M-Audio Fast Track Ultra | £279

A hardware interface with a software brain?
Jono Buchanan watches the portable USB audio interface come of age…

M-Audio's name is synonymous with high-quality, affordable audio interfaces. Among the first group of companies to recognise the potential interest in interfaces designed to complement a laptop setup a few years ago, its reputation has been further enhanced by the range of interfaces developed to support Pro Tools M-Powered. For non-Pro Tools users, however, interfaces like M-Audio's Fast Track Pro have proven invaluable, offering flexible I/O, painless integration into a DAW environment and relatively low cost.

The Fast Track Ultra is the latest USB interface to leave M-Audio HQ with designs on your laptop rig, though there could now be enough to make this interface a viable solution in the studio as well.

Your flexible friend

At a single glance, you can see that the Fast Track Ultra (FTU) is designed to fit a lot into a single space. The front panel alone features four microphone inputs (2 XLR, 2 TRS), with gain controls for each. A master output dial sits in the top right hand corner while there are two headphone outputs with independent level dials.

Round the back, you'll find a veritable patchbay, with 6 line level audio inputs, S/PDIF I/O, MIDI In/Out, plus 6 audio outputs. There's a 48V phantom power switch, 5V DC power supply input and the all-important USB connector.

Effectively, all of this connectivity means that the FTU is capable of 8 simultaneous ins and outs, including the digital connections. For the input sources, channels 1 to 4 can either use the microphone inputs on the front or the line inputs on the back, with a switch next to each front-panel input confirming your selection.

In keeping with the latest wave of interfaces of this type, the FTU can be buss-powered from your USB port, though this restricts the interface to simple, stereo I/O. To run all the inputs and outputs, you'll need the power supply. This is the FTU's single weak point, with a flimsy, too easily detached connector providing the all-important juice – I'm sure M-Audio can find a neater solution. Operationally, FTU can provide its eight streams of audio at up to 24-bit/96kHz and, as the preamps are transparent in use, this equates to a high-quality interface.

Software genius

FTU's software integration is impressive too. After you've downloaded and installed the driver, you'll find a control program lurking on your computer which allows you to configure the interface in a number of ways. For starters, you can set levels for all of the inputs and outputs, which can then be saved directly to the unit, so your settings apply irrespective of whether FTU is attached to your computer. This has obvious benefits on stage where FTU could actually be used as a sub-mixer.

There are also studio benefits, bolstered by the discovery that FTU features its own effect program, which allows you to blend and apply monitor reverb. Three rooms, two halls and one plate reverb setting are offered, as well as delay or echo algorithms, so you're free to select your effect of choice and then apply it across the FTU's I/O mix.

It has enough inputs to satisfy even demanding recording sessions and its output count means that this could comfortably act as a surround sound interface. Very impressive. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

Flexible, packed with features and genuinely ready to handle demanding recording sessions.