

Fairlight Dream Constellation

Building on a grand lineage and pedigree that is appreciated by those in the know, Fairlight has upped the ante on its approach to total audio production in post and introduced some recent enhancements. **NEIL HILLMAN** likes it, he really does.



interface for recording, editing and mixing. Enter then, the Fairlight Dream; in true Fairlight fashion, a mnemonic derived from Digital Recording, Editing and Mixing.

The reality of these latest sea-changes in the parent company is that there seems to have been no break in the usual high standards of service and supply that Fairlight owners have long been accustomed to; and reassuringly, UK Fairlight customers are now served by Tekcare: an independent company headed-up by the familiar Fairlight UK faces of Graham Murray and Rene Brandon. I looked at the Dream Constellation installed in their demonstration room in Potters Bar north of London.

The Dream Constellation sits at the top of a product line previously occupied by the Fairlight Prodigy 2: a well-proven combination of the Amek-constructed digital Fame desk with an integral MFX3-plus audio editor, which is said to be installed in some 200 studios worldwide. While the kernel of the new system still revolves around the powerful QDC engines first used in the Prodigy 2, the way in which it unlocks its processing capabilities is presented in a way that at first glance, does appear to be radically different. As someone who plies his trade daily on a Prodigy 2, it was quickly apparent that while the Dream and Constellation's combination is laid out with a much busier control surface than the more industrial Prodigy 2, the logic of the Constellation's console lay-out is easily assimilated, aided by the carefully arranged ergonomics of the Dream binnacle editor-controller. Put it this way, by the time the second coffee and plate of chocolate digestives had been dispatched, my programme's pictures had digitised into the Fairlight Pyxis picture-manager, the AAF for the project had transferred to the Dream editor across the Fairlight MediaLink from CD, and I was confident enough to examine the desk in detail and

appreciate its flow; only occasionally fumbling to locate the next step in any console process.

The Constellation is an impressive console, all the more so with its integral Dream recorder/editor offering up to 96 tracks, and a 96kHz capability. It wears its heart on its sleeve; or at least lays out its console control surface functions before you, as opposed to the Prodigy 2's methodology of a frugal array of desk buttons being supplemented by separate on-screen settings for such things as automation status or insert points. It's what you get used to of course — I love my Prodigy 2 immensely — but the Constellation design gives the feel of a return to a more 'conventional' big-desk layout, making an easier transition for operators coming from other large-scale desk systems. The overall impression is of an eye-catching retro design — its apparent acres of polished aluminium bringing to mind American diners and Airstream caravans; yet look closer and everything is completely contemporary and in-context, with nothing superfluous added for effect. It is, in short, beautiful to behold.

The Dream Constellation offers an up to 192-channel mix engine, routable with up to 72 mix buses. Those 72 available buses are used to provide a main bus, 8 sub-buses and 12 Auxiliary sends; each of which may be in 7.1, plus 16 mono multitrack buses, and with surround work very much in mind the Constellation's busing allows for the simultaneous generation of multiple surround formats. The monitoring is configurable to allow switching between up to nine different speaker sets, allowing fold-up or fold-down between formats.

The physical Input and Outputs are available in AES, analogue or MADI formats, with the ability to freely route inputs, outputs and buses to any internal or external destination.

The console is available in two chassis sizes, a 3 or 5-bay, with the maximum number of physical faders in the 5-bay being 60. The base system may be thought of in modular terms and added to as required. Both chassis sizes come as standard with a Fader Panel of 12 motorised faders, a Channel Switch panel, a Channel Assign Panel, and an Editor Panel. The optional meter bridge carries the already included main Meter Unit, which is supplied with a VU and phase meter as standard, and subsequent Channel Meter units — each channel unit offering 12 assignable, high resolution, 53-segment bargraph meters, available to complement each 12-pack fader panel fitted.

