

Tascam DM3200

Digital Desk | £2,639

Decent desks don't come cheap, but will the DM3200 change that? *Jon Musgrave* investigates...

WHAT IS IT?

Digital mixing desk for recording, mixing and interfacing with your DAW

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Big tactile surface
- 2 Optional FireWire interfacing
- 3 Built-in TC effects

EXTRAS

Meter bridge £649
FireWire £349
ADAT £186
AES/EBU £206
Analogue £362
TDIF £186
Cascade £227
Surround £445

Once upon a time, you'd see plenty of mid-sized 'project' desks reviewed in *Future Music*. Bridging the gap

between budget and professional was big business. But the humble DAW changed all that, and most of the desks we see these days are small, compact and cheap. The emphasis is now on monitoring your computer output with

the option to mix a couple of external sources and plug up a couple of mics.

That's fine, but what if you need to record a band, a drum kit or anything a bit more complicated? Your previously 'simple' option could prove to be a major hindrance.

Tascam's latest digital desk aims to bridge that gap and, as a replacement for their DM24, marks something of an

upgrade. As you can see, this is hardly what you'd call a 'desktop' design, measuring 83cm deep by 70cm wide and weighing a hefty 24kg.

On the face of it this is far more 'pro' than 'project', but the 'basic' price of £2,639 makes it much cheaper than its nearest competitor. And compared to the pro end of the market where you can part with the best part of ten grand (Mackie's Digital X Bus, for example), there's a big difference.

Full format

Inevitably there are a number of expansion options (that use the two ports on the back). However, the basic specification runs as follows.

The desk is 48 channel, made up of 32 main input channels (with full EQ and dynamics) and 16 return channels.

There are 16 internal busses, eight auxiliaries and a main stereo output buss (all with dynamics, though not EQ). Connectivity is quite extensive, with 16 mic/line inputs (including pre-



converter analogue inserts), one ADAT in/out, three TDIF in/outs, control room and studio monitoring outputs, and four analogue send/returns. On the back you'll also find S/PDIF and AES digital in/outs, a 2-track analogue send and return, time code input, MIDI, Word Sync, RS-422, USB and GPI.

On the facilities front, the desk features 17 touch-sensitive moving faders (16 channel and one master), built-in TC Works effects, on-board automation, talkback, headphones, project management with total recall and transport controls.

The operating spec is up to 96kHz at 24-bit, but the FireWire card is limited to a maximum of 48kHz.

All about the flexibility...

Where analogue desks are limited by their physical wiring design, the great thing about digital is that it's potentially so flexible. The DM3200 is no exception. This extends from the simple routing of physical inputs to channels

Expansion options

Although the DM3200 includes some interfacing as standard, like many digital desks fitting every option isn't possible.

The DM3200 optional expansions include ADAT, TDIF, analogue and AES-EBU, all of which add eight channels of in/out connectivity, allowing you to tailor things to your needs. Prices vary from £186 for the ADAT one to

£362 for the analogue. In addition to the expansion cards, you'll also notice from the pictures that our DM3200 has a meter bridge. Again, this is an optional extra and will cost you £649.

However, the two most interesting expansion options are the FireWire and the surround cards. The first option available to you adds 24 channels

of audio connectivity and MIDI to your FireWire-equipped computer.

This effectively turns the DM3200 into an integrated audio and MIDI interface.

The Surround one, on the other hand, adds 8-channel monitoring capabilities, which integrate with the DM3200's surround mixing options.

(either singly or in batches) to the more complex 'loopback' of busses and auxiliaries to channel inputs and the use of 'soft' insert points. All in all, the routing options are extensive and designed to deal with many scenarios, which you may not even think of until you actually need to use them.

The other flexible feature of the DM3200 is its interfacing with other gear. With a FireWire interface card effectively turning it into an audio/MIDI interface (albeit with only the one MIDI port), and a control layer within the fader section for driving your sequencing software, the whole thing becomes quite an attractive package. Using the USB connection to hook up with your computer, the DM3200 can use either HUI emulation or Mackie Control emulation to interface with your application, giving you complete transport control.

Fader control then operates in banks of 16 (using the bank cursors to shift along). This is a separate fader layer labelled as 'remote'.

Project business

With its built-in automation and complex set up options, it's no surprise that the DM3200 needs a management utility, which comes in the form of its project manager. At the mixer end, this uses a compact flash card for storage, though you'll also find a computer utility called TM Companion that allows you to back up projects to computer as well.

Projects contain system, automation and routing information, so you can easily return to a previous session. Data such as settings libraries can also be included if you wish.

The libraries include an array of presets and user settings for functions such as EQ, gates, compressors and effects, as well as broader things, such as overall desk routing. It's worth noting that you do need to keep storing projects manually as there's no 'auto-save' function.

