CB Electronics UR422

Running alongside the whole messy business of integrating and synchronising various disparate bits of gear is the high level requirement for an elegant way of controlling them all. ROB JAMES comes out of the closet and confronts his universal remote control.

I'M A CONTROL FREAK. There you have it; I'm out of the closet, self-confessed. But, while I can accept that this condition might be undesirable, or at the least very difficult to live with in real life, it brings a number of benefits when working with audio recorders, video recorders and DAWs. Especially in sound for picture work. Fellow sufferers will recognise the tell-tale symptoms — getting a thrill when a transport responds to every nuance of finger-on-jog-wheel. A quiet frissance of pleasure when a transport is hurtling off in one direction while another is stationery or even heading in the opposite direction, just as you intended. Maybe you feel it when banging a group of tracks into record across several machines with one key press and the absolute certainty that they are doing what you command. Perverted possibly, but undeniably pleasurable nonetheless. Even these delights pale when compared with the sensual satisfaction of instant reverse play *(Rob, you're freaking us out. Ed)*. For the true control freak, mouse or QWERTY keyboard control is anathema. Leaving functional considerations aside for a moment, this is where CB Electronics latest creation, the UK£700 UR422 immediately scores.

CB is best known for bespoke and semi-bespoke control solutions. Its products are found in studios all over the world and especially in sound for picture applications. While there is an unmistakable family resemblance, the UR422 showcases a number of innovations. The entire case is constructed from heavy gauge brushed stainless steel, as is the smooth jog/shuttle wheel. The two-line LCD display is fixed and shows white characters on a blue background. All the buttons, with internal indicator LEDs, are of a type familiar from other CB devices. Overall, the unit looks and feels contemporary and rugged. Just don't drop it on your foot! Thanks to the front panel overlapping the 'box' by a few millimetres, installing the unit into a console panel will be a doddle.

It should be made clear from the outset that the UR422 is purely a controller. For many applications in current workflow practice a synchroniser is unnecessary and would have added to cost and complexity.

On the rear of the unit there are two 9-pin sub-D RS 422 serial ports and a power jack. A universal in-line unit supplies the power. Also included is a clever in-line RS-422 device, which handles two functions. Jumpers allow the RS-422 cable TX and RX functions to be reversed and there is a power jack. If the supply is plugged in here instead, the UR422 can be powered via RS-422 thus reducing the number of cables to the unit. The RS-422 ports can be set up as two outputs or one input and one output.

In another departure from previous CB practice, a neat little PC application is included that communicates with the unit via RS-422 to provide a convenient method of programming key functions and storing alternative set-ups, loop and locate points. Keyboard definition files, loop and locate values can be saved, recalled, downloaded to the UR422 and/or uploaded from it.

A vast array of audio and video products support variations of the Sony 9-pin P2 serial control protocol. The precise functionality and quality of control is dependent on both the individual device implementation and the controller. The UR422 is 'plug-and-play' with the vast majority of common machines, recognising the device type identifier and configuring itself accordingly. There is specific support for the Rosendahl Bonsai Drive and MIDI Machine Control is available with an optional RS422 to MIDI convertor. Apart from the conventional transport keys, which include reverse play *(For sensual satisfaction? Ed)*, there are seven more full size keys and 10 slightly smaller ones. In many applications the smaller keys will do double-duty as record enables and numeric 1-8 plus shuttle and jog and numeric 9 and 0. The keys labelled Rec On and Rec Off will frequently be used for just those functions.

My experiments with several DAWs and a couple of tape transports indicate that the UR422 is an extremely capable 9-pin controller at the plug-and-play level. But this is far from the end of the story. Every key on the surface can be assigned to any available function on either or both connected machines. Up to 48 record tracks per machine can be controlled by 'fitting' a 'Bank' key. Eight fixed and 8 dynamic locate keys can be 'fitted' and up to 16 loops. If required, new labels can simply be laser printed and inserted in the buttons.

Different users and different applications mandate different key layouts. One of the great strengths of the UR422 proposition is versatility combined with simplicity. Some users feel bereft when deprived of reverse play, others never use it but feel similarly possessive about Instant Replay. (The transports locate back 10 seconds and go into play from one button push.) In some applications there is always a fixed start time. A constant locate can be fitted to return to this point at the press of a key. Of course, it would be possible to build a controller with physical buttons for every available function but that would be expensive, wasteful and huge.

The process of optimising key assignments for a particular purpose or person will undoubtedly take some time and effort. However, this will still be orders of magnitude less arduous and expensive than the process of designing and building a dedicated controller. Best of all, changing the entire mapping to a previously saved alternative takes just a few seconds.

Although the functions offered by the UR422 can, with some considerable effort, be duplicated with computers and suitable software, to assume that this could be a satisfactory alternative for intensive use would be to miss the point completely. Nothing really compares with a personalised set of familiar, intuitive, physical transport controls, occupying little valuable real estate yet endowing the operator with a real sense of security.

I don't think I'll be joining CFA (Control Freaks Anonymous) just yet… ∎

PROS	Low cost entry into the world of high-end 9-pin control; handles MMC too; industrial chic.
CONS	Programming and menu system will take a while to learn; display can seem a little cryptic until you are familiar.

Contact

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