Digidesign Digi 002

The 002 is a unique combination of controller unit and audio and MIDI interface for use with Pro Tools LE. Throw in a Standalone mode, which converts it into an 8:4:2 digital mixer, some nice plug-ins, and there's nothing quite like it.   GEORGE SHILLING

WHILE THE (STILL CURRENT) DIGI 001 is a PCI audio and MIDI interface, the 002 uses Firewire to connect to the host computer. The package looked at includes Pro Tools 5.3.2 for Mac OS 9.2.2 or Windows XP, and the 002 will work with iMacs, Apple Laptops and Sony Vaio laptops, although desktop PCs need a Firewire card.

Included are the eight analogue I-Os of the 001, but now, four of these feature switchable mic preamps that claim to be of a similar design to those on the HD's PRE unit. ADAT Optical I-O is also retained, adding an additional 8 channels of I-O, and SPDIF is also here as an option on the optical connectors or via separate RCA sockets. MIDI implementation now includes two Outs for 32 channels. The Digi 002's version of Pro Tools enables recording at up to 96kHz, which is quite a boast for such a relatively budget unit.

When you fire up the unit it enters Standby and you can enter Standalone mode on a button. To enter Pro Tools mode, the unit must be powered up and in Standby and will spring in to life via the Firewire when Pro Tools is launched.

Featuring separate XLR connectors from the line/instrument inputs, the microphone preamps are undoubtedly better quality than those in the 001. Phantom power is switched on the rear panel in pairs. There are also selectors for -10/+4dB for analogue inputs 5-8. Inputs 1-4 each have an analogue gain pot at the top of the front panel, along with a switch for mic/line selection (there are XLRs for mic input and separate jack sockets for line/instrument on the rear), and a 75Hz high-pass filter. An additional pair of analogue inputs on phono sockets can be used for external monitoring and there are dedicated buttons on the monitor section to select these or route them to analogue inputs 7 and 8. Monitor and Main Outputs

(actually outputs 1 and 2) are balanced jack, the latter duplicated with a pair of -10dB phonos, the former bypassing the front panel volume knob and monitoring selector. Outputs 3-8 are also balanced jacks. Digital connections are similar to the 001, with the option of mirroring the main analogue outputs on SPDIF. There is no wordclock connection.

All three MIDI connectors have corresponding activity LEDs on the front of the 002. However, in a brief comparison, I experienced far worse MIDI delay and jitter via the 002's Firewire than that experienced using the PCI card Digi 001.

Serious users of Pro Tools MIDI functions will see a big improvement in timing by using the separate Digidesign MIDI unit when Pro Tools implements MIDI Time Stamping feature and, for Mac users, version 6 for OS X will eliminate the OMS MIDI system.

The eight faders are accompanied by Solo, Mute and Select buttons (which can also be used to record-enable the track), along with a (normally 34 step) rotary encoder used for panning, send level, or insert parameter adjustment. Each knob is accompanied by an unusual circular 15-segment LED display ring, which can show roughly the setting of the knob, or act as a meter. These rings are sometimes difficult to see due to their proximity to knobs. Above each of these is an orange illuminating display ('Scribble Strip') used for showing track name (abbreviated to four characters), fader level, or parameter name/setting for the knob.

When you make any adjustment the display changes to show the setting momentarily. It is possible with most plug-ins to adjust all parameters from the

002 using the eight knobs; for plug-ins with more parameters you can scroll through multiple pages. Alongside and above these is a clever arrangement of buttons enabling selection of particular plug-ins and sends. There is a row on the left for selecting one of the five plug-in (or send) slots, and a row of buttons above, including one for EQ and one for Dynamics, which will identify plug-ins of a particular type. The Pan/Send button allows the use of five knobs to adjust all sends on one particular channel.

Next are left and right Page selectors for scrolling through Plug-In parameter pages. There is a Master Bypass that disables all plugs on a channel if they are visible, or just the one that can be seen. Finally, there's an Escape/Cancel key that can cancel Channel View operations, but is more useful in cancelling on-screen dialogues and would have been better placed nearer the Enter and Undo keys.

