Solid State Logic C200

Flagship to the new C Series dynasty, SSL's new big digital board owes much to the MT but nods in the analogue direction too.
ZENON SCHOEPE ticks the boxes.

DESPITE THE ATTENTION grabbed by the prerelease of the C100 desk, SSL sneaked out the C200 console at the AES in Amsterdam to what has to be regarded as a pretty positive response. Here was a digital desk that looked true to the analogue in-line heritage but also managed to modernise it with clever use of screens.

Immediately identified by most as a music production and 5.1 board, it actually has more of a multipurpose aspect to it and would be equally at home in broadcast and in trucks, particularly as its worksurface can be scaled down. The big development is 96kHz operation, something that all previous SSL digitals have lacked, courtesy of a new core that combines with a different approach to building desks. It's lighter, some 30% lighter than a comparable MT, more compact, but certainly not small, and cheaper.

Just how much cheaper depends on the amount of C200 worksurface you opt for. However, a 48 fader, 96-channel C200 works out at around two-thirds the price of a 96-channel K Series, for example. Everything is relative.

A mobile configuration is available that removes the centre screen section from the surface allowing the width to be reduced for OB vans. The display becomes remote along with its associated meters, and the remaining controls can be stand mounted separately if required with important function keys transferred to a waiting switch bank in the remaining centre section.

There are a number of options in the software that are more appropriate to broadcast use, for example, and these can be activated or ignored as part of the desk configuration. Similarly you have the choice of altering the physical order of the processing 'tiles' (EQ and auxes, for example) in the channel strips.

I won't pretend that I can do justice to this desk in the space available, treat this instead as a taster and get yourself in front on one.

First impressions yield a slightly less busy worksurface than the MT and this can be attributed immediately to the screens in the 'meterbridge' which take some of the density away. These screens are the strongest visual differentiation from the MT consoles. The use of screens contributes to a shorter depth than the MT because routing has been centralised and its

display is now up on the screen rather than being on its own tile. Contrary to some misinformation, the C200 has no touchscreens but the C100, which has shades of Scenaria about it, has one positioned centrally.

The C200 control surface is clearly derived from the MT, however, things have moved on since the latter arrived and it is the influence of the company's analogue desks on the new product that is most telling. SSL is keen to appeal to J and K Series drivers and if they were to go in to the C200's Protection System they'd find the same kind of statuses but for many more objects. Project management is also the same as on a J and K, as is the machine control, 4-port synchroniser within the desk, and motors off is available on the automation, to name but a few. Things like the automation functionality are identical to the K except that you have the ability to automate a lot more of the surface. Intrigued? Have a go for yourself and make your own decisions.

I would describe the C200 as a meeting point between the MT and the XL.

The constituent parts are the worksurface, the processor rack, and remote-controlled mic stageboxes.
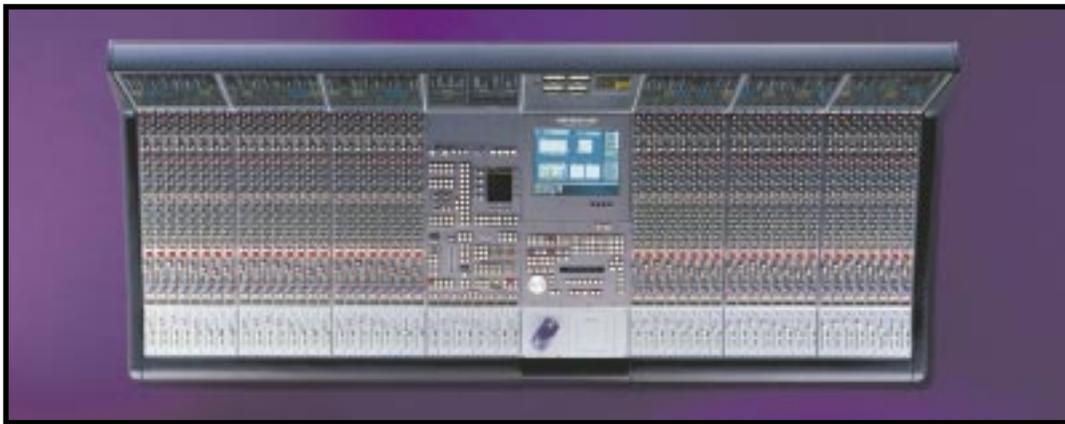
Key to the whole shooting match is the Centauri (pronounced century) technology in the core. The tie in here between the C100 and C200 is that both interface to the same new hardware; they share the same I-O, the same DSP, but employ different worksurfaces and different software. Among the biggest benefits is that the core is much smaller at 15U than anything you'd ever find hanging off the end of an MT. This diminutive rack contains all the processing in the front and all the I-O at the rear. The desk has scaleable channel DSP and scaleable I-O all in the same unit.

The rack contains the PSU with an option for redundancy and slots for channel DSP cards. On the C200, each card provides 32 channels of in-line (that's long and short fader paths) at 48kHz, half that at 96kHz. Previous generation SSL digitals could only run to 48kHz due to hardware limitation. The new desks use SHARC processing for the first time. You can add processing cards to raise your channel count, for 48kHz or 96kHz, at a later date and it's also significant that the processing is 192kHz ready. The I-O is not, currently.