The Fader Panel, in addition to the touch-sensitive faders themselves, houses the controls for panning, with Solo and Mute buttons being positioned above each fader. A backlit LCD above the fader shows the channel name, scribbled by the operator if required, with Pan and Level positions also displayed. Further LED indicators show channel bus assignments between the Main, Sub and Multitrack buses, with an LED used to show when a channel is armed as a track-feed for the Dream recorder. An Auto button is used to punch-in automation for a channel, with a soft button providing the means for inserting it into the automation. More LEDs indicate the mode of mix automation in use: Touch, Latch, Safe, Read, Write or Trim. Other LED indicators are provided for showing if a mixer channel is a Track, a Feed or a Bus. Signal presence, Insert, EQ and Dynamics are also indicated by individual LEDs when in use. Most of these serve as examples of how many functions have been brought back out onto the Constellation's desk, from the primarily on-screen approach of the Prodigy 2.

FAIRLIGHT IS A NAME borrowed exactly three decades ago by two earnest young Australians, Peter Vogel and Kim Ryrie, from the stern of a Sydney harbour ferry boat for their infant electronic musical instrument company. They launched their original 28kHz, 8-bit creation on an unsuspecting world and started a revolution: first in music, but then ten years later by turning their attention to audio postproduction. Challenging AMS-Neve's hard-disk sound-editor, Fairlight offered a product with a faster, more intuitive interface based around a new architecture and running its own rock-solid operating system. The MFX — an abbreviation for Music and Effects — is now a name synonymous with the best audio editor in the world.

Along the way, Fairlight has risen phoenix-like from the ashes of previous incarnations, salvation coming in the form of its own products; its constant innovation and high quality standards ensuring a steady demand in the market. Hit particularly hard by the double-whammy of funding a company growing too quickly and the global economic crash of 1987, Fairlight became Fairlight ESP in 1989. By 2003 the company yet again had to undergo major surgery; but it emerged stronger from the lessons learned from repeating its mistake of dependence and over-exposure to the fickle and unforgiving world of Venture Capitalists. It is now armed with a new family of products that claim to represent a major change in the hardware/software



The Channel Switch Panel, mounted centrally above the Constellation Editor Panel, accommodates the talkback microphone and provides access to the Track, Return, Bus and Live Feed signals as well as the various speaker sets, speaker mutes and automation enable. A tri-colour LED provides the status and selected mode of each switch — Recording by red, Automated by green and Trim by amber — with set-up switches used for Bus assignment, Bus format, Group linking, Input and Output patching and Stem assignment. Most notably, a dedicated switch enables desk automation to be cut, copied or pasted between tracks or clips simultaneously with any audio edit carried out via the binnacle Editor Panel. This a fabulous improvement over Prodigy 2 and other rival systems, and ends the need for painstaking offset calculations or the precise shuffling and capturing of old and new timecode positions while chasing an edit.

A Call button on the Channel Switch panel routes a channel to the Channel Assign Panel, home to the Input controls, Dynamics, EQ, Aux sends, and the surround pan control modules; with the console's dedicated mixer screen showing the adjustable parameters graphically. The input controls of the Channel Assign Panel allow access to the level, phase, insert, I-O patching, bus assign and plug-in parameters. Over 80 DSP plug-ins are available through the Constellation Plug-In Manager, using Creamware hardware for reverbs, delays, flangers, chorus, EQ and dynamic filters; a wide range of popular VST plug-ins are also supported by the Constellation. The various plug-in controls are automatically mapped to the appropriate knobs and faders on the Fader Panel. On-board the console, a two-stage Dynamics section consists of a Gate and a Limiter/Expander. The first stage is a compressor with adjustable ratio and threshold, level, attack and release time, hold time and make-up gain. The second stage may be used as a limiter, with similar adjustments available to those for the compressor; or when used either as a Gate or an Expander, the reduction depth or expansion ratio may also be adjusted.

