Soundtracs DS-00

You'll have seen the teasers and short form promo information and you could be forgiven for thinking that it's just another spin on a Soundtracs digital desk. ZENON SCHOEPE looks at one of the most significant breakthroughs in digital desk technology in recent years.

LET'S GET A COUPLE of things straight before we start: you're going to have leave your preconceived ideas about what constitutes an affordable digital desk right here and open your mind to a different way of thinking.

The DS-00 looks like a further logical iteration of Soundtracs' family of consoles, smaller perhaps and, if we're honest about it, prettier than the now rather dowdy looking older generation.

However, the visual and operational clues are all here and those familiar with the brand will be smirking already. The desk can be split into three vertical visual blocks for the sake of identification corresponding to channel/input, master section and the master screen area. The channel touchscreen on the left is surrounded by traditional Soundtracs pots and switches that impart physical control of touched on-screen parameters. The right touchscreen concerns itself mostly with set-up and other general activities. The centre section houses the physical control for monitor, transport and other switch-related functions. Both screens have 8-fader blocks beneath them that can be switched in banks to reflect layers.

At this point I'll state that I am not about to embark on a stroke by stroke account of this desk as its operation shares virtually identical principles with existing Soundtracs desks, which have been covered in detail on many occasions. I'll concentrate instead on some of the differences and draw comparisons to other models where appropriate. The DS-00 will hold no major functional surprises to anyone who is acquainted with a DPC-II onwards, just a few interesting twists.

The core DS-00 worksurface is a self-contained digital mixer that can be extended with 8-fader worksurface expanders. These can be bolted to the sides or arranged in a curve in a manner that evokes shades of the original Soundtracs Virtua. Like the Virtua it's also modular although the similarities end here. Internally the DS-00 is closest to a DS-3 but it can be expanded up to DPC-II spec.

The core console gives 64 channels of full processing, 40 buses, 24-bit on the inputs, 8 mic/line inputs, 16 line outputs, 24 AES I-O with SRC on input and output, 8 optical I-O, and 56 I-O on MADI. And here's the crunch; for this you pay around UK£27,000.

The expanders cost around UK£6000 each and run off the existing power supply – you plug one in, tell the main surface that it's positioned on the left or right, and you start to work. Adding a second expander requires adding an extra board to the main surface and that will drive another three for a grand total of four expanders.

An extra block of 32 channels of processing will cost around UK£2500 yielding a 96-channel desk. The Soundtracs effects option kit, which is also available for its other desks, will cost around the same.

A broadcast kit adds around UK£10,000 for full redundant power supplies, GPI cards, GPO cards, back stop PFL, mix minuses, etc.

For the music fraternity in need of physical presence in the control room, here's the plan. Bolt four expanders to the DS-00 for a 49 in a row single fader desk at around 3m width. Get it up to the maximum 160 channels of processing and you'd be hard pushed to break £75,000. Let's just pause for a moment and absorb that.

Every now and again you see a product that redefines expectations. The DS-00 is one of those products.

What's interesting is the approach. You're not forced to buy in to functionality that you don't want or don't understand; you can adapt the desk according to your chosen application. There are film panel expanders and pods that can be dropped in for DAWs. Even so the biggest film incarnation with all the bells and whistles will leave good change out of £100,000. 'Average' DS-00s will cost between £30,000 and £50,000, according to Soundtracs. Like all Soundtracs

desks it'll run at 96kHz, it halves the channel count, but it'll do this for 80 channels.

So how do they do it? It comes down to increased volume and purchasing power; Soundtracs is building for stock and not to order. The surface is physically smaller than even a DS-3, which has one extra input section, but it's taken the same proven SHARC engine and applied it to a modular system.

It's important to understand that this is not a stripped down package but a big desk in a smaller package that can be made bigger.

And it's not without its own unique functionality, as you'll find features on the DS-00 that you'll not see elsewhere in the range. For starters, the monitor matrix has been brought down to the front of the surface near the armrest reflecting the need to get to these easily (it's significant that these facilities were tucked away further North on previous incarnations).

With busing at the front, it has a full 40 x 8 matrix, three toggle presets plus bus tape switching, three control room monitors with all the fold downs you'd want (it mixes to 7.1), two calibrated levels, and Dolby insert points (analogue or digital).

