

SPL 2380

If you're serious about multichannel then you have to be serious about getting a surround monitor controller. However, most are pricey. **ROB JAMES** reports on a capable box with a truly affordable price tag.

SURROUND CAPABLE DIGITAL consoles are now commonplace and most of the current DAWs also offer surround modes. Despite this, the amount of surround material generated in smaller studios has so far been less than expected. A number of factors are to blame for this: unsuitable rooms; the cost and bulk of the extra speakers; fear of the unknown; and the lack of affordable surround monitor controllers.

Current digital consoles mostly have at least some surround monitor control functions but the legions of people working without a hardware console have faced a dilemma. It is perfectly possible to configure DAW software to provide monitor control. However, the lack of a quick and convenient hardware level control and muting is undesirable since even the most well-behaved DAW will output full-scale digital noise once in a while with highly undesirable consequences for hearing, hardware and good relations with the neighbours.

The alternatives have been to use a domestic AV amplifier or receiver as a monitor controller or to spend upwards of UK£1600 for a dedicated controller. A domestic AV amplifier can be a reasonable compromise but, unless it is one of the more exotic and expensive designs, it will degrade the signal in a number of possible ways. VCAs or DACs are often employed to control level and many designs convert all incoming signals to digital then back to analogue.



Against this background, SPL has introduced the Model 2380 Surround Monitor Controller at the hitherto unprecedented price point of UK£399. There are no bass management functions, encoder/decoder inserts, or dedicated metering take-off points. 5.1 and stereo are the only formats catered for. However, there are two 5.1 inputs and two stereo inputs.

Jacks, electronically balanced or unbalanced if a two pole plug is used, take care of the speaker outputs, 5.1 surround and stereo. A separate 'slave' output is also provided so recorders or meters can be connected without using up valuable A-D convertor channels on the workstation or console.

Controls are simple and logical; rotary level control, overall -20dB dim and Mute, plus switched individual speaker outputs, input and output selectors and mode switches. In short, all the essential features of a surround monitor controller.

So, just how has SPL achieved this price point? Many years ago we had a name for devices like this,

usually known by the acronym PIB for Pot-In-a-Box. In essence, this is precisely what the SPL 2380 is. A discrete, six-level potentiometer is used to provide the attenuation and all switching is handled by precision latching switches. The only active circuitry involved is SPL's long established and well thought of electronic balancing.

Unlike most other monitor controllers, all the controls are on the same unit as the I-O. For smaller studios this makes a lot of sense, for larger ones where, paradoxically, desk-top real-estate is often at a greater premium, the unit may be seen as rather large. Ideally suited to simple configurations from straightforward control of a single 5.1 and stereo source through to workstations with multitrack and stereo master recorders, the 2380 offers a purist approach to the problem with tantalising claimed performance figures.

With limited measuring equipment, I was unable to duplicate these but the results I did obtain were none too shabby and, more importantly, I couldn't detect any audible degradation. The precision pot tracks well and feels smooth.

The catch? Well, beauty is commonly supposed to lie in the eye of the beholder so I suppose there are people who will find it attractive... The French have an expression that sums up its appearance, 'joli-laide' (literally translated as 'pretty/ugly'). A triumph of function over form, then!

In action the switches need a firm press, reflecting their mechanical nature and the pot is smooth but fairly stiff – a good thing since it is less likely to be knocked out of position. For those of us now more familiar with feather touch digital switches this lends a vintage air to the unit.

With the Model 2380, SPL has spotted a real gap in the market and filled it. Anyone seriously contemplating working in surround with a workstation-based rig should be looking at this box. There is enough flexibility in the inputs and outputs to cover a wide range of uses. It is built like a tank and is suitable for monitoring surround mixes in 5.1 formats all the way up to DVD-A and SACD mastering. ■

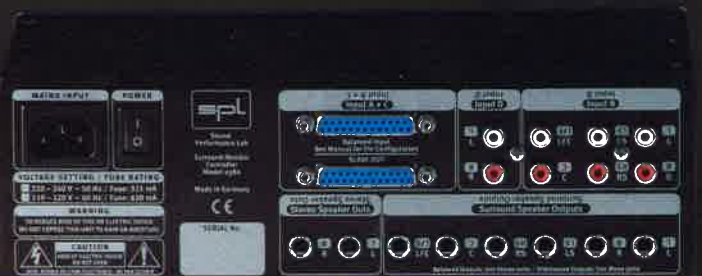
The ins and outs

The raked front panel contains two rows of latching push switches and a knob. The top, white row, has Surround Input A/B select, Surround/Stereo Input select, Stereo Input C/D select, Mono L/R, Mono Ls/Rs, Dim -20dB and Mute All.

The bottom, black row has all the Speakers On switches. L C R LS RS LFE and Stereo. A scale around the solitary knob is calibrated in percentage of maximum output. This scale can easily be calibrated and marked, using a pencil or tape, with the operators preferred SPLs.

The rear panel demonstrates an unusual level of understanding of the way many people have to work. All the legends are printed the 'normal' way up and upside down so they can be read when peering myopically over the top of the unit.

Balanced inputs A and C are on a single 25-pin Sub-D female with the usual Tascam pin-outs. Similarly the slave output is balanced and also uses a 25-pin female Sub-D. Inputs B and D are unbalanced phonos. All the speaker outputs are 1/4-inch jacks. Powering is built-in and there is a mains switch with a well subdued switch-on thump – unlike many of the more expensive units.



PROS

Price; simplicity; sound.

CONS

All in one unit may be too bulky for some installations; a tad chunky in appearance; SPL calibration is down to the user.

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