

Lexicon PCM96 | £2,195

So is it hardware or software? Lexicon cover all bases with one machine that papers over the junction. **Stuart Bruce** steps up to the famous plate

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A hardware reverb unit that also works as a plug-in

CONTACT

Who: Sound Technology
Tel: +44 (0)1462 480000
Web: lexiconpro.com

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Great-sounding, realistic reverbs and some very useable weird FX
- 2 Very good user interfaces
- 3 Works as a hardware unit and as a plug-in

Lexicon have been around for a very long time. When I started working in my first studio in 1981, they were already established as the major player in digital delay and reverb products, and in hardware terms, they still are. I have had a real love affair with their gear since the first time I got my hands on a Prime Time, one of the original digital delays, and the Lexicon 224, an 8-bit digital reverb that graced many an early 1980's production. I regularly use the 224XL, 480L and 960L every time I go into a studio that has one as they are still the gold standard of big posh reverbs, and you hear their algorithms every day on records old and new.

Retro respect

The PCM range has also included some classics so the PCM96 does indeed have a very fine pedigree, and a lot to

live up to! So, how does it fare? Well, taking it out of the box it looks pretty professional and straightforward. From left to right you have input meters, a reasonably-sized OLED display, a couple of buttons and four knobs for parameter

changes, followed by four more buttons and a flash memory slot. Simple and uncluttered and pretty much what you'd expect if you've ever used a PCM unit before. The back panel is pretty full, aside from the stereo analogue ins and outs which are on XLRs, (I don't like stereo jacks), you have AES digital I/O, two FireWire, two Ethernet, MIDI in, out and thru and a word clock input. Very comprehensive and in keeping with Lexicon's usual high standards.

Connection is made

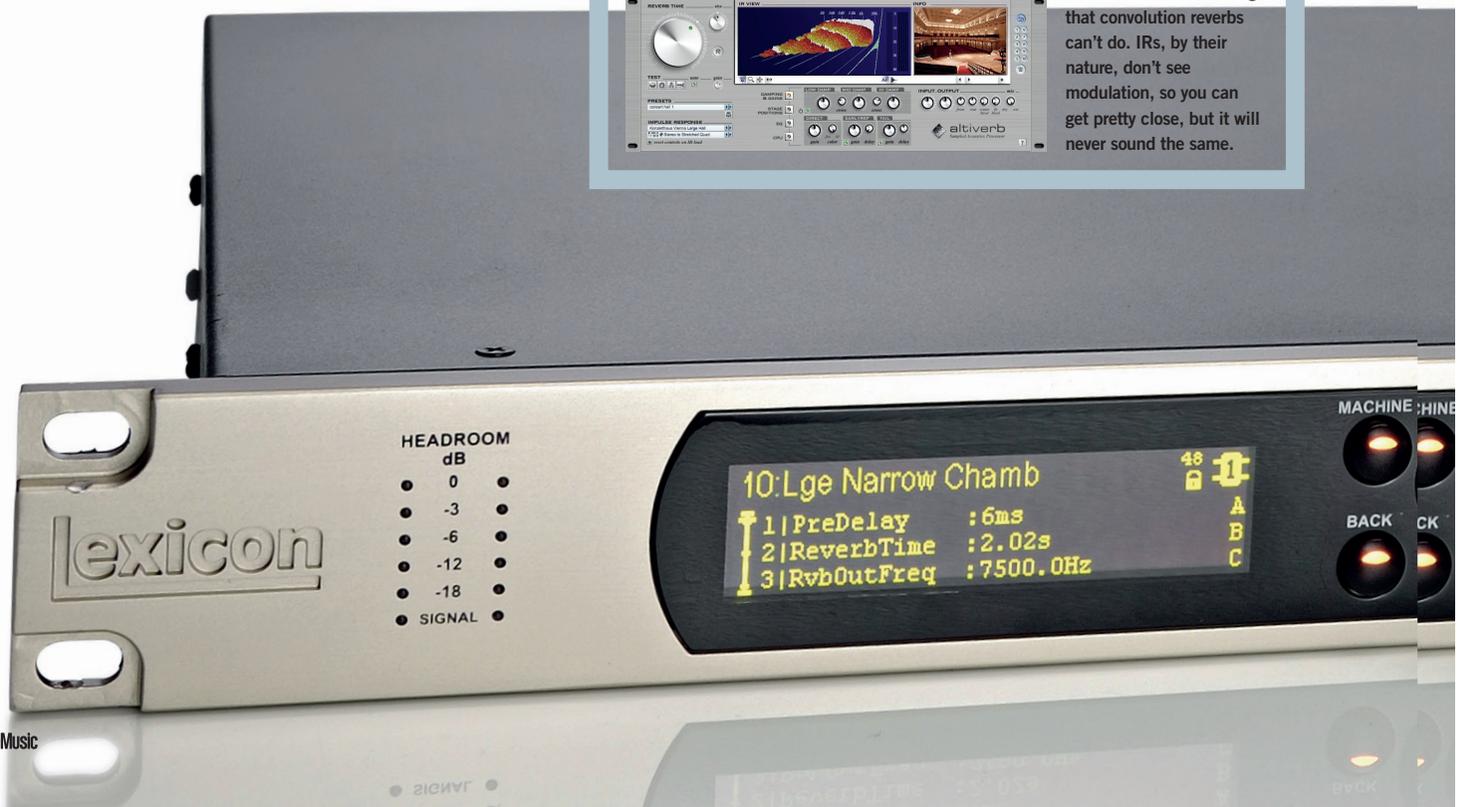
So, the first thing is to connect it up using good old analogue and see what happens when you stick some thing through it. Well, I'm very pleased to report that it sounds just like a Lexicon reverb! That is, big and warm, and as you move from patch to patch, alternately bright and sparkling to deep and dark. Lexicon have a vast vault of great-sounding reverbs to plunder and

