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Professional Audio and Music Production

Audient Zen Recording/Mixing Console

by [Barry Rudolph](#)

FIELD TEST

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May 2010 Issue

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The all-analog Audient Zen is the little brother of the English company's large-frame, in-line ASP8024 console. David Dearden and Gareth Davies, the founders of DDA, designed both desks. The Zen console is purpose-built for DAW-based studios and retains many of the ASP8024's pro features, but at a much lower price.



Zen's powder-coated, all-steel case has a footprint of about 29 inches square and is 11 inches high. (738-

mm wide by 655-mm deep and 284-mm high) The top control surface is hinged and lifts up like a car hood for access. Zen has an internal switching power supply that's convection-cooled--no fans.

ZEN OPTIONS

The console's back panel is populated with quality XLR and TRS audio connectors--no DB-25 connectors here. If the back of the console is kept accessible, it is usable as a patchbay with all inputs, outputs, insert points and monitoring connections readily available.

The Zen is a dual-input design with 16 100mm Alps faders; it accommodates up to 32 channels to the stereo mix bus by using the DAW input and the Alternate Input path on each channel strip. It has 16 mic preamps and comes with/without HUI-based

automation and 100mm motorized faders replacing the stock faders.

The 16 mic pre-amps, with switchable 75Hz hi-pass filters and direct XLR outputs, have up to 66dB of gain plus an additional 15dB available within the channel strip. They are the same Class-A preamps with discrete transistor input stages that are used in Audient's ASP8024 console and the ASP008 8-channel mic preamp unit.

There's a stereo A/D converter option with both AES/EBU and S/PDIF co-ax and Toslink outputs. The ADC supports up to 96 kHz (or 192 kHz under external word clock). Zen is upgradeable to 5.1 mixing if you connect an Audient ASP510 surround monitor controller.

PRO CHANNEL STRIP

A closer look at each Zen channel strip reveals: four direct channel-output routing options, individual channel VU meter select, polarity flip, insert in/out, channel line/DAW input flip and Alternate input routing. This console has no onboard equalizers or globally switched preconfigured operating modes.



Parallel processing is possible on every channel strip through use of the always-active channel insert send output. This would connect to a processor input, with the returned processed audio routed to the Alternate input path to be summed with the original signal into the stereo mix bus.

Also standard are eight bus/group outputs: a stereo master mix bus, two additional stereo buses and two mono buses. All groups/buses have +4dB inserts with a unique switchable parallel summing mode where the unprocessed send signal is summed equally with the processed signal coming back on the insert return.

There are also four Aux sends with full +4dB line-level outputs suitable for deriving additional mixes or feeds to pro gear. There are +4dB insert patch points available for all of the buses, as well as the stereo mix bus on the console's back panel.

Because Zen allows for sending audio to multiple designations at the same time and returning signals to multiple destinations--you do not lose a certain function at the expense of gaining another.

An onboard VCA-based stereo compressor/limiter is normaled across the stereo mix bus, but you can repatch it across any channel(s) or buses. Looking like the famed SSL bus compressor, this compressor is similar to those used in Audient's ASP8024 and Sumo products.

MONITORING AND CUE FACILITIES

The monitoring section comes with talkback with built-in mic, slate and cue/routing systems, and Solo In Place, AFL and PFL solo modes. The features continue with: polarity invert, mono summing of the monitor speakers, L/R speaker mutes, four external stereo audio sources including a handy jack for an iPod, three different monitor speaker sets, adjustable dim and mute buttons, plus set of recessed trim pots for setting an 85dB SPL calibrated monitoring level switchable at the touch of a button.

Button switches route Cue A and Cue B audio to be sourced from: either Aux 1 or 2; two different external stereo mixes such as a mix made inside of your DAW; the Control Room's audio or any combination of all these sources just by pushing multiple buttons. There is a mixer's headphone jack and external talkback XLR input located under the armrest.

For 5.1 mixing, connect an Audient ASP510 Surround Monitor Controller to the DB9 connector on the back of the console. You would then use Aux sends for the center channel and LFE and let the ASP510 take care of monitoring.

ZEN ON THE WORK SITE

I set up the console right on top of my existing Raxxess desktop table. The 100mm faders overhang the desktop with enough space for my QWERTY keyboard and trackball to reside underneath.

Tracking with the Zen is a breeze; it's clean, quiet and simple to set up and record any number of musicians. The 16 mic preamps let me record in the

"1-track/1-mic" mode while using the remaining six buses for mixing multiple orchestral microphones to stereo tracks. The 16 mic preamps sound good: They are quiet, clean, thick and warm. I found them especially good for drums, percussion and guitars.

I found that the stereo compressor would "vibe up" the sound as I cranked it up. With the Wet/Dry control, I could get just the right amount of stereo mix compression--or more for radical drum bus processing.

I monitored back through Pro Tools HD using a stereo mix created with the 16 faders. During the session, at a musician's request, I was able to do a mix plus "more me" directly from the mic channels, as any aux or cue send can also feed the mix bus.

Zen also has a DAW mix input that's useful for working quickly. If you pre-make cue/monitor mixes "in the box" for all songs, you can jump from song to song quickly when a musician's time is too precious to waste on stopping to make a new board mix for each song. Simply feed DAW 1-2 monitor outputs directly to the console's DAW mix XLR inputs.

