Smart AV Tango 2

It's a DAW controller with the solid operational and 'feel' characteristics akin to the great hardware DAWs of yore. ROB JAMES swings those hips and swishes those flares in delight.

*T*he Tango is arguably the highest form of Latin-American dance. It's decidedly risqué when done properly but also graceful, powerful and elegant *(You speak with the authority of a man who knows. Ed)*. It's also a bright orange soft drink. Last but by no means least it's also a rather interesting DAW controller from Australian manufacturer Smart AV. At first glance Tango 2 belongs in the assignable console camp but embodies a number of innovative concepts that take it beyond what you might expect. Smart AV has some unusual features of its own and there is a close link between the manufacturer and the real world. Roger Savage, Smart AV CEO is also CEO of sister company Soundfirm Australia, a major facilities house with branches in Melbourne, Sydney and Beijing.

With an R&D pedigree including people from Fairlight and the ill-fated DSP, Smart AV has been innovative since its inception. The first product, the Smart Console, introduced the world in 2004 to the concept of the 'ARC'. This takes the form of a touch-sensitive display that offers rapid access to a large number of channels and enables parameters to be applied to multiple channels extremely quickly. The first Tango took the concept further by applying it to the top of a large touchscreen (22-inch) where it is known as MonARC (ARC for monitors). A simple wipe across the top of the touch screen enables you to scroll across anything up to 240 channels and gives almost instant access to any channel. Using MonARC, channels can be interrogated and assigned to faders; tracks can be armed for recording, channels soloed or muted and much more. The UK£7700 (+ VAT) Tango 2 takes the game to another level with its enhanced user interface.

The Tango 2 touchscreen is agreeably positive in action, unlike many others. With a semi-matt anti-glare finish the screen is also a lot easier on the eyes than a glossy one. The colours may be slightly more muted but for a controller, so what? While on the subject of colours, the default colour scheme is quiet and 'of the moment'. If you want the original Tango scheme, or something brighter, or would simply like to highlight specific elements, the colour scheme is user customisable. So, if you let the runner loose on the Tango at lunchtime and come back to find the screen in garish shades of orange 'you'll know when you've been Tangoed'.

At bottom right there is an area ideal for exercising a pet mouse and the lower part of the wrist-rest is equipped with a drawer that accommodates a wireless computer keyboard. Of course, there is also a keyboard available on the touch screen for adding labels, etc.

From the layout to the OLED displays and the clear and positive buttons this console surface is a tactile delight. Control from the Tango jog wheel is excellent. In Pyramix, at least, it offers the same level of precision and number of parameters that can be controlled as the best of the old dedicated hardware DAWs. This is a big deal for those of us who grew up taking superb jog/shuttle performance for granted. To be picky, the faders, although motorised and well spaced, are not quite up to the same standard. However, linear motor faders or even just better quality conventional ones would add a significant percentage to the cost. Further cementing its professional credentials, the Tango 2 has six channels of programmable GPIO for such things as footswitch inputs and cue light outputs on jacks. Up to four 12-fader extension units can be added and assembled in any physical order into a larger console.

From bottom to top each of the 8-fader strips has a Hold button, 100mm motorised, touch-sensitive fader, Inject Touch Point, Mute button, Solo Touch Point and a rotary encoder. Hold locks the channel(s) currently being controlled by a strip to it, regardless of other actions. Inject enables a single channel to be assigned to a control slot in conjunction with the MonARC. If Inject is held, you can interrogate multiple channels rapidly by wiping a finger along the MonARC. This is very useful when looking for a stray setting. Used in conjunction with Hold, the Inject function can be latched, enabling a series of channel parameters to be modified rapidly.

To the left of the fader strips the top section has four talkback buttons, control room monitor level and a global Solo clear button. Talkback functionality depends on the DAW. These buttons can be used for shortcuts alternatively. The next section has the 'Ergonomic Spread' and automation control buttons. An Ergonomic Spread is Smart's nomenclature for the channels currently assigned to Tango's working strips. Spreads can be saved and recalled at will. When the console is in chair mode, touching the MonARC is equivalent to moving your chair to centre on a specific channel on a wide console — touching channel 16 on the MonARC brings channels 13 to 20 into the 8-channel slots on the Tango surface, for example. Wiping your finger up and down the MonARC enables you to move quickly around the channels. Wipe mode, on the other hand, allows non-sequential arrangements of channels to be constructed. Touching MonARC segments (in any order) populates channel slots from left to right.

