



PC MAC

# M-Audio Fast Track Ultra £279



The latest offering from the US audio interface giant features onboard effects, dual headphone outputs and more

> With over 20 audio interfaces on the market, M-Audio clearly know a thing or two about getting signals into and out of computers. The Fast Track Ultra is the latest in their USB range and, like many of their boxes, it offers a range of great features at an attractive price.

Top of the list is the 8-in/8-out, 24-bit/96kHz spec, MIDI I/O, two headphone outputs and - unusually for a box at this price - onboard effects in the shape of reverb and delay. As far as those ins and outs go, there are six analogue connections and stereo S/PDIF, with the first four analogue inputs hosting phantom-powered mic preamps. Inputs 1 and 2 also double as instrument inputs, using the industry-standard Neutrik combi connectors. Round the back, you'll find all six line-level analogue ins and outs on balanced 1/4" jacks, the MIDI sockets and the S/PDIF phonos.

Surprisingly, M-Audio have also included a couple of pre-converter TRS inserts for the first two channels, so you can patch in outboard units such as hardware equalisers, compressors and so on. The mics themselves are the same Octane design found on most of their newer interfaces, comprising a low-noise, high-gain preamp with a 20dB pad, phantom power and snazzy multicoloured level LEDs.

The other big news is the onboard effects engine. Accessed via M-Audio's MX Core DSP routing application, the result is a system that

enables near-zero latency monitoring with the addition of some handy reverb or delay, which can be a real help for vocalists in particular. See the *Route master* boxout for more on this.

## Power up

In use, the Fast Track Ultra feels very slick. All knobs and connections are reassuringly solid, and the pull-out 20dB pad on the mic gain is a neat solution that saves on panel space. It's worth noting that the rear line-level inputs sit outside the preamp circuit, so there's no way to control those levels. Sonically, the Fast Track Ultra performs very well, and the drivers enabled us to successfully use a buffer size giving just a few milliseconds of latency in Live without any problems (a free copy of Ableton Live Lite is bundled in the box).

Overall, the Fast Track Ultra crams in a lot, and although the onboard DSP routing and mixer implementation lack the finesse of M-Audio's newer FireWire interfaces (such as the ProFire 2626 - 9/10 in **cm127**), and the effects are quite basic, it provides welcome functionality. The inclusion of two headphone outs and a pair of analogue inserts - not to mention Pro Tools M-Powered compatibility - could also give it an edge over the similarly-priced competition. **cm**

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## System requirements

PC 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, Windows XP SP2/Vista 32-bit, USB 2.0 port

Mac 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, OS X 10.3.9, USB 2.0 port

## Test system

Mac Apple Mac Pro dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.11, Logic 8, Cubase 4, Live 7

## Alternatively

### Apogee Duet

N/A >> N/A >> £329

A very different interface, but if you want high quality and portability, it's the business

### Focusrite Saffire

cm91 >> 8/10 >> £250

This FireWire interface has two headphone feeds and onboard DSP

## Verdict

For Twin headphone outs  
Clever onboard routing and effects  
Analogue inserts  
Compact and well constructed

Against Need PSU for full channel performance  
Effects are quite basic  
Global phantom power

A quality interface with a few tricks up its sleeve, the Fast Track Ultra is another winner from M-Audio

9/10

## Route master

**Having onboard DSP may be the headline-grabbing feature of the Fast Track Ultra, but how does it work in practice?**

**It all comes down to the MX Core DSP application. In here, you'll find mixer tabs for each pair of physical outputs. These enable you to blend hardware input signals with the software returns.**

**When it comes to a headphone mix, you'll find the headphone outputs are hardwired to**

**the first two pairs of outs, so you can have two totally separate mixes fed to each set of phones. These two output pairs also have additional send and return levels at the bottom of the screen for feeding audio streams to the onboard effects.**

**There are room, hall and plate reverbs as well as delay effects, and you can set the Duration, Feedback and Volume parameters for each.**