

INPUT METERING
Filter and tape saturation at the input stage

EQ SECTION
EQ with vintage colour and contemporary accuracy

CONSOLE 1 HARDWARE CONTROLLER
Beautifully engineered hardware

HIGH RESOLUTION DISPLAY
The display provides menus and visual feedback

POTENTIOMETERS
Analogue-feel pots, not rotary encoders

THE MIXING SUITE PLUGIN
The included compendium of software effects

OUTPUT
Output section equipped with 6 sends

COMPRESSION
Choose from 3 different software compressors

TRACK SELECTION
Quickly select your track for processing

SOLO/MUTE
Quickly solo or mute the selected channel

COMPUTER MUSIC PERFORMANCE Award

Softube Console 1 Channel Mk III

£895

PC MAC

Adding some analogue feel to your DAW-life could now be a reality, but is Softube's latest controller really the one? **Roland Schmidt** swipes left

> If there is one nut that has never been fully cracked, it's hardware control of a DAW. As every platform is so different, trying to find a one-size-fits-all solution could be regarded as something of a Holy Grail-level task. But now software aficionados Softube has come up with

an answer to this long-standing problem and it might just be the perfect solution.

Putting the case

The Console 1 Channel Mk III is the latest revision to the Softube hardware lineup and an

upgrade to the previous Mk1/2 models. As implied by the name, the concept encourages the use of hardware to control the channel strip aspect of your DAW, but with a caveat. The hardware mirrors accompanying software, engaging with both Softube and Universal

Trying to find a one-size-fits-all solution could be regarded as something of a Holy Grail-level task

Audio plugins, in a methodology much like a VST wrapper. Softube has an association with UA, having developed plugins for them before.

The hardware unit itself is beautifully built. Carved from anodised aluminium, the front panel is bedecked with 27 analogue-style pots, which feel exceptionally robust. There are also a significant number of small buttons, most of which light up in order to guide your path. As a case in point, there are 20 numbered buttons across the top of the unit which illuminate in colours to match any colour-coding of channels active within your DAW.

In terms of size, the hardware comfortably fits on a desk without feeling cramped. With a footprint of 435x219mm, the front of the unit draws a slight slope toward the user, which is a nice feature if you intend to place it above your computer keyboard. Discreetly hidden away on the underside are two USB-C connection points. While there may be some scenarios where a computer can supply enough power to the hardware, Softube advises employing the included power supply, in order to maintain seamless operation. This means that you will likely need to assign both USB sockets; one to your computer and one to power. It's also possible to mount the Console 1 on a VESA bracket, should you wish to remove it from your desk space.

Another new addition incorporates two hi-res colour displays on the front panel. These adapt to your operation, displaying everything from menus to metering, but they are relatively small at around 30mm square. Below each pot, text defines the operation of the pot above, with a second line to indicate secondary operation. These can be difficult to read in certain light, due to size and colour.

Soft tubes and EQs

We are pretty sold on the quality of the hardware, but this is a mere 50% of the overall equation. We were testing Console 1 with Logic and Luna on a Mac. The setup procedure was exceptionally painless. Once our DAWs had been enlightened to the presence of the unit, operation was underway swiftly.

There is a requirement to install accompanying software and this is where some major refinements have taken place, endorsing success across a number of DAWs. The Console 1 software resides at two levels; firstly, it opens in a standalone domain once your computer boots, but you can also load the Console 1 plugin providing the aforementioned complete channel strip solution, which engages completely with the hardware. This actually goes far further than many channel strips, providing everything from EQ and compression, through to tape saturation and drive.

