Soundcraft Si Performer 2

Reviewed by Mark Johnson

One of the cool things about the current generation of digital mixing consoles is that they are great multi-taskers. You can get the same make and model of many available brands and it will be equally at home in the FOH position, monitor world, in the broadcast room, and sometimes even the multitrack room . . .

These digital consoles are truly designed and built to be all things to all people. Well, the folks at Soundcraft decided to push the envelope just a bit more with the Si Performer. And, with all due respect to Strother Martin's character in the film *Cool Hand Luke* - what we've got here, is an audio console that can do lights. Yep, you read it right. Right now there are probably both audio and lighting people gasping for breath at the blasphemous combination of the two technologies. But then think about it for a minute . . . How cool is this console for a small- to mid-sized house of worship, nightclub, hotel AV, or even a black box in a performing arts centre? Quite often in those environments, one person will cover both disciplines. Why not combine the control as well?

The Si Performer comes in two versions: the Si Performer 2 has 24 mic and 8 line inputs and the Si Performer 3 provides 32 mic inputs along with 8 line inputs. Both versions offer four stereo return channels. Two expansion slots provide additional I/O options. We were supplied with the Si Performer 2 to review. The console itself takes up very little space, it's about 28" (71cm) wide and about 20" (50cm) deep. All the physical controls are well laid out and accessible. The control surface has 24 faders, 22 main channel or Mix master faders, and Master faders (one left/right and one mono/SEL). At 37lb (16.7kg) it's also very light and easy for one person to lift and move around if needed - it's light weight, but not a lightweight. The power supply is also integrated, so there's no need for an external one.

Above the faders, top and center of the console, is a rather large control section that includes the ACS (Assignable Channel Strip) controls: In (with meters, 48V phantom power, phase, gain/trim, and switchable High Pass Filter), Gate, Comp, Equalizer, and Out (with delay, pan and output assign L/R and Mono buttons). Top right are Meters, monitor level control, USB I/O, power, a small touchscreen

display, and Lexicon Effects controller. The tOTEM (the One Touch Easy Mix) Fader Follow keys (for fast access to Mixes 1-14, Matrix 1-4, and FX 1-4) line the bottom of the whole control section. At the upper left of the control surface is the Accessories Tray, an approximately 7" (18cm) x 8.25" (21cm) area where you can fit an optional magnetic note pad with wipe off marker. Other optional accessories include console lamps and a dust cover.

As a person who has spent most of my professional career in audio, it takes a minute to wrap my head around the lighting aspect of the console. Make no mistake - *it is primarily an audio console that has the ability to control lights*. So for many lighting people (and possibly audio folks as well) it could be considered like cats and dogs living together. To help us audio folk, Soundcraft has provided some documentation to get us more familiar with some basic lighting control concepts, aspects and terminology . . .

Given the small footprint of the console, the only way to fit so much functionality into it and have a useable number of mic and line inputs available is to go to layers. The Si Performer has four layers (which includes the DMX control layer) as well as GEQ Lo and GEQ Hi layers. In addition, with the exception of mic inputs 1-22 (layer A), each layer generally provides control for multiple functions: Layer B - additional mic inputs and stereo line inputs; Layer C - Mix and VCA masters; Layer D - Matrix and DMX masters. An ALT button accesses the DMX channels in each layer (22 on each layer, 88 total).

The GEQ buttons provide 14 bands each layer - 31Hz to 630Hz on GEQ Lo and 800Hz to 16kHz on GEQ Hi - so that the console is now a giant graphic EQ. In addition to the typical indications for faders to the right of each fader on those channels, there is a 0 at the center (just above what is normally -15), with the topmost position being +12 and the lower most position being -12. A neat feature is that when in GEQ mode the here-to-fore smoothly operating faders now have a centre detent at the 0 setting.

All Aglow

Unique to Soundcraft, FaderGlow illuminates the area the length of the fader travel and each LCD channel display with different colours depending on the mode. Yellow indicates pre-fader aux sends; green is post-fader aux sends; cyan is FX returns; orange is matrix master; red is GEQ; magenta is stereo line inputs; blue is VCA master and white is DMX channels.

The headphone jack is located on the left hand side of the front of the console, recessed below the faders to keep it out of harms way. It is kind of hard to locate, however, to help make it easier to find, the jack is backlit.

