



Antelope Audio Orion 32+ Gen 3

RUSSELL COTTIER enjoys a new generation of audio interface excellence



The Orion 32+ Gen 3 is the latest offering from Antelope Audio. Housed in a sleek 1U rack-mount, the unit offers an amazing 64 simultaneous audio inputs and outputs. 32 analogue I/O is on the rear panel, with the remaining connectivity via various digital connections. However, that is not all, the Orion 32+ Gen 3 also sports stereo monitor outputs on TRS additional to the 32 analogue outs.

This generation of Orion does not offer much on the exterior to differentiate it from its older siblings, the front panel is grey anodised aluminium with an attractive screen print. A red aluminium power button is for standby mode, and adjacent to this there are three indicators for internal Oven (atomic) clock — which seems to be one of the key factors in the excellent sound — there are modes for external Wordclock Lock and Antelope 10M, Antelope's 10MHz clocking system.

The central trapezoid screen is somewhat similar to the previous generation with a four-digit, seven-segment display to indicate sample rate in an attractive blue-white colour. The adjacent 1" square OLED offers monitoring options and menus that can be accessed via the red Antelope button to the right of the trapezoid screen. I would have expected a shift to a complete OLED screen in this generation of the unit, which could have offered a significantly better screen experience and metering, but the functionality of the seven-segment display works well in a studio and allows instant clarification of the sample rate.

To the right of the unit there are four preset controls which allow instant access to particular configurations that you might want to save in the control panel software. Perhaps you have a setting for full band recording, one for vocals one for mixing — and so on.

The rear of the unit is very much similar to previous generations of the Orion 32. There is an IEC C14 power and Wordclock I/O over BNC along with the 10M input BNC.

There is SPDIF I/O and as mentioned earlier the TRS monitor connections. To the right of the unit are eight DB25 connectors which allow the 32 inputs and 32 outputs to be connected very neatly. The digital I/O is located centrally, with Thunderbolt, USB, MADI and four ADAT light pipe sockets.

FPGA powers hardware effects

Of course, Antelope is famous for implementing a Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) logic chip to power the hardware AFX effects. FPGAs can be reprogrammed On-the-fly to run specific audio processing plug-ins. For those of you not familiar with FPGA this is not an emulation of digital logic in a specific configuration, like you might imagine digital signal processing to be, this is a reconfiguration of actual hardware logic making processing blisteringly fast and allowing for near instant processing.

Previous iterations of the Antelope Audio hardware including FPGA processing have always shipped with unlimited free AFX effects software. This was one of the major benefits over their main competitors. However, Antelope has had a change of tack and decided that this generation would be released with only six AFX effects as standard. This is a software choice, not a hardware limitation, and licenses can be purchased for upgrading to the full suite as desired.

Discovery of this initially seemed rather disappointing, however it's worth noting that the unit with the six effect bundle version is significantly cheaper than previous iterations. The basic package ships with the Master De-Esser, Power Ex (expander), Power Gate, Power FFC (Feed Forward Compressor), Clear-Q EQ and the soon-to-be-classic Auraverb. All fantastic utilitarian effects, but it seems perhaps a counterintuitive choice when clean utility plug-ins are usually available as stock in most DAWs with very little CPU overhead. The benefits of FPGA are more likely

to be in deep convolution processing for reverb, amp and mic sims as well as algorithmic vintage hardware modelling.

That said the new AFX2DAW plug-in for the unit will allow much closer integration with your session files. AFX chains will be able to be easily accessed and saved from a simple plug-in interface, routing is essentially taken care of. Something that was not so easy to do in previous iterations of the unit.

Transparent-sounding converter

Though the outside of the unit looks similar to previous generations the inside has undergone a radical overhaul. The circuitry has apparently been improved even further, even though the previous generation was excellent already. The converters now have a 129dB dynamic range, sound transparent and clear, and are in my opinion arguably competitors for the best on the market.

With multi-platform support and new improved Windows Thunderbolt drivers, the Antelope Orion 32+ Gen 3 offers a host of key features to a variety of user bases. I still feel MIDI control of the mixer would be a valuable asset for the modern console-free studio, and even for live use. The unit also comes in an HD version with Digilink-Mini connections, and boasts a staggering -132dB noise floor on the monitor outputs, although I would be surprised if your power amplifier or air conditioning allow you to hear that!

Overall the Orion 32+ Gen 3 offers unparalleled connectivity in a simple uniform I/O layout, without cluttered front mounted connections. It is definitely a professional option at \$2595 but stands out from the competition in terms of I/O at this price-point. **1**

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Incredible-sounding conversion. Extensive and neat I/O connectivity. Low Latency and hardware mixing allows very useful routing options.

CONS AFX2DAW only works via Thunderbolt, not USB, due to bandwidth limits.

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