A pair of Scribble Strip displays in the master section can show statuses, console modes, plug-in name, etc or act as a mirror of the main counter in Pro Tools (albeit running slightly late). A sample rate display reminds you what type of session you have started or opened while a LED marked 1394 lights when Pro Tools is running and the 002 is communicating successfully by Firewire. This contrasts to the Link LED near the two Firewire ports that just shows if a successful Firewire connection has been made.

Alongside the faders at the left are Modifier buttons for alternative functions that correspond to the host computer's Shift, Alt, Control and Command keys. At the right is a useful Flip switch that permits the faders to be used for higher resolution editing of the parameter from the corresponding rotary encoder. This is great for plug-in editing and setting up send levels, although you cannot use the faders as pan pots. The button marked Master Faders predictably calls up any

master faders instantly for control by faders.

There are transport controls and direction buttons mounted on a raised dome. These have modes for Bank, Nudge and Zoom and can be used to select MIDI and Audio tracks to appear on the faders in banks of eight, nudged along one-by-one, or used to zoom or select audio regions in Pro Tools. In Bank and Nudge modes, the Up/Down buttons move any edit page selection to adjacent tracks. Zoom is useful for the Edit page, but you will still need the mouse when editing. As with the ProControl, there are buttons to switch the Plug-In window on and off, and select the Mix and Edit pages.

Additionally, there are buttons for Loop Play, Loop Record and Quick Punch modes, and associated with this is a useful footswitch socket on the rear panel. At the extreme right, is a vertical row of five function keys but only two of these have any function in Pro Tools currently. One brings the current highlighted

Included plug-ins

The 002 package augments the standard Digirack selection. The extremely useful Waves Renaissance bundle is here, plus Digidesign's own D-Fi and D-Fx, IK Multimedia's excellent Amplitube guitar amp modeller, an RTAS version of the Sampletank, plus Native Instruments' Pro-52 Prophet 5 emulator.

Plug-In to the control surface and the other disables the fader motors for low-level listening – although they don't make a lot of noise.

It would be nice to be able to assign macro functions to the unused keys, such as Save Session. All buttons, except those for transport, the Modifier buttons and the larger latching mic/line and HP Filter buttons, feature integral LEDs to show their status. I would also have liked LEDs in the Stop, Play and Record buttons. The monitor section at the top is very simple but effective, with a volume knob and useful Mono and Mute buttons. There is a separate volume knob for the front panel headphone output, which follows the main monitor output selection except for the mute button.

The first unit I was sent failed embarrassingly (and terminally) during a session; it seems early examples suffered a few problems. However, the replacement unit seemed to be of slightly higher build quality, although some rotary encoders were still slightly inconsistent, with sticky points on their travel. It all worked well, and the eight touch-sensitive motorised faders are very accurate and very fast when controlled by the computer. The hard plastic knobs' finger-shaped dimples are comfortable to use and I found them eminently usable, seemingly accurate to the required 0.1dB. It is when mixing and using the excellent Pro Tools automation that they come into their own, although there is no way of changing their automation mode from the Digi 002's front panel.

As with the Digi 001 it is possible to monitor any application that uses Sound Manager through the main outputs, even when the 002 is in Standby or Standalone. However, there is no zero-latency monitoring available when overdubbing, and although there is a good low-latency mode, many

users will prefer to set up an external system.

I really didn't have the unit for long enough to become totally used to the 002, but I would imagine that an owner would soon get familiar with the controls and be tweaking favourite plug-ins from the 002 rather than with the mouse. However, the constant need for the use of the 002 and the computer keyboard and mouse means some careful ergonomic considerations need to be made when installing. The 002 gives you the opportunity to avoid some mouse clicking, but for editing you will still need to use the mouse for most procedures.

Considering the price difference between this and a ProControl/HD rig, it certainly seems like a bargain. There is nothing else on the market with this combination of features, and they are understandably selling faster than the Chinese can build them for Digidesign. ■

| **PROS** | Unique product and combination of features – Pro Tools to go; fast motorised faders; good mic amps; Firewire connection; generous package of included plug-ins; mixer alter-ego. |
| **CONS** | Function keys with no functions; poor MIDI timing; sometimes torn between looking at the 002 and the computer screen; questionable reliability of early examples. |

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