Lynx Two

Another new PC soundcard and it costs how much? Bucking the trends in the consumer computer world, Lynx has its eyes on the pro user but it ain't cheap. How refreshing says ROB JAMES

SOUNDCARDS HAVE COME a long way in a short time. Expectations have increased and, like everything else in computing, prices have fallen. The Lynx Two appears to buck this trend by being expensive compared with the apparent opposition and by having relatively few features. If this sounds like a recipe for commercial suicide, read on.

Once installed (reasonably painless) Lynx Two is controlled via a simple application with three main pages. The Model A I had for review is equipped with four analogue inputs and four outputs. As with any sound card there is interaction between the user applications and the sound card driver application and this needs to be carefully thought through to achieve optimum results.

The Lynx Two screens have been re-worked in the latest driver which I downloaded. Mixer-Adapter is where parameters are set and useful feedback can be obtained. Mixer-Outputs now reflects the card's routing capabilities using four source selection buttons above each output. Sixteen logical I-O channels exist (1-8 L&R).

Levels are digitally controlled by on screen faders or via MIDI. To preserve maximum quality, leave the faders alone. The third screen, Record/Play replaces separate screens in the previous driver. In this Beta version I found the new presentation somewhat clearer than in its predecessor. There are some remaining issues about bus-mastering and Windows 2000 ASIO drivers with Emagic Logic 5 that need to be resolved.

Lynx Two is a good candidate for a number of professional applications. Users of soundcards with analogue convertors would do well to remember the old computing acronym GIGO (Garbage In Garbage Out). The conversion process is vitally important as once degradation occurs there is no going back. This card has the right features for transfer workstations that must accept and output analogue audio to and from a variety of formats in stereo or multichannel, digital stereo, or as encoded bitstreams.

The aim is to enable monitoring and copying to other formats at the highest possible quality. When the optional interface cards become available these capabilities will be significantly enhanced and it will become attractive for use with native processing DAWs. Meanwhile the excellent paper performance figures of the convertors are borne out in listening tests. This makes it an interesting proposition for mastering applications.

It is also one of the few cards with analogue I-O capable of working at a sampling rate of 192kHz – esoteric at present but useful future-proofing. The convertors are sufficiently impressive to stand comparison with external units costing considerably more than the card.

Some questions remain over the drivers and firmware but, if these can be resolved, Lynx Two is arguably the most professionally-orientated simple soundcard on the market.

Spiralling feature bloat may be useful for differentiating consumer sound cards in a crowd but it has no place in a professional product. Less is more. The money is better spent on decent engineering. Lynx Two is an appealing blend of high quality analogue conversion, stable internal clock, comprehensive synchronisation options, and LTC reader/generator. In fact the Model B is now on my wish list.

If results are measurably and audibly superior then a price premium over apparently similar products is perfectly justified. In the case of Lynx Two these are exactly the parameters aimed at and, I think, attained. ◼

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Connectivity and options

Lynx Two is available in three variants. Each of these provides 8 stereo logical I-O devices for a total of 16 channels. They differ in the disposition of the 8 channels of analogue I-O. Model A has four inputs and four outputs, Model B has two inputs and six outputs, and Model C has six inputs and two outputs.

They all have a stereo AES-EBU I-O with sample rate conversion at a ratio of up to 3:1. For output rate conversion the actual sample rate is determined by the Digital Input sample rate.

Sync can be internal from a decently stable crystal oscillator or external word clock, word times 256 or composite video. An LTC reader and generator are provided and the driver can convert to and from MTC. Lynx Two handles bit depths from 8 to 32 and sample rates from 8kHz to 200kHz. Apart from conventional audio, Dolby Digital and dts streams are also catered for with the correct flags recognised and generated. Bit for bit copies are possible. Three flavours of dither are on offer as a global setting on record inputs, triangular, shaped triangular and rectangular. Triangular is available on outputs.

Option cards are being developed to add 8 channels of digital I-O, initially in ADAT or AES-EBU with TDIF to follow. An appropriate breakout cable is supplied that connects to the card via a 25-pin D-sub and terminates in colour coded XLRs. A second breakout cable deals with sync, LTC and 2 channels of AES-EBU. Connections are BNC with colour-coded XLRs for AES-EBU. Adapter cables are included to convert these to SPDIF.

Analogue output is software-selectable between +4dBu and -10dBV nominal. Signal to noise figures are claimed at 114dB from analogue inputs and 116dB on analogue outputs.

Internal connectors allow multiple cards to be synchronised and will enable the forthcoming digital I-O option cards to be added.

PROS Possibly the best sounding 'simple' PC card yet; professional features without complexity; sensible expansion options soon
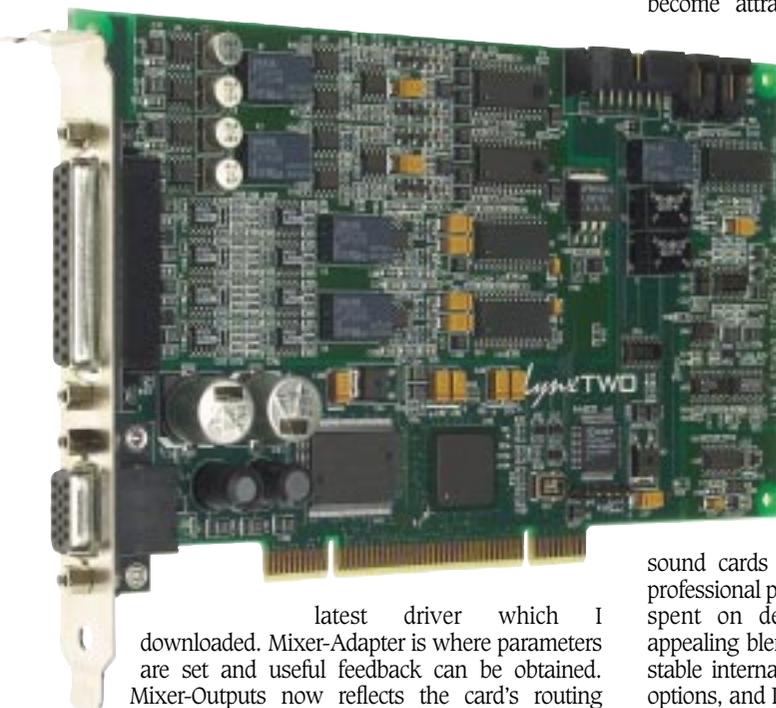
CONS Seems expensive until you hear it; some issues remain with firmware and drivers; no VITC or BITC.

EXTRAS Lynx has introduced the Lynx L22 192kHz PCI card, which supports 2-channels of 24-bit, 200kHz A-D and D-A conversion, AES-EBU and SPDIF I-O, and up to 16 additional channels of digital audio via optional LStream modules. The L22 is based on the Lynx Two and targeted at 'the most demanding' recording, postproduction, broadcast, and measurement applications.

The L22 provides I-O expansion via two LStream ports. Combined, these allow 16 channels of additional I-O from external ADAT, AES-EBU, or TDIF devices. The ports can also be used to route data and synchronize to other L22s or Lynx Twos.