

Solid State Logic X-Desk | £1,926

Solid State Logic launch into the mixer market. Can they keep their reputation for quality at these prices? *Stuart Bruce* searches for the Logical conclusion



WHAT IS IT?
A compact analogue mixer that sums, handles multiple input and output assigns, and provides comprehensive monitor and headphone control

CONTACT
Who: Sound Technology
Tel: +44 (0)1462 480000
Web: solid-state-logic.com

- HIGHLIGHTS**
- 1 Build quality and dependable brand
 - 2 Flexibility of routing
 - 3 Superlative sound quality



For anyone with the vaguest interest in audio production, the name Solid State Logic is synonymous with technical innovation and the very highest quality analogue and digital audio consoles. As

audio production techniques have changed, their product range has adapted to the new landscape. In our current DAW-dominated culture, SSL have provided us with two of the best examples of analogue/control

surface hybrids – the AWS and the Matrix. In their X-Rack system they've included all the classic mic preamps, compressors and even a summing mixer configuration. Therefore, it begs the question of the X-Desk: 'Why bother bringing out what is ostensibly another summing mixer with no DAW control and no total recall?'

Well, it's true that the X-Desk lacks many of the features of its older and bigger siblings, but it also lacks the price tag. Within this price range, the summing mixer market is pretty crowded, so just what exactly does this unit from SSL offer us?

Build and layout

First things first, this is a proper small desk – channels, cue sends and a Monitor section with talkback. As with the Matrix, each channel strip has dual line inputs that arrive via D-Subs on the back, so in total you



8 X 2 = 16
The combination of alt to cue and cue to mix turns the X-Desk into a 16-channel summing mixer.

Faders
100mm faders that have a smooth and accurate travel.

have 16 line-ins. At the top of the channel strip is an idented line trim centre with +/- 20dB of gain. The first of the three switches swaps between the Main and the Alt line-in. The second is a phase reverse, which is always good to see, and the third is the insert in and out.

There are eight inserts, one for each channel, which also connect via D-Subs. Just below these is another switch that swaps the channel direct out between pre and post fader. The direct outs feed another D-Sub, which gives you the option of riding a fader while recording, something that's pretty essential in any set-up.

Below the Input section comes the Stereo Cue and the FX sends. The Stereo Cue has Pan and Level controls and two switches. The first offers pre or post the channel fader, and the second switches the cue over to the Alt input. This is how you get 16 inputs on a

Cascading X-Desks

Two of the D-sub connectors on the rear of the X-Desk are labelled Cascade In and Cascade Out. If you find you need more channels you can simply buy another unit and plug cascade out of one to cascade in of the other. What this does is link the Mix, Cue and Aux busses together with the last in the chain becoming the master. That way you can expand your system



with anything up to eight X-Desks linked together.

The solo and AFL busses also link through the system so a solo on any channel will result in the rest of the channels on all of the linked

consoles being muted.

The cascade feature can also be used with X-Logic racks, allowing for a very high density of summed inputs with a very small footprint controlled from one small console.

mixdown – the Cue Balance can be sent to the mix buss along with the outputs of the eight channels. Below the Stereo Cue are the two FX sends.

The last knob is the Channel Pan pot and beneath this are the Cut and

Solo switches, which light red and yellow respectively, and the 100mm channel fader. The knobs all feel firm and positive in operation, as do the switches. If I have one criticism though, it's that the faders feel a bit light. I'd definitely prefer them to be firmer, but they're smooth in operation and, because of their long travel, are pretty precise.

Returns, sends, FX

On the top-right of the desk are the Cue and FX send masters. They each have an AFL button with an LED (AFL and Solo buttons should always have individual LED indicators). The FX send masters both have a second switch to make them pre or post, the default being post, which is the right way around.

There are two stereo returns that can be routed to the mix buss and/or the cue sends. There's another switch for Mono on each of them and a Pan and Level control. In Stereo mode, the pan knobs act as balance controls and in Mono mode they act as pan pots.

Next to these are the mix buss controls. At the top of this section is a switch that brings the cue sends into the mix buss for when you want to sum all 16 inputs. Below that is a level knob that goes from infinity to +10dB via a centre ident for unity gain.

Below this are two switches for the Master Stereo Insert. The first switches it in and out, and the second enables you to sum the pre insert mix buss signal with the insert return. This means that you could have a stereo compressor fed from the stereo buss and mix it into the stereo buss via the output level control of the compressor itself. This could prove to be a very useful feature and is a really nice touch on such a small unit.