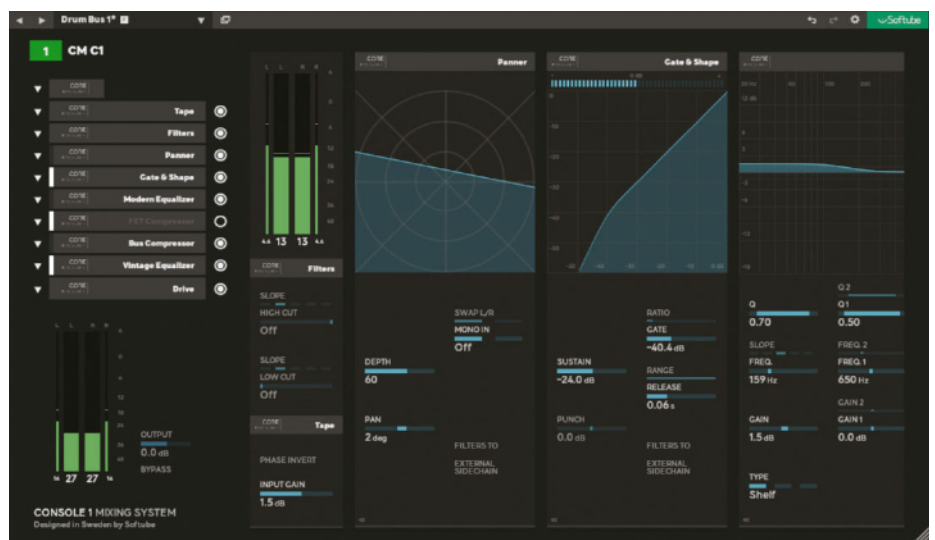


UA plugins are a perfect partner for the Console 1

Coming to an update near you

The Console 1 really is an extraordinarily useful tool for speeding up workflow during the mix phase of production work. During our testing, we did extensively put the included software through its paces, but we cannot ignore that its sonic breadth can be expanded considerably through the addition of plugins from other companies. As Softube already has an association with Universal Audio, it's no surprise that UA plugins integrate alongside the Console 1. As our testing rig is equipped with a considerable number of UA plugins, we have to report that this really opens up mixing potential. Having access to multiple mixing colours presents the best

of all worlds, but we also have to acknowledge that it excludes a considerable majority of plugins from other companies. However, Softube does have plans to include other plugins in future updates. At the time of writing, we were informed by Softube that an upcoming software update will allow integration from FabFilter effects plugins (this was released in April, Ed), this is not something that we were able to test in our review as the update was not available to test, but it provides a degree of reassurance that there is likely to be even more integration in the future, and that has to be a good thing for any Console 1 Channel Mk III user.



The signal chain can be adapted to suit within the Console 1 plugin software



Great care has been taken to ensure the hardware mirrors an analogue experience - down to the characteristic clicks

Upon opening the plugin, you will probably want to widen the window so that you can see more of the content on your computer screen. The plugin mirrors the front panel, and it doesn't take very long to start to trust the hardware, reaching for the pots that are right in front of you. You can also tweak settings onscreen, which is very appealing should you find yourself working away from home and not have the hardware with you.

Softube supplies a basic set of effects as part of the package which includes everything that you need to get going. As Softube has plenty of experience in designing production plugins, there is nothing rudimentary about the quality of the software that's included. Let's take the example of the included tape saturation, which defaults to the front of the channel strip signal chain. Coupled with high and low cut filtering, the excessive saturation that this element can

induce sounds stunning. It's about as production-ready as a plugin could be which, when added to the other included effects, sums to create an impressive and cohesive collection. Among the other included highlights, Softube supplies three different styles of compressor, closely resembling the 1176 FET, LA-2 and SSL Buss compressors. There's also a vintage and modern EQ, and an assignable filter which sounds rich, lush and full of depth.

When engaging with any of these elements while using the hardware, a series of white guiding lights around the base of each potentiometer provide feedback relating to the pot's location. These pots really do reflect the feel of an analogue mixer; in certain scenarios, such as adjusting stereo panning, the potentiometer reacts in such a way that the centre of the pan just clicks into position, despite the lack of any physical click on the





hardware. Clearly the software has some clever tricks up its sleeve!

A mouseless domain

One of the ambitions of owning a Console 1 would be less engagement with a computer. This is a big ask, particularly as there are no transport controls on the hardware, and you do have to fully embrace the idea of working within the Softube Console 1 plugin.

During our time with the suite, we were undoubtedly impressed on a number of fronts. The hardware itself is exceptionally high quality, with a look and feel that could make you forget that you're using software. The included set of effects is also of a very high quality. Whether you want a vintage sound, or something tinged with the contemporary, there is something in

During our time with the suite, we were undoubtedly impressed on a number of fronts

the plugin suite for everyone, and its is expandable, should you choose to purchase further Softube plugins at a later date. You can also substantially expand your mixing palette through UA plugins, as these are fully embraced by the Console 1 as well, but they do have to be loaded into the supporting plugin for use, rather than FX slots within your DAW. This means that you don't get to see and use the beautiful UA graphics, which is a bit of a shame.

It is important to note though, that this is very much designed to be a mixing interface. Unlike other DAW controllers, it has a particular purpose in mind and it's all about mixing at the channel strip level, while providing a degree of navigation through your track listing.

It's immensely enjoyable to use, but it is essential to note that Console 1 will not engage with third-party mixing plugins (beyond those from Softube, UA and the aforementioned FabFilter stable via a recent update). If you spend a lot of time mixing this is likely to save plenty of time, while also making the whole mixing experience more pleasurable and productive. **cm**

Web softube.com

Alternatively

SSL UF8 Advanced DAW controller £833

Although more of a general purpose DAW controller, the SSL provides a similarly comprehensive experience

iCON Pro Audio P1-M £499

The smaller brother to the high-end V1-M, provides excellent DAW control and flexibility in a smaller desktop footprint

Verdict

For Beautifully designed and built hardware controller
Setup and implementation is easy
Software effects among the best in class
Integration with UA plugins
You can start to mix with your ears again, and not your eyes

Against The onboard screens are a little small to be really helpful
It's not cheap

The Console 1 Channel Mk III should be an enormously tempting proposition for anyone who enjoys the process and artistry of mixing. The exemplary software almost justifies the price on its own

9/10