



Tascam US-2000

Despite the flush of FireWire audio interfaces there is a lot of mileage to be had from USB 2.0 in certain applications. **ROB JAMES** plugs in and drops out.



Conventional FireWire, IEEE1394a, is no longer seen as quite the panacea it once was for connecting I-O boxes to computers. Many people have become disillusioned by the incompatibilities they have experienced. There have been annoying issues with certain FireWire chipsets for real-time audio, which have led to endless frustration and disappointment for those unlucky enough to encounter them. FireWire is no longer as common as it once was as a standard fit interface in the PC world and is now also less common on Macs. USB 2.0, on the other hand, is now ubiquitous. Although not designed for real-time audio or video, USB 2.0 is now a mature interface with a good record and, with a little care, can do a very good job for audio purposes.

USB 3 is now with us and this promises considerably more. However, it is early days for it and there are few PCs or devices fitted with it although recent motherboards are equipped with it and adaptors and external hard drives are becoming available.

Against this background Tascam has introduced a flagship USB audio interface, the US-2000. Although Tascam seems to be aiming pretty squarely at music recording, the unit has equally obvious applications in schools, colleges and houses of worship. It comes bundled with a copy of Cubase LE4 and it is thus possible to begin recording on a suitable computer with just this package, some mics and instruments. Eight of the 14 analogue inputs can be provided with +48V phantom power.

Physically, the US-2000 is presented with an air of solidity and understatement. The unit is quite deep at 280mm. The front panel has a very positive latching power switch with ridges either side to discourage accidental operation. Below is a 1/4-inch headphone socket with an adjacent group of knobs for Headphone volume control, Monitor output level and two monitor mixer knobs to control the computer monitor return and input contributions to the monitor outputs.

Moving to the right a matrix of 100 LEDs is used to provide bargraph meters for every input and output, with five LEDs per meter. Here also you will find indicators for power On and for when the USB connection is in use. One niggle is that the drilled holes in the front panel that allow the indicator and meter LEDs to be seen are very small and this results in limited horizontal and vertical viewing angles. When I first switched the unit on I thought it wasn't

working due to the absence of lights until I realised that I needed to be at a much less acute angle to see them.

Each of the 8 mic inputs has an individual gain pot. Below these, horizontal toggle switches determine whether adjacent inputs are monitored as stereo pairs or as mono and if 48V phantom is switched on for the input pair. On the far right, two combo XLR-3/jack sockets give access to Mic/Instrument inputs 7 and 8. Moving to the rear, the first six mic inputs are XLR followed by balanced 1/4-inch jacks for the six Line inputs along with toggle switches that determine whether monitoring is to be in mono or stereo for adjacent channel pairs as with the mic inputs. A pair of unbalanced insert jacks enable external processing to be added to the front panel mic/instrument inputs. The four Line outputs and stereo monitor outputs are all 1/4-inch balanced jacks followed by the B-type USB 2.0 socket and two phonos for digital I-O. Since there is no sync input the unit must be locked to the external digital source when one is present. Mains input is the usual IEC. Recording and playback can be at 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz or 96kHz in 16 or 24-bit resolution.

Driver installation is a little unusual if the documentation is to be believed. Instead of the familiar, 'install the driver and plug the device in when requested', the manual suggests there will be a further screen requiring the USB lead to be unplugged then replugged a second time. When I installed it on a Windows 7 box, the second unplug/replug was never requested, so maybe this only applies to XP/Vista. Once installed, a small control panel application provides status and version information and offers the choice of Sample Clock Source, (Automatic or Internal), Digital Output Format (AES-EBU or SPDIF) and Digital Output Channels (1 and 2 or 3 and 4). Under Windows there is a further choice of five latencies, i.e. buffer sizes, to fine tune to the specific PC. On Macs running OS X, installation is conventional and buffer size is determined within each application.

The US-2000 shows up in applications with six Mic inputs, two Mic/Instrument inputs, four analogue Line inputs, two channels of digital Line input and four Line outputs. I used Steinberg's bundled Cubase LE4 and Merging Technologies Pyramix native with no problems.

I put the US-2000 through its paces with a wide variety of mics on a drum kit with dynamic close

mics, an overhead condenser pair, an EV dynamic and an AT stereo condenser. Mic gain, is adequate but not generous and the EV struggled. At maximum input gain noise becomes an issue, as you might expect. More seriously, the pot range is not smooth; there are three points at which the level jumps suggesting that there is gain switching going on. This means smooth fades are not an option except between jumps. Since there are no built in dynamics it pays to err on the side of caution even with studio recordings. Overdubs are easy and the built in monitor mixer is helpful in this context. If the mics suit the gain range, the resulting recordings are clean and dynamic. Line inputs are problem free since the gain must be set at the source device. The US-2000 is a resolutely stereo box. The number of outputs precludes using it for surround other than in quad, but this is really not what the unit is about.

In carefully controlled conditions the US-2000 is capable of making excellent recordings in conjunction with your favourite DAW software on Mac or PC. In my experience, although USB 2.0 is more limited in practical real-time bandwidth than FireWire, it is generally more compatible and gives rise to fewer problems. I certainly experienced none during the review period. If the feature set fits your application, the US-2000 is worth auditioning. ■

PROS

Simple to use; monitor mixer; full metering.

CONS

Steps in input level control; LEDs have restricted viewing angle; no dynamics.

EXTRAS

The MH-8 is a headphone amplifier and each of its eight stereo outputs gets



250mW per side with three switchable sources available. Two stereo inputs can be shared to any of the outputs, and individual stereo direct inputs are available for each of the eight channels. A headphone out can select any one of these inputs, or mix several together. A set of foldback outputs allows you to chain other MH-8s into a system.

The LM-8ST is a 1U line mixer handling eight pairs of balanced 1/4-inch TRS



inputs — switchable +4/-10dB — that can be bused to a pair of XLR balanced outputs, labelled ST1 and ST2/Aux. Pre or postfader bussing is available for the alternate bus, and master output level controls and metering keep signals under control. A microphone input is also provided.

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