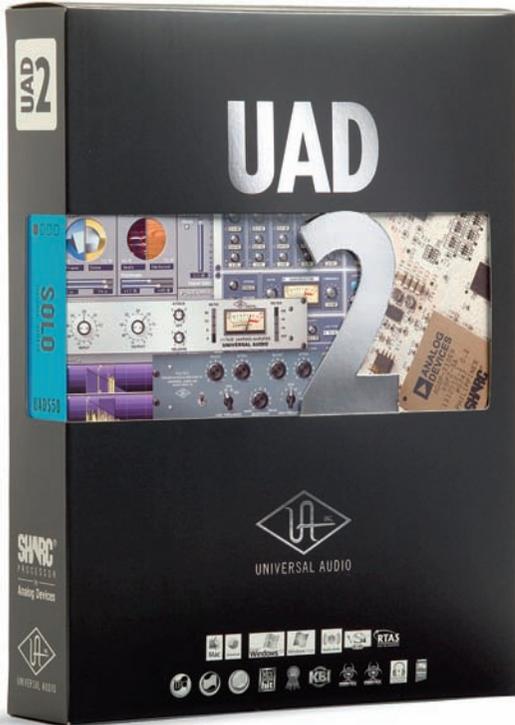


Universal Audio UAD-2 Solo

Universal Audio is already shipping its newly launched UAD-2 powered plug-ins and PCIe DSP accelerator card for DAWs in three different strengths and with three different bundle flavours. **ROB JAMES** savours the long-awaited successor to the UAD-1.



Universal Audio has a pedigree that runs all the way back to Bill Putnam Snr's signature hardware products, such as the Teletronix LA-2A and UA 1176 and not forgetting the indispensable Urei 565 'Little Dipper' Filter Set. The company now makes successful reproductions of classics but has also made a considerable name for itself with the UAD-1 series of DSP cards and expanders. These run some of the most desirable plug-ins around including recreations of UA classic boxes, the excellent DreamVerb and Cambridge EQ, along with licensed recreations of classics from other manufacturers.

I reviewed the original UAD-1 back in 2002 and found it impressive. It is important to get your head around the philosophy of this approach. I don't believe for one moment that the user experience of a software recreation of classic hardware matches up to the real thing. It isn't simply a matter of faithful reproduction of sonic character — it's the whole deal of tactile knobs and switches, the smell of cooking insulation and the sheer physical presence of the originals. That said I'm a pragmatist. I've known and loved a lot of audio hardware, not least during many years spent behind Neve consoles, but I could never afford to buy now nor do I have the space to accommodate them.

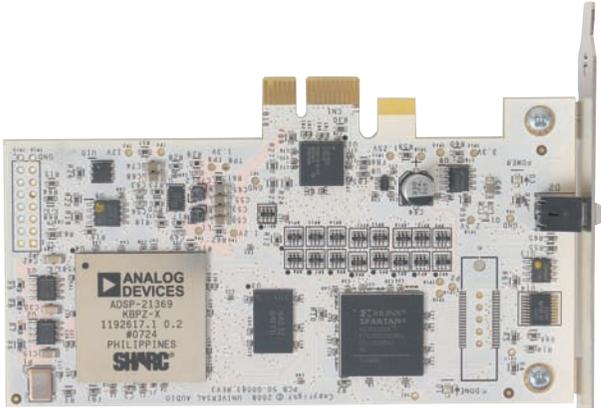
So, if convincing copies are available in software at affordable, if not 'pocket money', prices then that's a good thing.

The UAD-1 was good for its time but nothing stands still in IT and CPUs now have the power to do pretty much anything that a dedicated DSP chip can achieve, with the bonus that every time you buy a new CPU you get more power and more instances of plug-ins. Is there still a case for add-on DSP cards? UA obviously thinks so because it has just released this series of 1 lane PCI-e cards based on Analog Devices Sharc 21369 floating-point processors. I remember that UA was rather reticent about the processor employed in the UAD-1 but it is not so shy now it can emblazon a big AD Sharc logo on the UAD-2 carton.

