# DIGICO SD8

DiGiCo has had a strong foothold in the upper end digital console market for some time now with the D1, D5, and SD7. The SD8 shoots for a different sector, and from what we saw it looks to be well on target.

**By JIMMY D**

The SD8 is designed to hit hard in the sub $70K market, which is currently populated by consoles like the M7-CL and iLive. Just above this figure you get into the territory of the Digidesign Profile and Yamaha PM-5D. The SD8 has a similar feature set at a very competetive price.

Drew Menard and Paul Polito from Group Tech visited the CX bunker one rainy Thursday afternoon and brought the console in for us to have a look at.

## OVERVIEW

The SD8 has 2 stereo busses and 24 mix busses, each of which can be mono or stereo. 12x12 matrix busses round out the package. In standard form, the SD8 comes equipped with a 48 in / 8 out stage rack which connects to the console via MADI. There's a second MADI IO so you can connect a laptop for recording / playback, or another stage rack. You don't even need an SD8 stage rack; any of the DiGiCo racks will work.

The SD8 is based on SuperFPGA technology, as developed for the SD7, and while not everything has flowed down from this console it's clear where the SD8's heritage lies. The stuff that made it in was what you'd expect on a console in this price bracket, and then some more.

Physically, the console is simpler in appearance than we're used to seeing from DiGiCo. Three banks of 12 faders, each with 3 rows of rotary encoders above form the work surface. Above the centre bank is a 15" TFT touch screen. Each bank can be "assigned to centre", so you can access all the channel parameters on-screen. Banks are divided in to four pages, spread across 2 layers. You can assign channels, bus masters, or control groups to each bank.

Other features include 6x on-board stereo effects and 12 graphic EQs (which can be driven from the faders and have the all important "flatten" function). Add to this 4 band parametric EQ, high and low pass filters, compressor, gate, and up to 1.3 seconds of delay on every channel, buss, and matrix output and the capacity of the Stealth Digital Processing starts to become apparent.

*Jimmy discovers something worth getting excited over.*


*Paul Polito and Drew Menard from Group Tech.*

The SD8 was clearly designed to be used with a laptop computer – there's a dedicated spot to put yours above the left fader bank, complete with steel pegs to stop it sliding off. The headphone socket is sensibly positioned under the right hand side at the front of the console. All other connectivity is on the back panel, and includes MADI, AES wordclock sync, screen, mouse, keyboard, and network ports. A new addition to the SD8 is local audio IO on the console itself – 8 analogue inputs, 8 analogue outputs, and 4 stereo AES inputs and outputs negate the need for a FOH IO rack. There's also a removable panel for a soon to be released Optocore upgrade.

Visually I approached this whole review

*Patching 48 channels in one fell swoop.*

*Hands on with the SD8.*

with some trepidation - from seeing the pictures I thought the champagne gold colour looked really cheesy and cheap, but when you see it face to face it actually looks really good. Photos just don't do it justice.

## USING IT

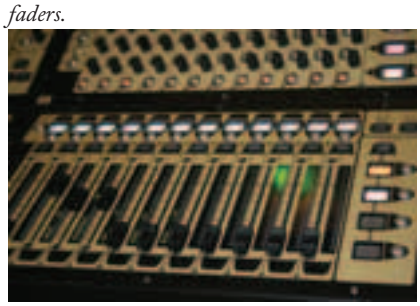
Probably the most difficult thing about using the SD8 is shifting it around – it's a 4 person lift when fully cased, but take of the lids and 2 people can satisfactorily wrangle it. Having spent some time on a D1, much of the operation of the SD8 was second nature. Some little things have changed or moved to different places (i.e.: how you assign fader functions to banks), but none of it is overly hard to find. I spent an hour playing with the thing, and I'd take it to a gig confident I could make it do everything I needed it to.

