SSL ORIGIN

RUSSELL COTTIER enjoys Solid State Logic’s return to analogue roots

Nestled into a country lane in the heart of Oxfordshire is a somewhat unexpected centre of technology: Solid State Logic has a track record of releasing very expensive mixing consoles, but SSL has just launched something that might change the landscape of the studio industry. An analogue console with classic SSL features, a focus on modern hybrid workflows and SSL build quality that hits a price-point within the grasp of many more of us.

The SSL ORIGIN draws heavily from the SSL 4000 series, a traditional in-line mixer as one would expect. With the channel input typically feeding the Small Fader path for recording, SSL has decided against the inclusion of a traditional routing matrix at the top of each channel, and this function is handled via a microcontroller based system that saves space and is rather elegant. A traditional routing matrix is less important in the age of the DAW, especially since the desk has direct outputs on every channel. The 16 Buses will likely mostly be used for groups during mixdown, rather than for printing grouped inputs, but that option is still available for the more old-school producer/engineer.

The ORIGIN’s channel strips show a return to the painted metal and screen-print approach, and feel like they will last decades of rigorous studio use. The knobs have a slightly wider spacing than a 4k, a clever choice that makes the EQ and Aux Send sections a real breeze to use in the heat of a mix or tracking session. This thing looks and feels like a classic SSL — but without the 30 or more years of wear and tear — in fact I’d venture to say it’s easier to use.

SuperAnalogue PureDrive

The top of the channel features the control for the SuperAnalogue PureDrive CHAN Pre-amp input, offering a wide gain range from +2 to +70dB for mic inputs and -12 to +55dB for line. Very light clipping can be achieved to give the console ‘bending’ effect in default mode, but punching in the Drive button really takes the input stage into the realms of doing what analogue consoles do best: colouring with saturation. The new PureDrive circuit is somewhat similar to the SSL Variable Harmonic Drive, though the actual design has been changed to accommodate more modern components. Let me assure you that it sounds just as good as the VHD, if not better. Punching a rock vocal, slamming snare or a heavy kick though this stage can really add something special: 2nd order harmonics are introduced at lower gain levels, then as the gain is cranked the 3rd order harmonics are introduced. A light touch across a full 32 channels of a mix can really add a significant weight and thickness.

As expected there is a Flip control that switches the channel input to the Large Faders, should you need to do that. Alongside the Flip we also find a PRE button for the Direct Out if you don’t need to set the level with the fader.

It is notable at this point that the ORIGIN has a very sensible design consideration: the EQ section, despite being next in the signal path, has been moved down towards the operator. Without question, this is how all consoles should be designed from now on. It is a sad truth that in the world of DAW editing we are more sedentary in the studio, but this design revision makes seated mixing so much more of a pleasure. The fundamental controls are now all within easy reach and workflow speed is significantly improved.

The two stereo Cue Sends and four mono Aux Sends seem clean and are easy to operate. The available sends allow plenty of scope for full band live tracking sessions. In the world of mixing in DAWs we are perhaps too used to unlimited stereo sends, but the Small Fader and buses could be used for an additional stereo send if so desired.

E-Series EQ is a winner

The EQ is where things start to get really interesting again, the 242 E-Series (black knob) EQ circuitry is great. We probably all know that the E-series EQ allows quick and simple equalisation with the option of a tight enough bandwidth to really push the frequencies we need. The 12dB/Octave HF band has Shelf and Bell modes that can be used to add a little sizzle or hone in on the beater of a kick drum, for example. HMF and LMF bands are exactly what we expect with continuously variable Q and plenty of range in the boost and cut. The ORIGIN has a high-pass filter but no low-pass, which is probably an acceptable compromise. With a corner frequency sweepable from 10-400Hz the HPF was very usable in a mix scenario. The HPF normally follows the EQ in the signal flow but has dedicated Bypass and Flip switches allowing it to be placed in either the Small or Large Fader paths. This is a nice feature for printing cleaned up low-end on the way in or tiding a reverb send from the Small Fader.

The bus selection system on the ORIGIN offers a couple of ways to select routing for each channel. Either by pressing the channel’s Route to Bus button and choosing the channels to send. The routing system has nice bright blue LEDs, so it is simple to glance at the assigned buses. Clearing all these settings is achieved in a couple of button presses in the Master Section.

Moving on to the faders, there is a 60mm Small Fader and a 100mm Large Fader, from ALPS. All faders have fully balanced insert points that can be set to pre-fade if required and in true SSL fashion these are always sending, but the insert button engages the return. The Small Fader accommodates additional input sources, with the SF To Mix button effectively doubling input channel count. The Small Fader can also be used in a Post-Large Fader mode to create an additional mix based on the Large Fader position, with the Small Fader as a trim.

