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**TRAC STAR?**

Soundtracs RX8 8-Buss Mixing Console

Reviews : Mixer

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Printer-friendly version**SOUNDTRACS RX8 8-BUSS MIXING CONSOLE**

**Is the RX8 the latest sporty model from Mazda? No -- actually, it's a keenly priced 8-buss mixing desk from Soundtracs. CHRISTOPHER HOLDER secures the first test drive.**

I recently had a conversation with a reader that illustrates the shifting tide of price and quality so well that you could be forgiven for thinking I made it up (I didn't). This guy had just bought a Lexicon PCM80 and a PCM90, and wanted to know what my opinion was about mixing desks. I thought "OK, he's spending upwards of £3500 on effects alone, so how about looking at a Yamaha 02R or a Soundtracs top-of-the-range Topaz, or an Allen & Heath GS3?" No, he was wondering whether there was anything that could compete with the Mackie 8-buss at around the £2000 mark. After we had a brief chat about mixers, he started to ask for advice on a *further* effects unit. Noting that he already had two top-notch units, I assumed that he'd be after a more budget-conscious multi-effects workhorse: but no, actually, he was thinking about something more in the £1200 region, like the Lexicon MPX1 or TC Electronic M2000.

Incredible. That's about five grand on effects alone, while he was still contemplating spending only around £2000 on a desk.

It all made me think about the relative costs of studio equipment and what you'd expect to pay to get a 'professional' sound. Traditionally, the mixer would have been the most expensive single item of gear you'd need to budget for, and it followed that it would be the single piece of gear that, perhaps more than any other, distinguished a home studio from a pro/semi-pro concern. Evidently, times have changed, and the perception is that you can get away with spending less on your desk and not be penalised with a crap sound. This of course isn't entirely the case -- the less you spend the more limitations you'll encounter, both sonically and in terms of facilities -- but it's true to say the compromises are becoming less severe. The Soundtracs RX8 could be a case in point: it's an affordable console in the same mould as, say, the Spirit Folio range, only it's big -- 24 or 34 channel inputs. But if what we're talking about is simply a grown-up budget console, it's got to fall over in some departments, right? You might be surprised.

**WORTH THE WEIGHT?**

Looking at the box and having little idea of scale from the promotional pictures, I embarked on a major clear-out of my studio to accommodate the huge bulk of the RX8. When it was time to pull it out of the packaging I was surprised to find a board rather more compact than expected. I was reviewing the 24-channel version, which is 86cm wide and a miserly 48cm deep. At 42kg in weight, this desk is not something you can tuck under your arm, but it's a fairly comfortable one-man lift (once it's out of its packaging), and this is made easier by conveniently moulded sides you can grab hold of. Physically, despite its small dimensions, the RX8 still looks like a 'real', grown-up mixing console. This is important if you're operating your studio as a semi-pro concern (or intending to): the desk is the focal point of peoples' attention and you don't want something that looks as though it fell out of a Christmas cracker.

In Soundtracs' promotional material much is made of the RX8's dual functionality: this desk is intended to be just as much at home in a live environment as it is in the studio. Although SOS is a magazine that focuses primarily on studio equipment, we know many of you out there gig as well, so it's worth noting some of the live features. Those on the live circuit will be happy with the six independent auxiliaries, with individual pre-/post-fader switching, so you can have as many as six foldback mixes. In the EQ section you'll find a high-pass filter to help cut low-frequency stage noise picked up by your mics. The group faders are actually stereo (eight groups, four faders), which can be more useful in a live situation, where you can have one fader controlling a stereo mix of drums, backing vocals, or keyboards (if your front-of-house mix is in stereo and not mono, of course). There's an additional mono output as well, which would come in handy to feed another zone, or a bass bin, another monitor mix, or a stage-centre speaker cluster. Unfortunately, there isn't actually a mono mix buss as such -- it's a mono sum of the stereo output -- so you can't assign just a vocal mix to a central cluster.

That's the live bit over with; what are the main recording attractions? For starters, the auxiliary section is as handy for recording and mixing purposes as it is for creating on-stage foldback mixes. Likewise, the four stereo groups will allow you to get the most from your 8-track recorder (or 16-/24-track with some thoughtful patching). Tape monitoring is handled by eight extra inputs into channels 1-8. These inputs are normalised to four stereo returns located above the four group faders, acting as monitors during recording. When it's time to mix down, a Tape button on each of the first eight channels switches the signal from the multitrack into that channel. Channel muting and a well specified monitor and talkback section are all included in a rather sophisticated feature set for the price.