It doesn't matter if you want to use the console for FOH or monitors, it will handle either. Buss structure set up now has the option for dynamic re-structuring – you lose audio for a second but you no longer have to build a whole new session to add in a mix buss. Some would argue that adequate planning would negate the need for this, but it's nice to know it's there for when things "change" unexpectedly. Anyhow, I started a new session and chose my bussing structure. From there, you go to audio IO set up and choose how you want your MADI routing to work. It's hard to explain the exact process, but much easier to say that it's fairly self-explanatory one you get there.

Next up patch some inputs, a process which has become faster on this generation of console. Start at the first channel; tell it how many channels you want to patch sequentially and choose which input you want to start at. It cascades the rest for you, and it happens instantly. If you choose stereo inputs it will assign 2 inputs sockets. Type your input names in, or use the new preset name feature to save some time. Next up, assign your outputs to a physical connector and you're good to go. All up the process only takes a few minutes. Add in some EQ

*Supermassive gain, no distortion.*

*Channel strips have metering adjacent to faders.*



*Faders are in banks of 12 with layer and page keys to the right.*

*Multiple MADI Connectors, Optocore soon to come.*

*Dual redundant hot-swappable power supplies.*

inserts and effects sends and returns, and it's still a pretty quick set up. If you do it in the offline editor then it's basically instant – just load the USB key and go.

## THE COOL STUFF

Hot-swappable redundant power supplies. Multiple inserts on each channel – both pre and post dynamics and EQ processing. Insertable processing channels are gone, and the whole insert process is much simpler now. New plastic fader caps work better with less "finger contact". I didn't find the faders fighting me even when I pushed them from the ends instead of on top. DiGiCo make their own faders.

Alternate inputs can be assigned for each channel. Switching these is really easy and since you're staying on the same channel nothing else changes – good for a broadcast environment where you'd have redundant lines for mics and other sources. Snapshot automation is fast and selectable in its recall scope, both globally and on a scene-by-scene basis. I don't particularly like the scene recall keys directly above the master fader, they sit unprotected too close to the mute and screen assign keys. Granted they're different colours and shapes, but a preference option to disable them would be a great addition.

You can assign nearly any of the channel parameters to the three rotary encoder rows above the channel strips, yet they still remain available as auxiliary sends with the press of a hot key.

The floating point processing means (as I interpreted from Drew's explanation) that unity is basically re-defined at every step along the signal chain – what this means in the real world is heaps of headroom. So long as you don't clip the analogue input stage, it's extraordinarily difficult to drive a channel into digital distortion. We tried. We routed a channel out to a group then back into an adjacent channel, and gained up every EQ, digital trim, and dynamics processor along the way. 177db of gain, VU meters pinging their dials off (see the pic!), and none of the expected digital distortion. In that respect it's probably the most forgiving digital console I've ever run into.

## TRYING TO BREAK IT

After about three quarters of an hour I turned to Drew and announced the commencement of the part of the day to "try to break it". He seemed remarkably unfazed, apparently with good reason. Going straight for the jugular I pulled the MADI cables from the console. Not unexpectedly, the audio stopped. I plugged them back in and the audio came back – instantly. I re-booted the control surface CPU – it did its thing while the audio chugged along merrily unaffected.

Not yet satisfied, I pulled both the power leads on the console (remember, we try to simulate real world eventualities). Plugging them back in, the console sprang back to life, and within about 4 seconds was passing audio again. Soon as the computer re-booted I had control over it all – this doesn't take long either.

## THE VERDICT?

I could go on about sample rates, and Tiger SHARC FX engines but at the end of the day how the thing works and sounds is really more important than the method by which this happens.

I really like the SD8. It feels good and it sounds great. An hour on the console left me feeling comfortable operating it, and a few gigs would make it second nature. Consider the bar raised.

The DiGiCo (www.digico.biz) SD8 is distributed in Australia by Group Technologies (www.gtaust.com), and in standard configuration goes for around $62,000 including a stage rack and MADI cable.

*Pics by Aiyden Lang.*