Studer VistaMix

CONSOLE UPDATE

Managing an array of microphones can be a full-time job. Panel programs, reality TV, conference and stage work could all benefit from more ‘human’ management of open mics and summed levels of those mics. Studer’s VistaMix is there to carry that load. Paul Mac reports.

THE STUDER Vista series of consoles is notable for many reasons. You cannot fail to recognise the Vistonics surface, for example, with its distinctive combined controls and screens giving adaptable control-surface graphics for one of the most satisfying user experiences available. But possibly more important is that Studer’s user- and application-focused approach, typified by Vistonics, is carried through what is now a large range of incredibly versatile products that have never stopped developing.

Recent enhancements have included the RTWT TM7 Touch Monitor module that can be integrated into the Vista series to provide loudness metering to ITU, ATSC, and EBU recommendations for both stereo and surround. Next was the Vistonics engine. This hardware module adds the equivalent of two Lexicon PCM96 effects units and is capable of running eight channels of mono, stereo, and surround effects with all control and assignment integrated into the Vistonics surface.

Continuing its commitment to broadcast, Studer also implemented the Ember open source control protocol. Ember is now gaining good support across a range of broadcast technologies. Jünger, Calrec, Stage Tec, MosArt, and others are including Ember+ control support.

MAGIC FINGERS

Studer’s VistaMix then, is simply the latest in a long line of enhancements to the Vista range that has kept it at the forefront of live broadcast production. The idea is simple: instead of riding a bunch of faders for multiple panelists or participants, trying to keep your output constant while not missing a thing, or simply leaving mics open, VistaMix offers a dynamic solution that opens and closes contributing microphones, yet keeps overall level constant, even when several people are speaking.

VistaMix comes with version 4.9 software for Studer’s SCoreLive DSP engine. To implement a VistaMix you simply assign a VistaMix Master. The master can be mono or stereo, with 8, 12, 16, or 20 inputs. Interestingly, it is possible to cascade or combine VistaMix masters into new VistaMixes. A possible application here is where you want separate VistaMixes for two quiz show teams, with an additional input for the host. This may not be strictly necessary for many instances, but having the option is nice. Once the Master is assigned, a cyan VistaMix ‘A’utor bus appears as a bus assign option on mono input channels. Obviously if more than one VistaMix Master has been created, all will be available as bus-assign options.

VistaMix parameters start with the ‘Cal’ (calibration) adjustment, which is intimately connected to the ‘Weight’ parameter. Cal is intended to be a base offset for relative levels among a group of VistaMix contributions. Weight, on the other hand, is the go-to control for adjusting relative levels on the fly. An example might be where you have a panel of participants and a host or chairperson moderating. You would set the basic mix with the Cal parameter, but might then add ‘Weight’ to the chairperson who would therefore dominate whenever they and one or more people were speaking simultaneously.

Being a dynamic process, there is a response time adjustment for VistaMix, just like the attack time on a compressor. A response time of five milliseconds is possible, though as I discovered on the demo, it is actually difficult to cause unpleasant side effects.

There is also a pre/post control for panning where stereo VistaMix masters are assigned. That is, panning controls can be pre or post the VistaMix process.

IN PRACTICE

The system was kindly demoded for me by Studer’s Simon Roofe. We used a multitrack of a panel-based quiz show, populated by comedians, which is a reasonably demanding task, especially as there are numerous interruptions, and a section where the host speaks over the other contestants and carries the dialogue forward from there. This is a prime candidate for the Weight parameter, which worked exactly as you’d expect. It only needs a small tweak for emphasis to shift enough to make a difference, which worked very well for the demo material.

Overall, AB-ing the material with and without VistaMix, it is clear the system is working fast, but with virtually no disruption. The overall effect is to focus the show, and take the ‘muddiness’ out of the output. This translates directly, not just to the all-important intelligibility rating, but improved narrative for the show – it takes some of the hard work out of listening, which will be a boon for any audience.

Stereo VistaMix masters may well come in handy for live/staged productions where aural localisation is important, but mono will be the norm for broadcast. Past this, I think VistaMix will require a small amount of experimentation. Operators will need to become familiar with the effects of cascading VistaMixes versus keeping it simple and concentrating on just one hierarchy at a time. The Weight control makes the simple option so much more versatile than it would otherwise be, so that may be enough for most applications.

CONCLUSION

All in all, VistaMix is another good idea, well implemented. And the bigger picture – the continuing development of Vista through regular software updates that embrace new ideas – will reinforce the Studer reputation not only for innovation, but for understanding the increasingly important responsibility that a vendor has to customers that invest in its technology.

INFORMATION

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