Lexicon Omega

Reverb leviathan, Lexicon, has waded into the desktop USB recording market. Derek Johnson investigates.

Hands up anyone who wants a keenly-priced, compact, USB-equipped audio interface for their Mac or PC. Maybe you'd like high quality mic preamps, plus enough audio channels for reasonably challenging recording sessions without taxing the USB connection. And how about seeing that interface bundled with some audio software to get you recording without having to immediately invest in a 'major label' sequencing package? A decent reverb might be nice to see amongst any supplied plug-ins – we're moving toward an all-in-one computer music system here, after all. Personally, I wouldn't say no to some basic Midi I/O.

So far, this description fits Digidesign's MBox, but for this review, we're looking to another high-end audio manufacturer. Lexicon, best known for industry-standard reverb processing, has re-entered the desktop audio fray with their new Omega USB audio interface. (The '90s saw two PCI card-based releases from the company.) Omega has the same superficial shape as MBox, but is wider and has more inputs and more controls than the Digidesign device.

The Hardware

Although Lexicon has decided not to specify the speedier USB 2.0 interface, or a variety of the ultra fast FireWire pipeline, Omega manages quite well, both in terms of what it offers and what it actually delivers. USB has been a bit of a talking point as an audio interface, with some products functioning better than others. Usually, it's the less ambitious products that perform best. And here, Lexicon has created a product that will reliably handle six channels of audio, plus a single 16-channel bi-directional Midi stream.

The audio, as the USB connection sees it, is broken down into two stereo streams (dubbed 1-2 and 3-4) that route audio from the hardware to your software, and a stereo return that brings mixed audio from software back to the real world of monitors or headphones attached to the Omega. If you're a bit of an audiophile, you'll be pleased to know that Omega can handle audio at sample rates of 48k as well as 44.1kHz, at resolutions of up to 24-bit.

The interface itself is physically equipped with no less than six analogue inputs, configured as two balanced mic ins (featuring dbx electronics, phantom power and a 20dB pad) and four balanced line ins. These six are arrayed as three stereo pairs. All six inputs have a gain pot each, and each pair is equipped with a mono switch and a routing button, to send the audio to either of the two USB audio buses. A digital input (16- or 24-bit) can also be routed into the system, but doing so hijacks one of the USB stereo buses, leaving just one for analogue audio. Likewise, 'instrument' level audio (from a non-active electric guitar or bass) can be jacked into the front, at the expense of line input 3.

Input level monitoring is basic – overload LEDs for the inputs and a stereo bar graph for the overall mix – but effective.

So, there we have no less than nine possible audio channels. However, as noted above, no more than four channels can be sent to your software. Basic mixing facilities mean that six external audio channels can be sent down the four USB audio channels, but some of them will be 'sub-mixed' in the hardware. (In fact, Omega functions as a basic stereo mixer when your computer's switched off.) Those routing buttons let you decide which combination of inputs will go down the cable.

This brief description indicates a flexible system – don't forget the Midi interface that's also using the USB connection – that never, during the review period, taxed USB's bandwidth.

Other hardware facilities include a headphone socket, a stereo pair of jack outputs and a digital out. You'll also spot a 'Monitor Mix' knob on the front panel. This handy option lets you mix audio being sent down the USB cable from the outside world with that coming back from the host audio recording software. Thus, the effects of any latency-induced delay artefacts can be mitigated while overdubbing – very

thoughtful, and very useful.

The Software

Now to the software. A different package is provided for the Mac OSX and Windows XP/2000 platforms. For Macs, there's a version of BIAS's Deck SE 3.5 multichannel audio recording package. This offers a pretty flexible interface, up to 64 audio channels, virtual tracks, sensible editing (with easy links to external sample editing software) and compatibility with VST-format plug-ins. In fact, a collection of plugs from MDA – who has been supporting the format for some time – are included in the bundle. One major demerit is Deck's very basic Midi feature set: it'll load and play back Standard Midi Files and that's it.

PC users are better served, out of the box. The bundled Pro Tracks Plus software is a Cakewalk product, and offers a very Sonar-like user interface. Up to 32 mono or stereo audio tracks are available, together with unlimited Midi tracks. The Midi side of this software is very much more the business than what's provided with Deck SE on the Mac. The bundle also includes AAS's Tassman SE soft synth, among other instrument and processing plug-ins, and Pro Tracks Plus (PTP) is compatible with DXi and ReWire virtual instruments and DirectX plugs. A groove-based, Tracker-like feel can be added to a PTP session with the use of 'Groove Clips' – snippets of audio that can have their tempo and pitch changed to match those of a session into which they are loaded.