Hands on

With any desk, there are always a couple of operational issues that have to be right. Firstly, is the layout easy to understand? And secondly, does the desk interface with your other hardware properly? Given the DM3200's size, there's plenty of surface space for controls, and, as you'll note, the desk is centred on an LCD screen, which should help.

However, although certain aspects of the layout are very obvious (faders, transport controls, rotary knobs and mic pres) other aspects aren't so clear. Moving around the surface, the whole channel

SPECS

Analogue

16 channels of mic/line on XLR/ TRS jack, 48V phantom, TRS jack insert points, four balanced send and returns on TRS jacks, 2-track in on phono, stereo output on XLR, control room outs on TRS jacks, studio outs on phono, headphones x2 on TRS jack.

Digital

Stereo ins/outs on XLR and phono, 3x TDIF, ADAT

Other

Word sync on BNC, MIDI In/Out/Thru, USB 1 on B type, time code on phono, foot switch on TS jack, RS-422 on 9-pin D-sub, GPI on 9-pin D-sub.

THD (1kHz @ max level, 20Hz to 22kHz): line to insert send <0.005%, line to stereo out 0.008%

Noise level (20Hz to 22kHz, max trim, 150 Ohm): mic in to insert send <-128dBu, stereo out (no input assign) <-83dBu

Weight:

24kg

Size:

700 x 824 x 230mm



section and output assignment is easy enough. And once you get the hang of switching the channel encoder mode between EQ, dynamics and so on, this row of rotary encoders is very powerful too. Surprisingly, the hardest section to get to grips with is the screen and surrounding function keys.

Although the tabbed screen with corresponding 'pod' knobs and buttons should be easy, the combination of these and the cursor keys, enter button and data wheel mean you're never really sure which is changing the parameter and which is moving you around. This can be frustrating at times, and you end

Surround as a pound

As mentioned, one of the expansion options is a surround monitor card. This addresses the need for proper monitoring when working in surround formats, including eight balanced outputs on a 25-pin D-Sub connector.

The DM3200 itself includes support for LCRS, 5.1 and 6.1 surround formats, making

full use of its 16 busses to give you two separate feeds at the same time (though they will both be in same format). You'll also find a variety of panning options and full control over LFE levels from each channel.

The surround expansion adds to this by giving you monitoring options too. Accessed from the 'slot

two' part of the digital set up, you can mute and solo individual channels, set reference levels and generally organise how your monitors are fed.

One of the most useful options is for downmixing. Obviously this will depend on your surround format, but you can choose what downmix mode to monitor and adjust levels too.

There's a lot going on with the DM3200, and the overall scale of the desk makes it very impressive

option, for example) would require some additional software development (and that comes at a cost too).

But if that all sounds a bit downbeat, remember that many of the regular functions can be performed without getting near the centre screen. And with the encoder modes providing good visual feedback, the screen display may become less of an issue. Overall the DM3200 remains a good desk for the money. **FM**

ALTERNATIVES



Mackie d8b

From £2,000 second-hand

Now superseded by the Digital X Bus (which costs almost ten grand), the d8b makes a good second-hand purchase. mackie.com



Yamaha DM1000 v2

From £4,500

The Yamaha is more compact (and more expensive) than the DM3200, but packs a punch in terms of features. yamaha.co.uk

up wishing you could just dart around with one control, changing parameters with another.

Another strange aspect is the monitoring section's layout, with the control room knob almost out of reach at the top of the panel, and the talkback controls halfway down the side – surely it would be much better for them to be grouped together further down...

In terms of sound, the DM3200 has a lot going for it and, although it wasn't possible to give it a full multi-track band road test, the EQ and dynamics sound really good. In fact, it's a shame the master output only has dynamics and not EQ as well.

Also on the sound front, there are two on-board effects processors. The two banks of factory effects come from Tascam and TC Works. The latter are all reverbs, while the Tascam bank includes everything from delays and choruses to

pitch shifting and distortion. All in all they sound pretty good and, as you'd expect, the reverbs are excellent.

Quite quaint

There's a lot going on with the DM3200 and the overall scale of the desk makes it very impressive. Sure, you'll need to factor in extra money for the meter bridge and expansion options, but in contrast to the competition, it still remains a good bet financially.

However, it's let down by the screen implementation. There's a sense that the operating system has been moulded to fit the available buttons, and the screen navigation seems unnecessarily complex. In this day and age, with mobiles sporting fancy colour screens, a single colour LCD display feels almost quaint. But clearly this is the sort of thing that saves on cost, and any further enhancements (an external screen

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

The DM3200 provides a lot of desk for the money, but the operating system takes a bit of getting used to.