**SPEC CHECK**

If we take a look at a mono channel strip we can get an idea of what exactly is on offer. Each channel comes equipped with a phase reverse switch. A rotary gain control offers a mic gain range of +10dB to +60dB, and a line input range of -10dB to +40dB. There's no mic/line button or pad button, but there should be a enough leeway to accommodate practically every signal you might throw at the RX8. A phantom power switch is supplied either side of the central master module -- ie. one for each set of 10 mono channels, which should be enough to get you out of trouble if you should find yourself having to deal with some sources that can't accept phantom, whilst needing to use your condenser mics.

Next up is the equalisation section, a fairly standard 3-band EQ with a swept mid. The HF and LF controls use a shelving filter and administer up to 15dB of boost or cut from above 12kHz or below 80Hz respectively. The mid-range section is sweepable between 190Hz and 7.2kHz, again with 15dB of boost or cut available (with a Q value of 1.5). Additionally, a high-pass filter can roll off the frequencies below 80Hz at 18dB per octave. An EQ on/off switch is also provided, which is great for comparing your carefully tweaked settings with the unprocessed signal.

**"The RX8 is intended to be just as much at home in a live environment as it is in the studio."**

auxiliaries, offers all the flexibility your heart could desire.

A pan pot sits under the auxiliaries, with solo and mute buttons beneath it. There's a decent amount of space around those two crucial buttons, and both are individually equipped with a status light. You may consider this mandatory, but it isn't always offered at this price point.

The routing section is much as you would expect, with a switch for left/right mix routing, and one each for Group pairing, 1/2, 3/4,

**pros & cons****SOUNDTRACS RX8**  
**£1410/£1825****pros**

- Clean sound.
- Loads of inputs.
- Built for real 8-track recording and monitoring.
- Flexible aux section.
- Can be used in a live context.

**cons**

- Short-throw faders.
- Rear-mounted headphone jack.

**summary**

A very cost-effective, capable and versatile desk with a comfortable layout and more professional features than you might expect at the price.

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5/6, and 7/8. Below the routing switches lurks a red LED to indicate that the channel is 5dB off clipping and a green LED to indicate that a signal is present, with a -20dB threshold. A 60mm fader completes the picture. If like me, you're used to 100mm faders, you might find the shorter variety cramped, but you do get used to it, and I don't think it makes life significantly more difficult.

The two stereo channels are virtually identical to their mono counterparts. Two balanced jack inputs service the stereo channel and, naturally, there are no mic facilities, but everything else is the same, although the EQ section is 4-band fixed, rather than 3-band with a swept mid. I suppose the rationale is that a stereo source like a synth or drum machine doesn't normally need such precise doctoring, although personally I'd tend to disagree.

## MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

Soundtracs are past masters at setting out an uncluttered and flexible master module, and this one is no exception. The talkback section is quite comprehensive: your dulcet tones can be routed to any or all of aux 1&2, aux 3&4, aux 5&6, and the groups; ditto for the 1kHz oscillator (the groups routing being more useful there, to help calibrate your multitrack tape recorder). Each auxiliary is equipped with a master level knob, pre-/post-fader switch and an AFL solo button (with status LED).

The monitor section is nicely self-explanatory. You can either monitor the mix or the 2-track return (2-track A or 2-track B), while the 2-track input can be routed to the mix buss as a further input (handy in a live situation if you're playing a tape during intermission). A latching switch gives you the option of PFL (Pre Fade Listen), or Solo In Place (where you can monitor the signal at the actual mix level and panning position) -- again, a rather nice feature at this price.

### BOOK REPORT

Soundtracs should be commended on their manual for the RX8, which rightly assumes little prior knowledge of pretty much anything. All facilities and terms are explained and discussed. The wiring section is particularly complete, and there are lots of real-world examples of what should go where. Having said all that, if you know your way around a mixing desk you'll hardly need the manual for working with the RX8.

The separate mono output (with its own level control) could be pressed into service in live work as an extra monitor send or to feed a sub-bass unit. It's also useful in a studio environment, for feeding an extra monitor to check mono radio/TV compatibility.

Metering is handled by two 12-segment LED ladders. The display area also features LEDs marked Power (self-explanatory); +48v (to indicate whether phantom powering is activated); and Solo (to show whether any Solo button has been activated).

The eight groups are controlled via four stereo faders, each with accompanying Solo buttons (with status LEDs), and a Mix button to route the group signal to the mix buss.

