

News

- [Home](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [People](#)
- [Review of Reviews](#)

Features

[Features](#)

PSNE World

- [Jobs on PSNE](#)
- [Digital Editions](#)
- [PSNE Archive](#)
- [Events Diary](#)
- [AES Video Casts](#)
- [PSNLive 2008](#)
- [Installation Europe](#)
- [Tech Zone](#)
- [Podcasts](#)

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- [Blur](#)
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Mixing on a budget

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Thursday, 08 January 2009



Can budget mixers ever play a significant role in a pro-audio environment? **Rob Speight** investigates.

The word budget can conjure up a swathe of different thoughts in different people. In any 'pro' environment, the word often strikes fear into the hearts of engineers as well as marketeers. Is there a place for 'budget' mixers in the pro-audio world that we like to think we inhabit? Or, should it all be left in the hands of bands

with a van, and bedroom record producers? More to the point, where is it all going, and are we likely to see a blurring of the definition between pro, semi-pro and budget?

To manufacturers, the value of the budget, semi-pro or home recording market segments cannot be underestimated, with many stating that in terms of turnover, the sector matches that of their higher end products – the volume of sales making the difference. At the top of this tree arguably sits Midas and Soundcraft. Long-established heavyweights of the mixer industry for the live environment, Soundcraft has also ventured into areas such as studio and radio. However, Midas with the launch of its Venice desk in 2002 entered the market at a new level: "Venice has been such a phenomenal success since its launch in 2002, it stunned us, in a way," says Midas' sales and marketing director David Cooper.

"Here we are, 22,000 pieces later, and sales have been at a consistently strong level. I think its success is down to the Midas brand being available at a much lower price point but also, although it is at a lower price point, the core brand values remain the same. It still sounds great, it is ultra-reliable – of the 22,000 we don't get any of them back – I mean you can throw them down the stairs, they are really rock solid. Also, the physical weight of the desk, they are quite heavy desks due to the Midas brick we put inside them..."

Venice is a cross-over desk, spanning both the high end (most of the big, wellknown PA companies own them), through to smaller pubs, clubs and venues: "It really is suitable for anyone who mixes live sound. It has turned into a must-have piece of kit, even though the feature set is pretty small, there are loads of applications where you don't need huge amount of inputs or outputs but need a good sounding reliable console," concludes Cooper. Soundcraft and its Spirit range has been synonymous with the budget audio arena for well over 20 years:

"Some years ago we changed everything to just being the Soundcraft brand and we have products that go from desktop recording at just over £100 a product up to £1,000 varying on what you need," details director of marketing communications Dave Neal. "A very simple six-channel mixer up to a multichannel, multi-buss desk with integrated Lexicon effects for the larger venue or small band with a PA system. In those days there were only a few companies doing products like that at that time. Spirit was certainly one of the pioneers at that level of the market and produced an amazing range of products that did very, very well. Of course now, there are many other companies making that level of mixer and it is a much more competitive area. Even so, it is still a high-volume sector for us." Other than turnover, what is the value of larger, more respected manufacturers being in this marketplace? Is it a test-bed or just a means of shifting boxes, asks PSNE: "One thing we don't do is compromise. For example, the EPM and MPM desks use the same mic pre as some of the higher end Soundcraft desks, as well as the same EQ design. We don't design down. We use those features that have made the brand synonymous with build and sound quality and the engineering is just as rigid. Obviously, you have to find ways to keep costs down, but that is down to good engineering, it is not through cost-cutting and compromise," Neal explains.

The EPM and MPM desks, which are available in frame sizes up to 12 and 20 channels respectively, are labelled by the company as multipurpose desks



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and sit comfortably beneath the dedicated live sound range. There are of course many other brands and products that also occupy this market sector – Allen & Heath, Behringer, LD Systems, Mackie, Dynacord, Phonic, Crest, Yamaha and APB Dynasonics, to name a fair slice. In the world of the budget conscious, analogue is still the way forward and in general terms the sonic and build quality of these (sometimes) little desks has improved enormously in the past four or five years. Allen & Heath's MixWizard range, now in its third generation, has been universally well received and is available in a wide variety of configurations, including the WZ3 12M dedicated monitor mixer. Additionally, the company's ZED range has been making similar waves. Crest's X-Rack series sit successfully in a similar place in the market and offers up to eight mono and eight stereo inputs, four-band EQ, six auxs and 100mm faders. While Dynacord's CMS 1000 and 1600, both with integrated effects processors and dual graphic equalisers come in at under £1500. Peavey is also in the market place with its PV10, 14 and 20 USB desks, all complete with internal effects processors and USB connectivity.

