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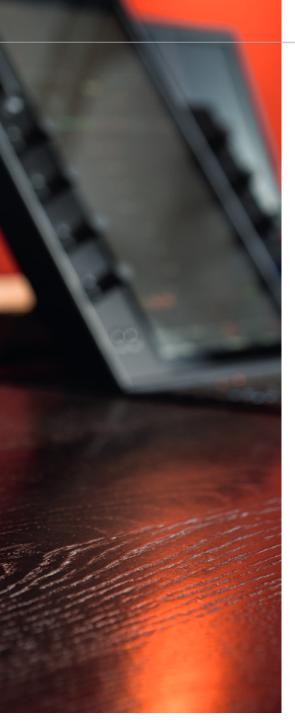**84** LAKE PEOPLE MC100

ON TEST

WORKSHOPS

Lake People MC100
Monitor Controller

The monitor controller is the hub of the 21st Century studio, and if you have the budget, Lake People's MC100 has all the I/O you'll ever need.

SAM INGLIS

As I grow old and boring, I find myself more appreciative of mundane studio gear. Maybe I've just been doing this job too long, but I can now become genuinely enthused by orchestral mic stands, or clever shockmounts, or a well-organised patchbay. And if you'd told the younger me that his older self would one day wax lyrical about monitor controllers, I suspect the younger me would have had some choice words to say in reply.

It's a good thing the younger me isn't around to express contempt, then, because the 2023 version removed the Lake People MC100 from its box with a surprisingly keen sense of anticipation. That's partly because hands-on monitor control strikes me as something that's increasingly important in modern studios, where there's rarely a console master section to handle volume control, speaker switching and so on. And it's partly because the MC100 is the very epitome of a functional, engineering-led design. This is a piece of gear designed to do a job, not to look cool or impress clients.

Not that the German-made MC100 looks bad. It occupies a surprisingly hefty metal case about 2U high, and is finished all over in matte black. Legending is clear and precise, LEDs are bright, and the action of all the controls is confident and positive. These include no fewer than 19 buttons, plus two potentiometers relating to the headphone output, and the huge 50mm main volume control. The MC100 is actually available in two versions, which differ only in the operation of this control. The standard version, which was supplied for review, uses an ALPS RK27 potentiometer with 41 detented positions, whilst the MC100 Pro uses a relay-controlled attenuator with 256

a stereo USB input. There may be sound engineering reasons for preferring XLRs to jacks or combi sockets, but let's face it, if you were going to apply that logic consistently, you wouldn't include phonos or mini-jacks either, so this might seem a touch wilful on Lake People's part.

Each input and output has its own dedicated and clearly labelled button, and the MC100's inputs and outputs can be toggled independently between exclusive and additive modes. In the exclusive mode, which is the default, selecting a new input or output automatically de-selects the existing one. In additive mode, you can have as many active at once as you like, and the contributions of multiple inputs are summed. The subwoofer output can be toggled on and off independently whether or not the outputs are in additive mode, as you'd expect. There's no bass management, so all of the outputs, including the sub, always deliver a full-range signal. A welcome side-effect of this is that the sub output could be used to connect a single mono loudspeaker such as an Auratone. The 'slave' outputs always pass the input signal at full level, unaffected by any of the other controls, so are ideal for connecting hardware meters, or for those who like to have a stereo recorder running full-time to ensure that musical ideas are never lost.

One of the more unusual features of Lake People's G-series headphone amps (www.soundonsound.com/reviews/lake-people-g103-mkii-g105-mkii) is something they call 'pre-gain': fixed gain or attenuation blocks that can be switched in and out of the signal path to make sure that the variable controls, such as headphone or speaker level, are useful over as wide a range as possible. These are present and correct on the MC100's headphone amp, where they're set using internal DIP switches. But there's also pre- and post-gain available in various other places. All three of the speaker output pairs, and the subwoofer output, have rear-panel switches that introduce either 6 or 12 dB of attenuation, while the RCA and mini-jack inputs can be switched between +4dBu and -10dBV operating levels. Once again, I can't fault the engineering argument for having this sort of setting be switched rather than continuous, but

if you need to match the subjective level across two different speaker systems, you're likely to need a finer degree of trim than is available here.

Swap Shop

Input and output selection accounts for barely half of the MC100's quota of buttons. There's also a front-panel power button, which is close enough to the headphone socket that you could accidentally press it whilst plugging in a pair of cans. Power up and down are pleasingly silent, with no thumps or clicks. There are Mute, Dim and Mono buttons, arranged in a broad arc around the main level control. And there are buttons to solo the left and right inputs, swap over the channels, and reverse the polarity of the right channel. (On the review unit, engaging Mute disables all the other buttons. I understand this is a firmware bug and will be fixed soon.)