Automation has also been brought to the front with the introduction of two sections containing dedicated switches and readouts and labeled Write to Start and Write to End. The idea here is that you can grab a time point on instigating Play, you set your balance or tweak your EQ, and when happy you hit Stop. The dynamic movements may have been written in the automation but the Write to Start mode writes your final fixed values back to the captured time point. You'll now understand what Write to End does. This is a useful and fast way of setting up balances and EQs when working on scenes, for example. Very simple, very powerful.

You can now also decide which parts of the channel you want to apply the Touch Safe function to but, other than that, the automation's the same as you'd find on any of the other Soundtracs desks. That means that they're all data compatible and that you get all the excellent editing features (inserting blank automation, scene cutting with ripple, for example) that work in conjunction with the great screen display.

Functionality changes on the channels are slight but there are improvements. The DS-00 has eight bands of EQ rather than six. That's 4-band fully parametric plus

two filters in the channel, plus high and low pass filters in the side chain (on the other desks you have to assign the channel filters into the side chain). Other bonuses include the fact that once a pot is turned the screen 'expands' its view automatically and you can now touch the aux bus that you want to work on or use the usual screen scroll buttons.

Every time I come to a new Soundtracs desk there is some gentle refinement to the operation that makes an excellent worksurface better. If you haven't driven a

Soundtracs board for a while then a return to it now would reveal a much slicker beast, and it was never a slouch.

The DS-00 has a dedicated Record Play per EQ section (as on the D4) and meter toggles change what the meterbridge looks like (PPM or VU) and what you're looking at. The main eight can be output to an external meter.

Macros are totally new and there are eight of them. You write a macro from a layout screen page that effectively makes the desk 'live' – anything you touch

Options

Aside from the input expanders a pod is available for DAW control and there's also a film matrix expander, complete with 17-inch widescreen monitor, designed in conjunction with engineer Doug Mountain from Todd AO. Price has not been fixed but it should be under £10,000.

The broadcast kit comes with redundant power supplies, GPI/O cards including full audio follow video capability, and up to a maximum of 96 mix minus sends (the desk comes with 64 channels and you expand it up in blocks of 32) dedicated per channel and fed from up to four mix minus buses. Any of the 40 buses can be subtractive bus mix minus. There's also backstop PFL with an overpress on the fader, separate PFL output, and auto PFL (Half and Full Auto PFL).

FP-00

HD-00

You can also put two DS-00s next to each other in 'shadow' mode. This allows you to bring an input screen up on one of the master sections and configures the engines to run in parallel (not cascaded). If one of them has a problem it will switch to the other in one sample. That's 100% redundancy for around £60,000.

is displayed on the screen – and then you assign the relevant action(s) to a Macro key. The keys can also be programmed for momentary action. You can program them to change the sources coming in to the matrix or to reconfigure the entire desk. Dead clever.

Input Assign calls up a whole input screen in the master section and a lone Touch-Turn control allows you grab a pot and switch for any touched screen parameter – particularly convenient for adjusting parameters in the effects section, for example. Soundtracs historians will remember a similar feature on the original Virtua.

The desk supports multistem mixing, there's local talkback built in to the surface and remote talkback with switching, two 15 input to stereo submixers for studio feeds, and, of course, it can be networked with Net-tracs to other Soundtracs desks with full file share. On-board effects processing is available as a kit for four stereo and two 7.1 effects and they're stored in snapshots and the automation.

Two glorious 'gum drop' switches select next and previous snapshots (blue is forward, red is back) with snapshots being global or local, with crossfades, sequence firing and external triggering if desired.

You get full transport control in 9-pin, SMPTE and MTC along with a jog and shuttle dial and, before you ask, it writes automation at less than play speed and in reverse.

The arrival of the DS-00 at its price point is good timing, according to Soundtracs, as room rates and build budgets are not what they were. At the lower end of its price scale I'd see the desk pitted against the Yamaha DM2000 and the Procontrol but up from here we're now into Soundtracs country.

The fact that the DS-00 is cheap to begin with and cheap to expand means that it can genuinely grow with your needs and hopefully your business expansion.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to picture a version for a project studio, commercial music studio, small post, big post, film, broadcast or OB. The constituent parts are all here.

No matter which way you come at this desk it is hard to criticise especially when it has the price/performance knock out punch. And let me say it again: it's not a stripped-down package, it's a big desk in a smaller package that can be made bigger and can be tailored to the application.

I'd like one and I think you could find room for one too. ■

PROS Price/performance; proven powerful technology; modular processing; modular worksurface; looks great; did I mention price?

CONS You'll probably end up spending more than you originally planned simply because expanding a desk is so cheap and it looks so good.

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