Adam Hall, which distributes the LD Systems range of compact mixers, offers the LD-Mixer. The 16-channel desk also features integral DSP effects processing, offering 100 pre-programmed presets with the option of a footswitch to punch them in and out as well as a control room and main mix matrix, all for under £350. It is here, where the budget analogue desks begin to make a transition – integrating digital features to a greater or lesser degree with some able to connect directly to a PC or Mac and DAW software.

Phonic is just one of the manufacturers to produce such a desk in the shape of its Helix Board 18 Universal Mixer with built in FireWire interface and bundled with Steinberg's Cubase LE. The desk can stream up to 16 channels of 24-bit/96kHz audio direct into a Mac or PC with zero latency. It costs around £500. "Helix is the best seller from Phonic," outlined Tuomo Tolonen, applications manager for Shure Distribution UK. "It is excellent for home recording and is so ridiculously easy to set-up. Install your drivers and off you go. What it provides really is a control surface but it also works in a live environment. We have sold lots of these to education establishments, schools, universities, where they can mix the show live and stream it directly onto a hard drive."

In a similar vein, Allen & Heath released its first dedicated recording mixer for 10 years in the shape of the ZED-R16. The desk, which combines FireWire with multi-mode MIDI/audio faders, MIDI controls, 'home studio' routing and transport controls is bundled with SONAR LE and allows users to build tracks in the studio or record live gigs. Coupled with its ADAT compatibility, dual FireWire ports and digital inserts the desk has a wealth of features unheard of a few years ago.

And, it is these hybrid desks that seem to be the major trend in this market sector. With the majority of players telling PSNE that the move to a fully digital budget mixer is still between two and five years off, these combinations of analogue and digital technology, relying on the processing power and GUIs of existing technology and software, would appear to be the rapidly developing trend. With prices teetering around the £1,500-£2,000 mark they are still within the reach of many a home studio or semi-pro setup. In a slightly different vein Yamaha's N8 and N12 Digital Mixing Studio desks also provide some onboard digital processing in terms of compression, EQ and reverb and again integrate tightly with Cubase. The desks, which also offer 5.1 monitoring, bass management and instant down-mixing retail just shy of £1,000.

"The biggest thing with digital is the user interface," says Neal. "As you make a larger product it becomes more difficult [to develop one] because most of the cost of digital is within the processing and the user interface. On a large console you have to have some way of dealing with a lot of functions. With things like the [large-format] Soundcraft Vi and Si [consoles], we think we have covered that very well. "However, as you move down into the lower cost it becomes more difficult. You can do it, we are going to choose to do it the best we can, we have some interesting thoughts, but I think analogue will be around for a while and digital will then move into that. I don't know if a digital product will ever replace analogue at that level, it will depend on what interfaces and costs you can come down to. When you are looking at say a £250 desk the digital costs are not there yet," said Neal.

"I don't think in the extreme near future that these smaller desks are going to go totally digital," concurs Tolonen. "However, everything is tending to go digital, certainly the live largeformat consoles are digital. It is hard to go to a gig these days and not see a digital desk, so I am sure it will filter down eventually but I don't think you will see it in the next six months." It is

interesting to see that, as in the top end of the pro market, where everything is interfacing to everything else, convergence and interconnectivity is making its way into the budget/semi-pro mixer market as well. Relying heavily on FireWire, ADAT and at the lower end USB, the features of 'traditional' analogue desks are being expanded by the use of external processing rather than becoming a totally in-the-box digital solution. Even at the lower end of the market Mackie's Onyx 1220, 1620 and 1640 all provide a FireWire option, Behringer's Xenyx range from the 1204FX up all provide USB connectivity.

"For the money, it is amazing what you get with these desks. They are so versatile, whether it is recording at home or doing a live gig you get, what the American's say a large amount of 'bang for your buck'," Tolonen says. With MAD1 and other more flexible, high bandwidth protocol cards becoming increasingly more affordable and available for PC and Macs, could we see the FireWire/USB connectivity move to the next level at this price point? Will a truly budget all digital console appear on the market in the foreseeable future? Only time will tell.

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