The Expert Panel has an OLED display with four buttons above and 12 shortcut buttons below plus a Smart button that accesses a second layer of shortcuts.

To the right of the faders are the Active Controls and Transport Control sections. The Active controls comprise one rotary encoder with switch that controls the parameter selected currently at the finest resolution available. Pressing the knob toggles between two levels of resolution. The middle button toggles parameters and the right hand encoder works like a pot and is motorised. The Transport section has a further OLED display with 12 programmable edit keys. The jog wheel is smooth and well weighted and, depending on the DAW, can control such things as navigation and zoom level. To the right there are five programmable locator buttons. A further five locators can be accessed in conjunction with the Smart touchpoint. The six transport control buttons are also programmable, which means reverse play is available if the DAW supports it.

To the right of the touchscreen 8 pairs of touch-sensitive encoders with built in switches control the active channel's parameters. Parameters such as plug-in controls are assigned to them automatically and they are aligned with the screen graphics.

Each channel strip includes Input, Inserts, Dynamics, EQ, Aux Sends and Output on-screen blocks. At the bottom of the strip there are channel information and encoder information displays. Blank blocks indicate that the function is not present in the DAW channel strip. If all blocks are blank the channel isn't present in the DAW. The EQ block can be zoomed and any band on the graphical display can be adjusted with a finger on the touchscreen. Similarly, the pan block can be zoomed and panning done with a finger.

The touchscreen Edit Panel gives access to all the editing features of the DAW that can be remote controlled. With 100 buttons per page and 10 pages, up to 1000 functions could be mapped.

Two software modules, Iggy and Sassi underpin Tango. Using high speed Ethernet for basic communication with the workstation, Iggy is, in effect, a virtual large format mixing console and via this almost all workstation functions can be mapped to physical or graphical elements of the control surface. Sassi is an object-oriented graphical console that enables virtual hardware connections to Iggy to be configured in the absence of real hardware components. In short, it enables the graphical interface to be customised to suit user requirements.

The success or failure of a DAW controller is all about workflow and this is the first I've come across that could approach the productivity levels of dedicated workstations and mixing consoles. While it is perfectly possible to sit down at a Tango 2 and enjoy some of what it offers in minutes, this is a controller that merits study in depth. Just as the best

of the previous generation hardware workstations required a lot of learning and practice to achieve really slick operation and maximum productivity so the Tango 2 will repay your efforts in spades.

After a while it is easy to forget that Tango 2 is a 'mere' controller. It feels like an expensive console. This can be a little deceptive at first since you may find yourself looking for functions that are not present in the workstation being controlled. The basic rule is, if the workstation mixer can do it, you can almost certainly control it from Tango. Furthermore, Tango 2 has a DVI input that can be used to display one of the DAW screen outputs. Better still, the touchscreen control works with the DAW. Obviously, some elements of DAW UIs are likely to be a bit small for the banana fingered, so you can also use a mouse at the same time for precision.

If you are a Pyramix, Nuendo or Logic user you are well served by Tango 2 with comprehensive native or near native support. For Final Cut Pro (N.B. Not FCPX — yet) the Mackie Control protocol applies. Poor old Pro Tools users are, as ever, restricted to the HUI protocol. This is more than a little surprising and annoying since Avid indicated that it intended to open the Eucon protocol to third party developers after acquiring Euphonix.

Smart AV partnered with Merging Technologies to produce the Ramses console specifically for Pyramix. Thanks to this co-operation it should come as no surprise that perhaps the fullest level of control is achieved with Pyramix, although Nuendo/Cubase runs it a close second. Digital Performer (via OSC) and Logic aren't too far behind but the DAWs that rely on the HUI and Mackie Control protocols are handicapped in comparison. That said, Smart AV has come up with ingenious ways of making the best of what they have to work with.

If, and this is crucial, certain DAW manufacturers release their protocols properly, then Tango 2 will be the leading controller available today. Meanwhile, for Pyramix, Nuendo, Logic and Digital Performer it already is. Once you get away from the idea that it is a 'mixing console' in the conventional sense and appreciate that it is a carefully targeted workstation controller, its power becomes apparent. With the Tango 2, Smart AV has perhaps produced the missing link between the old paradigms and something far more revolutionary. ∎

PROS Excellent look and feel; the degree of control with certain DAWs; productivity.

CONS Faders not as nice as the other controls; requires effort to get the best out of it; functionality depends on the DAW being controlled.

Contact
SMART AV, AUSTRALIA:
Website: www.smartav.net
UK, Emerging: +44 208 941 6547