Apogee ONE & GiO

All good things come in pairs. Or so the saying goes. American digital audio hardware manufacturer Apogee may well have had that thought in mind when introducing its ONE USB microphone and music interface and GiO USB guitar interface and controller for the Mac. ROB JAMES claps, cradles, and stomps.

Sometimes a couple of things come along together which, though they appear superficially at least to be very different, turn out to have a lot in common. Apogee's ONE and GIO are two such animals. ONE is a mono-in, stereo-out USB interface for Macs with a built-in microphone. GiO is a guitar effects controller board with a mono-in and stereo-out USB interface. ONE is by no means a delicate flower; GiO is able to withstand a regular onslaught of size 10 Doc Martens! Natural companions to Apple applications such as Garage Band 2009 and Logic Studio, these devices are an interesting departure from the norm. Both are 44.1kHz/48kHz sampling rate 24-bit devices.

A variation on the USB microphone theme, ONE builds on the technology employed in its senior siblings, the Duet and Ensemble, to produce a useful Apogee interface for all Mac users from entry level to professionals with limited requirements.

There have been many attempts at producing an affordable USB microphone — sometimes coupled with a stereo monitor D-A convertor — in form factors very similar to a conventional mic. However, there is no law that states they have to be that way. With the UK£199 (including VAT) ONE, Apogee has followed an alternative approach by mounting a mic capsule in a slim rectangular box along with a stereo D-A convertor and single-channel instrument/external mic input as an alternative to the built-in mic.

One problem with some previous affordable USB microphones is that the analogue gain was fixed and that conversion was, in some cases, just 16-bit. Real life covers a very wide dynamic range so these factors mandated a compromise to accommodate a reasonable range of sound pressure levels. The ONE avoids this dilemma by employing a digitally-controlled analogue preamp, which can be set either using the knob on the box or remotely from within the Apogee Maestro (software) panel or the Mac sound control panel.

In theory, software installation only requires the CD to be inserted, the installer run, and the Mac restarted. First point to note is that the ONE is Mac-compatible only, and, as such, requires OSX 10.5.7 or later. In practice, I had to download a new version to work with Snow Leopard, which also updated the ONE firmware. This also required a few connections/disconnections of the USB cable. After the last reboot a screen invites you to select ONE as your default audio I-O.

The encoder knob is also a switch; pressing it steps between controlling play level and the input level selected currently. Keeping the button pressed for a second or more mutes/de-mutes the output. Apart from the knob, the top panel is populated by a three-segment LED meter, plus indicator LEDs for playback, internal mic, external mic with separate 48V phantom indicator, and instrument. A small round hole is the only evidence that this unit is also a microphone. A mini USB socket and proprietary socket for the mic/instrument input break-out cable (included in the box) are on the back edge, with a 3.5mm jack output on the front edge near the indicators.

Settings can be saved inside the Maestro application or as part of Apple Logic, Garage Band, and MainStage project files. Maestro also allows users to save and name all of these settings as Maestro files, and includes a low-latency monitor mixer panel.

I found the internal mic to be more than adequate for a bit of voiceover or doodling. A mic stand cradle is available as an optional extra. With a decent external mic the gain range is fine at -63dB to +10dB, offering good quality for the price. Similarly, you will have nothing to complain about as far as the output is concerned.

This interface/mic is going to be ideal for laptop use, but equally at home in a video edit suite since it works with Apple's various Final Cut incarnations.

GiO, meanwhile, is a guitar stomp board with two devices in one — control and audio I-O, and it is worth noting that you can use the control elements without using the audio I-O. Gone are the days of my youth when there would be a bunch of effects pedals screwed to a plank with a rats nest of wiring. GiO is sleek, clean, and hefty with a USB B socket, jacks for guitar input, stereo output, and an expression pedal all spaced along the back panel.

Ranged across the top step of the device are big, chunky, internally-illuminated buttons for transport control: Record, Go to Start, Fast Forward, Rewind, and Play/Pause. On the lower deck GiO has five round buttons with multicoloured LEDs to indicate which effect each effect button is controlling, flanked by Next and Previous buttons that step through effects presets. The colours match the effects in Garage Band 2009, Logic Studio 9, and MainStage 2, and the LEDs are dimmed when the effect is bypassed.

Installation is similar to the ONE; after the reboot a dialog asks if you want to make GIO the default audio interface.

To avoid stomping through endless presets you will never use it would be wise to create user presets for the ones you actually want. These can be kept together so that you can simply increment/decrement through them using the Next/Previous buttons. Incidentally, these rubbery buttons are less positive than the rest. In Mainstage 2, Logic Studio, and Logic Express you can also assign functions, such as volume or wah, to an expression pedal. There is a choice of pedal profiles: Roland EV-5 or Yamaha FC7. I would have preferred to see an expression pedal included in the package, or maybe even part of the board itself, since it is pretty fundamental. It would also be good to have an extra socket for a second pedal.

GiO offers a convenient method of interfacing a guitar with a Mac and accessing the guitar effects in the relevant Mac applications in a more performance-orientated way. However, it is better suited to recording, since you really need sight of the Mac screen — unless your memory is better than mine — for remembering which effects the coloured lights actually signify. For onstage use with complex effects setups, alphanumeric displays are essential.

Apogee has produced a pair of affordable and desirable Mac interfaces that will speak to everyone from back bedroom recordists to professionals with modest requirements. ∎

PROS Attractively priced for the performance; simple and convenient; stylish.

CONS Mac only; 44.1kHz/48kHz only; no alphanumeric displays on the GIO.

EXTRAS Symphony I/O is pitched as 'the most advanced multichannel professional audio interface available with next-generation sound quality, Logic and Pro Tools compatibility and total I-O flexibility'. Symphony I/O is a modular system that can function in StandAlone Mode or connect directly to a Mac via any Mac-based audio workstation. It sports Maestro 2 software, multiple I-O options and ultra low latency performance.

The base chassis can accommodate two I-O modules, creating any combination of analogue and digital I-O with USB 2.0, Symphony and Avid's Pro Tools connectivity. Maestro 2 offers integral control of Symphony I/O for routing, mic pre adjustment, input and output calibration and hardware control.