

Tascam US-122

Computer external interfaces need to be compact and well featured to attract attention.

Tascam's newest audio/MIDI interface combines both with a build quality that belies its price.

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EXTERNAL AUDIO INTERFACES

For computers have obvious attractions. For a start, there is no messing about inside the case with the potential of invalidating the warranty. When the interface also takes its power from the computer there is the bonus of one less power supply to worry about. USB and FireWire can supply sufficient power to run at least a modest interface and USB 1 is now ubiquitous and, for Macs and more recent PC operating systems, works pretty well even for real-time applications such as audio and MIDI. However, the bandwidth of USB 1 is limited and more ambitious interfaces with 8 channels of audio I-O plus MIDI and metering are perhaps a little too close to the edge for comfort and better served by USB 2 or FireWire, at least for professional use.

Tascam's latest addition, the US-122, keeps things beautifully simple. For around UK£112 (+VAT) you get two channels of mic/line level audio input with phantom power and two channels of analogue output, MIDI input and output, direct monitoring, and a headphone monitor powered by the USB connection.

Styled by Frontier Design this is no lightweight device, coming in at a little under a kilogram. Tascam has wisely chosen to use full sized knobs and standard sockets in a heavy chassis and has succeeded in producing a clearly laid out and intuitive interface that feels well built.

Driver installation under Windows XP is straightforward – simply run the installer application, reboot and plug-in the US-122. Windows finds the hardware and offers to install the drivers, one at a time. I simply said 'yes' to everything Windows wanted to install. A minute or two later I was playing audio out of Steinberg's Wavelab 4.0 via the Asio 2 driver.

With the US-122 Tascam has produced a no-fuss and thoroughly usable tool that adds stereo audio capabilities and MIDI to any modern PC or Mac. Documentation is clear and covers many of the PC



issues common with USB. There is also a useful primer on optimising PCs for audio work. Leaving aside the wide range of obvious semi-professional applications, this unit will prove useful for location recordings with a laptop and could easily be used to edit and add commentary to radio features. Steinberg's Cubasis and a light version of Gigasampler are bundled with the interface, further enhancing the value for money for those who need them. ■

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PROS

Well thought out; price; look and feel.

CONS

No meters; not much else to complain about at this price.

EXTRAS

TASCAM's FW-1884 is an expandable DAW controller and audio/MIDI interface that combines FireWire high bandwidth data transfer, an 18x8x2 audio mixer that incorporates many of the features of its DM-24 desk, and a sophisticated DAW control surface.

The control surface has nine touch-sensitive, motorised, 100mm faders (eight channel and one master fader) and 11 dedicated rotary encoders for (4-band parametric) EQ, Pan, Solo, Mute Select and Aux send. There are also transport controls, a weighted jog/shuttle wheel and an array of assignable function/short-cut keys. A 'FAT Channel' provides adjustment and GUI representation of EQ, dynamics and effects parameters.



Audio inputs and outputs are balanced with XLRs for mic level signals and 1/4-inch jacks for line. Switchable 48V phantom powering applies to both mic inputs. The line inputs can be switched to unbalanced to accept guitars. Unbalanced inserts are provided for preconversion processing. Pots control individual input levels, stereo line out, headphones and direct monitoring. Switches enable direct monitoring and allow left and right to be summed. LED indicators show audio input signal presence and overload, MIDI IN and OUT activity, and USB active.

Conversion is 16 or 24-bit at a maximum of 48kHz sampling rate. Although the dynamic range figures are less than spectacular they are probably honest and more than adequate for the price point.