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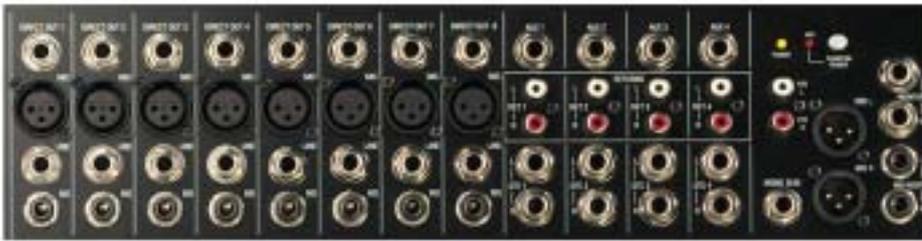


Soundcraft Spirit M8

BY GENO PORFIDO

With eight mono and four stereo channels, this flexible unit is in the middle of a new series of affordable high-quality mixers





compact mixer

Soundcraft's Spirit M is a new series of compact mixers. Three consoles with similar layouts—the M4, M8 and M12—are in the line; the number after the M indicates how many mono inputs with 3-band eq are available. In addition to the mono channels, all three consoles have four stereo channels, four stereo returns, and four aux sends. They also have a S/PDIF digital output, which is unusual for this type of board.

These mixers sit at a slight angle for ergonomic reasons, and all connections are easily accessible on top. While the M4 is too small to mount in a rack in a traditional way, all three models come with rack rails—they're hidden under the rounded metal side panels, which are removed for rack mounting.

We received an M8, the eight mono/four stereo model, for this review.

Once over

The overall look and feel of the M8 is identifiably Soundcraft, thanks to black metal flake finish, those cool aluminum side rails, and multicolored knobs and buttons. Its layout is extremely clean and simple; anyone familiar with a mixing board will instantly be at home—a welcome happening in this day of dizzying features.

The M8 is narrow enough to fit in a standard 19" rack and deep enough to accommodate long-throw faders and numerous channel goodies without feeling cramped.

One gets the impression that Soundcraft takes the overall interface design as seriously as they take the electronics. This filters down to details like the headphone jack, which is easily accessible but positioned to keep the cord out of the way. (But unlike all the other jacks, which are metal, this plastic one was a little tight on the review unit.)

Coming in at around 18 pounds, the M8 is no featherweight, but that heft helps make it feel tough and solid—which is important if this mixer is expected to survive on the road in a rack night after night. Soundcraft's live consoles have an excellent reputation, so they know something about roadworthiness.

While the only road trip this board took was from the shipping truck to my studio, it did get many hard miles of use as the primary mixer on a number of projects.

The Spirit enters

Patching this board into a setup is as easy as it gets. All the input, output, and accessory connections are right on the top of the mixer above the channel strips, except for the digital output which is up by the power cord socket. All jacks are labeled cleanly, and there's a decent amount of room for your hands when you're plugging things in. With all of the connections on top, the rear panel is used mainly for ventilation, but it does contain the single stereo S/PDIF out, power switch, plug, and fuse.

Each mono channel has an XLR mic input and a 1/4" line input that accept balanced or unbalanced signals, along with a tip/ring/sleeve insert just above the channel knobs. A post-fader/post-eq direct output is also available on each mono input for connection to multi-track recorders (or computer audio interfaces).

The direct out is wisely placed at the top-most section of the console, so cabling to recording devices doesn't get in the way of any input or insert cables. This is another area where attention to design detail is evident. The digital output (24-bit/44.1 kHz, no dither) can be handy if you're going direct to a digital recorder (like a CD burner, DAT machine, or hard disk recorder) and don't want to mess with an external converter box.

Beneath the connection jacks are the standard input gain knob, three bands of semi-parametric eq, and four aux sends. You'll also find the traditional pan knob, a couple of channel routing buttons, and a nice long 100mm fader. We'll cover the channel strips later.

