Steinberg Houston

Described as a Mission Controller for its Nuendo and Cubase systems, Steinberg has joined the ranks of those offering proprietary hardware control.

ROB JAMES

A HARDWARE CONTROL surface is this year's must-have accessory for sequencers and DAWs. This sudden obsession with real faders and knobs has caused a degree of merriment among traditional console manufacturers and some potentially lucrative opportunities. Focusrite has teamed up with Digidesign to produce the Control|24, E-Magic with Mackie for Logic Control, and here we have Steinberg's Houston, manufactured by Spirit/Soundcraft in the UK.

The ideal controller/PC or Mac workstation combination should be as intuitive and tightly integrated as the best dedicated hardware designs and relegate the host PC or Mac keyboard, mouse and screen to text entry, housekeeping and display.

Steinberg's grandly titled 'Houston Mission Controller' is at the lower cost end of this food chain. There are cheaper generic alternatives but I can't think of any that offer touch sensitive moving faders. First impressions are of a sensibly sized unit in shades of Nuendo grey with enough space to avoid clutter. Obviously the victim of industrial design, the slim, sweeping shape is attractive, as are the internally illuminated, 'jelly baby' keys. The smaller examples are positive but the rest, especially the transport controls, don't inspire confidence and often need a second prod. The jog/shuttle wheel has a clever knob with an indent and raised pip but it feels a little dead.

Houston offers MIDI and USB connections. I tried MIDI first and found it somewhat temperamental with a reluctance to communicate in more than one direction until I had uninstalled and re-installed it a few times. USB requires a simple driver installation and this worked first time for me but I have heard that others have found the opposite. No doubt this will be sorted in future firmware or driver updates. Once I decided to go down the USB route I experienced no crashes or lock-ups despite giving the system some serious abuse.

Once Houston is installed and working the fader touch sense needs calibrating to suit the specific environment. This involves holding down a couple of keys while powering up and takes a couple of minutes. The on-line manual encourages you to 'stand well back' while this is taking place, not because it is about to explode but to avoid your bulk influencing the results...

Once calibrated the faders prove to be smooth, fast and quiet with 1024 steps. There is little or no evidence of the dreaded 'rubber band' effect. Generally, control feels direct and natural, just as it should. Each fader strip has Solo Mute and Select keys plus a shaft encoder knob. There are essentially three groups of operating modes selected by three rows of keys at the top left. Fader Select is very similar to the Spirit 828 digital console's e-strip with all the knobs altering parameters on the selected channel strip. In Fader Set modes the knobs control the same function on each strip: pan, aux send 1, and so on. The third group of Global modes control instruments and the Send and Master effects. Currently only VST plug-ins that conform tightly to the specifications will work properly. Sadly, this means no control of DirectX effects.

Although Houston has only eight channel strips (plus the master) these can address as many chan-

nels as you may have in a VST mixer. Two keys shift the physical strips along the virtual VST mixer eight channels at a time or, used with the Shift key, one channel at a time. The VST mixer can be re-arranged to put specific channels together 'in view' by creating fader sets, invoked with the Fader Sets key and the numeric keypad. Other keys adjacent to the master fader allow more direct access to 'normal' channels, instrument channels, groups and busses.

Houston only displays five character track names. This would not be of any huge consequence except that it is the only indication of which fader is controlling which VST strip. You could number each track in the name field, but this only leaves 3 or 4 characters for a cryptic label.

Edit keys are used with the numeric pad to perform basic cut, copy, and paste tasks and for navigation. More editing keys would be most welcome. One real omission is any form of metering on the surface. Locator functions use the Jump Capture and Delete keys to set and move between markers.

A few minor functions such as Solo and Mute defeat were not working in the software version I tried. Some other keys currently don't do anything and others seem underused. There is clearly considerable scope for enhancing the functionality in subsequent software versions and space to accommodate new or enhanced functionality in Cubase and Nuendo.

Houston integrates well with Nuendo and Cubase, certainly better than generic third-party MIDI controllers do, but there is so much more that could be achieved. Hopefully some of this will be addressed in subsequent software versions.

By far the most useful features are the transport controls and touch sensitive faders. The layout is sufficiently open to make all this useable without inadvertent key presses and fader moves and coupled with the automation this make it possible to mix in a fluid and intuitive manner. Alone, this more than justifies Houston's existence. I find it difficult to imagine going back to using Nuendo in anger without it. □

PROS Fast, touch-sensitive moving faders; clean and uncluttered; low cost

CONS No metering; only a few basic editing keys

EXTRAS Steinberg has taken what it describes as the 'next step' with its new Cubase SX which it says is the most powerful and intuitive version to date. Features include intelligent MIDI input and processing tools, new virtual instruments and effects, easy-to-use editing, scoring, 5.1 surround mixing and mastering, a new user interface and a brand new software engine for Windows 2000/XP and Mac OS X. (see p18)

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