

FREAK OUT!

KENTON CONTROL FREAK

STUDIO EDITION



Reviewed By
Tony Thomas

Control surfaces are becoming somewhat ubiquitous in recording facilities these days as the trend from analog to digital continues. High-end devices like the Digidesign Pro Control (for Pro Tools) and the JL Cooper Control Station can set you back thousands of dollars. While some mixers (like Yamaha's 01V) can also be used as control surfaces with the right software, they aren't exactly inexpensive either. Low-end control surfaces like the Keyfax Phat Boy and Encore Knobby are more suited to real time synth control than mixing.

Among the lower-end devices suitable for mixing, the Kenton Control Freak Studio Edition stands out. (I'll call the KCFSE from now on for brevity and sanity's sake.) At under \$500 USD, the KCFSE sports 16 long throw (60mm) faders, sixteen push buttons, seven function keys (which do double duty thanks to the inclusion of a shift button) and a large rotary encoder knob with click stops for parameter selection and editing. Two control inputs (which can even perform CV to MIDI conversion for interfacing with classic synths) are included to replace one of the faders or buttons with a foot controller or switch, respectively. A brightly backlit two line LCD display fills out the interface. It has 64 programmable "profiles" which are essentially set ups for the sliders, buttons and function keys. When you move one of the faders, the name of the fader is displayed. It is essentially a 2X version of the original Control Freak which only had 8 faders and buttons. It's construction seems to be rock solid with heavy gauge steel used for the case and pro fader tops employed. It really feels like a pro piece of gear.

Device control is accomplished via MIDI making the KCFSE useful for a wide range of applications including hardware mixer control (for devices which support DSP mixing), MIDI mixing, synth editing, software control, MMC transport control and even MIDI lighting system control. As it is a MIDI device, you'll find the obligatory MIDI In, Out and Thru jacks on the back with a twist. The KCFSE also supports MIDI mixing--the MIDI input is mixed with the output of the device--making adding it to your rig a

breeze. Just plug your keyboard or controller into it, plug its output into the MIDI in and you are done. (Although, I found hooking up the KCFSE to a dedicated I/O to be very useful since it facilitates sys-ex dumps to and from the unit, the ability to link it up to MIDI Yoke and Hubi's, etc.)

While comparisons with Peavey's PC1600x are inevitable (the two units are configured similarly), the KCFSE has 14 more profiles, easier editing, 512K of memory (much of which is available for function expandability), MIDI clock generator and the ability to program multiple MIDI messages on a single fader or button. It also has a built-in MIDI clock generator which allows you to use the unit as a master clock and transport control for your sequencer. Hardware support also seems to be excellent as I was able to find profiles for all my gear among the internal presets. On their website, you'll find an array of profiles for everything from a Sequential Six Track to TC Finalizer available for download.

Programming the device is a breeze if you have knowledge of the MIDI spec. You can assign multiple commands to a single slider and even invert slider controls (so up is down and down is up). This would be useful for crossfading between two audio or MIDI parts using a single slider, for example. You can also scale the sliders to respond to a certain range and program a button to take its value from a slider. The program even makes it easy to enter system exclusive strings by automatically inserting the delimiters (F0h and F7h) where needed. You can vary designated parameter values using the rotary encoder using the two Real Time Value slots. Also, the pushbuttons can be configured as on (single command when pushed), on-off (different commands sent when pushed and released), or toggle (between two functions on successive presses).

Copy single allows you to copy fader and switch setups between profiles (or even to the same profile) and copy program allows you to copy a program from one memory slot to another. Learn mode facilitates "autoprogramming" of sorts by allowing the KCFSE to learn a command from a connected piece of equipment or software editor. You can also put the KCFSE in MIDI monitor mode to look at the data coming into the unit--very useful for diagnosing problems and figuring out what kind of data is being sent. The programming features would be very useful and you could even program custom configurations for each project allowing for group mutes, fader grouping, etc. Once you are done, you can dump your custom profiles to your sequencer or librarian app. In addition, you can use the "snapshot" feature to save your fader positions within a song. One nice feature is that you can't lose the factory presets. When you initialize the KCFSE, the factory presets are reinstalled. If you do initialize, any custom profiles are blown away, so make sure you backup the unit first.

When used with the Yamaha SW1000XG, the KCFSE opens up all kinds of possibilities since it unleashes the power of the SW's hardware mixing system. That gives you complete control over volume levels, pans, reverb, chorus, variation effect and EQ. These communicate to the SW via system exclusive. Even if your sequencer doesn't

support sys-ex recording, all is not lost since you can use an editor like XG Edit to set up the SW to receive some of the same data using continuous controllers (which are also easier to edit). You can use the GS/XG profile to edit basic synth parameters. I would say that the KCFSE is a "must have" device for SW users (although DSP Factory users can get similar capabilities by coupling the KCFSE with a software package like C-MEXX's C-Console).

All in all, I found the Kenton Control Freak Studio Edition to be a wonderful addition to my studio. It allows me to communicate effortlessly with all my synths and soundcards, especially the SW1000XG. It is an awesome piece of gear which I heartily recommend!

For more information:

www.kenton.co.uk

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