



## AFTRS Sydney – an ICON in education and training

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By Stephen Briel

The Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) Sydney has had a sound reputation as Australia's leading centre for professional education and training in the film, television and radio industries for over 30 years. Renowned for delivering industry-specific digital audio programs and courses to students and professionals on cutting-edge technology, AFTRS students and graduates have an impressive credits list which includes recent Academy Award nominations and Australian Film Industry award winners.

And with a recently installed dual-operator 32-fader Digidesign ICON D-Control console in its 'showcase' Mix Theatre, coupled with a pending upgrade to a fully-certified Digidesign Pro School, AFTRS has just amped up its reputation for developing new and emerging talent and up-skilling professionals in a 'real world' environment.

AFTRS Sydney Audio Mix Lecturer Chris McKeith says ICON allows students to learn and experience the operation of a film mix theatre that is representative of those that are in use around the world.

"The tactile nature and the features of Icon make it present like a more traditional console but with the versatility of the full digital system. This gives this Mix Theatre a familiar look and feel for traditional operators, while delivering the versatility and features that come with the digital systems," Chris says.

Used primarily for mixing short-films for film, DVD and video release, the AFTRS mix theatre is an impressive room. It comprises the ICON with surround panner, two Digidesign HD3 Accel systems running the Digidesign Pro Tools platform, with 48 I/O supplied by one Digidesign HD192 and four Digidesign HD192Digital interfaces. This set up is integrated with 5.1 cinema monitoring, Dolby Surround processing, 35mm/16mm Film and Avid Mojo Video playback, and records onto DA88, DAT and multiple Hard Drive systems.



ICON dual operator 32-fader D-Control in AFTRS mix theatre

"The complete integration with the ProTools environment is a great feature for the AFTRS workflow solution," Chris says. "This is especially relevant as AFTRS uses a complete mix-in-the-box approach for its projects."

The AFTRS workflow, while quite common in the production stage, has some unique characteristics during the post-production phase that only a dual-operator ICON could deliver on. Instead of pre-mixing and recording stems of music, which can limit the student in a final mix, the AFTRS workflow attempts to keep all of the music as an open wide mix, allowing the student to make changes. This is not capable on a smaller system.

"Dealing in film workflow we carry an enormous number of tracks including all the raw elements with the treatment over the top," Chris says. "ICON and the two Pro Tools systems allow us to bring up the music as an open mix on one side of the console, with Dialogs, Effects, Atmospheres and Foley on the other side."

Chris says this complements the teaching functions at AFTRS by allowing students to experience the mix process alongside an experienced operator, plus enjoy the versatility and learning elements this flexible workflow offers.

"ICON has improved workflow schedules through the mix theatre," Chris says. "Being able to take the session directly from the edit room into the mix theatre, and easily adapt and alter the working session, has meant less set up time and more creative mixing time for both student and teacher."

The ICON's 'customised touch-sensitive faders' further assists the creative mixing and learning experience of students. Chris cites the example of how EQ and Dynamics can quickly be assigned to break out onto the touch sensitive knobs, and that this allows you to work like you do on an old style console.

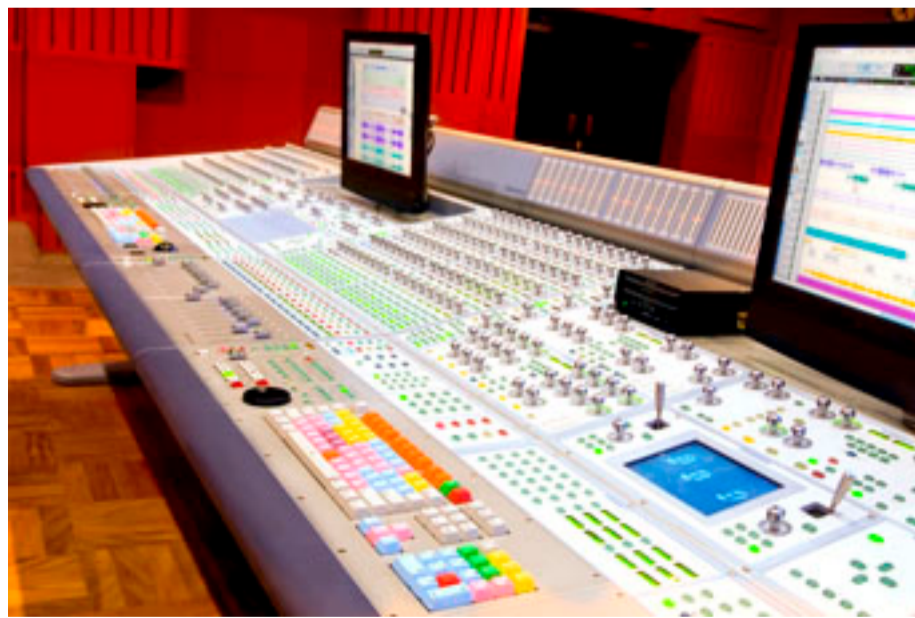
"The ICON also allows for customisation of often used plug-in parameters, thus simplifying some of the complex processing tasks," Chris says

Instant feedback from the knobs as well as the screen is another feature that is an important training tool.

"Feedback on what the knobs are doing and where they are going is critical for the student," Chris says. "This information is instantly available in two places – the screen and on the knobs, and this is very helpful."

Chris says that in film they carry a lot of stems as auxiliary faders, not masters. With ICON, Chris can set up a custom fader layer and the stems are all there ready for you with a touch of a button.

"Custom fader sets on the ICON, and now the additional VCA faders inside ProTools, allows the control of large numbers of channels easily." Chris says.



AFTRS offers 'real world' training on cutting edge technology

"Within the film mix environment where monitoring reference is very important, and can be quite complex as you juggle multiple formats on any one mix, Chris says the ICON monitoring section has simplified this process.

"The monitoring facilities in the ICON integrate well with the Dolby 5.1 and Dolby surround system," Chris says. "This has extended the monitoring capabilities while also being simplified."

Chris says that the surround panner option on the ICON is almost a necessity when working in film. The panner allows the student working in 5.1 surround to quickly and easily move effects around the room. The touch screen is also a handy tool as it quickly provides a 'starting point' before the student begins panning sounds around the room.

The surround panner is a necessary tool in the 5.1 film environment, and the touch screen version on the ICON is a great tool that allows 'flying sounds' around the room to be easily handled," Chris says.

Chris says AFTRS investment in the dual operator ICON has been crucial as the School continues to strive to offer 'real world' training on cutting-edge technology, and begins to establish itself as a Digidesign Pro School. Chris says ICON has enhanced teaching by allowing students to experience the mix process alongside an experienced operator. The dual operator system offers the capacity and stability to manage the enormous size of the projects within the AFTRS workflow, while maintaining and improving the creative process. Furthermore, ICON looks and works like a traditional large format console, without the expense of one, and has significantly improved the aesthetics of the mix theatre, the showcase of the facility.

"ICON offers a cost-effective mixing system that not only integrates perfectly with the existing ProTools platform, but also extends the mixing capabilities of the system," Chris says. "Also, it looks like it belongs in a room like this, which counts for a lot in this industry."