Steinberg CC121 controller and MR816csx interface | from £313

Steinberg and Yamaha have only gone and produced hardware specially designed for Cubase systems. *Bruce Aisher* gets plugged in...

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

CC121 is a USB hardware control mixer surface and the MR816CSX/X are multi-channel FireWire audio interfaces with on-board DSP processing

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HIGHLIGHTS

CC121

1 Easy to use

2 Direct access to most essential mixer function

3 Includes Cubase AI software

MR818csx

1 Numerous high-quality in/out options

2 On-board DSP processing

3 Well integrated into Steinberg DAW systems

PRICING

CC121 Advanced Integration Controller
£313

MR816x FireWire Interface
£625

MR816csx FireWire Interface
£939

Steinberg have a long but sporadic history of producing hardware products to complement their software. More recently Steinberg have developed Cubase AI (see the *Cubase AI* box) that is bundled with some Yamaha kit (Yamaha now own Steinberg). The two companies have cemented their relationship with three new pieces of hardware – the CC121 Advanced Integration Controller, designed for exclusive use with Cubase or Nuendo and two general-purpose FireWire audio interfaces optimised for the Steinberg range. All three are bundled with Cubase AI 4.5.

Ground control

Let's dive-in by taking a look at the CC121. Opening the box you will find a pleasant-looking angled metal box populated with a fader, knobs and buttons that should be immediately familiar to any user of Cubase. The unit takes the simple single channel approach to remote control, rather than an expandable multi-channel design. As a relatively simple USB device, I

expected it to be buss-powered, but unfortunately an (included) external PSU is required to power the motorised fader, although the unit will work in 'un-motorised mode' without the PSU in an emergency.

Installation is straightforward and, with the device being recognised immediately on connecting the USB cable. After booting-up Cubase I waited for the blue 'Cubase Ready' LED to light – but it didn't. After some

investigation I noticed that the CC didn't appear in the device setup menu. So I uninstalled my MIDI loopback software, rebooted XP and restarted Cubase – lo and behold, the CC121 kicked into life.

In use, the CC121 is easy to get to grips with – select a channel and the hardware will reflect the current software fader position and button assignments – including Solo, Mute, automation Read/Write, Track Record

Cubase AI

The Cubase line, somewhat confusingly now includes four variants of the main product. Cubase 4 sits at the top of the tree, followed by Cubase Studio, Cubase Essential and finally Cubase AI supplied with the kit we are reviewing. AI can be upgraded to Essential or Studio for £75 or £199 respectively.

AI is a cut down bundle-only version of the main Cubase product limited to 48 audio and 64 MIDI tracks and smaller plug-in set. The

HalionOne sample playback synth, that features a sound set taken from the Yamaha Motif range, is the only included VSTi and there are various limitations in terms of in/out, buss and editing.

However, it doesn't feel particularly limiting in use, and is a perfect introduction to the Cubase family and, as it uses the standard Cubase 4 mix engine, is capable of professional results.

and Monitor Enable. In this section you also find a continuous rotary encoder for Pan and buttons for Edit Channel, Edit Instrument (when a VSTi is selected) and channel number selection. In the top of the centre section of the unit are twelve rotary encoders for the standard Cubase/Nuendo 4-band EQ, with Q, Frequency and Gain for each band. The EQ-type button when enabled turns the knobs into type/shape selector for each band – there's also an all-important EQ Bypass. Below the EQ lives the Transport section featuring the usual complement of Play, Record, Cycle and Locator buttons.

of the lock button. Press this while editing a given parameter and you can navigate away and continue working as usual, but with the knob maintaining control over the locked parameter. I

command shortcuts). Audio interfaces are the dowdy cousins of the computer recording world. They do the same job day after day, and once installed sit in lonely oblivion. However, they are one of the most important parts of a recording setup – standing or falling in terms of the their circuitry.

"Hover over any parameter, knob or slider in Cubase and this knob has instant control focus"

On the right of the front panel, things get a little more interesting. Pride of place is taken with the 'AI' knob. In Jog mode this is a standard Jog/Shuttle wheel for navigating the track and position the play locator – particularly useful on film or video synchronised projects. However, the default AI mode is what this knob was really designed for.

Hover over any parameter, knob or slider in Cubase and this knob has instant control focus. Those of you familiar with using a mouse wheel for parameter adjustment will be familiar with the concept, but the AI knob takes this one step further with its use

tried using the AI knob control on Cubase's internal plug-ins with much success, but things come a little unstuck when trying to get it to work on 3rd party plugs – it only works with VST3 plug-ins! Unfortunately, most plug-ins are not VST3, and many software companies are happy to stick with version 2 for the foreseeable future. Shame.

