

Future Music UK Central Station



By Tim Oliver for Future Music, UK

Central Station is the new studio control centre from Presonus. Tim Oliver climbs aboard to see that it's more New York than Hornby Central.

The idea of losing the mixing desk from the control room equation isn't a new one, writing rooms have long lived the advantages of on-board computer mixing but for project studios with separate recording rooms and maybe several pairs of monitors to juggle it's been a bit more complicated: Not least the problem of communication between control room and studio. So if you're one of us many people who regularly consider how much easier the dusting would be without that under-used knob thing, then read on because I might just have the solution.

Overview

Well, not me exactly but Presonus have come up with the almost original idea of a discreet desk master section in a 1U rack-mounted box, doing all the things that a master section does. In a nutshell that includes: talkback, cues, monitor input source selection, speaker selection, metering and volume knob. And for a bit extra you can have the salient features on a very neat remote that sits handily beside the computer keyboard. It should be noted at this stage that it's a stereo or 2.1 device and not suited for surround system monitor control.

Build

Presonus' quality of construction is consistently superb and the Central Station is far from an exception. Everything about it feels solid principally down to the all-metal casing and the machined metal knobs. The look is now recognisably generic Presonus: metallic background with blue legend and knobs and push-button blue LEDs. It feels classy to use and is up there with the GMLs and SSLs in terms of the confidence it oozes when you start twiddling.

Features

You have the option of four pairs of inputs: two pairs of balanced 1/4" jacks (called TRS 1 & 2), a pair of RCA phonos (called the Aux input), and a digital stereo S/PDIF or optical TOSlink input. The two TRS inputs are intended for the first four outputs of your work station, the Aux input is designed with a CD player in mind and the digital for DAT playback, but like a 'serving suggestion' on the front of a Corn Flakes packet this isn't cast in stone and you could just as easily use the digital connection to your work station if the CS converters proved better than the ones you currently use (it's 24-bit, 192kHz). On the front panel are two sets of input select switches labelled the 'Main' and 'Cue' section, and like the monitor source selects on a desk, the Main section lets you select which input is fed to the three speaker outputs, A, B and C, but unlike a normal desk this also governs the main output as well, (a pair of balanced jack sockets). Arguably the 'main' output is more or less redundant because you'll most likely bounce the mix down internally, but it does mean you can mix to another medium - DAT or even 1/4" or 1/2" analogue tape. The Cue bus is for the foldback mix.

The Main section includes a level control for the 'Aux' input pre-supposing that for all the other inputs there's going to be independent level control but not from a CD player. The Cue section has an overall output level to control the studio headphone volume. The very neat and efficient intended working mode is to have your first pair of workstation outputs on TRS 1 for the Main output, and the second pair of workstation outputs on TRS 2 for a separate foldback mix to the Cue output.

Talkback

Built into the unit is a condenser microphone and level control that feeds into the Cue bus when the Talkback button is pressed. This little omni-directional electret mic is very sensitive and can go way beyond levels you're likely to need unless you want to make the singer's ears bleed, and when you press the talkback button the Cue and Speaker levels are automatically dimmed by 30dB. There's an extra balanced dynamic mic input on the back if you don't like the electret. You couldn't wish for a clearer talkback but there are one or two things people might miss here: you don't have control of the dim level which at 30dB is quite low and means in practice it's hard to hear studio talk from open microphones without taking your finger off the button. A bigger blight is the fact that there's no way of setting up automatic talkback - the situation where as soon as the music stops the talkback mic opens, which is great for making control room and studio feel connected. Another input to duck the mic using code or a solid tone would have been a good touch.

Speaker Control

Another big feature of the Central Station is the Passive Speaker Control: three speaker outputs that you can mute, dim and sum into mono. The svelte design concepts verge on the fascistic here because speakers A & B toggle between each other but C latches in along with either A or B, the thinking being that C is for dropping in a sub-woofer. If, like many, you have 3 sets of speakers dotted around the control room using set C becomes a bit of a pain. Even so the operation of the switches and the speaker change is exceptionally smooth helped by the speaker level trims on the front panel for level matching, and the large volume knob is a joy to use.

Metering and phones

Central to the Central Station as it were is a 30-segment stereo meter to monitor the level of the main output. It's very clear and very detailed, and is scaled in both dBu and dBfs for analogue and digital respectively.

There are two headphone sockets and associated level pots. The signal source, Cue or Main, is selected by a little press of the volume pot, a very satisfying relay switch that you simply have to press again and again. It's mystifying why there are two, and even the manual doesn't give a 'serving suggestion', though it'll certainly prove useful on the odd occasion you record a performer in the control room. A second cue bus would have been more useful.

Operation

I can't go on enough about how good this unit feels to use: the talkback, speaker select switches and volume knob are the everyday controls and they feel really solid and pro. Using all these in a rack box isn't exactly convenient wherever you put it which makes the remote more or less a necessity because it sits so handily beside a computer keyboard. The sound of the unit is totally transparent – there are no op amps or ICs in the main audio path to colour the sound and the balanced connections keep it clean.

Conclusion

The Central Station is bound to be the catalyst for many studios to off-load their mixers because apart from input channels it provides all the control features that a desk gives in one very compact unit. The operational design is very tight, there's one clear and concise way CS is supposed to be used and the thinking is good but it leaves little scope for versatility.

Though the two bits are sold separately, the remote makes so much more sense in use that you'd be a fool not to get the both. Studio Control Centre is a lofty title but

after only a short time it's clearly a worthy one, in fact I got so used to having it around I couldn't let it go back.

As an optional extra the Central Station's remote control unit has to be one of the most necessary options you'll come across because though the main box works beautifully, it's never going to be very convenient to use even if it's sitting on the desk top. The remote duplicates the most often used features and is designed to sit to the left of your computer keyboard, so first thing you come to as you reach across is the monitor level and next to that the talkback. Above the level pot are the speaker select switches and furthest away the least used, the input select buttons for the main bus. The Cue bus isn't duplicated here.

The action of the controls is exactly the same, it's just the positioning that's so much more handy, and the great thing with the two units is that you don't have a messy nest of cables on your work surface, just the single thick remote cable.

The Central Station plus remote is the perfect answer for any small studio that wants to lose or side-line its mixing desk.