

ESI ESU1808 | £345

Counting up the ins and outs of ESI's latest interface, *Karl Foster* contemplates why it costs so little...

WHAT IS IT?

USB audio/MIDI interface

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Ample audio I/Os for a very affordable price
- 2 Individual phantom and pads on mic inputs
- 3 Hearty basket of quality bundled software

Time+Space is a company you'd usually associate with music-making software. However, this UK outfit has taken to distributing hardware products from German manufacturer ESI and the ESU1808 is one of the latest on offer. It's an audio/MIDI interface that hooks up via USB 2.0 and boasts a whopping 18 audio inputs, as well as eight audio outs. MIDI I/O is also available from this rackmountable device, along with S/PDIF via phono for digital audio connection. That's an awful lot of connectivity and all in a 1U box.

Before plugging in and making some noise, a trip to the manufacturer's website is necessary in order to download the latest Vista or OS X drivers. Mac owners running Leopard will also need to perform a firmware upgrade to get things going. The on-screen control panel is tidy enough with level meters for the 16 analogue ins and dual digital ins, plus meters and sliders for the eight outs. These latter can be linked into four pairs if need be and you've the choice of balanced and unbalanced lines.

Neat design extends to the hardware unit itself. At front, from left, we've dual XLR audio ins with independent

phantom power and each has its own pad button alongside comfortably rubberised level knobs and LED level indicators. Moving along, we've two Hi-Z (high impedance), 1/4-inch jack unbalanced ins for instrument connection, each again with a rotary knob for controlling input level. Analogue inputs five to eight are

designed for unbalanced signals via 1/4-inch jacks, their front-panel location making for convenient reconfiguring of line-ins, should you decide to house the 1808 in a rack.

Channel surfing

One feature you don't often see on a unit of this type is a Mono mix button, and the 1808 has two of them. A press of Mono A enables you to create a mono mix of signals arriving at inputs one and two, while Mono B does the same for inputs three and four. So, if you suffer from that annoying phenomenon of only being able to hear a signal on just the left or right stereo channel, bodging the buttons will center the sound.

Above the dual input rotaries (channels 1-8 and 9-16), the master

ESI DuaFire | £169

If a rackmount format is not important to you, but FireWire connectivity and a low-budget buy are, ESI also produces the DuaFire, a 2-in, 4-out audio interface. You'll notice the acronym MIDI doesn't appear and that's because the DuaFire doesn't handle MIDI. In terms of data connectivity, there's a

sole FireWire port at rear, so there'll be no daisy-chaining with this unit. However, you do get an XLR mic in with phantom power, coupled with a 1/4-inch line in, a Hi-Z input for instruments that doubles as a line-in, and at rear there's a pair of unbalanced ins via phono. This, in conjunction with

an earth terminal, suggests the DuaFire could well be aimed at turntablists and DJs.

Output is via either phono or 1/4-inch line-outs and power is from either a 6-pin FireWire bus or from the supplied PSU. The DuaFire is sturdily built, sporting a metal case that looks like it could take some punishment, and ships with the same software bundle as the ESU1808. The 96kHz/24-bit, gives good headroom for the price. Shame about the lack of MIDI, though.





level control for all eight outputs and the headphone section, there's a row of status LEDs. Sample rates range from 44.1kHz to a respectable 96kHz at 24-bit and the LEDs provide an at-a-glance view of which rate is selected. Also featuring are digital in, clock and

mix), MIDI and S/PDIF I/Os as well as the USB socket. The 1808 is USB 2.0 only, so if you're still running a computer with USB 1.1 ports, it's time for an upgrade.

In operation, the ESU1808 sounds as an audio interface should: neutral.

many audio ins and outs on a sub-£350 interface – you could record a pretty populous band with just the one unit.

The casing seems road-worthy enough, so for live use, or for those equipped with numerous hardware synths, it appears an ideal and cost-

effective computer audio solution. It would be nice to see a FireWire port at rear, rather than USB, and a power switch at front, but these are minor niggles when

taking in how much is on offer to you for so little cash. **FM**

It's unusual to see so many I/Os on a sub-£350 interface – you could record a populous band with one

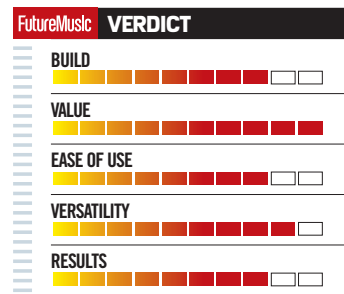
MIDI I/O indicators. All very convenient. But what is decidedly inconvenient is the location of the power switch. It's round the back and a faff to reach if the 1808 is flightcased. That said, the plug for the supplied PSU has a knurled, screw-on sleeve, so you won't have to worry about the power cable dropping out after a bout of brutish behaviour.

Connection selection

Also at rear are the remaining eight audio ins, all balanced 1/4-inch connections, the eight 1/4-inch balanced/unbalanced line outs (numbers seven and eight are what you'd use for monitoring the overall

While guitarists hanker for signature tone from their audio devices, recordists usually want clean sound and that's what this device delivers. ESI has gone to the trouble of bundling a good deal of sound-colouring software, as well as Steinberg's Cubase 4 LE sequencer (for Mac and PC) and a special edition of modular soft-synth Tassman, so you can add 'character' in software rather than it being induced by the interface. It appears, however, that the bulk of the software bundle is Windows-only, so Mac users might be a little miffed.

What really impresses is the 1808's flexibility and, considering the price, build quality. It's unusual to see so



The ESU1808 is a fine buy for those demanding a lot of audio ins and outs, but are short on readies

SPECS

Inputs: 2x XLR with phantom power and pads, 2x 1/4-inch Hi-Z jacks, 4x unbalanced 1/4-inch jacks, 8x balanced/unbalanced 1/4-inch jacks

Outputs: 8x 1/4-inch balanced lines – 7&8 for stereo monitoring, 1x 1/4-inch stereo headphone jack

Data I/O: S/PDIF via coaxial phono (inputs 17&18), MIDI In and Out

Interface: USB 2.0

Sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz and 96kHz

OS support: Windows XP/Vista, Mac OS X

Driver support: CoreAudio, MME, WDM, ASIO 2.0, DirectX, GSIF 2.0

Software: Cubase LE 4, LFX 1310 multi effects, Tassman ESI, ESI BovBjerg piano, ESI Atti-Tube amp sim, ESI FX Pack, assortment of additional third-party plug-ins

Dimensions:

495 x 135 x 45mm

Weight:

2.5Kg

ALTERNATIVES

Tascam US-1641
£299

As the model number implies, the US-1641 offers 16 audio ins and four outs, eight of which are XLR mic/line ins with phantom. At less than £300, it's worth considering if you don't mind losing a few audio I/Os compared with the ESU1808.

tascam.de/en



Edirol UA-101
£329

Edirol's UA-101 may lack the sheer number of audio I/Os touted by the ESU1808 (it's 10-in/10-out), it does stretch to 192kHz/24-bit if you restrict the I/Os to six.

ediroleurope.com

