Mackie Control Universal Pro | £999

Mackie's DAW controllers update is more than just cosmetic but will *Steve Evans* let go of his mouse?

Over time, everyone develops their own way of using their sequencer, and their own way of flitting between different programs to create their personal workflow. Even the boundaries between 'disciplines' have become blurred as Live allows DJs to mash-up and perform intuitive edits on the fly, which can be recorded and edited later.

Had these been designed from the ground up as hardware we'd have become used to octopussing our way round them. Sadly hardware controllers have always played catch-up, so there's always a period of re-learning while you work out whether or not a hardware controller actually helps you.

For Pro Tools users who also use Logic in their rig, the Mackie MCU has always been a bit of a no-brainer. It was always rock solid, and talked to other software unlike the Command 8 or Pro Control from Digidesign. The D-Control/ Command options from Digidesign remain prohibitively expensive for all but those money's-no-object pro users. And you can achieve a good level of control with an MCU, and run your monitoring with the equally good Mackie Big Knob, and all for a tenth of the price. But with Pro Tools, the MCU was emulating Mackie's HUI protocol and not operating at its full capabilities. In Logic Control mode however, a more comprehensive set of controls meant that this was a first-choice controller for Logic users who could also benefit from the C4 controller bank (available separately for £869) too. The third mode of operation – Mackie Control – enabled free reign over almost all the other popular DAW applications, which makes us wonder: if it ain't broke, why are they fixing it with this 'Pro' unit.

The new MCU, MCU Extender and C4 updates now bear the suffix 'Pro'. This always worries me a little – traditionally, adding the word 'Pro' to a product name is often wishful thinking on the part of the manufacturer (products used by professionals rarely carry this label). What have *we* been using all this time? MCU Amateur?! But

C4 Pro: The perfect partner

The C4 Pro features 32 continuous rotary encoders with which to control virtually anything. It doesn't have a USB connection, but Mackie say that one USB connection for the MCU Pro and then small MIDI cables from the MCU to C4 or MCU Extender Pros is tidier, and means less demand for USB sockets.

But what if you use the C4 as a standalone?

Each pot has its own LED scribble strip so you can see what you're editing, but layout of the parameters of complex plug-ins or software instruments is down to the manufacturers.

Consequently you can't position the parameters in exactly the positions you might want, but several banks of 32 parameters at a time should make for easy access.

Bundled with C4 Pro is C4 Commander Pro, which has an ever-expanding library of MIDI synths and effects enabling hardware control via the C4, and all from your comfy spot in front of the computer.

there's no denying that the new look is fantastic. The moulded, dark-grey plastic with matching buttons has given way to a sleek silvery grey metal with clear buttons that illuminate. The jog wheel is in a darker plastic and beautifully weighted, and this (dare I say it) more professional feel is extended to the improved Penny + Giles touch-sensitive, optical faders.

The result is a unit that looks like something from a Soho post-production suite, and whose sharper edges make for a snug fit when the extenders and add-ons are present, giving the feel of a large console.

A peek at the rear panel of the MCU Pro reveals the biggest improvement of all. The single set of MIDI connectors has been replaced by a USB socket and

three sets of MIDI connectors. This means you don't have to have a separate MIDI interface to use it any more. You can plug it straight into your computer and then use the MCU Pro itself as a MIDI interface, for keyboards or additional controllers.

The other major improvement to the MCU package is the inclusion of Tracktion, the simple but highly effective DAW app recently acquired by Mackie, which contains lite versions of some of the finest plug-ins available – Amplitube and Sampletank for example. Now you get an entire sequencing and hardware controller package right out of the box.

In Use

As is often the case in the corporate world, the new range has probably been booted out the door a little early to meet release schedules and there are a few teething problems. The very first C4 Pro units had an inherent MIDI delay, which prevented proper display unless connected by a separate MIDI interface.

Mackie have recalled these and the bug has now been fixed on all subsequent units. Also the USB MIDI implementation isn't quite right on the bundled Tracktion software in the first run, preventing full USB-only operation and resulting in some general 'bugginess'. This will be fixed in an update though, and it all works perfectly with Tracktion V3 (which will automatically be offered to new users regisetring Tracktion2.1 and can be downloaded from the Mackie site).

Functionally the MCU Pro and C4 Pro work as well as they always have, but the feature set varies depending on the software you use. At the moment the C4 Pro isn't supported on as many

apps as the MCU Pro, most notably Pro Tools. I'd like to see support for GarageBand and Bias Peak added at some point.

This is still a very new product though, and has only recently (at the time of writing) appeared on the Mackie website. Only the Quick Start manuals are available at the time of writing, and news of updates will be coming thick and fast over the coming weeks I suspect. Ableton Live users may require something more specific for live performance work, but the Pro series supports it, and 'Lexan' plastic overlays are available for Live and the other big apps. Teething problems aside the MCU Pro remains my first choice for a hardware controller, and by extension the C4 too. They feel great (and now they look great), and the USB interface is a welcome addition.

Whether you can be weaned away from a mouse is another thing. Some users are so used to operating with a mouse and keyboard that a change is unthinkable. Also, there are some functions you'll always need the keyboard and mouse for, so you'll be keeping them around anyway. If you've never worked with faders, then balancing up your sub masters intuitively by hand is an entirely different and superior way of doing things. **FM**
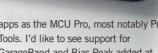
> ## "Balancing up your sub masters intuitively by hand is a entirely superior way of doing things"

ALTERNATIVES

JazzMutant Dexter
£1,800

The uber-futuristic multi-touchscreen controller currently supports Logic Pro 7.2, Cubase 4, Nuendo 3 and Sonar 5. Pro Tools and more is assured down the line. It's very expensive but brings touchscreen control like large format digital consoles.

jazzmutant.com

Behringer BCF 2000
£172

This set of eight 100mm motorised faders, not only works a treat but is an absolute bargain. Plus, it now comes in a wonderfully Mac-a-litious white finish for those superficially stylish studio types.

behringer.com

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