RME Fireface UCX

Targeting much of the thinking behind the UFX at a different user base and price point, the UCX has much to commend it. ROB JAMES gets in the face of an audio interface.

Audio interfaces to computers have become highly sophisticated bits of kit and RME has a long track record in manufacturing these devices with the Fireface UFX an excellent example of the breed. However, for many applications it is overkill. Enter its little brother, the UCX, which has one or two unique tricks of its own. Housed in a half-width 1U the UK£807 (+ VAT) unit is deceptively powerful for its size offering 36 channels of audio and a 90-channel mixer with 42-bit internal resolution (30 hardware input channels, 30 software playback input channels and 30 hardware output channels.) These numbers reduce at HD sampling rates (up to 192kHz). Like the larger UFX the UCX offers a lot more than a simple interface — it is also a comprehensive and flexible routing matrix and mixer, a monitor controller, a high quality clock source and has a pair of very serious digitally controlled analogue preamps. It also has an alternative firmware that supports 'Class Compliant Mode' which adds some intriguing possibilities in conjunction with an iPad or iPad2.

On the front panel two XLR/jack combo sockets are Mic/Instrument analogue inputs 1–2 with Clip, Signal present and 48V phantom power indicator LEDs. Analogue outputs 3–4 are jacks with Clip and Signal present indicator LEDs. A rotary encoder/switch sets the input gains and output volumes from the front panel. The knob works in Channel or Level modes indicated by LEDs. A two character alphanumeric display shows which channel you will affect and the level set. The knob is used for pan on stereo channels by holding it in for a second and also accesses setup mode and stores and recalls setups. Channel modes and many other setup parameters are only accessible via the TotalMix application. A block of State and MIDI LEDs indicate WC source, Word clock, SPDIF, ADAT or Host and MIDI In 1, In 2, Out 1 and Out 2 activity. The headphone jack uses analogue outputs 7–8 and has generous output level.

Around the back, ¼-inch balanced jacks access analogue inputs 5–8 and outputs 1–6. Phonos deal with SPDIF in and out and a pair of Toslink optical sockets provide 8 channels of ADAT format I-O. The optical input auto-switches when SPDIF is detected and the output can be switched to SPDIF in software. Word clock In and Out are BNC; 75ohm termination is set in software. One mini DIN is for the supplied or optional remote controls and the other does MIDI in and out via the supplied breakout cable. USB2 and FireWire 400 sockets connect to a host computer. Although not recommended, both can be connected at once. The first active port takes precedence. Power is supplied by an external in-line convertor. The connection is the usual concentric type and a toggle power switch completes the picture. The power plug has an indicator LED built in; a nice touch.

TotalMix FX, the digital mixer and signal router application, is powered by two DSP chips. It offers a comprehensive routing matrix and a full mixer with three-band EQ and high-pass filter, dynamics and reverb/echo effects. Mixer outputs can be rerouted back to DAW inputs for recording. The EQ is very useful, as are the dynamics, the reverb and echo effects. The control room section even includes a talkback button. In conjunction with the remote control the monitor section is more than adequate for most purposes. External hardware control of the mixer is possible via Mackie Control Protocol.

Autoset is a very nice, lazy option that sets the analogue gain according to the input level. It attempts to keep 6dB of headroom and is inaudible in everyday use. It neatly avoids overs with no effort on the part of the user. The only catch is that levels in excess of -6dBFS will reduce the gain permanently until the user intervenes. While setup may seem a little complex initially, it all makes sense and very quickly becomes intuitive.

The supplied remote control is almost identical to the RME Babyface in appearance and as such it is a very handsome object. The solid metal low profile case has an attractively curved front, a jog-wheel/switch and two buttons. The wheel controls volume and its switch toggles Dim. The Recall button is used to store and recall levels and the Prog button can be mapped to almost any TotalMix function.

Apple seems to be phasing out FireWire in favour of Thunderbolt and many PCs are currently equipped with neither so the dual Firewire 400/USB2 interfaces are very welcome. Of course, it will also work with USB3 and FireWire 800. Rather than use any of the off-the-shelf chipsets, many of which are less than ideal for real-time applications, RME has developed its own solution. In my experience it gives the most solid connections with the lowest latencies. Since the UCX has only one USB socket and this is used as a host connection it lacks the clever direct USB recording present on its larger sibling the UFX.

UCX has an alternative firmware accessed via the front panel encoder button. Once 'CC' is selected the unit reboots in Class Compliant Mode. The UCX then works by default as an 8-channel audio I-O and Sysex capable MIDI I-O for the iPad and iPad 2. The digital outputs work in parallel. For subscribers to the Apple hegemony this is a very big deal and extends the reach of the UCX considerably. The Apple Camera Connection Kit, which converts the wide connector to standard USB, is also required. At present professional apps that take full advantage of the UCX do not exist but this is changing rapidly as I write. Meanwhile it is already working with MT DAW and Music Studio.

Like every other RME product I have used the UCX is characterised by the cardinal virtues of excellent engineering, accuracy and neutrality. It is commendably compact and, when used with a laptop forms the heart of a very versatile and easily portable recording and editing rig. I used Pyramix Native on an old Acer laptop and it all worked very well. Noise levels are low and I would have no hesitation in using it for professional production. It is equally at home in a studio and can provide all that is required for modest music set-ups and for video editing/mixing. The six outputs are ideal for surround monitoring and two mic inputs are plenty for ADR and effects recording. The enticing prospect of being able to use it with an iPad adds the icing to the cake. ■

PROS Beautiful build quality; excellent low noise sound; versatility.

CONS A mite complicated to learn; no USB recording; doesn't work with iPhone.

EXTRAS Apart from the supplied remote control RME is also offering the alternative wired Advanced Remote Control (ARC). This has been designed for direct access to more functions. The ARC looks very similar to the UCX remote with a solid metal case, main encoder dial and 8 pushbuttons. The 'extra' six have indicator LEDs. Seven of the buttons can be assigned freely via TotalMix FX to more than 36 different commands. This remote also works with recent build UFXs.

Contact

RME, GERMANY:
Website: www.rme-audio.de