The rack runs to a maximum of six cards for 96 channels at 96kHz, twice that at 48kHz. The rear panel has eight slots for I-O cards that can be any combination of analogue (24), AES (32) or MADI (56 or 64) to give a maximum spec of 512 I-Os. A routing card allows fitting of a fibre expansion port to connect to a stagebox and there are two types.

The C Series Stagebox is designed for live production with 48 mics and four outputs as standard that can be expanded with extra D-ACs and GPIs. This connects back on the fibre optic to the core and affords full remote control from the worksurface. The Super-Pre stagebox is a C Series version of that found on the XL and MT Plus and, being higher speed, is intended for music recording. This takes 24 mics and uses motorised pots for the remote control. It's the better one then and is around 30% more than the standard stagebox. You can have a mixture of both types.

As far as the worksurface is concerned it's quite possible, perhaps inevitable, that you will have more channels than you have worksurface. The one I looked at had 48 faders controlling 96 channels and you can quickly A and B between the two layers. You can buy an 8-fader strip and a centre section as the bare control minimum but you add bays in blocks of eight up to 96 faders.

If you choose to go much smaller than the number of processing channels you have an extension of 'bay swapping', which brings a chosen bay into the sweet spot, allows you to access 'virtual bays' by paging them across the worksurface that you do have.

The meterbridge screens are crucial to the look and operation of the C200. Above the input banks, the top half of the displays show input metering for the channels. Blue meters relate to the large fader, gold relates to the small fader. Light blue and dark blue let you see what happening on the layer below. You can create a stereo module anywhere on the surface by linking the A and B layers.

The screens also show routing, which is assigned centrally, to the 48 multitrack and other buses from long and small faders with the same colour co-ordination. The twelve main buses are routable from both faders and you can also define the panning up to 5.1.

The centre section has more metering than an MT with routes on to the 12 main buses and a programmable matrix that allows you to fold these

down to your 5.1 and simultaneous stereo downmix, for example. The central screen follows MT principles of allowing visualisation of a whole channel's processing complete with graphic representation of EQ curves and dynamics bends. It's supplemented by a smaller screen set in to the surface, like on the MT, to show such things as processing block assignment and aux master status.

The channel strip is a solid interpretation of an arrangement that is extremely well known. Starting off at the top with gain controls, a dynamics section (dynamics and EQ have presets that are project independent) with compressor-limiter and a gate-expander, and delay.

Two filters are accessed from one pot and can be split away from the 4-band EQ and inserted into the sidechain. Default EQ is two parametric mids and two shelves but can be changed to 4-band parametric. EQ profiles have been brought over from the MT and offer standard C200, full frequency range on each band, and emulations of analogue E and G series.

In analogue desk style, the dynamics, filters and EQ can be split as blocks between the long and the short faders. There are 12 auxes and they're accessed via six pots and a shift switch from the short and long faders. Any pair can be linked for stereo from the masters. Like the 9k, you can assign an aux to the multitrack buses for extra sends.

Turning a pot throws up a numeric readout of its value on the screen above the relevant bay, and it's also reflected in EQ curves on the central screen. Plus there are 'light rings' around the pots for positional information. You can freely and easily copy processing sections across the desk.

The C200 is fully multichannel capable from long and short faders and you drive panning from pot, puck and pen and there's divergence and a separate level to the LFE. K Series tricks like Ultipan are in progress.

To my tired old eyes it's an impressive looking piece of real estate. The MT similarities are strong. It's the usual SSL trick of balancing top-layer simplicity with a depth of complexity that would cover pretty much any eventuality at the highest level. The fact that it's digital merely means that the depth is deeper than any of its analogue boards and consequently far more configurable and tunable to a specific task or operational preference. That's what digital is supposed to be about.

Its automation remains logical and consistent (the two aren't always associated) and I'd like to think that a J Series user would come to terms with the total dynamic aspect of the channel strips fairly quickly and painlessly. There's a huge chunk of common knowledge that they'll bring with them.

It's a very information-rich surface with high levels of visual data. The desk has clearly benefited from feedback from MT and MTP users, and there are now quite a few of these. This new incarnation of the worksurface reflects this but also confirms that SSL wasn't that far off the mark in the first place choosing to champion a largely knob-per-function approach and layout.

If anything, the rationalisation of the surface, the movement of routing on to the screens, for example, has uncluttered what was a fairly busy and brightly-lit expanse on the MT. The C200 is better, clearer and more effective.

As with so many first punts at applying a technology to a new market, the manufacturer is obliged to include things to support, comfort and encourage the new user even though they may privately suspect that they will prove to be unnecessary. Second 'pass' worksurfaces (like the C200) are always better and more free-flowing in their directness because the user is now more confident and the designer has the freedom to develop a modern solution rather than a bridge to the past.

It's never going to be easy coming out with a new SSL because everybody will have an opinion on it – particularly those who can't afford them and never use them – just like people can tell you what they don't like about the new Ferrari. It's largely academic.

The key points are: it's a better package than an MT; it's cheaper than an XL; it's undoubtedly powerful and sophisticated; it's versatile and flexible; it's easy to use by analogue SSL pilots; it's lighter and more compact; it's 96kHz.

It deserves to do well and I think it will. ■

PROS Good application of accepted analogue operation to a digital worksurface; deceptively powerful; slick; looks the part; cheaper.

CONS No Ultipan (yet); still an expensive proposition.

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