

# Apogee Ensemble | £1,404

When a big hitter like Apogee introduces a more affordable interface you know it's going to sound great. *Jon Musgrave* hooks up with the Ensemble



### WHAT IS IT?

A multi-channel audio interface for Mac

### CONTACT

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Excellent sound
- 2 Great integration for Logic users
- 3 Tidy interface

**E**very now and then, in their keenness to promote a new product, a manufacturer jumps the gun a little. We first heard about the Ensemble about a year ago (and even saw one at last year's Sounds Expo), so it's certainly been a bit of a wait. Even so, with a company such as Apogee wading into the project level arena (on price point at least), we have high expectations. No doubt their desire to get it right (combined with supplying the back orders that have accrued) has caused a few delays in a review unit making it out.

The big selling point for the Ensemble has always been its intended integration with Apple Logic, but it's worth pointing out that it's also fully Mac OS X compatible (via Core Audio and its Maestro software). On the downside though, it won't be a PC-supported product...

### Silver lining

So what other features are tucked up its sleeve? The most significant is that it's a completely digitally controlled unit. To elaborate, the two knobs on the front are multi-purpose encoders designed to

drive the Maestro or Logic software control panels. It's a simple enough concept (and one you'll often see on MIDI controllers), though far less common for interfaces.

Combined with the many spot LEDs there's plenty of visual feedback, which

means you can use it without opening the software control panel (although some features can only be accessed from the software).

So aside from all the headline-grabbing stuff, what's the bottom-line spec? First up, it uses FireWire (so installation is simple) and features 36 channels of simultaneous audio (18 in, 18 out). As is often the case for a FireWire interface, this comes as eight channels of analogue, eight ADAT and two S/PDIF.

The backside is packed with connectors, all of which are balanced and (aside from the mic inputs) are on TRS jacks. There are four mic amps/inputs (digitally controlled from within the software), two of which have pre-converter insert points.

The first four inputs also have high impedance jack inputs (two on the front, two on the back). Inputs five to eight and all eight analogue outputs are on regular TRS jacks.

### Route master

Like a number of its competitors, the Ensemble incorporates an onboard mixing DSP.

This is controlled via the Maestro software, and although input selections can be made within Logic, when it comes to re-

routing physical connections, this can only be done in Maestro. It has two routing pages that affect the behaviour of physical connections. So this is where you could route an input to an output for monitoring

purposes. Alternatively, all inputs show up on the mixer page, where you can also blend in the stereo DAW output.

Surprisingly the V-Buss system found on Apogee's Symphony card hasn't been implemented for Ensemble. This is a shame as it allows genuine track-to-track bouncing functionality in Logic. So overall, Maestro is useful but looks more impressive than it actually is. My feeling is that other manufacturers have been more successful with their DSP mixer applications.





In addition to the optical and phono digital connectors on the back, you'll also see word clock ins and outs (with a termination button) and one additional FireWire socket.

Physically, the only other things to spot are the two headphone outs on the front panel and the row of multi-coloured meters.

outputs, with level control, mixing in your DAW output too. Great for near zero-latency monitoring.

**Sonic delivery**

Apogee's reputation has been built on quality A/D and D/A converters. So with software control making the headlines, it's easy to forget that the conversion

robust digital clocking no doubt plays a part in this delivery. Having whacked the gain up considerably to see how much noise the whole front end can generate, it's good to hear that the Ensemble seems extremely well isolated from the computer. Some FireWire interfaces seem to pick up all sorts of interference. But not Ensemble. This is

**SPECS**

- Eight channels of 24-bit AD/DA conversion (up to 192kHz)
- Four digitally controlled mic preamps (75dB gain)
- Two fully balanced inserts on mic pre channels
- Four high impedance instrument inputs
- Two individual, controllable and assignable high-level headphone outputs
- Multi-channel monitor options (including 7.1)
- Eight channels of ADAT I/O
- Two channels of SPDIF I/O
- Apogee 'Soft Limit' on individual channel basis for eight analogue inputs
- UV22HR dither option
- Apogee 'Intellclock' system

“Some FireWire interfaces seem to pick up all sorts of interference. But not Ensemble”

On the software front, settings can be made via Maestro or if you're using Logic from within the Apogee Control Panel, it's in the main 'audio' menu.

The graphics may be slightly different, but the settings (mic pre gain, clocking options and so on) are the same in both. There's nothing to stop these two apps running together, and in use changing settings in one will show up in the other. The big upside to all this software control is that settings can be easily saved and recalled. In Logic they're automatically saved with the song (but not automatically reloaded), and you simply hit the 'recall setup from song' button to get them back.

The one aspect of Ensemble that Maestro deals with exclusively is the hardware routing (see the box on page 74). With its connection matrix and software mixer you can route inputs to

and mic pre element of the Ensemble will be the most important thing for many people.

First up, with plenty of gain (75dB) the Ensemble is great for any low output mics (dynamics and ribbons spring to mind). In use as you increase the gain, initially you'll hear a relay click in at about 21dB, and if you listen closely you can hear a slight digital noise as you move up. Other options (phantom, phase reverse and the Apogee 'soft limit') add tiny noises too. This isn't a problem, but just as with analogue mic pres, you need to be aware of what you can and can't adjust on the fly in critical recording situations.

You can tell the converters are top quality. The sound is nowhere near as clinical as you might imagine, offering a smoothness you only get with more pricey gear, and Apogee's reputation for

situations where the knobs didn't seem to pick up in the right way (it was momentary and not something I worried about). Functionality issues have been ironed out recently. So after a sluggish start things are looking pretty good for this ground-breaking product. **FM**

**ALTERNATIVES**

**Metric Halo Mobile I/O 2882**

£849  
Although it only offers up to 96kHz operation, the 2882 is one of the most highly regarded interfaces on the market, incorporating many recallable software options.

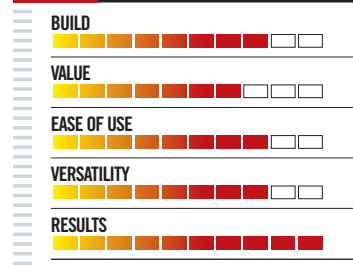
[mhlabs.com](http://mhlabs.com)

**RME Fireface 800**

£849  
Equally good is RME's top FireWire interface. With two ADAT interfaces, you're also looking at more simultaneous streams than the Ensemble or the MH 2882.

[rme-audio.com](http://rme-audio.com)

**FutureMusic VERDICT**



After a slow start, Apogee's Logic-integrated interface is beginning to show its truly innovative colours.