Newcomers to audio on either platform will welcome Lexicon's comprehensive documentation, which makes installation and setting up an easy task. PTP even benefits from a handy on-screen help system.

Thankfully, one way in which the Windows and Mac bundles do not differ is in the inclusion of Lexicon's Pantheon reverb plug-in. This first appeared as a freebie with Cakewalk Sonar 3.0 (see AT review in issue 32), and its appearance here is most welcome. The only bummer is that this, ostensibly VST-format, plug-in will only function within the software it's been supplied with!

Pantheon has no exact counterpart in the Lexicon hardware range, but brings you a share in the algorithms for which the company has become renowned. Overall, it has all the vibrancy and realism of the trademark Lexicon sound in a compact, easy to use application.

Six reverb types – Hall, Chamber, Room, Plate, Ambience and Custom – are on offer, with a comprehensive control set. Pre-delay, room size, decay time, damping, wet/dry mix and level are controllable by sliders, while density regeneration and delay, left/right echo, spread, diffusion, and bass boost and frequency are tweaked via on-screen knobs. Mac and PC versions look the same, although I found some buttons on the Mac version to be a bit fiddly. Lexicon supply 35 quality presets, and you're free to save as many as you like.

More Software

Omega can also be used with other software, though this is a bit of a hazy area, recently made much clearer by a help document on Lexicon's web site (www.lexiconpro.com). Omega can be set up as system audio input and output hardware for either Windows

XP/2000 or Mac OSX. There are certain considerations that are outlined in the really helpful documentation, and the on-line extras.

On the Mac, Omega can operate with Steinberg's Cubase SX and Mark of the Unicorn's Digital Performer. Using the former requires a little care, but the website provides all the steps logically laid out. Follow them, and you'll have four inputs available for audio recording in SX, via Mac OSX's CoreAudio drivers. The same goes, I presume, for Digital Performer but I don't have a copy installed on my Mac. It's probably a good idea to keep your Mac OS up to date – I made everything work under 10.3.3, but did log difficulties in earlier versions.

On the PC, there seems to be currently no way to get Omega to function with Cubase SX. Shame. It can easily be selected as audio output for Propellerhead Reason (same goes for Mac OSX), and obviously it works easily enough with Cakewalk Sonar 3.0. Lexicon also discuss, on-line, using the software with Adobe Audition/Cool Edit Pro and Sound Forge 7.0. There needs to be a little work on Lexicon's part regarding the integration of Omega with a wider range of software – perhaps via generic ASIO drivers, for example, for Cubase SX on the PC. [AT understands that Lexicon will be releasing ASIO drivers, downloadable from its website, by the time you read this review – CH.]

The Choice is Yours

With the imminent release of Mackie's Spike USB audio interface/sequencer package, the upright form factor of the Omega, and of course Digi's MBox, is obviously becoming popular with manufacturers. It's popular with me, too! The Omega takes up little space on whichever desktop I'm making music, yet is packed with features. It's hard to make a direct comparison to Spike, since not only is it a little differently specified (it features a built-in SHARC DSP chip) but it's not available as I write this review. We *can* have a quick look at how Omega stacks up against the MBox, though.

It's all down to what you need. Omega is ostensibly wcheaper than MBox, yet it actually has more input connections to play with, and sends more audio channels down the USB cable – four compared to MBox's two. MBox counters with insert points on both its inputs, so integrating external processing hardware is a doddle. Omega is compatible with a wider variety of software, though to be considered truly universal on both platforms, it needs a driver or two more. The latest 6.x version of Digi's ProTools LE is a cut-down (but still powerful) version of a solid, widely-respected, industry standard platform (and a platform I favour myself). We could discuss mic preamps, too: the MBox's are designed by Focusrite, which is a very nice bonus, but the dbx-sourced circuitry on Omega more than holds its own, and adds value to an already very good value device.

On the face of it, the fact that MBox draws its power from the USB connection (Omega has an external 'wall wart' PSU) seems perfect for mobile use. In practice, however, a power cord-free session lasts only as long as the battery life of your laptop – which isn't a tremendous amount of time especially if the MBox's phantom power option is engaged.

Omega has a lot to offer, and I've enjoyed my time with it. It's a very flexible and well-specified device, with audio quality to spare. The USB link never became clogged, and I fed it some very busy data – Midi and audio timing always remained rock solid. Even the software bundle is good – especially for PC users – and I loved the Pantheon reverb.

So, what are you waiting for? If you're asking yourself the questions I posed in the first paragraph of this review, the answers may well be rolled into one device: Lexicon's Omega.

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