The new range comprises three cards — Solo, Duo and Quad — and as the names imply these have one, two or four Sharcs respectively. Each card comes in one of three packages that vary the bundled plug-ins and on-line store credit included: Basic, Flexi and Nevana (guess what's in that bundle). If you have enough free slots or an expansion chassis it is possible to install up to four UAD-2s in the same machine.

I had the most basic (and thus the cheapest) package, the UK£339 (+ VAT) UAD-2 Solo, which comes with the standard bundle and a US\$50 voucher to use at the online store. Despite being the baby of the range the UAD-2 Solo still manages to offer an average of 2.5 times as much grunt as the original UAD-1 card. This means that not only do you get more instances of plug-ins but there is scope for more processor intensive plugs to be developed.

Installation is straightforward. Software first, followed by the card, then downloading an authorisation file for the bundled plug-ins. UA has cunningly included 14-day trial versions of every plug



in the range. Get thee behind me Satan!

For the present, the new cards do not support RTAS and some of the original plug-ins have not yet been ported to the new architecture but all this will come free in a subsequent software revision.

I popped the card into a Mac Pro running Final Cut Pro and SoundTrack and was up and running in very short order. Despite the 366-page PDF manual, operation is mostly self explanatory. A control panel application with several pages enables you to view the currently installed plug-ins and their license status, activate them, monitor resource levels and change configuration options. It is evident from these that a lot of work has gone into ensuring maximum compatibility with different hardware platforms and DAW software hosts. However, you should consult the list of compatible hosts before purchase as there are some surprising omissions, e.g. Pyramix. Such applications may well work but there are no guarantees.

Turning to the plug-ins themselves, when I reviewed the UAD-1, although I was impressed by

the various bundled and optional vintage plugs, I was, and still am, knocked out by RealVerb-Pro. The good news is that while RealVerb Pro is still included, UAD has developed it still further into DreamVerb. The bad news is that it's a chargeable option although at a very reasonable price. I'll stick my neck out here and say that, used carefully, this is the best thing I've heard since the original Quantec Room Simulator.

UAD-1 and UAD-2 versions of all plug-ins are different but, at least for the present, UA is offering free updates to the UAD-2 version for existing owners.

Other plugs that are new since I last looked include Neve, Harrison and Helios channel strips and the SPL Transient Designer (not yet compatible with UAD-2).

My all-time favourite analogue console is an older Neve and my all-time favourite compressor/limiter is the Neve 33609. Reproductions of this and the 1081 Equaliser, 1073 Equaliser and 88RS Channel Strip, all exclusive to UAD, are very welcome. Sadly there isn't a version of my favourite Neve EQ, the 33114.

Not having an 88R to hand, or the other hardware modules, I cannot comment objectively on the veracity of the simulations but they do produce a highly seductive sound. The 33609 certainly performs exactly as my memory tells me the (still current) hardware 33609 does. I do miss the tactile experience though, but the price is a lot more manageable. All the Neve processors come with 'SE' versions that provide less exact simulations but with a lower processing overhead.

One of the joys of UA's hardware and software combinations is the complete absence of zipper noise and glitches when altering parameters. All of which

makes me as happy as a pig in poo. All plug-in parameters can be fully automated, sample rates of up to 192kHz are supported and many of the plug-ins up-sample for maximum quality.

I consider these devices to be a perfectly reasonable compromise between somewhat soulless plug-ins and expensive and bulky hardware boxes, analogue or digital. They have more character than many native or TDM plug-ins while being a great deal more affordable and practical for many of us than a room full of hardware. If you haven't already heard Universal Audio processors, hardware and software, you really should make the effort to do so. ■

PROS

Exclusive plug-ins; extra horsepower for supported DAWs; UA's own reverbs.

CONS

Not compatible with all DAWs; not yet up-to-date with all previous plug-ins; best effects use a lot of available resources.

EXTRAS



Solo, Duo or Quad UAD-2 cards can be mixed or matched in any combination of up to four cards. Each UAD-2 is powered by single and multi-chip configurations and offers 2.5x (Solo), 5x (Duo) and 10x (Quad) the power of a UAD-1.

Contact

UNIVERSAL AUDIO, US:
Website: www.uaudio.com
UK, Source: +44 208 962 5080