Convolution vs Algorithm-based Reverbs

The market is full of great reverb plug-ins, many of them convolution reverbs like Logic's own Space Designer or Altiverb. So why would you want to buy a unit based on algorithms given that you can find IR's on the net of pretty much any hardware unit ever made? Well, it's true that you can sample a reverb unit but you can't capture it's soul. You can see from the parameters

available on the Lexicon that you have control over pretty much any detail of the sound. It's that level of control that you lose when you make an IR from it. Now I love my convolution reverbs. The detail, particularly in acoustic spaces can be uncanny, and I like to make my own when I have the time, but sometimes you need to build the space from the ground up and algorithms

allow you to do that. Compare any two plugs that use the two methods and you'll see and hear the difference. Another reason why Lexicon has always stood out from the crowd is their very detailed use of chorus. That's another very important element of their sound, one of the things that contributes to that big, broad, Poptastic landscape that they give us. And that is something that convolution reverbs can't do. IRs, by their nature, don't see modulation, so you can get pretty close, but it will never sound the same.



they have used it to very good effect here. It does what I would expect of it and has some great new additions, such as an infinite reverb, which allows you to trap the 'tail' of the reverb, holding a chord or making a drone, from any sound. There are all the old classics such as the Concert Hall and Room simulations, and even the Resonant Chord algorithm, which is hours of fun.

As for the control surface, I personally hate multi-function buttons and scrolling through hoards of parameters and despite having used them for 24 years, I still don't really get

There are the classics such as the Concert Hall and Room, and even the Resonant Chord algorithm

on with them. I prefer the big remotes that Lexicon built for the 480L etc, that put a lot more parameters directly under your fingers. The fact that I can cope with using a PCM96 in this way says a lot for the sensible way that Lexicon devise their onboard navigation software and their control layouts. Also, the three smaller knobs marked A, B and C give you direct control of the three parameters displayed on the screen, taking old blokes like me away from the horrors of single knob operation.

There was a time when that would have been the end of the review, but we live in an age when being a simple bit of hardware is no longer enough, we



need 'added value'. Those FireWire and Ethernet ports loitering with intent on the back of the unit provide just that.

Software-centric

The PCM96 comes with a CD containing software, which allows you to control the unit remotely from your DAW and stream audio through it via

re-install the software twice before it finally worked. The documentation was bad and if it weren't for the very helpful Sam at UK distributor Harman, I'd probably be scratching my head still. Now, if I'm having trouble doing that (and I'm supposed to be an expert) it could be pretty difficult for anyone else.

So, slapped wrists and a little time on the naughty step for somebody. At this price we expect better! That said, once we got it going it works exactly as it should. In Logic I need to run the system with the maximum I/O buffer of 1024 as with any lesser setting the latency is very big, so using it as a monitor reverb when overdubbing is nigh-on impossible, unless your name is Spector or you're making the Ronettes comeback single.

