

Crane Song Avocet

With its pedigree as an outboard manufacturer beyond reproach, you've got to wonder if the delights of a monitor controller might be a little off-beam for Crane Song. Apparently not, as closet bird fancier **ROB JAMES** is quick to point out.



CRANE SONG IS A curious name for a manufacturer and Avocet equally so for a pro-audio product. Dave Hill, the man behind Crane Song, has been recording since 1972 and the brand dates back to 1995 and has a small but highly respected product line of outboard processors and software. As for the Avocet, I'm no ornithologist so I had to look it up. The Avocet or Recurvirostra americana, in the US and Recurvirostra avosetta in Europe, is a large, long-legged wader, AKA, a 'cobbler's awl' thanks to its very long and thin upturned beak. (*Why are we here? Ed*) The Avocet I am looking at is a monitor controller.

Designing a successful monitor controller is not as easy as it might appear. There are many pitfalls for the unwary. I've reviewed a lot of surround monitor controllers and one or two of the stereo variety and I've yet to find perfection.

A monitor controller needs to be as unobtrusive as possible, sonically and physically, yet provide delicate, comprehensive control for its intended application(s). It must be intuitive in operation and ideally set-up. Since it will be in constant use, aesthetics are important too. If it is also simple to install, that's a bonus. The UK£1550 plus VAT Avocet is immediately impressive with retro-chic design elements (the power lamp and the main level knob) carefully blended with almost flush switches, LED indicators and bargraph meters. The stepped level control is one of the most tactile I've ever encountered with 24 concentric LEDs to indicate the current level. There are five steps between the Off and -32dB LEDs. Above this there is an LED every 2dB but the attenuation increments are 1dB. The intermediate steps are shown by the simple expedient of lighting two LEDs.

To keep normal listening level at the desirable one o'clock position on the main level control, two 10dB to 30dB in-line XLR pads are supplied for use with

power amplifiers lacking input level control. Ease of installation ticks another box.

At first glance I wondered why the main unit is so big (2U). Looking around the back reveals the reason. Dave Hill has eschewed the use of the ubiquitous 'Tascam' format 25-pin sub-D connectors in favour of good old XLRs. More expensive but easier to install and arguably sonically superior. The headline features list includes three analogue inputs, three digital inputs, three analogue outputs (all mutually exclusive) and a

talkback and headphone system. With the main unit jumpers in their default positions digital inputs are upsampled, if necessary, to 192kHz and de-jittered before the D-A conversion process. If desired the upsampling can be set to 96kHz or disabled completely. The 'DAW' digital input can be 1 Wire, 2 Wire or SPDIF, selected via a switch on the rear of the main unit. The main and headphone paths employ relay switched stepped attenuators for level control. Yes, the relays do click, but this is the path to audio Nirvana. Less laudably the buttons on the remote also click quite noisily. The lengthy remote control cable supplied allows the main unit to be sited well away from the control position. A 15-pin sub-D Accessory socket brings out extra functions such as the buffered stereo output, mono output, talkback mic output, headphone bus output, and input control functions for talkback enable, mute and an input selection control that could be used for pre-listen or solo. This connector will also be used for the planned surround expansion. However, I do wonder how the near essential individual speaker mutes and summing of surround inputs can be accommodated.

The most economical method of keeping the audio path clean is to use purely passive circuitry. However, this brings it's own problems with impedance and awkward level matching. The Avocet employs discrete class A amplifiers to provide audio excellence and the required range of control.

A regrettably common defect of monitor controllers is thumps when the unit is powered up or down, potentially damaging to drivers and hearing. Avocet is perfectly behaved in this respect. On power up, after an initialisation routine, it wakes up with the same settings as before, except MUTE is always active.

Operation is simple, intuitive and logical. Speaker outs and analogue and digital inputs all have dedicated buttons, so do Phase Reverse, Mute, Dim and Mono.

A jumper determines whether Mono appears on one speaker or both.

Pressing the Headphone Level button also selects Headphone Mode. Now, the Aux, Analogue 1 and 2 input select buttons select the headphone source as either the Aux input or the main input buttons, before or after the main level control. Talk sends the mic input to the headphone output. The remaining button is the odd one out. 16 Bit truncates the digital input to 16 bits. Why, you may well ask, since this is not something an engineer worth his salt would ever do intentionally. After some thought and an email or two, the answer is, if you are delivering only 24 bit masters, there is a chance that somebody will inadvertently truncate them for 16 bit media and it would be better to know how this will sound.

Each input has +/-10dB of gain trim. A second press on the selected input button puts it into trim mode with the LED flashing. The offset is dialed in with the main level control and the input select pressed once more to store. There are also trim pots on the back of the main unit for +/-8dB of gain trim on the analogue inputs. A high gain mode, selected by an internal jumper adds 14dB of gain to the Analogue 2 input.

Avocet sounds all but invisible using the analogue inputs. It would be hard to think of higher praise. Not only that, the D-A is stunning. The manufacturer has reclaimed my favourite Benchmark D-A so I couldn't make a direct comparison but this D-A is definitely up there with the best on offer at any price. Taking this into account and considering the entirety of Avocet's virtues, if you need a stereo monitor controller, put this on your audition list today. I am impatient to discover whether the surround version will be equally outstanding. ■

PROS	Sound; ergonomics; aesthetics.
CONS	No input summing for applications requiring it; switches mechanically click.
EXTRAS	Crane Song's Egret is an 8-channel D-A converter with a stereo mixer.

The stereo mixer has level, cue send, and a pan control on each channel. Each channel also contains a solo and mute button. Egret has a master level control, a master cue send control and a headphone output with its own level control. Each channel has a TRS insert and direct balanced outputs.

The D-ACs support sample rates up to 192kHz and have sample rate converters on each channel for input jitter reduction. A front panel switch disables the SRC for cases where low latency is required. The converters can be used independently at different sample rates.

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