

DIGIDESIGN 003

A more professional feel, and a jog wheel... AT puts the new 003 through its paces.

Text: Brad Watts



► Last issue we managed to rope in a just-out-of-the-oven Digidesign 003 Rack for appraisal, pending the arrival of the star of this review – the control-surface endowed 003. The Digidesign 003 console is unquestionably the unit that boasts the most significant changes of the two in this major LE release (I found the 003 Rack sonically superior to its predecessor but vaguely disappointing in terms of new and expanded features). The 003 takes the Digi 002 console concept and runs with it, offering a new control surface that's designed to re-connect LE users with tactile mixing tasks and liberate them to some extent from the drudgery of mouse-based mixing. There are more features and greater monitoring control on the 003 than on any other dedicated LE system.

THREE CHEERS

I reckon Digidesign has done a really great job with the 003. It's a far more professional looking unit than the 002, having an altogether more sophisticated 'production surface' air about it, rather than the 002's vaguely sci-fi vibe. Moreover, since Digidesign released the Icon and D-Command systems, the dark and brooding aesthetic – a hangover from the early Digidays – has been completely abandoned.

At first glance, the 003 seems a lot larger than its predecessor, an impression that stems mainly from the extensive array of extra controls the 003 offers. The actual footprint, however, isn't that much larger than the 002 at all; the overall width is a mere 6mm wider. The main difference is that the 003 is a much 'squarer' unit. Unlike the 002's forward taper that considerably reduced the surface real-estate, the 003 has room for a proper armrest area across the front as well as space for things like the modifier buttons, which are now placed more sensibly on the lower left of the fader bank. Unlike the 002 there's also a set of dedicated automation mode buttons that sit just above the modifier buttons, which are a great addition and give the unit much more scope as a mixing tool.

The channel strips offer their own five-segment LED peak meters just above the rotary encoders, which also display automation modes for each channel, again making the unit feel more like a mixing console. Off to the right of the eight faders, just above the transport buttons is the navigation controller – this functions as per the 002, only this time around Digi hasn't attempted to make the navigation controller look like a jog-wheel. Reason being? There's now a proper jog/shuttle wheel on the 003. Just like a bought one, the outer shuttle section will fast forward and rewind while shuttling the current edit track – from extremely slow

click searching up to chipmunk speed (800%). Meanwhile the inner jog section will move the playhead at sample precision. Tops! Just be aware that ProTools needs to think for a second or two as you disengage jog or shuttle operation, and remember that you can't access any menus with either feature engaged. A few extra chores can be accessed via the inner jog section of the wheel, such as moving fader banks, and horizontal and vertical zooming of the edit window.

003: LICENCED TO BILL

These are a few of the features that give the 003 a more professional feel than the 002. I don't believe Digidesign envisaged the 002 being taken up by such a professional user base, but due to the increase in computer processing speeds and the higher cost of HD systems, there's been a swarm of people opting for the native processor-driven LE systems. Thankfully, the 003 looks set to fit this pro-user mould more snugly, especially with the inclusion of wordclock I/O. This is a big step up for serious recordists using a Firewire and host-processor-based recording system. Jitter is typically the main problem with cheaper recorders, which usually lack the high-grade clock circuitry to ensure stable and jitter-free sound reproduction. It's only been the last generation of Firewire recorders that have begun to address this problem. Of course, the way most people step around the jitter problems in cheap digital devices is to use vastly more expensive external clocking devices such as the Apogee Big Ben or similar, which inevitably supply their clock signal via wordclock connections. But, of course, this simply wasn't possible with the 002 systems because they didn't have any such connectors. Well now, finally, the 003 (and 003R) have access to top-shelf clocking via BNC wordclock – which amounts to better recordings and mixes all 'round. It's also especially advantageous for facilities that keep a smaller Digidesign interface online merely for OMF and AAF transfers to and from ProTools sessions. The 003 devices can assure adherence to 'house-clock' and perfect sync.

Interestingly, 'Stand-Alone' audio mixer has been eradicated from the 003. The 002, you might remember, could work as a stand-alone mixer but, to be honest, I suspect very few people ever used this feature. The fact is, you're either using ProTools with the 003 or you're not using it at all. Omitting this feature has actually pushed the 003 more into the professional arena to my reckoning and presumably also contributes to Digidesign's ability to keep the price down. This isn't the full story, however. The MIDI standalone mode has in fact been expanded and enhanced. This allows different profiles to be saved for different applications, which can be loaded and switched 'on the fly' while ProTools



DIGI IGNITION PACK 2 BUNDLES

All 003 systems come with the ProTools Ignition Pack 2 Pro, which includes these third-party plug-ins:

Ableton Live Lite 6 Digidesign Edition; Propellerhead Software Reason Adapted 3; IK Multimedia AmpliTube LE; FXpansion BFD Lite; Celemony Melodyne Uno essential; Digidesign Xpand! by A.I.R.; Digidesign Synchronic; M-Audio ProSessions SE sound library; Sound libraries from Big Fish Audio, Cycling '74, Sonic Reality, and Zero-G; Way Out Ware TimewARP 2600 Lite; Arturia Analog Factory SE; iZotope effects: Ozone 3 Lite, Trash Lite, and Spectron Lite; Trillium Lane Labs TL EveryPhase; Trillium Lane Labs TL Utilities.

is still running. So you could, for example, use Reason simultaneously with ProTools with the mixing surface controlling each one separately.

