



Steinberg CI2 £195 PC MAC

This new hybrid interface/controller from Steinberg promises to be inte-great for Cubase users



> Steinberg impressed us 18 months ago with two new Cubase-integrated products, the MR816CSX DSP Studio and the CC121 Controller. Now we prepare to be wowed by the more wallet-friendly CI2, an Advanced Integration USB Studio, as Steinberg have dubbed it.

This 2-in/2-out USB audio interface includes combination input connectors that can take an XLR mic or 1/4" line level connection, with the option to switch the first input to a Hi-Z instrument setting. Other features include a global phantom power switch, footswitch operation, input peak indicators, separate level knobs for 'phones and main output, and indicators to show that the unit is AI-ready and USB-active. There's also a hardware monitoring mix control (ie, blending between inputs and your DAW output), and usefully, the inputs can be switched to mono or stereo using the mono button (this doesn't affect the DAW output).

The CI2 also has AI functionality accessed using three controls: the multifunction AI knob, 'action pad' button and lock button with indicator (see boxout). To make use of the AI features, you'll also need an AI-equipped version of Cubase (5.1 or later) - the CI2 ships with the compact version, Cubase AI5. You can, of course, use the CI2 with any other DAW - you just won't be able to make use of the AI gubbins.

Taking control

With Yamaha responsible for manufacturing, the CI2 is solidly constructed, with a quality feel to all the buttons and knobs. The unit is also surprisingly compact and entirely USB-powered, keeping things both simple and laptop-friendly.

From a user perspective, the layout is functional rather than flashy, but we found that all features behaved as advertised, and we were particularly glad of the mono button for the 'phones mix - something some manufacturers just can't get right. Another nice touch is the footswitch input, which replicates the behaviour of the 'action pad' (see boxout for more info).

Sonically, we found the CI2 performed well, and although Steinberg don't quote any specific figures, there seemed to be plenty of gain available. It's also worth reiterating that it will drive two phantom-powered mics solely from the USB bus power.

So what about downsides? First up, the input peak indicators are just that, so there's no 'signal present' activity indicator, which seems a little stingy. And you may have spotted that there's no MIDI or digital connectivity - something that could lose it marks when compared to the competition. Finally, it may not be immediately obvious, but sampling rates are limited to 44.1/48kHz, although this is perfectly fine for

most of us, of course.

Minor issues aside, we're pretty impressed by the CI2, and the Cubase AI5/CI2 combo makes for a great entry-level package. **cm**

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System requirements

PC 2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM,
Windows XP/Vista

Mac G5/Intel CPU, 1GB RAM, OS X 10.5.5

Alternatively

Focusrite Saffire Pro 24
N/A >> N/A >> £243

No 'AI', but this FireWire interface is seriously feature-packed

PreSonus FireStudio Mobile
cm150 >> 9/10 >> £269

More connectivity and full-on software, but not as integrated

Verdict

For Sturdy build quality
Simple but effective AI options
Bundled with Cubase AI5
Affordable

Against No MIDI
No digital connections
Tough competition at this price

A straightforward, solid interface that really comes into its own when used with Cubase

8/10

Artificial intelligence

Setting the CI2 apart from similar interfaces are its Advance Integration or AI features. The dual-function AI knob acts as a control and push-selector. Aim your cursor over an enabled parameter (an EQ band's Q, for example) and the knob can control it, and by using the 'lock' button, you can move the cursor elsewhere but still retain the parameter-twiddling functionality.

Pushing the knob typically activates the browser, accessing the presets for effects or

instruments, with this behaviour denoted by the green Browse LED next to the knob.

The final piece in the jigsaw is the 'action pad', which activates the interactive recording window and functions. Between two and six functions can be selected, and the pad cycles through them. Presets range from simple start/stop to more complex record drop-in options. You can also create your own from a list of 25 commands, which is very easy to do.