Above the group faders are four stereo returns. In reality, you're not likely to use this section for multitrack monitoring unless all the channels are tied up with inputs for recording. Just the basics are provided (Level, Balance and Solo controls), and a Tape/Group switch which allows you to toggle between the output from the group and the tape for comparison, if you are working in that configuration. Most of the time these inputs will be used for conventional effects return purposes.

## INS AND OUTS

All the inputs and outputs are rear mounted. Channel inputs are on XLR connectors for mics and a balanced jack socket for line inputs. All jack socket surrounds are metal rather than plastic, even though providing plastic ones could have been a justified price-cutting move. Each channel has an insert point (wired post-EQ), and there are further insert points for each group and on the main stereo output. The manual features a good section on the connectors used, the reasons for using them and the correct wiring, which may prove handy when you're spending a day with the soldering iron. Elsewhere, all inputs are on balanced jack sockets, with the XLR Left and Right mix outputs, and the '2-track A' phono in and out being the exceptions. The headphone jack is also around at the back, which is a little inconvenient.

The power supply is external, being a 'lump in the lead' variety rather than a wall-wart. The power socket on the desk has a locking thread to stop accidental unplugging.

## FEELGOOD FACTOR

I like the layout of this desk. Quite often a manufacturer's claim that their console is 'dual purpose' (for live and studio use) can spell trouble, depending on how much time you spend in one or the other sphere of operation, but from a studio point of view the RX8 is a very well conceived console that should acquit itself well if you should ever need to swing it into live work. The multitrack facilities are very well thought out, and switching between the four stereo channels of the monitor section and the first eight channels when mixing, provided a very easy way of working, with little tedious repatching. During recording I used the two stereo channels for my effects returns, and during mixdown I shifted them to the designated effects returns channels to free up the better equipped channels for stereo synth sources.

All the pots are tastefully colour-coded and moulded to have an actual 'pointy bit', so that you know exactly where you stand when you're twiddling in low light. Similarly, the generous complement of status LEDs leaves you quietly confident that you could find what you need in a hurry.

Having four stereo group faders rather than eight mono ones didn't cause any practical problems for me during testing. Good recording practice dictates that you set up your levels correctly at the input stage, set the channel fader to unity gain, and then the group fader to unity gain, to get the best possible signal on tape, so you shouldn't necessarily need independent control of over each of the eight groups. Setting up sub-groups when mixing normally involves stereo elements (especially if there's any chorusing or reverb involved) and again you shouldn't miss the mono group faders too much.

There are some minor niggles, which are normally the result of cost-cutting -- for instance, the 60mm faders, limited metering, and rear-mounted headphone jack are unfortunate but not unexpected. It's the features that you could understand *not* being present that pleasantly surprise: status LEDs on every Solo and Mute button, two 2-track returns, and the manner in which the auxiliaries, groups and monitoring have been approached. The nature of the desk's internal construction, from a couple of horizontally installed PCBs (rather than a vertical, modular arrangement) means that the pots, switches and faders don't feel absolutely rock solid, but this in no way impinges on the actual sound.

As you would expect from an accomplished manufacturer like Soundtracs, this is a quiet desk. The quoted noise figure for a mic input is -127.5dBu, while -93dBu is claimed for the line input. Crosstalk is also virtually undetectable, and I was quite impressed with most aspects of the sound. The mute switches act predictably and without any hint of clicking, and though the faders have slightly more resistance in their movement than I prefer, they operate smoothly. In fact, the only switches that audibly glitch are the Solo buttons, which admittedly won't affect your recording.

The EQ section is perfectly serviceable, and I was pleased with the gentle manner in which you can treat your sound. The 3-band semi-parametric configuration means that you're not going to be able to perform precise sonic surgery on your signal, but I found what's on offer to be pretty useful. The EQ on/off switch is much appreciated as well.

## DESK JOCKEY

To return to my story from the beginning of this review, the weird thing is that I can sympathise with the guy on the phone. If you've got a wad of cash in one hand and a catalogue of synths and recording gear in the other, you want to pour the money into gear that's creative, that fires your imagination. The mixing console seems so prosaic: sound comes in one end and is fired out the other. It's not until you make the switch from a budget mixer to something more professional that you understand what you've been missing out on.

For me, this is where the RX8 fits in -- for those who have outgrown their small Spirit Folio or Mackie 1202 but can't afford a Mackie 8-buss or Soundcraft Ghost, the RX8 starts at around £1400, is an 8-buss console, and offers six auxiliaries and plenty of inputs. As such it's going to have immediate appeal to a range of potential buyers.

**info** Soundtracs RX8 (24-ch) £1410;  
32-channel version £1821.25.  
Prices include VAT.  
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