Digidesign Mbox 2 Pro

The latest in the Mbox range of Pro Tools entry level products is a FireWire 6 in, 8 out audio interface designed to work with Pro Tools LE. ANDY DAY reckons it's a well balanced package.

MY FIRST IMPRESSION of the Mbox 2 Pro was the large size of the unit for a relatively small amount of I-O, but it actually works quite well when using it with a laptop because you can stand the computer on top and have easy access to all the controls. Despite its size the Mbox Pro is very light and portable making it ideal for 'on the road' and location recording due to the power being supplied through the FireWire port. I used the Mbox Pro with a Mac-book 2GHz laptop and could get about 3 hours of recording with a full battery charge (without phantom power). You can also use the supplied AC adapter, which comes with plug adapters for every known power socket in the world.

The interface consists of MIDI I-O, 6 analogue inputs, 2 front panel DI jacks (for guitars and basses), 2 rear panel XLR/jacks for mic inputs and an aux input, which can be line level or direct from a deck. This is quite a nice touch for DJs wanting to hook up a deck into Live or Reason. The mic inputs can be phantom powered, padded and trimmed from the front panel. The DI jacks are also handy for quickly plugging in a guitar and recording, plus with two headphone sockets (each with individual level controls) you can always monitor what's going on. Another nice feature for DJs is the ability to switch one headphone socket to monitor outputs 3 and 4, allowing a cue mix to be routed directly to the headphones in a live DJing situation.

One of the main differences between the Mbox Pro and the normal Mbox is the inclusion of Word clock I-O and this makes integration into other digital studios easier. The lack of AES connectivity is a concern as most digital studios have AES connections rather than consumer SPDIF. Outputs consist of six analogue jacks (two of which are unbalanced) and one SPDIF. Generally the Mbox Pro is well speced and quite well laid out, albeit slightly lacking in digital I-O.

As with the basic Mbox, the Pro comes with Pro Tools LE V7 and the fantastic ignition software pack. This is definitely the best thing about the package, you get Reason 3 adapted, Live 5 lite, Melodyne, Amplitude LE, Samplitude LE, some rex loops and BFD real drum simulator. This is great for musicians, as you

can compose, mix and produce tracks straight away, all with the Mbox package. I installed all the supplied software and after a few registration hiccups I was up and running. I already have Live 5 so I used that instead of the supplied lite version, but it worked with the Mbox first time around.

This was my first look at Pro Tools 7, because I work mostly in postproduction and the new features in 7 are more about MIDI. I was very impressed with how Digidesign has improved the MIDI features of Pro Tools and the Rewire integration with Live and Reason is great. The ignition pack represents great value for money, as all the supplied software can be upgraded to the full versions at a preferential rate. But the versions supplied are not just glorified demos and represent great pieces of software in their own right. I recorded some MIDI tracks in Pro Tools and routed those to instruments in Reason and Live, and for geek value recorded them back into Pro Tools to check for Rewire delays. On my Mac-book everything was spot on for timing. Things have definitely changed for the better with MIDI in Pro Tools 7, however, I prefer to use Live as it's my main composition tool nowadays. The cool thing about the Rewire integration is that you can flip between Pro Tools, Reason and Live seamlessly. It's easy to record MIDI in Live, route the output to Pro Tools to add RTAS plug-ins or record for later mixing. And because Pro Tools LE is compatible with Pro Tools HD you can take your session to another studio to mix on a larger HD system.

Another nice inclusion in the Mbox package is a training DVD on Pro Tools 7. This is useful for beginners and experienced users alike, I discovered a few tips myself from watching a few chapters. This is definitely the way forward for all DAWs and hopefully something other manufacturers will copy. Finally, regarding Pro Tools LE 7, I was surprised that it still only works in stereo, especially with the possibility of outputing 6 channels from the Mbox2 Pro. 5.1 capability would be the next obvious step, if for nothing else than to justify the 6 outputs on the interface.

The sound quality of the Mbox 2 Pro is very good and it does have the capability to record at 24/96k,

although I don't think many people are actually doing this yet. The mic amps seem reasonably quiet and there is plenty of gain range. I recorded some vocals using a Neumann U87 (which I powered from the Mbox) and the results were amazingly good, plus, with the included RTAS plug-ins, there's a reasonable choice of EQ, dynamics and effects. There are some additional add-on packages for both Mbox products that give more functionality in music or postproduction applications. With the Music production toolkit you can add extra plug-ins and unlock some of the more professional elements of Pro Tools HD. The DV toolkit gives you timecode display within Pro Tools LE and the ability to import/export OMFI files, as well as a few post-orientated plug-ins. These toolkits close the gap even more between the Mbox family and Pro Tools HD, especially as host processors become more powerful, allowing more RTAS plug-ins to be used in LE. I would be very interested in trying the Mbox 2 Pro and DV toolkit combination within a postproduction workflow.

My final conclusion is that the Mbox 2 Pro successfully bridges the gap between Mbox 2 and Digi002. But for the extra £180 over the Mbox 2, I would expect more pro features like AES I-O (or ADAT 8-channel I-O) and ideally 5.1 support within Pro Tools LE. Despite these points, it's a good product with plenty of uses in music or postproduction and with compatibility with Pro Tools HD systems. A good platform to base your projects on. ■

PROS Compatible with Pro Tools HD; excellent package of software with Pro Tools 7 LE and the ignition pack; useful DVD tutorial.

CONS Lack of AES I-O; no multichannel support in Pro Tools LE; slightly higher priced than other audio interfaces.

EXTRAS Mbox 2 Pro (UK£480) includes Pro Tools LE software and more than 50 effects and instrument plug-ins, including DigiRack, Bomb Factory, the Xpand! sample-playback/synthesis workstation, and the Pro Tools Ignition Pack. For UK£60 more, customers can purchase Mbox 2 Pro Factory, which includes an additional five Digidesign and Bomb Factory plug-ins (worth more than £650), the Mbox 2 Pro system, and an iLok Key.

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