Digital vs Analogue Mixing Desks:

How are UK console manufacturers striking a balance between developing new digital desks and satisfying the traditional requirements of mixing engineers brought up on analogue equipment? The main issues are the operational aspects and the sound quality - especially the sound of the EQ.

AMS/Neve make the Capricorn and Libra digital consoles and have the largest number of large-format digital mixing consoles in use around the world. To give engineers something immediately familiar to work with, the EQ in the Capricorn is based around the Neve Formant Spectrum Equalizer - as used in the popular Neve V-Series analogue consoles. AMS/Neve still make top-flight analogue consoles such as the Neve VX and have started re-manufacturing the classic 1081 channel inputs - which include the mic amp and EQ section as used on the vintage Neve consoles. AMS/Neve's Colin Pringle commented: "People even use these as alternative input stages on newer consoles to get the warm sound that they provide!"

Recording engineer/producer Mike Ross-Trevor works mostly on film and orchestral sessions at Whitfield Street and CTS studios. "When I worked on the Capricorn the only thing that worried me was that it seemed slower to set up and configure than the analogue consoles - which is not what you want on a live orchestral session. With the Neve VR analogue console you just reach out immediately for the thing you want to do, do it, then move on. I think it is this time factor that has prevented digital consoles from really taking off. Studios will put them into a mixing room or an overdubbing room - but not really into the main recording rooms. Soundwise I think Capricorn is great - no problems there."

Significantly, SSL don't yet have a large digital mixing console for music recording. Why? John Andrews, SSL Marketing Director, explained: "When digital became an issue in the marketplace, SSL demonstrated its confidence in the future of analogue by launching the 9000J - the ultimate analogue console for world-class recording facilities. We think this will be the last large analogue console - as ultimately everything will go digital. The big question is simply "When?". When recording studios demand digital we will supply it - and we are keeping a very close eye on developments."

Real World Studios recording engineer Richard Chappell spoke very highly of the Sony Oxford digital console. "We tried the Harrison, the Libra, the Capricorn, the new SSL analogue console, and decided on the Oxford eventually. The EQ in this board is excellent - and if I want an analogue EQ, I just plug one in. The console's EQ is a lot more versatile than most analogue EQ - featuring 5 parametric bands. We were wary of the digital technology before we used it - but now we are convinced that it is a great way to work. Operationally the Oxford is pretty easy to get to grips with - a couple of days and you are away!"

The consensus in this brief opinion survey appears to be that operational aspects are important, while many engineers are perfectly happy with the sound of the EQ on the digital desks - or prepared to work with classic analogue input modules.