Each channel sports a 0dB button allowing a very quick and consistent way to sum a mix through the console at unity gain without
faders. It’s worth noting here that the Large Faders are housed on the same rugged plastic finish you would find on the Duality and AWS consoles. This means that the fader scale graphics will not wear off. Personally I was not a fan of the feel of the stock ALPS faders as I like a little more smooth resistance and weight.

**Custom-layout centre section**
The ORIGIN sports a 19” centre section that can house your own custom layout of units, including 500 series modules, control surfaces, keyboard, trackpad, monitor and of course the ORIGIN console Master Section and Group faders. This concept allows the console to become the main furniture that you would use in the studio when editing. A well designed centre section like the ORIGIN avoids the problem that I have right now of typing on a keyboard perched over my own console’s group faders.

The stereo group faders are ideally positioned for final balancing, these are not VCA masters, rather audio faders for audio groups and can be assigned to centre mono, or used as a stereo group. Of course this is the ideal setup for printing stems, something that labels and broadcast seem to insist on these days. One possible configuration that SSL are championing is the computer monitor placed upright across the meter-bridge and the Buses/Stereo Group Master Meters panel moved down the console. This worked well and the depth of the console was not too much to cause problems in viewing a 19” wide monitor.

Moving on to the Master Section there are 16 bus master trims, four stereo returns with sends to foldback if required and masters for the 6 Aux/Cue Buses. There’s an oscillator section, all the expected solo mode buttons, desk functionality controls, Auto Sleep power saving and an extensive communications panel for foldback assignment. The panel even includes an XLR socket for a talkback mic and a rear input for a studio listen mic. The classic SSL talkback and listen mic compressor circuit is accessible via the rear DB25 connectors or patch bay.

**Classic SSL Bus Compressor**
SSL absolutely had to include the classic SSL Bus Compressor, a circuit originally from the 1989 G-Series. The power of this compressor should not be underestimated in terms of getting that ‘sounds like a record’ feel. It’s tempting to overdo it sometimes, but even under heavy gain reduction the compressor sounds good. Rock mixes glued nicely with a 4:1 ratio and auto release dialing back the Attack from 30ms to wherever the compressor starts to cut into the transients just enough. The master fader comes after this in the signal chain with the master bus insert point sitting before the Bus Compressor.

The monitor control section offers outputs for three stereo monitor pairs, plus two headphone sockets hidden under the arm rest. There are buttons for the three external inputs and a 3.5mm stereo input.

ORIGIN sounds excellent. It’s clean as a whistle, with no noticeable noise-floor in normal use, and the SuperAnalogue PureDrive really lets you add as much of that saturation as you like. My test mixes came out sounding fantastic. The look and feel of the console have really been carefully considered and it really has an impressive presence, matched by the ergonomics and flexibility in the configuration.

At a list price of £33,500 the ORIGIN is an interesting beast. SSL is really catering to mid-level studios, independent producers and educators who want a solid industry-standard desk without the cost and complication of automation. Most Resolution readers will probably be familiar with the ageing consoles that populate so many commercial studios these days. Some of us will be familiar with the battle many of these 30-40 year old behemoths require to keep them running, not to mention the electricity bills involved. This is a good point to mention that the ORIGIN runs from modern switched-mode power supplies and has a configurable Auto Sleep mode that takes power consumption down from around 900 Watts in normal use, to less than 40 Watts.

The idea of a new console with well-supported spares, a focus on hybrid workflow and capacities that have not dried out, certainly starts to look very appealing when factoring in the cost savings in maintenance, downtime and power. So the SSL ORIGIN could be the ideal choice.

How is SSL achieving the keen price-point for ORIGIN? Well the answer lies in the 2017 acquisition, when SSL joined Audiotonix. Leveraging the manufacturing power and expertise of a larger group has facilitated the recent products we see from SSL. Component manufacture may have been decentralised, but SSL desks are still assembled in the heart of England and undergo hundreds of individual electronic, physical and visual tests before shipping. The factory is more accurately described as a workshop with a small team of labcoat-clad experts poring over each and every control of each and every desk before they go out. The quality control process is in the order of days per unit, not just a quick check.

Could the SSL ORIGIN become a new ‘industry standard’ console like its progenitor the 4000? Well, that’s for time to decide but it certainly has a very good chance.

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**PROS**
- Comparatively affordable for an SSL.
- Ergonomically terrific in layout and flexibility.
- PureDrive preamp is excellent.

**CONS**
- No channel dynamics included.
- Faders and fader caps could be improved.

www.solidstatelogic.com