SPECS

Connectors

Rear panel: 10 D-Sub connectors providing: 16 line inputs, 8 channel direct outs, 8 channel insert sends, 8 channel insert returns, master, cue, aux and master insert outs, Ext, FX1, FX2, and master insert returns, X-Rack expansion, X-Rack link in, X-Rack link out, 2 XLRs for master monitor out, 2 XLRs for alternative monitors out, IEC mains connector

Front panel: iJack (stereo 3.5mm jack for connecting iPod to console), stereo ¼-inch jack for connecting headphones

Performance

Channel line/alt in to channel out (post fader): Frequency Response 10Hz – 40kHz ±0.2dB, THD+N < 0.05% (20Hz – 20kHz), Noise < -83dBu (20Hz – 20kHz), Headroom > +24dBu (into 10kΩ) stored on SD card

Channel line/alt in to mix buss (single fader): Frequency Response 10Hz – 40kHz ±0.3dB, THD+N < 0.05% (20Hz – 20kHz), Noise < -77dBu (20Hz – 20kHz), Headroom > +24dBu (into 10kΩ)

Dimensions:

434 x 310 x 120mm

Weight:

4.8kg



The bottom-right corner of the X-Desk has the Monitor and Headphone section. Starting with the Monitor, you have three knobs. The top one is the Talkback level control. Below this comes a Dim level control, which has a good range of -30dB to -3dB and finally the Monitor level control, which in true SSL style really does go right up to 11! Below this are two big switches for Monitor Dim and Monitor Mute. Next to all of these are the Monitor Source selects, of which there are

three choices: Mix, External Source and the iJack. In normal operation, these are cancelling switches (selecting one switches off the others), but if you select the Sigma switch above them you can select two or all three of the sources at the same time. This is very useful if you need to check a part from a CD or iPod and play along with it.

Switches and sockets

Below these you have an Alt Monitor switch, so you can have two different

sets of speakers hooked up to the desk. Underneath that, there's a Mono switch and at the bottom is a generously sized talkback (T/B) switch.

Lastly, the bottom-right corner has a ¼-inch headphone socket and a 3.5mm socket known as the iJack. This enables you to plug your iPod or other MP3 player straight into the X-Desk. Above these are the Headphone Level control and a switch to send the cues to the headphones (the headphones normally follow the monitor source selector). When the cues feed the headphones, the talkback also goes there.

The Good and Great

Three things we liked and loved about the Solid State Logic X-Desk

> The Alt line input feed to the Stereo Cue, when combined with the Cue to Mix function, turns the X-Desk into a 16-channel summing mixer with the added flexibility of a level control and pan pot for each channel.

> With fantastic audio quality throughout and a plethora of inputs and outputs, you can set up your studio to work with the minimum of re-patching, massively improving your workflow.

> The insert on the mix buss has two modes. It functions as a straight insert or, with the Insert Sum switch on, sums the insert return into the mix buss, giving a direct stereo feed into the buss to blend in compression or EQ.

Sound

If all that seems like a very long description of a very small machine, it is. The X-Desk may not be huge, but it certainly doesn't lack in features. However, the really big question is how does it sound? Well, the answer to that is 'bloody great'.

I started by taking a few of my more recent 'in the box' mixes and splitting them into stems. The results were very impressive. Tracks felt punchier and more open. The low was more defined and the stereo seemed wider. Exactly the feeling I had when I tried the Matrix a while back, but also, admittedly, the same feeling I have had using several different good-quality summing mixers.

So what sets the X-Desk apart from the crowd? Well, it's the fact that this is a desk. Those eight faders and the way that SSL have put it all together mean that you can have a very flexible system at your fingertips. Let me explain. Imagine you already have

Build

Solid metal casing with really good quality components, all built in the UK.



some mic pres, EQs and compressors. You have 16 or 24 inputs and outputs from your computer and a couple of sets of monitors. Your normal mode of working involves having several inputs set up to the computer, maybe a couple of mics, a DI and so on, which you run through your pres, EQs and compressors and plug directly into your A/D converters. Sometimes you want to mix some of these sources together to make a mono sound source, sometimes three or four of them to make a stereo source, and sometimes you want to send all of them to individual tracks. At the same time, when you mix, you want to use eight stereo busses from your system. Without a desk you can't do most of that.

Connecting with D-Subs

If you look at the photo of the back of the unit you will see that all audio connections, with the exception of the monitor outputs, are on D-Sub connectors. Being an

accepted standard in the pro-audio industry means that you can now pick up these kinds of cables pretty cheaply.

Fortunately SSL have followed the standards

and each connector on the X-Desk is either inputs or outputs. This means off-the-shelf cables will work throughout. Watch out for manufacturers who split inputs and outputs on one D-Sub – it could cost you to have a pro wire. Worth considering with a unit like this as custom cabling costs can be very high.

Check out these sites for standard looms – cpc.farnell.com or studiospares.com.