These controls all do what they say on the tin, and are genuinely useful, but there are a couple of ways in which they don't align with my own preferences. First of all, although the Mute button does not affect the headphone feed, the Dim and Mono buttons do. In an ideal world, I think that would be optional. More of an issue for me is that the Solo buttons operate upstream of the Mono button. What I want to happen when

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Lake People MC100
€1799

PROS
- Comprehensive I/O selection, with the option of exclusive or additive source and destination switching.
- Very clean sound and perfect tracking throughout the volume range.
- Detented control makes volume settings easily recallable.
- USB input adds considerably to its versatility and supports DSD.
- Additional 'slave' outputs are handy for metering and so on.
- High-quality headphone amp with neat crossfeed feature.

CONS
- No quarter-inch I/O.
- The Solo buttons would be more useful if they followed the Mono button rather than preceding it.
- No talkback.
- The price will put some people off.

SUMMARY
A monitor controller of uncompromising design and build quality, which drips with thoughtful features.

steps. The MC100 is an active monitor controller and draws its power from an external 'line lump' PSU.

No Jack City

The MC100 has a total of five stereo input paths, while on the output side, it supports three sets of stereo speakers, with an additional subwoofer output and headphone out. In a fit of purism, Lake People have implemented all the balanced I/O on XLRs only, with nary a quarter-inch socket to be seen apart from the headphone connector. This jack-free zone comprises the first two stereo inputs, the three main speaker outputs, the mono subwoofer output and two pairs of 'slave' outputs, while the full input quota is completed by a pair of RCA phonos, a front-panel mini-jack and

The MC100's rear panel is a jack-free zone!

I press Solo L and Mono at the same time is for a mono sum of both channels to appear only on the left speaker output. What actually happens is that the soloed left input channel appears on both speaker outputs. The ability to audition a mix in mono over a single speaker is very useful: the ability to audition one channel on both speakers, less so.

Standalone monitor controllers derive ultimately from mixing console master sections, and consequently, some of them include talkback. The MC100 doesn't, though you could probably improvise something using the front-panel mini-jack input if you didn't mind it always operating in latching mode.

USB & Them

The MC100 signal path is, for the most part, all-analogue, but the fifth input is on a USB Type-C socket. Intriguingly, this not only supports stereo PCM audio at sample rates of up to 384kHz, but can also carry DSD audio, the single-bit format that still has its fans in some audiophile quarters. More prosaically, it can be used to connect a phone or other portable device, and I had no problem selecting it as the system output for my Mac whilst simultaneously running DAW output through my audio interface. This is one of those features that's not glamorous, but certainly makes life easier.

I've already mentioned the headphone amplifier, which is similar in design to Lake People's standalone G-series models and sounds equally good. What this offers that those devices don't is crossfeed: the ability to bleed some of the left input into the right channel and

vice versa. This is a long-established and effective way of making headphone listening sound somewhat more speaker-like, and the implementation here is excellent. The subjective level remains exactly the same at all settings of the X-Feed pot, and there's a separate button that toggles it on and off.

On paper, the relay-switched attenuation in the MC100 Pro should offer better crosstalk, channel matching and longevity compared with the standard version. I didn't have the opportunity to compare, but I can say with some confidence that the standard

> "Channel matching at low levels is usually the Achilles' heel of volume controls based around dual-gang potentiometers, but the review MC100 tracked perfectly down to the lowest setting, with no hint of an offset to either side."

version is easily good enough for me! Channel matching at low levels is usually the Achilles' heel of volume controls based around dual-gang potentiometers, but the review MC100 tracked perfectly down to the lowest setting, with no hint of an offset to either side. The 41 detented steps provide fine enough level control that you can set exactly the volume you want, but are clearly enough differentiated that you can recall settings precisely, for example if you want to work to a calibrated speaker level.

In terms of features, apart from talkback and its inability to provide a single-speaker mono feed apart from the subwoofer output, the MC100 does everything I could want from a monitor controller. Three pairs of speakers is enough for most studios, and the 'slave' outputs mean you don't have to sacrifice

an output pair for metering or for capture to a stereo recorder. On the input front, all traditional bases are covered, and the USB socket greatly increases the MC100's flexibility. And of all the features that a monitor controller should have, the most important is that it must not colour the sound in any way. The MC100 sounds supremely transparent to my ears, exactly as it should.

So, having tried the MC100, I'm still enthusiastic about it! However, it must be admitted that Lake People's uncompromising design approach, and their commitment to manufacturing in Germany, make for a substantial price tag. The MC100's most obvious rival, for example, is SPL's MTC MkII; and despite costing considerably less, the MTC has built-in talkback and offers two headphone outputs to the MC100's one, both of which feature a similar crossfeed system. Most of its I/O is also on quarter-inch jacks rather than XLRs. But it lacks the MC100's highly versatile digital input and its front-panel mini-jack socket, as well as the Solo buttons and some of its gain adjustment toggles.

Can you buy something that has the same basic features as the MC100 for substantially less, then? Yes. But will you regret opting for something that's built like a tank and which bristles with nice additional touches? I doubt it. If you're the sort of person who believes in buying once and buying right, the MC100 is likely to make an enthusiast of you, too. ▰▰▰

£ MC100 €1799; MC100 Pro €2299. Prices include VAT.

W www.lake-people.de