Universal Audio
UAD-2 | from £345

With several times the bite of its predecessor, *Jono Buchanan* goes swimming with (four) SHARCs…

Over the past few years, Universal Audio's UAD-1 card has become a popular choice among professional producers. Available as a PCI card (in various forms), its processor allowed access to a suite of plug-ins which has been continually developed, with third-party collaborations with the likes of Neve, Roland and others.

However, with plenty of us now able to run seemingly unlimited numbers of our favourite software processors, UA have taken the opportunity to put considerably more lead in UAD's pencil, with version 2 of the hardware, which is available in three new forms – Solo, Duo and Quad cards. The Solo card boasts performance at 2.5 times the level of the original, the Duo at five times and the Quad at a whopping 10 times the original.

This hardware shift coincides with UA's move to Version 5 of their software, so installing the new card means a radical overhaul to any existing system. One cautionary note – UAD-2 is not currently RTAS compatible under Version 5 of the software, though it will be in a later update.

Opening up

Over the course of this review, I'll be focusing on two main things – the install and update process and, of course, the relative level of performance

afforded by the new hardware, which I've tested on a 'Quad' card. First things first, let me debunk a few myths, rumours and concerns.
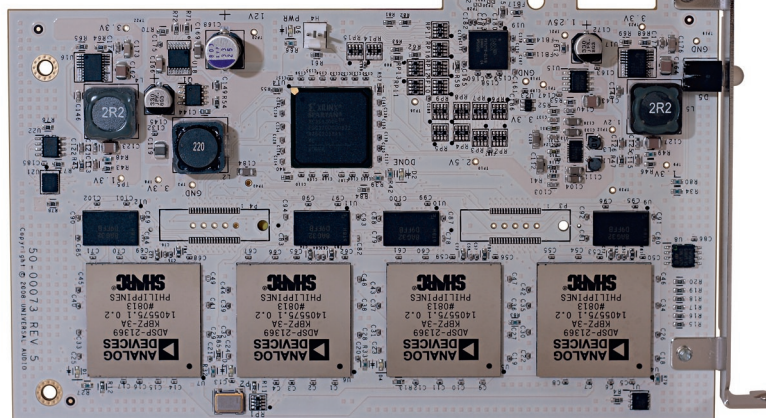
At present, there are no new plug-ins for UAD-2. Universal Audio have wisely decided to launch this hardware with an existing 'known' set of plug-ins, rather than trying to throw new ones into the mix, though there are several new treats planned before the end of the year. Secondly, you are perfectly able to run a UAD-2 card alongside and in addition to a UAD-1 card and, if you own a moderately-well or completely stocked UAD-1 card, you'd be advised to do precisely this at the moment because seven of the existing UAD plug-ins are not yet UAD-2 compatible.

These are four plug-ins from the Precision range (Maximiser, De-Esser, Buss Compressor and Enhancer kHz), as well as the Roland RE-201, the SPL Transient Designer and the VCA VU Compressor. However, these plug-ins will continue to work, despite the install of software Version 5, via your UAD-1 card and the porting process to make these available for UAD-2 isn't expected to take much longer. Install is much as it was with UAD-1. Install the new software, power down, open your computer up and fit in the card. The

Quad card features four pristine SHARC processors and also features an LED on the 'visible' panel at your computer's rear, which flashes between red and green during power before settling on green once your machine has booted.

Software central

Version 5 of the software dramatically updates the appearance of UA's Meter and Control Panel, the trusty application which allows authorisation and configuration of the available plug-ins. The plug-ins you do own will require a new authorisation file in order to work with UAD-2, so there's a slightly heart-stopping moment when, at first boot, you see the full list of your plug-ins with 'Activate Demo' prompts next to them. However, UA are one step ahead. Via the 'Plug-Ins' drop-down menu, you can jump to the UA website via the 'Authorize Plug-In's button and

from here, you can cross-grade your plug-ins for use with the UAD-2 hardware. This takes a few minutes but, in due course, provides you with a brand new authorisation code which successfully completes the cross-grade process when it's dragged to the UAD Control Panel.

That's the good news. The bad news is that, while cross-grading is currently

free, from January 1st 2009, it will cost you $25 per plug-in (up to a maximum of $250) to cross-grade your plug-ins from UAD-1 to UAD-2. For loyal owners of existing hardware who have invested in the UAD system, but who can't or don't want to update in the next three

months, that's going to sting a little. However, remember that you don't have to cross-grade, as long as you're happy to run your existing suite of plug-ins via your UAD-1 card. Once you're fully installed and cross-graded, the new UAD Control Panel comes into its own. It shows you a full list of your plug-ins, and allows you to choose which plug-ins you'd like to run from which of your

cards, so if you want to spread the load, you can. Via other tabs, it's also possible to deliberately limit DSP load on your card, check your card's status and, most crucially, see how the card is performing via its own DSP meters. You can see how my power tests worked out in the *Performance Test* box. One key point – UAD plug-ins can run in low latency mode with the release of UAD-2, which means that they can be used through software monitoring while recording.

Conclusion

If you're a fully paid-up UAD devotee, the switch to UAD-2 can only be exciting. Yes, it's an outlay for a card, with the all-guns-blazing Quad a serious investment but, this switch will ensure the future of the UAD platform for the foreseeable future. It's now possible to turn your DAW into a full Neve console, for a fraction of the cost of a real desk. Performance is more than impressive and the preparation taken to ensure the install and cross-grade is smooth and error-free is commendable. Very, very good. **FM**

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Performance Test

To test the power of the new card, I ran an A-B test with the Neve 88RS inserted into as many channel strips as possible, first running on my UAD-1 card and then on the new UAD-2 card. I engaged both the compressor and EQ sections of the 88RS and managed to run 16 instances of this plug-in on my UAD-1 before it had had enough. Once switched to the UAD-2 card, with 96 instances running, I'd maxed out the first three chips but had only eaten into half of the fourth chip. I managed to run a whopping 112 88RS's on UAD-2 before it had had enough. To stress, these tests were carried out with Logic playing back the same audio loop on each of these tracks. Effectively, this means that a dual 2.3GHz G5 PowerMac can become a virtual 112-channel Neve 88RS mixer. UA claim that more powerful computers could run up to a maximum of 128 88RS's per card.

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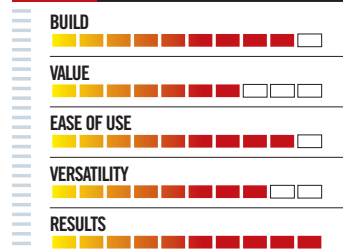
The UAD-2 card suite for the plug-in power-mad – it might just rule the world.