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Road Tests



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Sabine Navigators

Remember back when you had audio gear and each box did one thing? It was an EQ or a crossover or a compressor or whatever, but it was one box that did one thing. As we went digital, functions started to combine, and maybe you would get an EQ and crossover in the same box. As DSP has gotten cheaper and more powerful, more functions have been crowded into each box, and we now have a whole generation of boxes that are called "system management" or "speaker controllers" that do what used to take a whole rack to accomplish. The Navigator is Sabine's entry in to this fray.

The Gear

The Sabine Navigator is a loudspeaker controller but it ups the "how many functions can one box perform" ante by including a matrix mixer in a small but powerful package. The single rack space unit comes in 3 x 6, 4 x 8 and 8 x 8 configurations with a number of control options. You can control it via the front panel, use the included control software and hook it up to a laptop via an RS-323 port, or, for an extra two bills, an Ethernet connection is available, meaning you can control it from anywhere in the world. (That last one leaves us with the vision of a sound guy with a TV remote in one hand and a mouse in the other tuning a system from his living room while watching reruns of X-Files. Not a pretty picture, but the idea of off-site control is pretty cool.)

Before we get into the Navigator, an admission is due: In the past year or so I have been working with a company that has given me the chance to work with just about every system controller out there, ranging from units that run for about a grand, all the way up to the biggest, baddest, most expensive stuff out there. So I have become something of a system controller snob. The Navigator was going to have to work hard to impress me.

On the front of the unit is a good-sized LCD screen, navigation buttons with a scroll wheel and input/output meters. Below every input and output there is a mute and menu button. I usually use XTA controllers and found both the layout and operation to be very similar to the box I usually use. The back panel is pretty straight forward. XLR ins and XLR outs, an RS-232 port and an optional Ethernet port. There's also a fused power switch with a voltage selector.

What is it: System Controller and matrix mixer in a 1 RU box

Who is it for: Local and regional sound providers who need good gear at a reasonable price

Pros:

- Plenty of bang for the buck
- No loud pops when unit is shut off before amplifiers
- Very easy to use

Cons:

- No threshold or gain reduction indicator



I'm not one to dig through manuals and I didn't have to very much with the Navigator. It was very straight forward and user friendly. To get started there is a system configuration menu. You select where you want the inputs and outputs to go. Since it is a matrix mixer, you can go into each output and select which and how much of each input goes to that output. Sweet.

Every input and output has 6 bands of EQ. It shows octave and Q bandwidths, and is selectable between fully parametric, hi-shelf and lo-shelf. Each output has a crossover page too. It does Bessel, Butterworth, and Linkwitz-Riley types at a -6db to -48db per octave slopes. Lots and lots of choices here. It also has a compressor/limiter on every output. It also has the classic Sabine feedback suppression built in on every input.

One problem, though, is that there is no threshold light or gain reduction indicator on the front panel. I would have liked to have seen a brickwall limiter too.

The Gig

When I try new gear out I like to see how big of a pop it will make if you turn it off while the amps are still on. So I turned my amps down to save the drivers from what I was sure would be a good-sized thump, closed my eyes, and flicked the switch. NOTHING! I turned my amps up all the way and tried again. Same thing! I couldn't get it to pop at all when I shut it off. Those who do club work with crappy power will love this unit just for that I loved the software too. Very straightforward, and once again, no manual needed. I love it! For those of us who hate sitting in the hot shop with broken air conditioning, writing programs can be done at home. Just connect, upload, and you're done!

I used this unit in a 4 mix monitor amp rack at a local club. I swapped it with the old fashioned TDM crossover I had in the rack. It looked good, sounded good, and had a good amount of headroom. At the show I wanted to make a couple of changes internally. It was fast and easy to access everything I needed.

Sabine may not be the first name on the rider, but system control is an area where the sound company still has some wiggle room, and the Navigator can definitely play with the big boys. If you are looking for system control and like the idea of throwing matrix mixing and feedback suppression into the mix, the Navigator is worth checking out.

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