AWS-G500 Anycast Station Live Content Producer

Sony, $19,500

For almost $20,000, the Sony Anycast Station had better be good—and it is. But can you justify it? Well, yes, if you consider the cost savings of the smaller crew it makes possible multiplied over time, plus the savings of not buying other pieces of gear whose functions it integrates.

The Anycast Station is a 17 ½–pound Linux machine the size of an attaché case, crammed with AV interfaces and custom software. When it's closed, you could mistake it for an old portable word processor. But inside is a stunning 15.4-inch LCD screen and control surface for switching six video sources with effects, managing graphics and titles, mixing and monitoring six mono or stereo audio channels, commanding six remote robotic cameras, and Webcasting Real streaming video. There's even a keyboard that pops out to work wirelessly or stows face down to become a wrist rest.

The main software looks like a professional multi-image display processor, such as Miranda's Kaleido. Across the bottom are small source previews. Large preview and program video windows, split by audio level meters, are above.

Audio and video signals

The Anycast Station's three input slots come filled with two SD Video Interface Modules and one PC Video Interface Module. Each SD module accepts two DV, S-Video, or composite sources and has a FireWire (or i.Link in Sony-speak) port that works with approved external hard drives to record .dv files of each input module's video feed. With two drives connected, you can record all four video inputs to edit in post.

The PC module has two RGB inputs that accept computer signals up to 1280 x 1024. It's like having two high-quality scalers built-in, a real boon for live events with PowerPoint and application demos. The Anycast Station also has two built-in RGB outputs for driving projectors or plasma displays, so slides or demos can be mixed with video and shown on-site without down-conversion, while being scaled cleanly for video broadcasting and streaming.

An SDI module should be shipping by the time you read this, according to Sony, and an HD interface is planned. The modular design of the system offers flexibility now and ability to upgrade later, a feature unmatched by other products.

Audio I/O includes eight inputs, six of which are balanced and mic/line selectable, including two Neutrik connectors with switchable phantom power

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DV AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Pros
Compact all-in-one design. Ergonomic controls. Professional I/O and modular input cards. HDD recording. Remote control cameras.

Cons
Weak CG and Webcasting software. Expensive.

Bottom Line
Everything you ever wanted in a portable, all-in-one video studio, plus a few things you didn't even know you wanted.

that accepts XLR or ¼-inch TRS. Combined with generous audio outputs, you don't need a separate audio board, even for fairly sophisticated productions.

Through menus, you can assign signals from the physical inputs to the six audio faders and video channels, and designate an unused DV input as a program output because there isn't one dedicated for this.

After assigning and naming inputs, adjustments abound. Each audio input has independent gain, trim, pan, delay, EQ, and compressor/limiter controls. You can apply level and delay independently to each audio output for different monitoring, live PA, and recording needs. Video inputs have HSL adjustments, though they only apply to analog, not DV, sources.

Remote control cameras

The Anycast Station is a controller for up to six cameras that use Sony's VISCA protocol for full pan, tilt, and zoom (PTZ), as well as tally, focus, exposure, and white balance control. The small cameras connect to the video input ports, and control signals use VISCA cables that daisy-chain from one camera to another.

To more easily manage cameras, you can save up to six stored presets for each one and recall them by pressing a numeric button while the camera is selected as the next source. So except for live moves that require finesse, camera operators may not be needed.

Graphics, effects, and titles

The Anycast Station imports TIFF, Targa, and BMP files from Sony MemorySticks or USB flash memory. My iPod Shuffle worked fine as a USB flash memory drive to move Photoshop graphics, once I put the files in the proper folder.

Alpha channels are honored for imported graphics, and the selected file is superimposed at the push of the DSK (downstream key) button. There are multiple graphics layers, so in addition to the DSK, you can use a luminance key to superimpose additional graphics or titles from one of the RGB inputs, plus a logo layer with transparency.

Transitions are limited to just 16 sensible 2D effects, which can be manually controlled with a slider or played with the Auto Trans button with a duration defined in numbers of frames.

The Text Typing Tool is Anycast's CG software for making simple titles. Its Achilles' heel is that you must exit the main switcher interface to launch it, so you can't use it during a live show to make or edit titles. It has no templates and includes three ugly fonts (though it can import Windows TrueType fonts). Given these weaknesses and the ease of importing graphics, I would never use the Text Typing Tool.

Webcasting

The Anycast Station's built-in RealMedia streaming encoder and Helix server are tightly integrated and easy to use. Just pick from lists of suitable resolutions and bitrates, name your stream, and press the big "on line" button to start Webcasting. Status and the URL appear beneath the program window. For reaching a small audience of up to 10 viewers with RealPlayer, it's all you may need.

However, the Anycast Station's Webcasting currently supports only 4:3 resolutions up to 320 x 240 and one preset bitrate at a time. If your needs include larger audiences, other formats, or streams optimized for multiple bitrates, you're better off feeding a DV stream to an external laptop running more full-featured Webcasting software.

Upgrades

Sony has promised software upgrades by March 2006 that will include, among other enhancements, picture-in-picture effects and recording mixed program video and EDLs—not just the video sources—to external hard drives.

I hope Sony will upgrade the CG software and add support for HDV and 16:9 aspect ratios—all possible given Sony's resources and the Anycast Station's modular design.

Conclusion

With the Anycast Station, Sony leads this Webcasting product space. It's the best-designed and integrated solution I tested, plus the most portable and upgradeable. Despite its high price, it's a good value for what it offers. It could pay for itself quickly through reduced expenses because it's the only product I tested that eliminates the need for a crew to operate cameras and an audio board for professional productions. ■