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03

VOL. THIRTY-ONE
NUMBER SIX

MARCH 2018
USA \$5.99
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ESI MoCo Passive Monitor Controller



\$89.95; www.esi-audio.com

For a lot of small studio rigs, a really feature-rich monitor controller might be overkill. It's possible to boil down the real applications for a monitor controller into just a few functions—changing between sets of monitors, changing between one's DAW output and a playback machine for reference mixes, checking for mono compatibility, and of course controlling playback levels in your control room.

In a situation like this, a monitor controller essentially becomes a fast and easy alternative to plugging and unplugging cables between monitors and sources. "Fast" is a critical point here; human hearing retains fine details of audio quality for only a few seconds at most, so the only practical way to do A/B testing is to be able to switch back and forth instantaneously. With that in mind, even a simple monitor controller can go a long way toward making studio workflow more professional and repeatable.

ESI, German maker of audio and MIDI interfaces and the exceptional uniK+ studio monitors, has addressed this need with the MoCo, an elegant and practical monitor controller whose feature set covers the basics for any small studio.

The front

Outfitted in a sturdy and sleek black chassis with red trim, the MoCo offers an ergonomically-slanted front panel with a large, smooth-turning volume control neatly surrounded by six pushbuttons. To the far left and right, out of the way, are the Mute and Mono functions. Note that the Mono function sums the Left and Right channels and sends them to both speakers at equal volume; this isn't quite the same as simply allowing the user to hear audio from one speaker or the other, but will handle most mono-compatibility checking just fine.

Above Mute are two buttons labeled Input A/B and L<->R; these allow the user to switch easily between the two Input sources on the rear panel (noiselessly, I should note) and to swap the Left and Right output channels. That's a handy way to troubleshoot issues appearing in one channel of your audio, to help determine where in the audio chain they're occurring.

Above Mono are two buttons labeled Output A and B. These buttons individually activate either of the two sets of output speakers connected to the MoCo. Again, switching is noiseless and pop-free. By placing each set of outputs on its own button, the user gains more flexibility than if the MoCo simply offered an A/B switch; not only can both speaker sets be turned off

(equivalent to muting audio), but you could also set up Output B to feed a separate subwoofer that can then be switched on and off at will. It's cruder than a full bass management system, but helpful for separating "client impressed" monitoring from "flat reference" monitoring.

The back

The rear panel of the MoCo offers two sets of inputs and two sets of outputs, each labeled A and B. For the inputs, A is balanced 1/4" TRS while B can be either RCA or a minijack, both unbalanced. For the outputs, A is balanced XLR while B feeds both balanced 1/4" TRS and an unbalanced minijack.

There's no power supply connector; the MoCo is a fully passive unit. While that means you don't get LED-illuminated buttons, a USB interface, or a built-in headphone amp, it also means that the audio path has no gain stages in it, so it's really pristine.

The payoff

The MoCo impressed me when I heard and used it at the NAMM Show, and I brought one back with me to live in my in-office studio for a few days. As is expected and hoped for with simple passive monitor controllers, I really have nothing to say about its audio quality, because it did nothing audible to my signals—it was quite transparent and happily worked with Hi-Fi equipment, monitors with balanced and unbalanced inputs, audio interfaces, and smartphones.

The Output B minijack turned out to be surprisingly handy; in a real-world home studio, a set of "reference" and "check" monitors might not be two pairs of studio speakers on stands next to each other, but rather one pair of reference monitors and one pair of small desktop computer speakers... the latter often fed by a single Aux minijack. This makes for a very easy and practical way to check on the portability of your mixes.

The MoCo is everything you need in a basic passive monitor controller for a very reasonable price. There's no longer any excuse to not have proper monitor control in even the smallest studios.