Lastly, we come to the Function section, where four knobs and a rotary encoder give you control over Studio and Monitor levels. Cubase Studio and AI don't feature a Control Room section so assignment is up to the user (they can be set to a range of

Light my fire

With the MR816csx and MR816x, Steinberg (and Yamaha) have aimed to develop a product that lives up to the Advanced Integration moniker. On the face of it, you get a well-specified multiple in/out sound card with eight on board microphone preamps and decent digital interfacing options, but there is more to it than first meets the eye, in the shape of on-board DSP reverb effect processing. The CSX version adds some additional channel strip functionality (see the *Sweet Spot Morphing* box), but otherwise the two units are identical in functional terms.

Installation was quick and easy, and once inside Cubase it was possible

to control many of the hardware's configuration and routing options in-situ, in a way that I have only previously seen on some Pro Tools systems. One example is that of input channel routing. Simply select an audio tracks in Cubase and then press the Quick Connect button on the hardware for the chosen input and the job is done. Monitor mixing is well integrated into Cubase using the MR816's internal mixer to assign and route mixes configured in the Control Room – you will need the full version of Cubase 4 to access this though.

Cubase also lets you control the internal MR816 DSP effects, which can be assigned to either the internal MR mixer or for use as a VST plug-in. For non-Cubase users there is the MR Editor, which gives you access to all the MR's options.

Sweet Spot Morphing

The MT816csx features eight channels of the Yamaha's Sweet Spot Morphing technology. At its most basic the internal DSP provides 8 mono instances of compression and 3-band equalisation. Nothing particularly radical here, although you do get a decent sounding compressor with sidechain processing. The EQ is of the Low- and High-shelving variety with parametric Mid band.

Useful, but not groundbreaking. What sets this channel strip apart from the rest is the Sweet Spot Morphing feature, which is a large centrally located knob that sweeps through a wide range of 'presets' – adjusting multiple parameters simultaneously. It allows you to quickly dial in different tones and, although perhaps not a feature for the purists, is great for getting a 'vibe' with a minimum of fuss.

The other aspect of the channel strip worthy of mention is the fact that, as with the REV-X, it can be used both in plug-in mode and as the channel processing section of the internal hardware mixer, where it can really aid foldback monitor mixes.

ALTERNATIVES

Presonus Faderport

£99

This is nifty little controller that covers much of the same territory as the CC121, altough not as well integrated into Cubase.

presonus.com

MOTU 896 MkIII

£800

The MR816X goes head-to-head with this DSP equipped MOTU unit. The MOTU doesn't offer specialised Cubase/Nuendo integration, but has a better digital I/O count.

motu.com

M-Audio Profire 2626

£399

The M-Audio received a Platinum Award in *FM* a few months back. It lacks the monitoring and DSP functions of more expensive units, but has plenty of Ins and Outs to choose from and decent software.
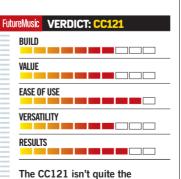
m-audio.com

Conclusion

So, how do I feel about these new additions? Although built into solid metal cases and featuring bright and responsive buttons, I felt that the knobs looked and felt cheap on all three units. The CC121's AI knob could have been larger and sturdier, and it's plug-in control shortcomings mean that it falls short of the mark in current usability terms. The EQ controls generally worked well, although a little sluggish during screen updates at times.

One major omission is the lack of direct Channel FX Send control and this wouldn't really have added significantly to the price or size of the unit. Overall though, the single-channel approach works well, despite a few occasional glitches during track selection. If you record and mix using only internal Cubase EQ and plug-ins

then you may find it is the perfect tool to drag you away from an 'all mouse' universe. However, if you use 3rd party plug-ins more than Steinberg's then you may be disappointed, and for the price, it is limited in certain respects.

In use the MR816csx worked without a hitch, even at very low latencies. The input and output stages are of a high quality and the microphone preamps gave a suitably clear and open sound. This is a fine sounding unit that, while not truly 'high-end', is very capable. The REV-X reverb is a great addition, although it's a shame that two reverb slots couldn't be accommodated. The integration aspects of the MR really do make a difference and it makes a fine partner to any Cubase system. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT: CC121

BUILD	
VALUE	
EASE OF USE	
VERSATILITY	
RESULTS	

The CC121 isn't quite the definitive low-cost controller that it could have been.

FutureMusic VERDICT: MR816CSX

BUILD	
VALUE	
EASE OF USE	
VERSATILITY	
RESULTS	

The MSR816csx and x however, while not cheap, do perform rather well as master interfaces.