

Sound Devices 552 Field Mixer

Some impressive improvements for a seasoned industry workhorse.

Text:/Gep Blake



FOR THOSE OF US who get excited about such things – you know who you are – the shiny new Sound Devices 552 field audio mixer is definitely something to get excited about. While five-channel mixers aren't exactly a new concept in the world of portable sound recording, this little box of innovation also sports a two-track 24-bit audio recorder and enough advanced features to warrant an involuntary "oohh!" from the most discerning user.

The 552 supersedes Sound Devices' extremely popular 442 four-channel model which has been used all over the planet since 2001, and it looks set to build on the 442's reputation for being cost-effective, light, reliable, feature rich and versatile. The Sound Devices range of field mixers now consists of the mix pre – a two-channel stereo mixer; the 302 – a fully-featured three-channel mixer widely used in electronic news gathering (ENG) applications and the 552. One wonders at first why they would choose to discontinue the evergreen 442, until you realise the boffins have somehow managed to squeeze in quite a bit extra, such as: there's an extra channel; the 24-bit digital recorder records in WAV or MP3 format; there an AES/EBU digital output; a timecode input; more comprehensive metering and even the ever helpful SVEN (Synthetic Voice for Enhanced Navigation). All this into a package with effectively the same size, weight and power consumption as the old 442, and for a comparable price.

SVEN ANSWERS BACK

On the road this sound device is nothing short of a joy. No, they're not paying me to write this! [No we're paying him. Too much it seems, if he's having this much fun - Ed] Honestly, I've been looking for faults and this is the worst I can do. The multi function joystick that operates the recorder feels like it has the potential to get bumped and possibly broken in particularly adverse situations; the slot for the SD card is placed at the bottom of the unit and while I'm not quite sure where else you could put it, it's certainly not conveniently positioned for a quick change in the middle of the interview with the leader of the opposition, but then, chances are there'll be a quick change of the leader of the opposition in the middle of the interview anyway; and then there's SVEN. He adds a whole new meaning to talk back. The voice synthesizer announces menu settings, status information about files in the recorder and time and date information when recording. Don't get me wrong, this is a great idea, and I suspect one day it will be a very useful tool, but it can be disconcerting to hear what sounds like a cross between the Swedish Chef from the Muppets and Stephen Hawking in your headphones while you're trying to concentrate on pristine audio.

From a usability perspective the 552 is very well put together. Everything you need is at your fingertips and the faders feel just right. Input trim pots, high pass filter and balance controls for each channel have independent pots which recess when you don't need them

and each channel has a Pre-Fade Listen switch (PFL) which also performs several secondary functions on the input menu. A great feature is the fact that although the front panel is bristling with LEDs it's quite intuitive. Even with the broad range of input / output and operational adjustment parameters, after a short period of familiarisation, it's easy to get a comprehensive snapshot of your key settings at a glance. The sturdy construction is enhanced by a gasketed front panel which provides excellent protection from the elements.

The five transformer-balanced inputs each have a two-stage gain control, PFL, limiters which are almost imperceptible, and pre and post-fade direct outputs. There are multiple, balanced output connections, including XLR, Hirose 10-pin, and TA3. The 552 can output AES/EBU at sampling rates of up to 96KHz on either XLR or 10-pin multi-pin, giving you two connections for four channels of digital output.

The metering on the 552 is via two large 21-segment LED displays, which use highly efficient GaN LEDs. These can be seen clearly in direct sunlight and can be dimmed. Sound Devices claim the meters are unaffected by shock, temperature or humidity extremes and while metering preferences can be a subjective issue, with selectable ballistics (VU, Peak, Peak + VU, Peak + Peak Hold) and 'Zoom Mode', which allows the user to quickly display the output levels in 1 dB increments from 0dBu to +20dBu, the metering is more than ample. The LED display is also a straightforward interface



for menu operations – basically the top row of LEDs indicates the parameter being adjusted and the bottom row indicates the degree of adjustment. Although this means you sometimes need a ‘cheat sheet’ to remember where to find a particular parameter, it doesn’t take long to learn where the most commonly used adjustments are and SVEN is helpful if you don’t know what you’re looking for. Any tweaking of menu settings is generally a set and forget proposition, but if you do have to make modifications on the run, the menu can be accessed without interrupting the normal audio flow throughput.

BUT WAIT...THERE'S MORE

Given the availability of very compact high quality recording devices the inclusion of the digital recorder is hardly surprising, but it’s a great idea and it blurs the line between mixers and recorders. (In a good way!) While the inbuilt recorder is only two tracks, the 552 still has the ability to output four discreet digital audio channels and accepts time code, automatically recognising and adjusting to any format. Although the 552 does not have an internal time code generator per se, if no time code input is present, the recording will default to Time of Day code. Australian distributor, John Rowley of Soundequip, has been working with Ambient Recording in Germany to develop a third party device to enhance the time code capabilities.

Overall, the Sound Devices 552 is a very welcome addition to the world of location audio recording and mixing. It’s robust, versatile, cost effective and brimming with useful attributes. Equally at home on the road or in a studio setup, this is a really useful box for sound recording professionals, corporate production facilities, event companies... in fact anyone that needs a portable device to record or mix high quality audio. 🐣

Price: \$3850 (inc GST)

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