Roland Aira MX-1 Mix Performer £499

The MX-1 is an interface, live mixer, multi-effect unit and DAW controller all in one. Si Truss gets mixed up…

CONTACT **WHO:** Roland UK **TEL:** 01792 702701 **WEB:** www.roland.co.uk **KEY FEATURES** Mixer, interface and multi-effect unit. Operates stand alone or with PC/Mac **I/O:** 2x pairs of mono jack ins (L/mono, R/mono), 1x stereo jack in, 1x coaxial in/out, 1x USB in/out, 4x Aira Link USB host in/out, Aux RCA phono send/return, MIDI in/out, 2x jack main out (L/mono, R), headphone out l

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Good mix of
analogue and
digital connectivity

**Range of standalone,
interface and
controller modes
offers a lot
of flexibility**

Deep effects
sequencing
capabilities

–

**Only offers a single
stereo channel for
the Aira TR-8**

EQ capabilities are
somewhat limited

**Effects can be a little
in-your-face in their
default modes**

Categorised by Roland, slightly awkwardly, as a 'Mix Performer', the MX-1 is part mixer, part multi-effect, part interface, and quite unlike anything else on the market right now. Design-wise, it bears a close resemblance to the Aira TR-8, housed in a plastic chassis of the same dimensions and sporting a similar – if slightly rearranged – selection of faders, knobs and sequencer buttons. It has

a similar black/green colour scheme too, although doing away with the green trim around the top edge, which leaves the MX-1 looking ever so slightly smarter than its borderline-garish Aira counterparts.

At its most basic level the MX-1 is an 18-channel mixer, which can operate either as a standalone device or as an interface for a Mac or PC. Connection wise, the MX-1 features two pairs of mono ¼-inch jack inputs, along with an additional stereo ¼-inch jack in. The rest of the input channels come from a quartet

of 'Aira Link' USB ports, which can send/receive audio and MIDI from a selection of Roland products, and a digital coaxial in/out port. Outputs, meanwhile, consist of a pair of mono jacks for the main out, along with a separate headphone jack that outputs a monitor signal. There's also a phono send and return. The back panel is rounded off by a pair of standard MIDI in/out connectors and a main USB port for connection to the host computer.

Those inputs are controlled via 11 mixer channels on the front

panel, each comprised of a fader, a trio of effect select buttons and a single Tone/Filter dial. The first two pairs of analogue inputs get a fader for each mono channel, which can be linked into pairs controlled by channels one and three. Inputs five and six, meanwhile, share a single mixer channel. The next four channels correspond to the four Aira Link ports, although when no eternal gear is connected to the USB input this can be assigned to mix audio channels from a DAW connected to the primary USB port. Finally, the

last channel controls the main output signal from the computer.

As an interface, those four Aira Link ports make the MX-1 an appealing prospect for owners of other Aira products. Each of the flagship instruments in the Aira range – the TR-8 drum machine, TB-3 bass synth and System-1 synth – can transmit audio to a host computer via USB, but doing so can be a little unwieldy. To use them alongside an existing interface, you need to create an aggregate interface but, since the Airas have a fixed sample rate of 96k, they can be inflexible on that front. So, being able to hook multiple Aira units up to a single hub – which also provides a decent number of analogue ins for recording – is considerably more convenient. The MX-1 has an adjustable sample rate too.

Each of the Aira Link inputs provides a stereo channel of audio into the MX-1, with its own fader on the front panel. While it's great being able to feed multiple USB inputs into one unit, I was disappointed to discover that the TR-8 is limited to a single stereo output when connected via Aira link. Used standalone, the drum machine offers 14 channels of audio over USB (ie one for each drum), along with two sets of analogue outs – a main output and an additional pair of assignable jacks. Particularly given the MX-1's focus on performance effects, having just the one stereo output for the whole drum machine feels a bit limiting should you wish to, say, use a stereo delay without affecting the kick elements, which doesn't work so well in stereo. It's not the end of the world, but it just seems like Roland have missed a trick by giving the TR-8 less, rather than more output options when used with the MX-1, particularly since the mixer seems to offer so much in the way of flexibility in other areas. On the plus side, recent updates have added an assortment of extra Roland products to the list of gear compatible with

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MULTI-MODE MIXER

The MX-1 has several operational modes which control how it interacts with a host computer and where audio is routed to/from. In its default mode, the MX-1 functions as a standard mixer – taking audio from each of its inputs and routing to the main output and streamed over USB to a host computer, if connected to one. In External mode the MX-1 will route 18 channels of audio from a DAW across its mixer channel, allowing users to make use of the built-in effects sequencing and mixing functions as part of a computer-based project. Finally, Controller mode puts the MX-1 into MIDI-only mode, to control any software mixing environment (or anything you fancy assigning it to). The MX-1 can also

moonlight as an Ableton Live controller. With the latest driver and version 9.2.3 of Live installed, it can automatically map to control launch clips using its step sequencer, with the Value dial used to scroll through scenes. The mixer channels control channels of Live's mixer, with the Tone/Filter dials controlling Live's sends and the FX buttons used for soloing/arming tracks. In this mode Live is still able to record audio directly from the MX-1's input channels.

the Aira Link ports, including the JD-XA, JD-Xi, Jupiter-50/80, FA-06/08 and the new Juno-DS, which broadens its potential appeal.