Send and return

To the right of the mono inputs and above the stereo inputs is a small aux return section. There are four left/right RCA inputs, making room for four stereo effects returns or auxiliary line-level ins (like a CD player or turntable preamp). Since there are a lot of DJs making the scene these days, perhaps those RCA inputs will come in handy, but most effects units have 1/4" outputs. You may need adapters for studio applications.

But the four aux sends, which is plenty for this size console, are 1/4". These are mono sends, so you'll have to use two if you're using truly discrete stereo effects devices.

Two of the sends are pre-fader, two post-fader, allowing you to create (among other things) cue mixes with the pre-fader sends and address effects devices with the post-fader sends. All the stereo and mono channels have green Signal Present LEDs (always useful for quick confirmation of channel input) along with a red Peak LED.

Below are the inputs for the four stereo channels, providing eight 1/4" inputs (two per channel for left and right in). Under the input jacks are two rows of gain knobs, one row of four each for stereo return channels and input gain for the stereo channels. Since there are no faders for the aux return channels, each aux gain has a peak LED next to its knob to monitor the signal level.

Stereo channels

The stereo channels are a bit different from the mono inputs, being designed to handle mainly keyboard and Hi Z (high impedance) instrument inputs. These channels have no mic preamps or XLR inputs, channel inserts, or direct outs. A channel mute and PFL (pre-fader listen) are stationed just above the faders.

Each stereo channel has simpler eq than the mono channels: shelving treble and bass eq fixed at 12 kHz and 60 Hz. Stereo sources likely to be used on these channels (synths etc.) usually have their own filters or eq.

Master channel

The M8's Master channel has a switch to activate the global 48V phantom power. There are various master ins and outs on top of the channel, including a stereo RCA pair for playback input (CD or 2-track), a single mono sum 1/4" out, a pair of balanced XLR outputs for mains with matching 1/4" inserts, and a pair of 1/4" outs for the board's studio monitor sends.



A Returns Master level knob provides overall gain control of the entire aux return section, with a Mute button directly beneath it. Additional Master controls include level control and a PFL for the playback input and a PlayBack Replace Mix button that routes the playback signal from the normal monitor section into the main outputs. You can adjust the overall level of all four aux sends at once using a master gain knob. This has an AFL (after-fader listen) button.

frequency is shelving, fixed at 12 kHz and able to cut or boost up to 15 dB. 12 kHz seems to be the standard frequency for top end on most small consoles these days, and it adds a crisp, clean sound to most signals. This doesn't control harsh upper mids, but it adds a smooth top end.

The mid eq can be swept between 240 Hz and 6 kHz with up to ± 15 dB of gain. This broad frequency range allows you to shape the tone in a variety of ways.

Like the high eq, the low is shelving and fixed at 60 cycles to give a tight punchy bottom to your bass or kick drum. 60 cycles is pretty darn low—80 Hz is a more common choice—but this eq affects a fairly broad bandwidth, so you get plenty of coverage in the upper bass regions as well.