All the knobs have a 'freewheeling' feel to them - you don't have the resistance that you would normally feel in an analog pot and it seems

that you have to turn them more to make adjustments. I guess this allows for finer adjustment of parameters, but it takes some getting used to if you're more accustomed to the analog feel.

The Performer Si benefits from Soundcraft's Harman affiliation incorporating BSS graphic EQ as well as four Lexicon FX engines - and no doubt Harman's recent acquisition of Martin Professional will support the lighting control aspects of the console as well.

Another benefit of being part of the Harman family is that the console includes Harman's communications and control protocol, HiQnet, control system, along with Soundcraft's ViSi Remote system, which enables control of the console via an iPad. Additionally, multiple iPads can control one console providing for an iPad-based personal monitoring system.

The Si Performer features two expansion card slots that accept Si Series options cards. Available cards include a MADI card (Optical or Cat5), Aviom A-Net 16, CobraNet, and two AES/EBU options. I/O for card slot one is 64 x 64 and 64 x 32 for slot two.

Whew!

While it's all quite a bit to digest, in fact, you can get up and running with the basics pretty quickly. However, to be able to use some of the more powerful aspect of the console, you need to spend a bit more time with the Si Performer to learn its particular workflow. I was able to check out most of the basic features of the console with only occasional referrals back to the Quick Start Guide.

The colour LCD touchscreen is small, though it's easy enough to navigate and used basically for set up. But if you have to get to something in a performance situation it could be hard to see or you could accidentally select the wrong parameter.

DMX on an audio console.

FaderGlow.

On the back panel are a veritable plethora of I/O including 24 XLR input channels, 16 balanced outputs, as well as eight line level inputs, MIDI and Word Clock I/O, AES/EBU input and output, HiQnet, DMX512 (for lighting control) and the aforementioned card slots. The Si Performer can also take advantage of stageboxes from Soundcraft's ViSi Connect range. The Compact Stagebox is connected to the mixer via Cat5 or optical MADI and comes configured with 32 mic/line inputs, eight line outputs, eight AES/EBU output channels, or 16 line outputs. As well, the stagebox is fitted with two Soundcraft Studer D21m I/O card slots.

Going to the D.O.G.S.

While stageboxes for digital consoles allow for comprehensive I/O to be located practically anywhere and provides for sharing the input sources between multiple consoles via Cat5, coax, or fiber, gain adjustments made at one console affected the gain settings on the other consoles in the system. Direct Output Gain Stabilisation (D.O.G.S.) compensates for adjustments to the input gain when two consoles are receiving input from the same source. With two consoles in a 'master/sync' configuration (i.e. the FOH console could be designated as the master and the monitor console could be the synchronised console), the gain relationship from mic input to the direct out is maintained in the master. When a gain adjustment for a channel is performed on the master console, the direct out gain receives the inverse level effectively keeping the overall gain from input source to direct out, unchanged.

Seeing the Light

Being the audio guy that I am, I called some lighting people to help review the lighting aspect of the console. The DMX control is accessed by pushing the ALT button on the control surface and then pushing layer A, B, C, or D, essentially providing a four-scene preset console by using each of the layers. First we plugged in a Swisson DMX measurement tool/tester to check the stability of the DMX signal from the console. The tester revealed some drop outs, particularly as we moved the fader from zero to full and then intermittently once the fader was at full. We then plugged in a Martin Professional Stagebar 54-L LED bar and, lo and behold, faders one through five on the console controlled the red, green, blue, amber, and white (respectively) output of the Stagebar. There was some choppiness as we faded the light up or down, but at whatever point we stopped moving the fader the light was solid. So there it was . . . and while it doesn't compare with lighting consoles designed for high-end concert or theatrical use, the audio console was definitely controlling the lights. And the 'On' buttons for each channel can be used as 'Bump' buttons when on a DMX layer. I had to marvel at that, and even one of the lighting guys had to admit that for any of the applications that I mentioned at the top of the review, this was a useful tool. And with Harman's acquisition of Martin Professional, I can only assume that the future will most certainly be brighter for the lighting aspects of the Si Performer, and each firmware update will bring increased functionality.

For houses of worship, hotel AV, nightclubs, cruise ships, and any other application where one person operates both audio and lighting, Soundcraft effectively gives you two consoles for the price of one, and maybe you can get back a little more real estate in the production control area as well. All in all, there's quite a bit going on in such a small package.