The Channel Assign Panel's 6-band EQ section has level compensation and can be independently switched in or out of circuit manually or by the automation. Bands 1 and 6 are switchable between a shelving or a Low/High Pass Filter, while parametric equalisation is available on bands 2 to 5, complete with a shelving response. Each of the 12 Auxiliary buses can be defined within a surround format up to 7.1, with a rotary control for each channel's send level or panning. Just a single joystick is used to pan either individual mono feeds or multiformat feeds within the Constellation, as opposed to the two of the Prodigy 2; a Spread control affects the width of the signal to be panned, while the Rotate control turns the entire sound field around a fixed central listening position. Uncluttered on-screen graphics

provide a clear picture of any adjustments made. The LFE channel is provided with a separate level control within the panner.

The Constellation Editor Panel houses the Fairlight binnacle controller for the recorder, plus dedicated controls for the transport functions, an input pad with GPIO capability for writing to 3 banks of 9 programmable macros, auto-location, project menus, dual-destination talkback keys, monitor speaker selection, and — importantly — the master fader. A small LCD screen in the editor panel shows detailed menu functions such as edit modes, project navigation, system settings and set-up plus Virtual Studio Runner — a system that uses Fairlight's MediaLink server technology as a host and detects incoming files and automatically posts them to the studio's or the client's FTP site or burns the file to any available network CD or DVD drive. Virtual Studio Runner can even notify the client that a file is available for them via an SMS text message. This Constellation Editor Panel is in fact a facsimile of the standalone Dream Satellite system but incorporates essential mixer functions too because central to the design philosophy of the Constellation is the fact that this is a complete multitrack recording and editing system, not just a comprehensive mixing console.

Using the automation is certainly straightforward enough, made easier by the immediacy of a selection process that is mostly of a one switch, one touch duration. Motorised knobs, as well as the motorised faders, illuminated switches, backlit buttons and status LEDs provide a clear indication of their relative position, as well as enabling instant access to many of the controls while under way with a mix, either directly at the channel itself, or more globally at the central controller. There are those several modes of writing or updating mix information including manually punching in and out with dedicated keys and this is also used for defining automated drop-in points. Touch mode, however, is the general application of automated mixing that most dubbing mixers would use, where the automation is enabled on faders, knobs and buttons only when they are touched as the transport plays. The mix data may be written in an absolute mode or trimmed with an

offset but in either case adjustable, smooth transitions between old and new automated events are created, with the automation data safely and neatly wrapped and stored within the disk recorder's corresponding project file.

The introduction of the Dream Constellation to Fairlight's product range offers existing owners a credible, logical and tangible upgrade path, and invites new users to think again — very, very carefully — about their options for a grown-up, large-format, automated mixing system. The bangs-for-your-bucks, price versus performance ratio of the Constellation is simply staggering. It's fully compatible with any of the



usual cinema playback formats up to 7.1, it delivers up to 96 tracks from its fast and stable integral audio editor, with up to 192 mixer channels driving up to 60 motor faders. Just imagine the smile of satisfaction from your bank manager when you painstakingly explain all this. Failing that, declare your intention to achieve 90% of an AMS-Neve DFC's features for just 20% of the cost, and help keep those circling vultures of Venture Capital at bay. ■

PROS

Neat, thought-through touches appear at every visit to the mixer — for instance, touching a specific soft key plus one of the faders and the desk instantly resets to its default or unity settings.

CONS

Its maximum size of 60 faders may be seen as less impressive a statistic by some film stages demanding a desk the size of an oil tanker.

EXTRAS

Fairlight's Constellation XT is powered by a 240-channel, 72-bus QDC engine with 6-band parametric EQ, two stage dynamics, 12 aux sends, 48 or 96 track recorder and integrated plug-ins on each channel. The control surface also boasts a new high-resolution display technology. Organic Light Emitting Diode displays (OLEDs) provide detailed information on any selected parameter value. Unlike traditional LCDs, OLED displays are crystal clear in all light environments and have a viewing angle of up to 160 degrees.

An In Line Panel (ILP) provides dedicated and assignable controls of the channel's input settings, EQ and dynamics filters, auxiliary sends, surround panner and all of the currently inserted plug-ins.

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