Crane Song Egret

Combining a D-AC with stereo mixing and summing this box is described as a flexible DAW back end. GEORGE SHILLING gives this bird the eye…

The Crane Song Egret (comically referred to as 'Egert' throughout the manufacturer's information sheet) is described as a 'flexible workstation back end'. Perhaps that isn't the best bit of marketing spiel I've heard but it is certainly designed for a number of uses. This bird's main function is D-A conversion, but it also includes stereo mixing for eight mono line inputs, plus stereo Return inputs. As well as mix summing, you could plumb in mic amps for balancing live-to-stereo recordings.

This heavy two rack-space box follows the usual classy Crane Song design theme, with a brushed aluminium front panel, green knobs and round pushbuttons (UK£3800 + VAT). Connectivity on the reverse is comprehensive and expandable. Four stereo AES XLR inputs are provided for access to the 8 channels at sample rates up to 192kHz, but there is also a pair of ADAT connectors, allowing S/Mux input at sample rates up to 96kHz. In addition to the digital inputs there are eight TRS Analogue Inputs for direct access to the mixer. Further TRS jacks provide mono Cue send output and stereo Return inputs. There are no controls for the latter, they simply sum into the mix bus before the master Gain knob.

Eight XLRs provide individual analogue outputs, and a further pair provide main outputs. The individual outs are sourced directly from the convertor, before the mixer gain controls, so they could be used as insert sends, returning via the jacks. On the far left of the rear panel is a 25-pin D-connector labelled Expand, and it is assumed that this is the means by which multiple Egrets can be connected. Furthermore, the long-established Spider mixer (*Resolution* V3.3) can also be used to sum further analogue inputs. The mains IEC socket is accompanied by a rocker switch — it's irksome to find this on the back rather than the front, but presumably there is a sonic advantage.

On the front panel the channels are arranged left-to-right. The largest knob at the bottom of each channel is a damped Gain control and this is a continuous pot simply calibrated 0 to 10. Alongside each of these is a black button labelled Analog, allowing you to access individually the rear panel analogue inputs on a channel-by-channel basis. Working upwards there is an Aux send knob, again scaled 0 to 10. Sends are post-fade, so these are more suitable for reverb or effects than a headphone cue,

and are summed to the mono Cue TRS output jack on the rear. Next above this is the Pan knob, there is no centre détente here but these are most likely to be set to extreme left or right.

The white pushbutton is for Mute and is accompanied by the only illuminating indicator on the channel, a tiny red LED. Pushing this button audibly operates a relay. Above this is a red Solo button, and pushing this in causes other channels' Mute relays to operate with a click, lighting their LEDs. Alongside this is the Color knob, legended from 0 to 10, more of which later. The three smaller knobs are damped like the Gain knobs, perhaps even slightly stiffer. On the right of the channels' controls is the master section. At the top is another small green pot for controlling the master Cue/Aux level and below this is a Phones master level (with plenty of juice) for the headphone output at the far bottom right of the front panel. Under this is the master Gain. The master output Gain knob is a clicked soft-control, and it seems to control a series of relay switches, clicking up in 1dB steps for the upper part of its range, with LEDs for level indication. It is not one LED per step though, with in-between positions resulting in two LEDs lighting variously, and in varying brightnesses. This is helpful for accurately recalling settings, although of course the same is not true of any other control knobs here. Tall vertical stereo LED meters indicate output level clearly and brightly. A large green lamp shines when power is applied, and two toggles are located between this and the headphone socket. The first is a three position switch labelled Source. This selects different digital inputs between AES, ADAT (in the unlabelled centre position) and 'Digi 2', which can be safely assumed to refer to the expansion socket. It is claimed that the convertors can operate independently, even at different sample rates, although it's not clear how this is achieved.

The other toggle labelled SRC enables or disables the sample rate conversion circuit 'for cases where lower latency is required'". However, at 44.1kHz using the ADAT input I could only determine a miniscule difference, latency being roughly 0.05s in both switch positions. At 96kHz using the AES input the latency was far lower, and any difference was again barely measurable.

As with all Crane Songs I have encountered this

is a well built device. The review model included one slightly intermittent Solo button, but this was likely due to the device having been banged about on its journeys across the globe, and in a van around the UK. No manual seems to exist, just the aforementioned two-page information sheet, but operation is fairly straightforward.

Using the device for basic summing with channels all hard-panned and set to the same gain level, I reset a mix to use the Egret's convertors and mixer, rather than summing inside the computer. This was a fairly straightforward piano and vocal recording, with backing vocals, an extra keyboard part and a little percussion. Summing was achieved before returning to the computer via 192 analogue inputs for mix bus processing. I set all the Color knobs to zero initially. With levels carefully matched, (revealing bags of headroom according to the meters) I definitely felt that the Egret made things a little more open and less 'digital', with a definite hint of a more musical and analogue sound, along with great clarity. It was only very subtly different, but certainly a more pleasurable listen. As with previous Crane Song encounters, it seems that sonic purity is high on the list of priorities of designer David Hill. Turning up all the Color knobs, things changed, again in a fairly subtle way, but there was noticeable added warmth and the suggestion of some gentle compression, rather like you might achieve with a well-aligned tape machine with levels set just right to squeeze the tape slightly. If you've heard the Phoenix plug-in, you'll have an idea of what this achieves, just softening the edges slightly.

Summing with the Egret (as with most summers) can create variables that might cause inaccuracy or certainly slow down the instant, accurate recall in-the-box mix guarantees, especially if you are tempted to use the Cue send for a reverb. But the Crane Song achieves summing in such a temptingly elegant manner, (with the Color enhancement adding gorgeous, subtle flavour), that I'd love to chain multiple Egrets for a veritable summing feast. But even on its own, this is a very tasty bird! ∎

PROS	Super high-quality D-A conversion and mixing; Subtle but pleasant 'Color' enhancement.
CONS	Only eight inputs; no channel meters; no Pan centre détente; no manual.

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