

Wharfedale WPR-26

Calum Orr discovers a final solution to his speaker switching woes.

For quite some time now I've been looking for a pro solution to my speaker switching problems, with little success. I've spoken to several electronics experts about it, and each of them has suggested I get a bunch of relays, stick them in a box alongside some other components, and voila! The only problem with that idea, of course, has been my total lack of gumption to undertake the task. I just haven't been able to bring myself to spend six hours fiddling around with a soldering iron and a bunch of minute components only to find that my handiwork may not perform the way I want it to. There had to be a better solution to the problem than making a speaker and amplifier management system myself in the 'backyard'.

For five years I have been using my trusty Tandy speaker switcher to toggle between my pairs of monitors, knowing that the unit was 'less than pro', but always turning a blind eye to the problem. You can imagine my excitement then, to get a call saying that a new Wharfedale remote speaker switcher was on its way for review. Coincidentally, I'd heard strong and positive whispers about this new unit only days before. So in anticipation of the WPR-26 being my long sought-after solution (and knowing that I had to review it), I mercilessly trashed my Tandy switcher, removing my hard-wired speaker cable soldering in anticipation of (hopefully) never having to use it again.

Out of the box the WPR-26 looks like it could be a hyper-funky preset delay unit, resplendent in fire engine red regalia with a large digital readout. It sure isn't discreet in appearance and already several clients have asked, "What's that funky lookin' red thing in the rack?" – unusually high praise for a lowly switcher...

The unit itself is a 19-inch, 1RU affair. On the front panel, the Wharfedale WPR-26 sports nine black, chunky square pushbutton switches, a large readout of the current speaker pair selected and a sizeable on/off switch. The first push button enables the selection of two different amps (A or B); the second button

sensibly gives provision for hearing the left side only (great for monitoring in mono, although this switch doesn't sum left and right, but merely cuts the right channel so you'll have to do your folding to mono elsewhere in your chain); while the third button engages the unit's mute function (handy when you've got to answer the phone!). The remaining six buttons are for selecting speaker pairs 1 through 6, depending on how many you have connected. In my case I already have all six wired up: the first of these routes signal to my PMCs, the second activates the NS-10s, 3 is set to Auratones, 4 to my Axis monitors that feed audio into the live room, 5 is set to some circa-1960 HMVs in my workshop, and last but not least, the sixth and final switch pipes audio to my family's old hi-fi speakers that live beside the barbie. One thing this switcher can't do however, is have more than one set of speakers running at a time; a problem or an irrelevance, depending on your requirements.

The speaker connectors on the back of the unit will receive either banana jacks or bare wire ends. As you can imagine, with the output of two separate amps and provision for six sets of speakers available, it's quite crowded around the back. This won't matter if you already have banana jacks but if you're currently using bare wire ends, be patient when connecting things up.

Remote Existence

Also on the back panel is the socket that connects to the secondary remote infrared receiver (the primary receiver lives inside the readout window on the unit itself). This secondary remote sensor has a six-metre cable that gives extended operation of the Wharfedale's remote, which itself has a range of up to 15 metres. The remote provides all of the same functionality as the unit's front panel buttons and allows you to switch between speakers or amps from anywhere within its range. This is ideal for hi-fi shops demonstrating a bunch of speakers (the principle reason for the design),

but more importantly, it enables a whole other world of compari-





sons in the recording or mixing studio. It was a total revelation to switch speakers while sitting on the studio couch with my feet up. Not only because it was way cool but because I found it a great way of obtaining a fresh perspective on the music as well as revealing any mix anomalies.

In operation, the unit introduces no extra noise into the system and there are no clicks or pops when switching between the speakers. There is a small noise from the rack unit when the relays are switching but this is barely audible and doesn't affect the operation whatsoever; in fact, it made me more confident in its operation.

If you have more than one set of speakers to manage, the WPR-26 is hard to top for the price. Most domestic switching units can connect two or occasionally three sets of speakers, so the ability to manage two amplifiers and six sets of monitors seems like a generous amount of connectivity... I can't imagine many people will find six stereo outputs limiting, unless of course you're in the business of displaying and selling speakers. It will put

an end to the dodgy setups many people have lurking under their workstations, and convert many inadequate and mildly embarrassing switching arrangements into a slick, versatile and good-looking system. I often rue the day when review equipment has to be returned (it's an occupational hazard writing for AT, being confronted with new and expensive audio gear all the time) but someone will have to send the 'boys' around if they want this baby back!

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• CMI

Phone: (03) 9315 2244

Email: cmi@cmi.com.au

Web: www.cmi.com.au

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