Chaining options

With an X-Desk you could run 16 outs to the Main and Alt line inputs to give you eight stereo summing groups and then plug your pre/EQ/compressor chains into the insert returns. When

on your DAW and it's ready to record straightaway. If you want to ride the level to tape, then make the send post fade, or simply leave it pre fade and use the fader to set your latency-free monitor level.

baby also handles your monitoring and headphones, it's going to become the heart of your studio very quickly.

The only trick that SSL seem to have missed is one simple thing. There's no switch on the monitor

section to select the Stereo Cue as a monitor source, so to hear it independently of the stereo buss you must patch its output to the Ext Source input. That

For a summing mixer, a small console and a monitor controller, this could well be the unit for you

you're tracking, run your mix via the Alt inputs to the Cue Mix, which in turn is sent to the Stereo Mix.

If you want your vocal chain that comes into insert return one, simply press the Insert button and you have it. If you've wired the direct outs to your A/Ds, all you need do is select Input 1

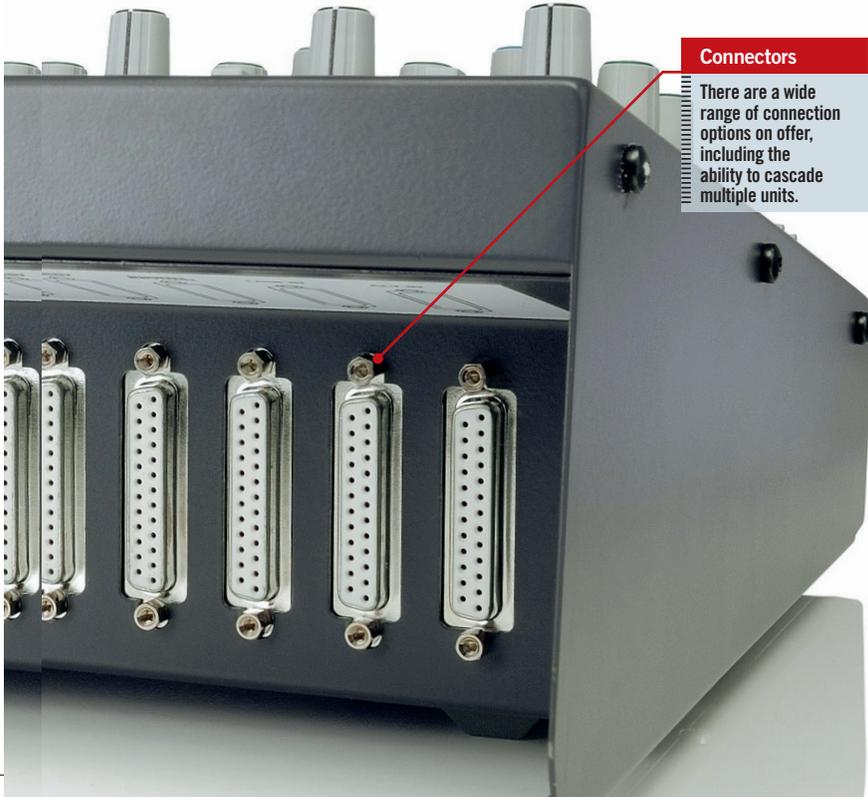
With multiple inputs you can mix them on the faders and record them via the stereo out, and you could also bounce up to eight sources from your DAW via the desk to take advantage of some analogue EQ and compression, all without having to re-patch anything. Taking into consideration that this little

way you could have a monitor balance from your DAW and a stereo mix returning to it at the same time, useful when mixing multiple input sources or bouncing down.

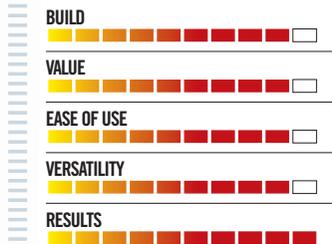
This is certainly the simplest desk SSL have ever made, but it packs a hell of a punch in features and sonically. If you're in the market for a summing mixer, a small console and a monitor controller, this could well be the unit for you, and at this price you'd be daft to ignore it. It looks like SSL have set the new standard and could well have cornered a new market. **FM**

Connectors

There are a wide range of connection options on offer, including the ability to cascade multiple units.



FutureMusic VERDICT



A solid unit with fantastic features and sonic quality, built in the UK. Nothing at this price can touch it.

ALTERNATIVES



SPL Mix Dream
£2,661

Because of the faders and the monitor section it's very hard to compare the X-desk to anything else but if you want straight summing you can't get much classier than this.

soundperformancelab.com



Neve 8816
£2,127

The Neve is closer to the SSL, especially with the addition of the 16 channel fader pack. It sounds great, has sends and some flexible master insert options but with no monitor section and the faders coming separately the price is high.

ams-neve.com



TL Audio A4
£650

Featuring 16 inputs with individual pan controls, stereo insert on the mix bus and a switchable tube output stage the A4 handles all your basic summing needs. A good sounding unit at a very good price.

tlaudio.co.uk