VIDEO
2 MINUTES WITH...

Softube PC MAC
Console 1 MkII £439

Can a dramatically lowered price and support for UAD plugins
up the score for this innovative hardware/software mixing hybrid?

> A redesign rather than an 'upgrade', the second iteration of Softube's Console 1 channel strip plugin and controller combo doesn't bring any new hardware functionality to the table (just very minor layout changes and brighter LEDs), and the software is the same as that available to users of MkI. However, through a series of free updates, that software has come on quite a bit since we reviewed the original Console 1 (8/10, **cm**204), and with a massive price drop from £719 to £439, our main criticism of it – that it was very expensive – has certainly been addressed. Let's take another look…

Strip to the bone
Console 1 consists of the Console 1 plugin (VST/AU/AAX) and a USB-powered hardware controller – and it is 'only' a controller, not a UAD-style DSP box; the software runs entirely native to the host Mac or PC.

The plugin is a modular channel strip, incorporating three main sections: Shape (gating and transient shaping), Equalizer and Compressor. Each section loads its own software model from a menu of classic emulations, initially limited to the three corresponding elements of the stunning bundled SSL SL4000E channel strip that we

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covered in the original review; but over the last three years, the library of separately available add-on modules has grown considerably. You can now splash out on the equally impressive British Class A ($249), SSL XL 9000 K-Series ($329) and Summit Audio Grand Channel ($329) full channel strips, many of Softube's other plugins (Drawmer S73, Trident A-Range, etc), and – with the latest software – a number of UAD plugins (see *Universal appeal*).

Input and Output modules bookend the three main sections, housing High and Low Cut filters, Volume, Pan, Solo and Mute controls, overdrive (also modelled as part of the loaded emulation) and various utility functions: signal flow, sidechain routing, phase invert, etc.

The plugin UI simply comprises a graphical representation of the hardware controller, for use when it's not attached. The actual parameters of the loaded modules are revealed in the On-Screen Display, which we'll get to shortly.

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The controller is a reassuringly hefty metal wedge, roughly the size of an old-school QWERTY keyboard and studded with labelled rotaries and buttons that automatically map to the parameters of the three loaded modules, as well as LEDs indicating every knob position and button selection, and 'approximate' LED ladder meters for input/output levels and Shape/Compressor gain changes.

1 of a kind

The Console 1 workflow goes like this: load the plugin onto every track, auxiliary and bus in your DAW to build a virtual mixing console – a full 4000 E, a hybrid 4000/9000, or whatever you like and can afford; hop between channels with the 20 Select Track buttons (Page buttons shift up and down in banks of 20) to take control of their channel strips; and use the controller's Volume and Pan knobs, and Mute and Solo buttons to govern basic mix functions via the plugins rather than your DAW's mixer. The idea, ultimately, is to leave your DAW mixer set at its defaults and mix entirely via the controller.

Visualisation of the specific parameters for the selected channel strip and its modules is handled by the pop-up On-Screen Display (OSD), which mirrors the hardware layout but names each knob to exactly match its assigned module control, and provides more accurate metering than the LEDs and a spectral analyser in the EQ section. Being so big (although it can be shrunk down to just a meter bridge) and taking precedence over all other windows, the OSD is ideally positioned on a second monitor. Hitting the Display On/Off button to open and close it soon becomes second nature for those not so-equipped, however.

While all major DAWs are able to send track names to the OSD, so you always know which mixer channel you're working on, only two of them – Cakewalk Sonar and PreSonus Studio One – feature full "Integrated DAW Control", communicating track selection to and from the hardware, as opposed to keeping DAW and Console 1 track selection completely separate. More importantly, they also send Pan, Send (using Shift to modify the Drive, Character and Pan knobs), Mute and Solo control data directly to the DAW's mixer rather than the Console 1

Three UAD plugin modules running in Console 1. In this case, all their parameters are available

Universal appeal

Console 1 (MkI and II) now supports UAD plugins, but not in the way you might be thinking. No, sadly, It hasn't become the first third-party option for hosting Universal Audio's fabulous DSP-powered emulations; rather, it's now capable of loading a fair few of them into the Shape, Equalizer and Compressor sections, assuming you have the means to run them in the first place – ie, a UAD or Apollo system.

Console 1 support needs to be designed into UAD plugins, so the list isn't totally comprehensive as yet, but there's already a lot in there, including Pultec, Harrison and API EQs, and Fairchild and Teletronix compressors.

There are no full channel strips, though, primarily – we assume – because most of the plugins that could be rolled into full strips lack a suitable candidate for the Shape section.

The number of accessible parameters is limited by the number of rotaries on the controller, so decisions have been made as to what you can use; and with no way to load the full plugin GUIs, you can't even get at the unsupported controls with your mouse. The EQ curve doesn't appear for UAD plugins, either. None of this, however, detracts too much from the intoxicating coolness of being able to build, save and operate custom UAD/Softube channel strips.

plugin. This might seem like a small thing, but in use, it noticeably enhances the workflow, making the connection between Console 1 and those two DAWs feel more symbiotic than it does with all others. Support for Integrated DAW Control is down to DAW developers (several of whom are working on it, we're told), so while the lack of it for most definitely stings, we can't blame Softube.

Take control

Console 1 is every bit as powerful and brilliantly realised as we reported in our original review, genuinely enabling full mixing capability in software without mouse input, using a knock-out library of components and strips. Of course, the spell is temporarily broken whenever you need to adjust a non-Console 1 plugin – a frequent occurrence in most projects, naturally – but there's no way around that.

We loved Console 1 last time we looked at it, and with a £280 price drop, that ever-expanding library and awesome UAD integration, we love it even more now. Even if you never add to the base SL4000E strip that comes with it, it's worth every penny, combining superb sound with a thrilling hands-on workflow, and being much easier to use than you probably think. **cm**

The On-Screen Display shows the loaded strip's parameters, positionally matched to the hardware's physical controls

Alternatively

Mackie Control Universal Pro
cm122 » 9/10 » £999
Take total control of your DAW with this veteran controller

UA SSL 4000 E Channel Strip
cm224 » 8/10 » £229
Excellent E Series emulation for UAD systems

Verdict

For	Much better price
Stunning SSL 4000E channel strip
UAD integration
Excellent build quality
Bus-powered

Against	Doesn't offer full communication with every DAW
Limited UAD parameters in some cases

The refreshed Console 1 comes in at a great price, still sounds magnificent and works beautifully, and adds tightly integrated support for UAD plugins

9/10