

Mac PC What is it? USB audio interface
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PRICE: £200



LEXICON Lambda

Do we really need another USB audio interface? Perhaps not, but hardware bearing the Lexicon badge is usually worthy of serious consideration...

► SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC: 500MHz Pentium III or AMD K7, 256MB RAM, Windows XP, 1GB available disk space

Mac: G4 450MHz, 256MB RAM, OS X 10.2.8, 1GB available disk space

► TEST MACHINE

PC: 1.4GHz Centrino laptop, 760MB RAM, Windows XP, Steinberg Cubase LE and SX3, Magix Samplitude V8 nSE

Lexicon is one of those brand names that's synonymous with quality. While we're still seeing new companies entering the digital reverb market, Lexicon have been right at the heart of it since the 1970s, and the company are justly proud of the fact that 80% of platinum records used their digital processing somewhere in the production process.

Lexicon released their first USB audio interface, the Omega, in 2004, and the new Lambda is very similar, though it offers less connectivity. It follows a design blueprint that we're

now very familiar with – an upright box connected via USB – and on the front panel you'll find mic and line input level controls, an output level control, an instrument input, a headphone output, level/peak ladder LEDs and a simple mix balance control for monitoring the direct sound.

The rear view

On the back panel there are two balanced line inputs on TRS 1/4" jack sockets and two balanced microphone inputs on XLR sockets. Unlike with some interfaces, the inputs

don't use XLR combo jacks and they aren't switched – you can leave both mic and line sources plugged in at the same time and use the front panel to choose between or even mix them.

You also get a pair of TRS 1/4" jacks that function as insert points for the mic signals. These will be useful if you've got an analogue compressor that you can't bear to replace, for example, but many computer musicians probably won't need them. There are two line outputs on 1/4" jacks and MIDI I/O is onboard too.

Lambda connects to your computer

over USB and is designed to work just as well in a studio environment as it is 'on the road' with a laptop. It's bigger than Digidesign's Mbox and fatter than Focusrite's Saffire, but it's certainly lightweight enough to carry in a rucksack along with your laptop. The only slight problem is that it's a bit awkward from a shape and size point of view.

Lambda gets all the juice it needs from the USB connection. While it's true that laptop battery life is always a concern during location recording, the fact that it's at least possible to record mains-free in remote places is reassuring. More importantly, it means that you have one less power adapter to carry around (or, more importantly, to remember to pack).



▲ The 'set and hope' latency configuration screen

with Lambda is a pleasant one. We're referring to its sound quality, which is not just a little better than other audio interfaces but substantially better. In fact, the sound is so good that when you first plug Lambda into your monitor speakers, it grabs your attention and makes you do an aural double-take.

Both the single instrument input

that range from average to unusable, and even when we used an absurdly high latency setting, our version of Samplitude reported massive error counts on the recorded audio. This is highly unlikely to be a problem with our system, as we've used it to test many current interfaces without incident. As the extraordinary latency figures reported back from Cubase SX confirm, this is a driver design issue.

Careless driving

In fact, it feels like Lexicon's software engineers haven't grasped why Steinberg invented ASIO in the first place. ASIO was designed specifically to enable performers to hear their performances through software processing with imperceptible latency – that's the whole point. You may as well just use Windows MME or DirectX drivers in conjunction with last-century direct monitoring features, such as those on Lambda's front panel.

Then there's the fact that you're 'not allowed' to use the Pantheon reverb plug-in (see *The word on the 'verb'*) in hosts that aren't 'authorised'. Why not? If you've paid for something, then you should be able to use it whenever you need it. Pantheon isn't free, after all.

Despite the underpowered microphone amps, Lambda is good audio hardware in an attractive and convenient box. However, it's spoiled by its own device drivers and the fact that (in some cases) you're not able to use the reverb plug-in you've already paid for. As such, it's probably worth holding onto your cash to see if these software issues can be resolved. **cm**



▲ Lambda has 48V of phantom power on tap

"IT FEELS LIKE LEXICON'S SOFTWARE ENGINEERS HAVEN'T GRASPED WHY STEINBERG INVENTED ASIO"

Speak up!

Even without a PSU, Lambda can still provide 48V phantom power, so you can plug whatever type of microphone you want into it. Microphone gain, however, is extremely disappointing – when Lexicon's engineers discovered that you have to shout into a microphone with the gain on full in order to make the peak lamps light up, didn't they realise that these mic amps are nowhere near powerful enough?

Fortunately, the biggest surprise

and rear microphone inputs (despite their lack of gain) deliver top-class results. It's comforting to be able to work with LED bar-graph metering on the front panel (rather than just peak lamps alone), and given that Lambda is designed for close-at-hand, desktop operation, it's handy that the main output level knob controls speaker monitor and headphone levels.

But there are problems. The insubstantial software control panel only allows you to select latency levels

► ALTERNATIVELY

M-Audio Fast Track Pro
N/A » N/A » £199

Offers similar specs to the Lambda but also features digital I/O

Digidesign Mbox 2

cm94 » 8/10 » £329

Another fine-sounding USB audio interface, this one ships with Pro Tools LE

The word on the 'verb

When you consider that Lexicon have created some of the greatest studio reverbs of all time, it should come as no great surprise that Lambda ships with Pantheon, the company's one and only VST reverb plug-in. This stereo reverb ships with 35 presets covering a wide variety of applications and all of the expected reverb controls are present behaving pretty much as you'd expect. There's certainly plenty of scope for creating the reverb that you need.

In terms of reverb generation, Pantheon is about as good as it gets. The sound is classic Lexicon, and it's never too hard to work out exactly which controls you need to tweak in order to create the patch you want. Pantheon is reasonably efficient, too – on a modern system you should be able to manage three or four simultaneous instances without blowing your mix's CPU budget.

Pantheon could be the only reverb that you'll ever need, then... which is why it's shocking to discover that it isn't authorised for use with most host applications (in fact, it only seems to work in Cubase). This is unacceptable when you consider the general-purpose nature of Lambda, and it's a limitation that tames the package significantly.



▲ Pantheon: Great for Cubase users but not much use for anyone else...

As well as Pantheon, Lambda also ships with Cubase LE, a stripped-down music sequencer that's based on Cubase SX technology (though not on the latest version).

VERDICT

FOR

- + Easy to use
- + Great sound
- + No mains adapter needed
- + Front panel master volume control

AGAINST

- Drivers give unacceptable latency
- You're not able to use Pantheon in all hosts
- Not enough mic gain

The Lambda hardware is great, but poor drivers and the strange decision to limit the use of the bundled reverb plug-in let it down

RATING