Digital stream

Now, the beauty of running this machine from your DAW is that you get the software equivalent of the Lexicon LARC which makes it even simpler to program. There are two ways of using it in this mode, as a plug-in or as a controller for the analogue version. That means that even if you are using it analogue through a console you can still control it via the Ethernet port like a plug-in, with all the advantages of

SPECS

I/Os: Two analogue inputs and outputs on XLR's, AES Digital In and Out on XLR's, two Ethernet ports, two FireWire 400 ports, IEC mains, word clock input on BNC, compact flash Memory card slot.

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

System Requirements: when used as a streaming plug-in either in Audio unit or RTAS formats. At the present moment this is Mac only:

PPC G5 1.8GHz or any Intel, OS X 10.4.9, Standard 10/100 Ethernet, Firewire 400 (800 works with adapter), 1GB ram, 150MB free HD space, CD drive, ProTools LE 7.3.1 and higher, ProTools HD 7.3 and higher or Logic 8.0 and higher

Size:
483 x 318 x 45mm
Weight:
3.93kg



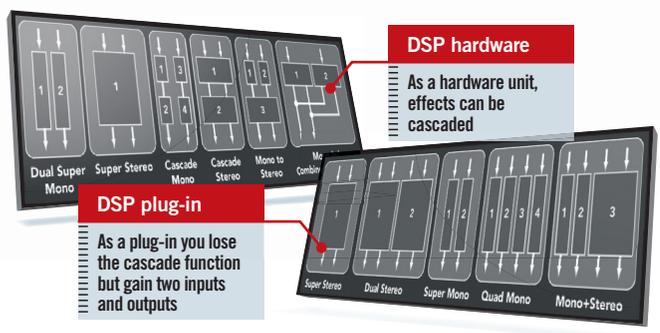


having the big graphic interface and saving the setting with your song. A very useful feature which works well, although it will only have one set of inputs and outputs. However, using it as a plug gives one extra feature, namely that you can double your inputs and outputs. When streaming over firewire the PCM96 can run two independent stereo programs on two insert points or up to four separate mono's.

As an analogue unit, it does have the possibility of running more than one program at a time, but unless you are running it as two monos, it's still just one unit. The plug-in version effectively doubles up the unit.

DSP Configurations

The PCM96 has many different DSP configurations as both a freestanding unit and a plug-in. Here is a brief description of them:



Good reverb is processor heavy, so anything that can remove this from the equation is very welcome

the only criteria you need to decide on are the sound of the reverbs themselves and whether or not it suits the way that you work.

ALTERNATIVES



TC PowerCore X8
£1,115

With eight DSPs and the VSS3 System 6000 reverb algorithms, it's flexibility for other plug-ins and processing make this a good option for other processing, but it won't work without a computer.

tcelectronic.com



IK Multimedia CSR
£199

Modeled after classic reverb units and sought-after gear, but limited to software with all the uglies of latency and CPU issues.

tcelectronic.com

Processor power

The modern audio world places enormous emphasis on the flexibility of recording systems. So much of our processing is now done 'in the box' and, particularly if you are running native, this puts a lot of strain on our computers processors. Good reverb is processor heavy, so anything that can remove this from the equation is definitely very welcome.

However, when you look at the Lexicon and its pretty hefty price tag other factors do come into play. There are a lot of good software reverbs out there like Altverb and IK Multimedia's CSR which come in considerably cheaper than the PCM96 and which being exclusively software-based, give install counts only dependant on your computers CPU.

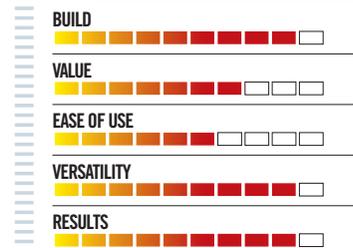
Buying a unit like this requires plenty of justification and you have to look at your personal needs. If you regularly use a hardware unit live or in recordings through an analogue or digital console, the PCM96 will give you excellent results and slot right in to your setup. If you also tend to mix 'in the box' it will open up possibilities for you that other purely hardware or software units simply can't do.

Tail of time

That Lexicon have been at the top of the digital reverb market for 30 years should tell you something about the quality of the algorithms they use. This is a very fine unit that stands pretty much alone. My gripes about the installation process will probably be redundant by the time you read this so

As with the SSL Matrix that I reviewed a few issues back, this unit marks the beginning of manufacturers bringing the advantages of the analogue and digital worlds ever closer and as such can only be a good thing. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



A great sounding and very adaptable unit marred only by an awkward setup.