Full effect

The MX-1's mixer and interface capabilities are, however, only half the story. The unit also offers an assortment of effects capabilities, at both per-channel and master levels. Each channel can be assigned one of three Beat FX: Filter, Slicer and Sidechain, each with five selectable variations. These three effect types all offer variations on a rhythmic 'ducking' effect; Filter via a low-pass filter, Slicer an abrupt gating effect, and Sidechain mimicking the ubiquitous 'pumping' sound associated with heavy-handed compression. Each effect is controlled via the 16-step sequencer, which is used to punch in the effect on a per step basis (it's worth noting that Sidechain is actually more of a pseudo-sidechain, controlled by the sequencer rather than routed audio input). In their default state, each effect is set to maximum and the results are somewhat in-your-face. Fortunately, it's possible to adjust both the intensity and the length of each channel's effect. Used with a slightly lighter touch, the MX-1's Beat FX can easily be scaled back from obnoxious Vegas-style pumping into subtle, polyrhythmic territory.

Each channel also benefits from a Tone/Filter rotary. These can be assigned an EQ or filter effect from a range of ten options, which cover bases from DJ-style bi-directional filtering to low/high frequency boosts. These offer a decent range of tone-shaping options, although anybody used to performing with DJ gear or more traditional 'live' mixers, will likely miss having a proper (at least) three-band EQ.

The MX-1's Master FX section, meanwhile, offers six effect types: Delay, Filter, Flanger, Bit Crush, Roll (a beat repeat effect) and Scatter (the rhythmic glitch effect found across much of the Aira line). Again, each effect offers an assortment of variations, with eight types of each on offer (it's worth noting that one of the Delay's alternative modes is a reverb). A central bi-directional rotary is used to dial in the intensity of each effect, while a combination of the Time button and Tempo dial are used to edit the length. The

TRANSPORT Naturally, when used with a computer or any USB or MIDI input, the MX-1 can act as a slave, but in standalone or master modes it features a play button, tempo knob, tap tempo, shuffle and fine-tune.

SEQUENCER The 16-step sequencer is primarily used for controlling Beat FX and assigning Master FX in Combi mode, but it also fulfils an assortment of other functions, including saving and recalling Scenes.

FADERS The MX-1's channel faders are fairly short and not ideal for making precise level changes, but it is possible to adjust the curve to your preferred taste.

MASTERING Engaging the Mastering button applies a final layer of master channel effects. There are five variations, offering the usual range of compression and limiting treatments.

SCENE STEALER

With multiple channels of effects sequencing, along with an assortment of effect types, EQ/filter modes and audio routings, there can be a lot going on in any single MX-1 set-up. Fortunately, all set-up options and parameter values can be saved as Scenes. There are up to 64 Scenes slots available, easily stored and recalled via the step sequencer buttons. Once you get your head around the capabilities of the MX-1, this proves exceptionally handy, allowing live performers to quickly recall settings for different tracks in their set, or studio users to set up different layouts for different project types.

Master FX section also offers a Combi mode, which lets users assign different effects to each step across the sequencer, with unique, if a little full-on, results.

The final piece of the MX-1's effects puzzle comes from the auxiliary send/return, connected via two phono ports on the rear of the unit and dialled in for each channel via the Channel Settings panel. Here it's possible to edit the Gain, Pan and Fader curve of each channel too.

Particularly for owners of compatible Roland gear, the MX-1's combination of analogue and digital inputs, along with its ability to work with or without a computer, makes it a very interesting addition to the interface/mixer market. On the effects front, while its pumping Beat FX might seem a bit garish on the surface, and a little too entrenched in a certain style of in-your-face festival EDM, there's a deceptive amount of depth on offer. It's fairly easy to rein

in the sound to create something more nuanced. It's not perfect though; as mentioned, the lack of individual outputs for the TR-8 is a disappointment, and the single Tone/Filter knob is no match for a proper EQ section. Neither of these are things that can't be worked around, however, and the fact remains that the MX-1 is innovative and offers a good range of practical features. It won't suit everyone, but for a certain demographic of laptop-based producers keen to incorporate some hardware into their workflow, the MX-1 will prove very appealing. **FM**

FM VERDICT

7.8

Looking for something flexible to build a live and/or studio set-up around? This is certainly an option worth keeping in mind.