

Ego.Sys WaMi Box

The WaMi box offers hard disk recording via your PC laptop's PCMCIA slot. This review fell into Graeme Hague's lap

Being known as bit of a technical guru means you get asked a lot of questions. One that has popped up more than once has been, 'how can I get my PC laptop to do hard disk recording?' The answer has always been, 'you can't'. Until now. But with ADATs and portable MiniDisc multitracker around, I always wondered, 'why would you want to do serious hard disk recording on a laptop anyway?' Still, a laptop running my favourite Midi+Audio sequencer, along with a little GM module, and the WaMi Box to plumb my vocal mic and



for an attractive on-l songwriting setup. So, Ego.Sys may have spotted what could be a growing niche.

First impressions. It's called a 'WaMi' box. It is like something you'd see in a kangaroo, but more of a 'wave' and 'm' sound. It's not much like a photocopy of a document. We'll support this

At this point, it doesn't look good.

However, the WaMi box itself does look very good. It's designed to be a high quality, external soundcard that attaches to your laptop via the PCMCIA socket. The WaMi Box is about the size of a DI box. Along one side it has two line in, four line out, and S/DPIF I/O connectors – all RCA type and gold-plated. Very neat. Midi and optical I/O are at one end and 6.5mm headphone and microphone connections (the latter with in-built preamp) are at the other, separated by the PCMCIA port. On the fourth side there's a row of status LEDs. The metal case has a nice mottled grey finish with everything clearly marked.

The test notebook was a 266MHz Toshiba machine, with 32MB of RAM – a little above the 'recommended' level of 200MHz (75MHz minimum). The recording application was an evaluation copy of Cool Edit Pro – nothing elaborate is bundled with the WaMi – but Ego.Sys assures me that all popular makes and versions of software are supported, as are Direct X plug-ins.

A simple test to start with. I imported a stereo track into the laptop from a CD player, and then replayed it while choosing different outputs. Everything behaved itself perfectly and the 20-bit AD/DA converters sounded nicely clean and clear. Extra tracks were added with no problems. Next, by plugging an AKG 300 mic through an in-line phantom power unit and directly into the WaMi microphone input, a voiceover was created. The result was really very good, with a natural sound and plenty of level. A quick swap to a grungy old Shure SM58 and the same occurred – the preamp in the WaMi box

does an impressive job all on its own.

To fiddle with things outside of your preferred software, the WaMi Box comes with an on-screen five-slider software mixer controlling the master input, two stereo outputs (outs 1&2, and 3&4 with panning), a Midi input, and master out. The input provides reverb, chorus, and equalisation generated by the box's DSP chip. The effects are certainly usable, with a wide range of intensity on both. Also, the four-band equaliser was perfectly servicable.

Then a problem came up. The mixer is supposed to expand out to sixteen channels, but nothing I pushed, pulled or dragged would convince the damned thing to get any bigger than the default size. Time to resort to the manual – heaven forbid. There was a reference to a 'mode' button, but the accompanying illustration looked more like an old coffee stain and was indecipherable. A visit to the Ego.Sys Website for help proved impossible. Their server was down – or something. Another bad sign. I gave up on expanding the mixer and tried something else.

The on-board GS Soundbank was accessed through a low-end version of Cubase. The sounds themselves immediately struck me as cheap and of little practical use. However, one of the three applications the box comes with is a Soundbank Editor designed to import .DLS banks. The WaMi's got 16MB available for these, or it can be used for storing regular samples. So, theoretically, the existing soundbank can be replaced with something better. But it was a disappointment that the in-built soundbank was so bad, given the high audible quality of other aspects of the box.

Finally, the WaMi Box can't be connected to a desktop PC through any combination of adapters, which is frustrating. Most operators would be likely to transfer work from their laptop to a studio computer. For the sake of consistency, being able to use the WaMi for edits later as well would help.

All things considered, the WaMi Box worked very well in its fundamental function as an I/O card for a notebook – offering good, clean sound. I'm sure the WaMi Box will surprise me with how people end up using it. I've already heard reports of it finding its way into broadcast circles, live use, and into corporate presentations. That's the nature of an innovative product like this, it'll find itself a market, of that you can be sure.



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