



MIDAS PRO6

Live Audio System

SIMON ALLEN gets up close and personal with one of the major launches of 2008: the hotly anticipated PRO6.

The Midas PRO6 is here, and here to stay. This has been a very eagerly awaited release, and I can see why. It is safe to say that the PRO6 will have a strong position in the market, and initial sales and responses are good. This more affordable brother of the Midas XL8 is compact, but not compact in its functions, as I discovered when I visited the purpose-designed demo facility at Midas HQ in Kidderminster.

Overview

At first glance the console is a dazzling array of colour, and the prominent illuminated logo makes the PRO6 stand out and be very recognisable. This is the second networked digital audio system from Midas. Employing technologies from its flagship model the XL8, the PRO6 offers the same sample-synchronised audio performance in a compact package with that Midas sound.

The system comprises of the desk itself, which really acts as one large remote control, and two 7U rack space units handling all the DSP and I/O. The I/O unit is completely configurable to whatever array of ins and outs are required, but the standard system provides 56 channel inputs, eight returns, and digitally: 41 busses, initially configured as 16 auxes, 16 matrix, three masters, and six solos. As the I/O hardware is all AES50 networked, the system can soon be increased to connect 264 inputs and 264 outputs, which should be enough. The other great news is that the hardware for the XL8 and the PRO6 are compatible. The desk itself also offers some changeable audio I/O cards to allow audio connections at FOH position if the racks are located on the stage.

The whole system has that inevitable feel of Midas high quality about it, and the company has worked hard on fail-safe ways of protecting the show! The connection

between the desk and the racks are two lots of 100m digital snake using Cat-5e copper cabling: one master, and one as a spare. There is an optical option for further distances. Inside the console there are two Linux-based computers, and should one fail, the other can run the desk through the rest of the show. There are also redundant power supplies for back-up, so the PRO6 really is ready for the live sound environment.

The console has 16 input channel faders, 12 on the left and four on the right, with master faders and auxiliary masters in the middle. Even though this is a digital mixer with two daylight viewable screens, the layout and manual feel is very much based around familiar analogue lines for intuitive operation. This is a massively capable piece of kit that is all singing and dancing, but it is designed in a logical manner. To move up and down the endless channels or busses and auxiliaries, there are simple navigation functions, as well as the now common VCA method of working.

The pots work on direction and speed of turn to alter values rather than being simple encoders with only so many positions. This really does give the feel of Midas' heritage in analogue mixers. The pots are also touch sensitive. As you touch them they become more noticeable on the screen with relevant information, such as dB value, giving the operator a 'heads

up' approach to mixing. You can look at what you're mixing, and not get involved in the gear. I actually think that because you are always looking at the same place on a screen in front of you rather than all over the mixer, and different bits of outboard gear in different places, and so on, that once you become used to it, it might actually make you more involved with the stage than a wholly analogue approach. It's a little like choosing between





- ▶ having your car's speedo on the dashboard, or in your lap.

All of the coloured backlights on the controls are user definable, making the desk work for you in a recognisable way. Track names are also

editable with an external keyboard, so no need for tape any more. The approach Midas took was to use colour as a way to help you guide yourself around the mix so you can grab the correct control as needed without thinking about it.

The colours are big and bold, and the well-illuminated controls and screens make the desk fit for indoor and outdoor use. There are 10 VCA groups that are individually accessible from the centre of the main control area, which are very easy to assign channels to by holding down the selector buttons. This also provides a better way of navigating through the channels.

Compact is the name of the game here. Everything you would ever need for any show can be found inside the PRO6, from automation, to 5.1 surround sound panning, to plenty of effects and reverbs, to several compressors, EQs, and graphics. This allows easy load in and load out for quick and easy set up. Show settings can be saved on an external USB memory stick for efficiency and consistency in your sound every time. Show settings can also be loaded on either the PRO6 or the XL8 making life easier for touring engineers. Midas has written all of its own algorithms for their Linux-based operating system, spread across two internal computers each with dual core processors. The effects and compressors etc are modelled on well-known devices, so no need for all of your outboard. All the audio sampling is done at 96kHz, 24-bits, any signal processing is done at 32-bits, and the system automatically compensates for any digital delay, so you don't encounter phasing with any number of plug-ins you may use.

In Use

I managed to find my way around this desk to a level of confidence gig-ready within only a few hours. I think for experienced digital desk users, the move to the PRO6 would be an easy transition, and it would just be a case of finding where everything is; whereas for analogue engineers, they should not be afraid, as it is very intuitive.

The only issue I had was getting out of habits from other desks. In particular I am very used to Pro Tools on a MacPro, with dual screens and the pointer going straight from screen to screen. The PRO6 has two screens but as they look after different jobs and are run from separate computers, there are two tracker balls. At first I did find it odd, but as I started to get more used to the functions and where they were, I stopped thinking about it. You also find that once any setting up has been done, most of the mixing and any work that is done during the show is via the hardware controls, and you tend not to touch the mice.

All the software, effects, and graphics have been ▶





▶ written by Midas for this desk, and go together well. It is easy to go in and find anything you want to adjust as you're working, as everything has a direct display access button.


The EQ on the input channels is a four-band parametric EQ, which is easier to use than some analogue desks, and you can make it do exactly what you want. The only drawback for me was not having a complete four-band EQ control section, but just control over one band at a time, then scrolling to the next, which was part of the attempt to make the PRO6 as compact as possible.

On each input channel, you also have a choice of four excellent compressors, which was worth the trip for me alone. Alex Cooper at Midas, who is behind the sound of all the compressors and effects in the PRO6, has done the most amazing job. The compressors are very different, and nine times out of ten it is obvious which one to use for what application. They have been modelled on high-end compressors, and sound great. As part of the dynamics there is also a gate for each input channel too.

One of the biggest factors that will help the PRO6 stand out from the crowd is the great job Midas has done ensuring the sound is that well known Midas sound. Everything analogue on the system and the way the DSP sounds is very replicative of the famous forerunners. For instance, if you drive the pre-amps hard, then all you get is pure analogue distortion without digital clipping, so you can still use Midas pre-amps to get your sound. As I said, the EQ and dynamics are stunning, but the effects really bring home that this is a live desk. The reverbs sound

brilliant and even though they are emulations of many different types of reverb, such as room, plate, hall, and so on, they all sit in a space that I could hear would translate to a large PA very well. It was as if there was a third dimension to them that wouldn't cloud up your mix, but could also be very forthright in its effect.

Conclusion

This really is as great as we were all hoping it to be. I think the Midas PRO6 will suit so many applications, and its ease of use will make it the favourite more often than bigger consoles like the XL8. All the current digital mixing manufacturers are claiming their console is easy to use even for analogue engineers, and whilst they might be intuitive, the Midas PRO6 is certainly the most analogue-familiar that I have used, possibly because of its roots. The desk looks great and feels of high quality, but most importantly, the sound is there. It has that Midas sound, and with its excellent DSP plug-ins and reverbs, it suits the live environment really well. It seems as if Midas has thought of everything in this system, but time will tell. 

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