

**Sonifex flies the UK flag for  
radio mixers, but patriotism  
aside, what will ALISTAIR  
McGHEE make of the S1 Mixer?**

The other day I happened on a website offering to sell me some old modules out of an Amek GP desk at a price that the term 'eye watering' was invented to describe. I mixed on those Amek desks for many years, as have hundreds of BBC radio engineers. They were frighteningly reliable – ours took nearly 18 years of daily abuse, powered up 18 hours a day, and was on air for at least six of those hours. Great, great bits of broadcast kit; but I never thought of them as sonic classics, or of the early 80s as a halcyon period in British radio desk manufacturing. Which just goes to show how wrong you can be. If I'd known how much those modules would be worth I would have saved a few.

The advent of digital has ushered in an era of Teutonic radio mixing with Studer, DHD, Lawo, Klotz, and now Stagetec all producing radio desks and doing good business. Calrec still has a radio product and Glensound has a specialised niche in mixer production, but who else is flying the flag for UK manufacturing? Well Sonifex – a company dedicated to radio that has a huge range of radio solutions from talk back to tone generators and all points in between.

screwdriver to adjust it. This is fine when you're setting the level for your studio presenter who will be on mic every day for hours at around the same level, but if a guest rocks up with a guitar and gives it some, you might find minus 10dB on the trim just not enough. I know the argument about allowing control, and I know lots of radio desks take this approach, but gain in my book is so fundamental that I want it where I can get at it.

### Talking 'Bout Talkback

As a proper radio desk the S1 has sophisticated talkback facilities including a mode where guests can talk to each other while the mics are shut. You can also use an Aux and the SCi software interface to create extra talk back facilities. Monitoring options include auto PFL and a vital split feed option that maintains a mono programme feed in one ear while monitoring PFL in the other. The meters can be switched between PPM and VU, and as a really nice feature, you can plug a mini jack straight into channel 7 with a socket on the front panel.

Round the back you get the remote and GPI options on two D connectors. Suffice to say you can configure



## SONIFEX S1 MIXER

### Analogue Radio Mixer

#### Radio-Speared Forays

The S1 is its latest foray into radio mixing, providing an entry level solution for simple self op setups while maintaining the radio specific features that define a broadcast desk. 'And what are the radio specific features?', I hear you cry? Well, the first is variety. We want to plug interesting things into our desks like telephone balance units, we want clean feeds without building them from an aux. We want to switch loudspeaker monitoring off when we open mics, and we want more comms than you usually find on a live desk. Radio people want things to happen when they open a fader – like starting the playout machine, or firing up a mic live light, or activating the speech logger. And when you're thinking about desks for radio presenters, we want mixers that can be operated by people – some of whom struggle to work a pedal bin.

The S1 is a well built mixer, the VCA faders are Alps 100mm, and the aluminium frame and solid top plate give it a substantial feel. All the controls including the fader tops have a rubberised feel that gives a nice tactile sensation when in operation. The top plate and channel strips are simple enough to be taken in at a glance, and all the clear labelling and judicious illumination make this a really simple and easy to use desk. You could sit down and operate this with little or no training. I only have one niggle as far as controls are concerned. The gain trim is between the pan and the aux sends. I prefer the gain to be at the top of the channel strip, but that's personal preference.

You have two Aux sends and some simple EQ to complete the strip. There's no dynamics, which would have been nice for engineers but maybe out of place on a self op desk. The S1 is mostly analogue, but does offer digital I/O on two of the stereo channels (two flavours of SPDIF) and there's SPDIF and AES outputs. Channel 5 can be mic or telephone hybrid with cleanfeed, and channel 6 offers a stereo input with a stereo cleanfeed option.

One of the unusual notions of a radio self op desk is that you want to hide some controls from the operator. So phantom power and some of the gain options are on small buttons on the rear panel. That's fine, but the main mic gain is also there (you get plus or minus 10dB on the top panel trim pot), and it requires a tweaker-sized

start/stop and GPI signals to your heart's content. This is where you'll interface your CD players or playout system to provide as much control as possible on the desk surface. And here's the real secret, the Sonifex SCi software that allows control and set up of your S1. So, out of the box every channel has an 'on' button below the fader at the bottom of the strip. In Europe a lot of radio is mixed on these controls. Set the level and then switch the channel on and off. At the BBC we've never really got into the habit, and we've had other desks modified to remove this feature. Sonifex allows you to set this feature up as you want it. I set aside some time to get to grips with SCi. There's a meter bridge output and an option for an external talkback system.

And here the story gets a little sad. The S1 offers RS232 on a female nine-pin, and I had a little trouble matching that – and getting a couple of computers to play nicely. That's life. However, the facilities offered by the S1/SCi combination lift the desk up as a really professional piece of kit. The configuration options on offer are deep and subtle – it's a stand out package.

#### Conclusion

To be honest the S1 is a big wolf in a lamb-size baby-grow. The Internet and increased interest in the educational benefits of radio mean many small stations are looking for a desk to get them underway, and they should really save their pennies for an S1. It's tempting to think a cheaper mixer designed for live or production work will suit, but the Sonifex is miles ahead for radio. It has the features radio professionals want and a build quality that will last. And it's made in the UK. 

#### THE REVIEWER

ALISTAIR McGHEE began audio life in Hi-Fi before joining the BBC as an audio engineer. After ten years in radio and TV, he moved to production. When BBC Choice started, he pioneered personal digital production in television. Alistair is now Assistant Editor, BBC Radio Wales, but is allowed out occasionally.

#### INFORMATION

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