provided with master faders, switchable inserts (each with a Sum button for parallel compression), and their own routing buttons to main mix, or, in the case of the mono buses, also to the stereo buses (with accompanying pan pot). Furthermore, there are routing buttons for the stereo cue to assign it to stereo

bus or main mix, so Michael Brauer-style parallel compression is more than amply catered for here. Cue level and pan pots are also accompanied by routing buttons to send to Cue A and Cue B, for easily configured dual-foldback systems. In the centre section these Cues can also sum together either or both mono Auxes 1 and 2, plus the DAW mix and DAW FB outputs, and even the control room source with an adjustable level. The stereo Cue also features individual pre/postfader switching, and the aforementioned Alt input button. Those mono Auxes are switchable so that Aux 1 can alternatively send to Aux 3; similarly, Aux 2 can instead route to Aux 4. Again, each of the two mono Aux knobs can separately switch pre/postfader.

Below this is the main Pan, and, at the bottom, another useful row of channel numbers, although these are not illuminated.

The faders seem to use a slightly unusual law, with an expanded area around their middle, making fine adjustments easier. However, the big feature of the motorised faders is the included 'automation'. I use quotation marks here because, actually, there is no onboard automation provided, despite the faders. Audient has cheated slightly with this and come up with an ingenious method of using the HUI protocol to let the DAW do the hard work of automating the faders. Make no mistake, this console can only be used in a primitive fashion as a HUI controller — there is no control of pan or send, the Solo buttons don't work, and there is no bank shifting. The intention here is for you to hook up the two pairs of MIDI connections and create 16 dummy channels in the DAW, merely for use as automation recording and playback channels for level and mute. This works surprisingly well, with all the clever touch, trim, latch, or whatever DAW modes now available to control real audio faders. The big illuminating Solo, Cut and Safe buttons are excellent, and Safe buttons can be used as Solo Safe or as Automation Safe.

In practice, the automation works well with Pro Tools; occasionally faders failed to glide back after a trim (possibly a MIDI/HUI problem), but generally the motorised faders are incredibly snappy — really a joy to use. However, unless you get back into the old habit of recording manual moves, the methodology can become a bit cumbersome. The problem is the tendency and habit of editing graphically; without the underlying graphic of the audio for reference this isn't so easy, so you tend to scroll down to the actual audio and edit that DAW channel's automation instead, which perhaps defeats the object of fader automation! And unless there are dynamic inserts on the console strips, little is lost by doing that. This may just be a question of getting into different operational habits, but, with the DAW on hand, I found that I simply didn't need to automate many faders.

Excellent centre section monitoring facilities include three sets of monitor outputs with separate trims for the two Alts; useful L channel phase invert; Mono; separate L and R cuts; four stereo external



inputs; plus a front panel 3.5mm Jack with accompanying level knob. All externals can be summed, although there are no surround facilities. Variable Dim is provided, and there are SIP, PFL and AFL solo modes, with a variable 'Solo in Front' level and a solo indicator right under the main control room monitor volume knob. There is also a useful fixed monitoring level setting button labelled REF, with trim pots to set the level. There are Aux master knobs with Solo buttons, and an integral talkback mic — sensibly located away from the talkback buttons! Under the front edge of the console is an XLR for an external talkback mic. Also under the front edge is a handy stereo headphone output, with its own On button and level control on the centre section.

The bus compressor includes controls with remarkably similar settings to a well-known rival bus compressor, with the addition of a Parallel compression Dry/Wet knob and a few more 'in-between' Ratio settings. Predictably, it sounds good, if not an exact clone. Helpfully, the compressor's inputs and outputs are accessible on the rear panel, so it could be put to other uses when tracking. The main mix insert also features a Sum button. One extra option is a stereo digital out, and the front panel provides for external Word clock selection and sample rate (44.1, 48, or 96kHz).

I used the console 'in anger' for a metal band on tracking, overdubbing, and mixing sessions. The mic preamps sounded great, and summing with the desk, rather than mixing in the box, tempted me into using more external outboard, and the sonics certainly achieved some extra dynamic vitality lacking from ITB mixes. I did slightly mourn the lack of recall, but to include this feature would require a significant price hike, I imagine. (Zen16 UK£5,500 + VAT; Zen16 with moving faders £6,500 + VAT.)

Overall, the Zen was a joy to use, entirely worthy of its name — dependable and of equal high quality to the editor of this esteemed mag.

There is a Zen proverb: 'When walking, walk. When eating, eat.' And so, perhaps, when recording and mixing, use a Zen. ■

#### PROS

Top-notch sound quality; ASP mic preamps; bus compressor; excellent central facilities; designed for DAW integration; novel approach to automation; built to last; good layout.

#### CONS

No recall; no automation possible on bus and mix masters; no button status LEDs (except in the centre section).

#### Contact

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