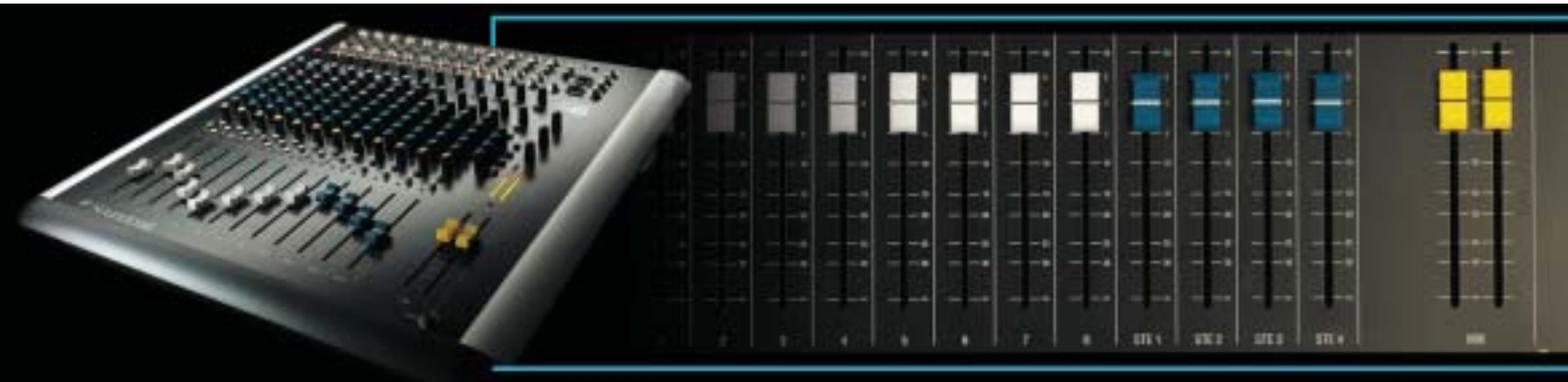
The tradeoff to this wide bandwidth is that things got a little bit mushy at

Last but not least, those nice long 100mm faders feel tight and smooth, unlike some boards that feel like they'll fly away if you pull a fader down too fast.

Catching the Spirit

I had the pleasure of working with the M8 on a number of projects. It was very flexible. All told, there's a total of 32 inputs and at least ten outputs, enough to handle anything from a 3-piece band live to an 8- or even 16-track studio setup. There are plenty of places to plug all kinds of things.

Compared to other analog mixers I had in and out of my workspace during the review period, the M8 sounded clean, quiet, and warm. The mic pre is nice and neutral, the line inputs are punchy and quiet, and the eq is surprisingly accurate and versatile. And the digital out is a very handy plus if you're going to



Other master controls include the Mono Sum Level out, Monitors level, and the Headphones gain. A 12-segment tri-colored LED meter is provided for monitoring levels. Color coding helps make the board easy to read—every knob from eq to pan has its own color.

Full-featured mono input channels

Each mono channel has both XLR and 1/4" inputs that can accommodate most any balanced or unbalanced input signal. The mic preamps use a similar design and are in the same ballpark as the ones in Soundcraft's top-notch Ghost console—which means they're darn good. (I used a Ghost at my last studio and loved it.)

Moving down, the highpass filter is set to 100 Hz. It provides 18 dB per octave of low end rolloff. This is an extra feature not present on some mixers costing more than this, and it's very useful when you need to get rid of low-end rumble.

The classic Soundcraft eq section is a basic 3-band design. Its high

times when I was expecting the kick drum to be the recipient of the low frequency boost. Perhaps a bandwidth that narrows as the eq gain is boosted would be a good alternative.

But that's a minor subjective preference. Overall I was extremely pleased with the eq, particularly for its accuracy. Slight adjustments can actually be heard, and that to me is the sign of a good eq. Plus, it just plain sounds great.

One cool little button called Direct Pre makes the M8 console special in my opinion. This button routes the channel's signal to the direct output, bypassing the fader. Once your channel's input level is set, drop the Direct Pre in and the fader no longer affects the send to the Direct Out—but the signal still stays in the mix.

This lets you keep the level to tape set and still send an adjusted signal into the mix with the fader. For musicians using a computer rig on which monitoring latency is an issue, this lets you monitor in time with the track. Soundcraft gets an A+ for including this one.

be running your signals straight to a hard disk recorder or CD burner; you can avoid extra stages of conversion and keep your signals squeaky clean.

If you're looking for a small but powerful, flexible, and affordable console for your live recording or studio work, I highly suggest looking here first. Soundcraft has always made quality sounding products, and the M8 follows that tradition proudly.

Price: M4, \$699.95; M8 (reviewed), \$849.95; M12, \$999.95

More from: Soundcraft, 1449 Donelson Pike, Nashville, TN 37217. 615/360-0471, fax 615/360-0273, www.soundcraft.com.

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