LAYOUT & ERGONOMICS

Digidesign has done its best to keep a similar button and switch layout to the 002, so users making the move to the 003 won't suddenly find themselves relearning the ropes. Everything is pretty much where your fingers would fall with the 002. The biggest change is having the mic pre controls on the right rather than the left. Gone too are the right-hand-side function buttons, these have been replaced with dedicated buttons for fader muting, focus, utility etc. More impressive however, are the dedicated Save, Undo and Enter buttons. The Save function in particular is well thought out, lighting up when any change is made to a session, flashing when pressed once then stopping the flash sequence when pressed a second time. Only then is the session actually saved. It's a nice little reminder staring you directly in the face while mixing.

LED OR LSD?

Overall, the 003 has improved appreciably in the legibility department. Firstly, the strip display now presents two lines of information and is raked at a much better angle for viewing from a seated position. It also allows entire track names to be displayed rather than constantly relying on annoying four-letter abbreviations. Secondly, the use of the odd 'toadstool'-shaped knobs for the rotary encoders allows the LED surrounds to *actually* surround the encoder. You might remember that the 002's LEDs were situated above the encoder knobs like a halo. The toadstool design therefore saves space and offers you a much better view of the LEDs – an impressively simple solution, even if the knobs do feel a little weird at first. The 'toadstools' don't make a lot of sense for the mic pre gain knobs, or for that matter the headphone and monitoring level controls, but mixing and matching different knobs simply wouldn't be an option, for obvious reasons. As it is, they create a nice uniform style in keeping with the more up-market Icon control surfaces.

Another feature which makes the 003 console feel more professional are the motorised faders. They're a lot silkier than the ones in the 002: smooth to the touch and quiet into the bargain. Definite and – dare I say it – tangible advances have been made here and I'd go so far as to liken these faders to those of the Control 24. Like the 002, the faders can be muted (disabled) for extra quiet monitoring, and again, just like the 002, there's no internal fan to interfere with listening.

Other steps forward for the 003 that must rate a mention include monitoring system additions. There are now two sets of control room outputs so you've got immediate access to both your main monitors and a junky pair of 'horrtones'. Two sets of headphone outputs with individual gain controls are also a welcome inclusion, with the option to route Outputs 3&4 to the second headphone out. This allows a second headphone mix to be sent to the talent while you retain the mix you've been aiming for. Very handy.

UPS & DOWNS

Sound quality has leaped forward with the 003. Last issue I pointed out the huge decrease in distortion figures and the superior dynamic range of the 003 compared with the 002 (see the box item, or alternatively, have a look at last issue's 003R review for a more in-depth coverage of the sound quality improvements). The 003, to reiterate, is without doubt a much better sounding unit than its predecessor – in fact, it's specs are very close to the 96I/O HD interface.

Disappointments for me are much the same as with the 003R. There's no phantom power LED indicator to give you any visual feedback on whether it's activated and the



COMPARATIVE SPECS

DIGI 002

Dynamic Range

Inputs 1-4: 101dB (A-weighted)
Inputs 5-8: 108dB (A-weighted)
Alt Inputs: 99dB (A-weighted)
Main Outputs: 114dB (A-weighted)
Monitor Outputs: 112dB (A-weighted)
Outputs 3-8: 114dB (A-weighted)

Mic preamps

Dynamic Range: 101dB (A-weighted)
THD + N: 0.004%
Mic EIN: -127dBu @ 65dB gain, 150Ω source, 20Hz - 20kHz

003

Dynamic Range

Inputs 1-4: 107dB (A-weighted)
Inputs 5-8: 113dB (A-weighted)
Alt Inputs: 113dB (A-weighted)
Main Outputs: 113dB (A-weighted)
Monitor Outputs: 112dB (A-weighted)
Outputs 3-8: 113dB (A-weighted)

Mic preamps

Dynamic Range: 105dB - 107dB (A-weighted)
THD + N: 0.0007%
Mic EIN: -129dBu

phantom switches remain buried around the back of the unit. Plus, if headphone outputs can be placed in the front (into the armrest section) why can't a D.I. input live out the front as well? The ADAT optical I/O is also a fairly underwhelming feature. If this could have been expanded to a dual-optical S/MUX I/O the 003 would have taken a huge leap forward — 16 channels of 96k recording! Alas, as the unit stands, adding an extra eight inputs via ADAT lightpipe still restricts the machine to 48k sampling. Obviously the powers that be at Digi don't mix in S/MUX circles and vice versa — a real shame.

THREE GOOD REASONS

Annoyances aside, the 003 looks better, feels better and sounds a whole lot better. Plus, there's much more control over mainstay mixing and automation functions, which will allow you to use the mouse and keyboard even less. Digidesign has certainly heeded the concerns of the 002 user-base and come up with a design that suits the pro and semi-pro users who adopted the 002 as their main ProTools platform. I do wonder, however, if the company has another product up its sleeves to bring 16-channel, 96k recording to the masses. Otherwise, the only choice is the M-Powered systems or going straight to a PCI or PCIe HD system, which seems to me to be a gap in the Digidesign product line. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price

003 Factory: \$3845

Contact

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Pros

Professional feel to layout and design.
Jitter seems to have been tamed.
Wordclock I/O.
Two headphone channels.
Two control room outputs.

Cons

Why oh why are the phantom power switches at the back?
For 16 channels at 96k it's still HD or M-Powered.

Summary

Although Digidesign has missed a number of opportunities with the 003, the improvements to sound, as well as added mixing and automation control could well make the 003 a desirable upgrade for current 002 owners.