

Mackie Digital X Bus

The eagerly anticipated digital X bus builds on Mackie's experience of digital mixing desks gained from the d8b, and blends it with a knowledge of DAW control from the HUI and Mackie Control Universal.

It also brings the computer out of the closet and into the desk itself, allowing it to use selected VST plugins, as well as DSP cards such as Universal Audio's UAD-1 on top of its own processing. This is because the desk itself is based around a fairly standard motherboard and processor running an embedded version of Windows XP. This is good news for future proofing your investment as the motherboard, processor and software can all be improved and upgraded.

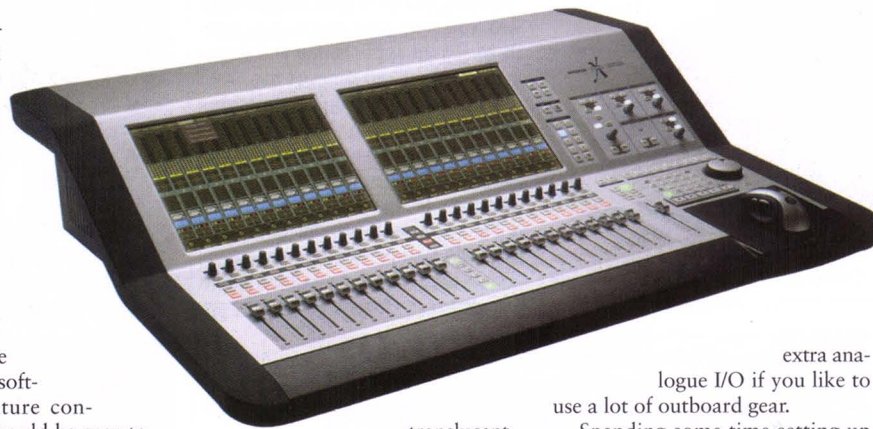
The digital X bus itself is an attractive desk with an uncluttered appearance. (PSNE looked at the X.200; the X.400 is to come – see tech specs, right.) It is slightly larger than its d8b predecessor and certainly sexier. Of course the first thing you notice are the twin 15-inch touch screens. They are crisp and display a lot of information, which is why the rest of the desk is so sparse. There are 24 touch-sensitive faders [plus 1 master fader] with associated mute, solo, assign and select buttons and 24 rotary encoders at the top of each channel. These encoders allow quick access through a set of dedicated buttons to functions such as panning, aux sends and what is charmingly still referred to as level to tape. A group of bank buttons switches the faders to allow control of up to 72 channels, as well as groups and masters. A nice feature is being able to lock a channel so it always stays in place as you change banks, so you can keep an eye on the lead vocal, for example, while working on something else.

The last button in the bank section switches over to MIDI, and this gives you control over your DAW. All the usual suspects are catered for, as well as some you might not have thought of such as Adobe Audition. Being software based, future controller set-ups should be easy to add to the library.

The touch screens display meters and the 24 channel strips of the selected bank, with a mini overview of routing, inserts, aux sends, dynamics and EQ. Touching the relevant section brings up a window with on-screen buttons and dials that line up with the rotary encoders, which you then tweak to taste. I'm not sure if I prefer the new encoders to the older style ones from the d8b. At times it seemed difficult to return a dial to zero, the detenting wanted to be just either side of where I wanted it to be.

You can flip these pop-up displays onto either of the monitors to leave the other screen showing the overview. The touch screens worked well for operating the mixer, although sometimes accessing the smaller set-up menus took a couple of prods. There are plenty of shortcuts on the desk's surface to speed things up, like double-clicking a channel's select button to bring up EQ and dynamics, and 16 programmable macro keys. You would be moving around the desk quickly and confidently in a very short space of time.

There is a qwerty keyboard that appears on the touch screens for naming duties. It's quick to use and



translucent so you can still see what's going on underneath. You can plug a keyboard into the desk if you want, but you don't need to. Likewise there is a mouse mat built into the surface of the desk but that is probably best reserved for your DAW.

The desk comes with only two cards installed, a sync card with timecode and wordclock in and outs, and a mix card which delivers monitor, headphone and two track inputs and outputs.

There are eight free slots for I/O cards and the cards mostly have eight ins and eight outs. You are free to mix cards types including digital, on ADAT TDIF or AES, and analogue, on lines or a combination of lines and mics. The mic amps are software controlled, which will help with session recalls. FireWire is one of the most interesting I/O options and will connect directly to a computer, passing 24 channels of 48kHz audio in and out along with control data in just one cable.

There is enormous flexibility in the desk's routing of sources and destinations and the I/O section can effectively become your patchbay. Since there are no analogue insert points on the desk, budget on some

extra analogue I/O if you like to use a lot of outboard gear.

Spending some time setting up session templates with all the ins and outs labelled in the desk's software will pay off, especially at two in the morning. The desk will, of course, remember and recall everything for you at a later date.

The digital X bus feels familiar enough as a mixer to get to grips with straight away, and it's a lot of desk for the money with the bonus of integrating seamlessly into your recording setup. There was a certain amount of noise from the desk's built-in power supply, for which Mackie offer a silencing ducting kit. That and the previously mentioned rotary encoders are my fairly minor gripes. Being software based there will be revisions and improvements along the way, and the fact you can upgrade key parts of the desk's hardware means those improvements need not be limited by the desk itself. It's a big step forward.

It may be an urban myth, but it is said that when SSL first debuted what was to become the hugely successful 4000 series, people remarked that no one would want to buy a mixing desk with a computer inside it. Times have changed. **CB**

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X.200 Specs

Dimensions (W x D x H)

>> 110.75cm x 80.77cm x 23.4cm

Format

>> Up to 68 physical inputs and 76 outputs
>> 8 busses and 12 auxiliary sends [8 mono, 2 stereo]
>> Inserts available on all channels, buses and masters from the pool of physical I/O

Onboard DSP Processing

>> Sample rates up to 192kHz
>> Supports 64 channels of EQ and dynamics at 96kHz and 32 channels at 192kHz
>> Support for up to two Universal Audio UAD-1 DSP cards
>> Native support for approved VST plug-ins currently Waves and Universal Audio

DAW control support

>> Includes Pro Tools, Logic, Nuendo, Samplitude, Cubase SX/SL, SONAR, Digital Performer, Vegas, Audition

I/O Card options

>> Mic/Line 4: four XLR mic inputs and four balanced line-level inputs +48V phantom power and digitally controlled trim controls
>> Mic/Line 8: eight mic/line inputs and eight balanced line-level inputs etc
>> Line Card: Eight balanced line-level I/O on DB-25 connectors.
>> Digital Card: eight channels of digital I/O, ADAT or T-DIF
>> AES Card: Eight channels of AES/EBU inputs and outputs via one DB-25 connector
>> FireWire Card: up to 24 audio streams in and out at 48kHz

Pricing

Digital X bus X.200, £8,936+VAT I/O cards, £297+VAT [except Mic/Line 8 card, £510+VAT]

The X.400, coming later, will feature dual processors, more I/O, 24 (not 8) buses and surround features. A UAD-1 card will come fitted as standard