Drawmer
MC3.1 Monitor Controller

Desktop speaker control with the features serious engineers truly need

REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR.

In September 2013 we looked at the MC2.1, the first monitor controller from British audio manufacturer Drawmer. The MC2.1 offered the ability to route three stereo sources to up to three sets of monitor speakers and headphones, along with a healthy selection of mix-check options with great sound quality, all for a respectable $600 street price. Now we look at its new big brother, the MC3.1, which significantly expands on the MC2.1's feature set.

Both units are British-built using low-noise transparent active circuitry, timed relay protection, and paralleled quad pots on the main and headphone level controls. Unlike the internal power transformer on the MC2.1, however, the MC3.1 uses an external line-lump power supply.

A new look and layout

The most noticeable difference between the two is the form factor. The MC2.1 is a rectangular desktop box measuring $3^1/4$" tall x 10" deep x $8^1/2$" across, with its controls located on its front face. The MC3.1 is larger and wider at 3.9 x 10.8 x 8.6 inches, and its controls are on its slanted top surface. It is still a fixed desktop-style box with all of its inputs located on its rear panel.

The physical controls on the MC3.1 have the same look and style as the previous model, and make wonderful use of the extra real estate. Source selection and input controls are on the left, master volume and speaker selection are in the center. Headphone controls and mix-check features are on the right. Most of the knobs and buttons now feature LED indication lights, which is a very nice touch.

Goes in

The MC3.1 expands its input capability with five selectable choices. The physical inputs for sources 1 and 2 are located on the back via balanced Neutrik XLR/TRS Combo jacks. Input 3 is a rear-panel RCA input, perfect for CD players and the like.

The new inputs are labeled Aux and Digi. Aux is located on the top left side of the unit and is a minijack input for smartphones and iPods, complete with its own volume level knob. This is a most welcome addition, since most phones

and MP3 players have much quieter outputs than pro-level sound gear. The Digi input is located on the back, also with a Neutrik Combo jack. As its name implies, it is a digital input capable of up to 24/192 resolution and sounds great.

To your speakers

Unlike the MC2.1, whose speaker and headphone outs shared the same routing, the MC3.1 now offers two selectable chains. First, you can send any of the five inputs—either alone or in combination—to one or more of three sets of monitor speakers. These are again selectable by LED-equipped push buttons with left and right XLR output pairs on the back. There is also a fourth routing option for a subwoofer, with its own button and a mono XLR out on the rear.

Note you you could also use a subwoofer via a mono XLR out on the MC2.1, but it was shared by speaker out A. On the MC3.1, it is completely independent, allowing you to engage a sub with any of your speaker sets (or on its own). This mono output has no built-in bass management, so all of that must be done on your subwoofer if so equipped. While this may sound like a limitation, the flip side is that if you don't use a subwoofer, you can alternately use the mono output for a single mono check speaker like a classic Auratone 5C Super Sound Cube.

Each speaker output offers its own individual level attenuation on the underside of the unit (just like the MC2.1). This allows you to make sure that all of your speaker sets are perfectly level-matched when you switch between them, and the MC3.1 manual offers a nice tutorial for doing so.

The large black Master level knob in the center of the unit also has a new trick of its own—a preset level setting. When engaged, it bypasses the output knob and plays back music at a predetermined volume level that is set with a front-located setscrew. This is handy for setting a master reference level that you can always return to at the touch of a button (I set mine to 82 dB SPL).

On the phones

Like the MC2.1, the MC3.1 also contains a pair of front mounted $1/4$" headphone outputs each with its own volume control, but here is where the new Cue section comes into play. In addition to the master source selection, there is a

second tier of matching output choices for the Cue section. This allows you to send a musician-specific mix to input two (I do this with Cubase 9's control room mixer section), or you can play back an iPod mix for the musicians for practice and route it to just the headphones while you monitor the main mix in the control room.

Even better, each headphone out is independent and can switch between the Main mix or Cue mix at the touch of a button. When the headphones are set to Cue, they have access to the talkback signal, and when in Main mode the headphone mix gets access to the mix check functions.

Lastly there are a pair of $^1/_4$" TRS left and right Cue outs on the back that can send the dedicated cue mix and talkback to a set of speakers in the tracking room, or even to a dedicated headphone amp.

The talkback section contains a built-in electret mic, level control and rear $^1/_4$" output for slating. The MC3.1 adds a $^1/_4$" external mic input—I found an SM58 with a $^1/_4$" adaptor did just the trick, and there is also a $^1/_4$" input for using a remote footswitch for activating the talkback. The external mic can be switched on and off on the top of the unit.

Mix tools

Lastly are the mix checking tools, which (like the MC2.1) include: Mute, Mono, Phase Reverse, and Dim, as well as the ability to mute the left or right speaker individually. This has become a critical part of my mixing workflow, as it allows you to put the unit in mono and then monitor said mono signal on a single speaker. This eliminates the chance of phase and filtering issues that can happen when doing mono checks with stereo speakers.

New on the MC3.1 is a speaker swap button that flips the stereo signal, and lastly is a 3-button Band Solo section that allows you to solo the lows, mids, or highs to zero in on frequency-specific issues. These can be used in groups so you can listen to the lows and highs without the mids, or the mids and lows minus the highs, and so on.

In use

For the last few years the MC2.1 has been the monitor controller in my studio and I am quite familiar with its reliability, its features, and its solid, clear sound. I rely heavily on its mix check features, especially the mono/single-speaker function—so much so that if a competing product lacks this feature, I have been quick to dismiss it.

Sonically I notice zero difference between the two units, and I find the MC3.1 to be a welcome improvement in every way. I love the new slanted/wedge design! If there was one thing I did not like about the MC2.1 but chose to live with, it was the flat-front design. I would have racked it with the optional mounting kit, but I am out of rack space... yes, I know, first-world studio problems!

A few of the things that the MC3.1 adds were possible with the MC2.1 with some fiddling, such as using a mono subwoofer or sending a cue mix to the unit via inputs 3/4 (and living with said mix in the control room during tracking). In all honestly, though, it's as if Drawmer read my mind and added not only the features I wanted, but also several that I did not know I wanted, like the independent headphone out choices, external talkback, and even the band-cut/solo buttons.

Conclusion

I am pretty stoked over the new MC3.1, and I am pretty sure my studio will see an upgrade in my future. The MC2.1 is still a stellar unit and Drawmer offers an nice itemized list of similarities and differences between the two online and in the PDF manual.

At $900 street, the new model is a tad more expensive, but to get anywhere close to this feature set in a competing unit, you will probably be close to double that cost or more. In terms of sound quality, this is not a "budget" unit in any way shape or form. Killer job, Drawmer! ⌐

PRICE: *$900*
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