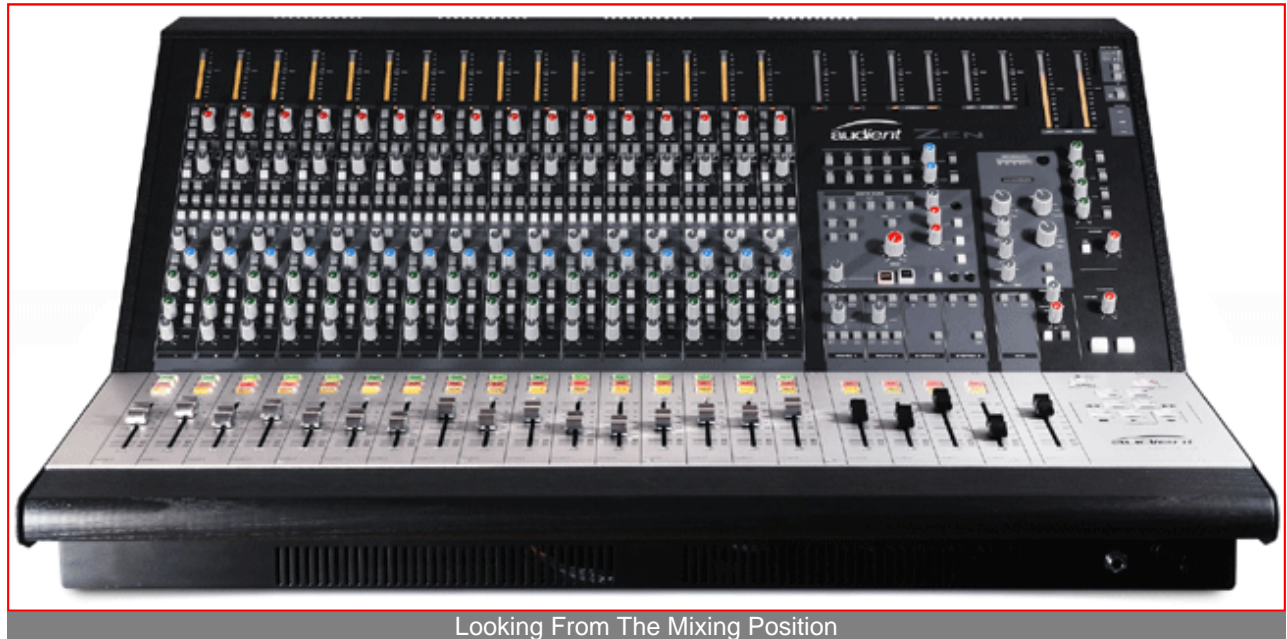
For mixing, I was impressed with the console's elaborate routing abilities. Simple button-pushes replace most patching. For example, you can route the two additional mono bus outputs and/or the two additional stereo buses into the main mix bus for parallel processing or for folding submixes (stems) back into the main mix bus. No additional channel strips are required.

AUTOMATION

I worked the HUI protocol-based set of 16 motor faders, Mute and Solo buttons, transport controls and the Automation On/Off feature to death. It is responsive, fast and accurate, and the Auto On/Off feature works great for auditioning, presetting fader positions and then dropping them all into the DAW mix automation on the fly. All of the DAW's capabilities--write, touch, trim, mute, etc., including graphical breakpoint editing--will be sent to the 16-channel motor faders in Zen.

Other console features include Solo Safe buttons that toggle between Solo Isolate (where selected channels remain unmuted when other solo buttons are pushed) and Automation Safe for locking a channel from any automation changes.

Zen uses two sets of MIDI connectors (eight channels per MIDI cable) to communicate HUI information to the host DAW. This requires a MIDI-to-USB interface box, such as M-Audio's MIDISport 2x2. I hope to see these MIDI jacks soon replaced with an Ethernet connection.



Looking From The Mixing Position



Side View Of Zen

I fed 16 channels at full level from my DAW interface to the 16 channel line inputs. If you have 16 additional (for 32 total outs) channels of I/O, you can feed the DAW inputs, switch to the Alternate Input path in the channel strip, and have 16 more inputs for effect returns and static track elements--things that change little or not at all during the mix. If needed, I'd use conventional "in-the-box" automation for

level changes on these.

I found another automation process good for mixes that I had already developed "in the box" but wanted them to gain the benefit of analog summing. I stemmed out my in-the-box mix to 16 outputs. Because stereo tracks, hard-grouped tracks or VCA-grouped tracks from the DAW are controlled by single faders, by carefully arranging groups and tracks, you can affect motor fader control over very large track counts. In this scenario, I fed the 16 audio tracks to the alt input path in each channel strip; the motor faders will not be passing any audio.

To setup Zen accurately and for perfect recall, I first sent an -18dB tone (Pro Tools' Signal Generator) out all 16 channels so that I could individually adjust the levels of each channel's Alt Input sent to the Mix bus to -18dB level on the Mix bus meters.

As a nod to the precision of the console's electronic design, manufacture and component tolerances, I saw that all of Zen's control knobs were in exactly the same place. With all 16 channels at unity, I was now ready to send the 16 channels of audio into Zen--this time, the 100mm motor faders were working only as controllers to set and ride levels inside of my DAW.

IT'S CHANGED ME

I've had the pleasure of living with the Zen console for more than a month now, and I've fully integrated it into my process. It's allowed me to return to analog console mixing, but I never felt like I had to adapt my process due to any hardware shortcomings or non-recallability.

I am constantly amazed at the difference the Zen console has made in the sound quality and precision of my mixes--it is not subtle. Individual track elements are more present, firmly locked in their panned positions, and my mixes seem sonically 3-D in the way they "leap out" of my monitor speakers.

I'm enjoying the advanced technology of DAW music mixing with complete recall and plug-in processing, using vintage analog processing and getting that indescribable "mojo" that happens when analog audio signals sum and mix within superb electronics.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: Audient Ltd.

PRODUCT: Zen Console

WEBSITE: www.audient.com

PRICE: ZEN16MP, \$10,400; ZEN16MPMF, \$12,300

PROS: 32 channels to analog sum, HUI automation, flexible routing.

CONS: Uses MIDI for HUI.

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