

Tascam US-2x2 and US-4x4 | from £103

With two new audio interfaces in their US range, Tascam are striding into the budget audio interface war. **Jono Buchanan** reports from the frontline

WHAT IS IT?

Two affordable USB-powered audio interfaces for Mac and PC platforms

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Rugged build quality and all-metal casing
- 2 Open, warm preamps and A/D signal conversion
- 3 Impressive value

PRICING

US 2x2:

£103

US 4x4:

£177

Tascam's relationship with 'audio capture' now spans many separate approaches. Currently, their product range

is perhaps best known for field recorders, with their wide assortment of portable hand-held and multi-track recorders a popular choice for those wanting to make recordings in out-of-studio locations. However, Tascam also have a range of Digital Portastudios, designed to provide all-in-one multi-track recording systems, dedicated digital signal processors, a collection of products for iOS devices and a growing range of audio interfaces.

Into this latter category come two new products which are the collective subject of this review: the US-2x2 and US-4x4 audio interfaces. These come in as the foundation level products in the US range, under more fully spec'd interfaces further up the product line.

As you'd hope, this also makes them the most affordable interfaces in Tascam's line-up.

Let's take a tour

Both interfaces are Mac and PC compatible and the 2x2 is buss-powered via its USB connector. Starting with this more compact interface, what's immediately notable is that, in comparison to the lightweight construction and feel of some rival interfaces, Tascam's smallest model is reassuringly rugged. This quality is reinforced by aluminium end-cheeks whose design cunningly raises the front-panel a little off your desk, so that accessing its controls is easier. At the back, you'll find a modest array of essential connectors: a 1/4-inch, balanced stereo output pair (somewhat unconventionally labelled 1 and 2 rather than left and right), MIDI In and

Out connectors and the all-important USB connector. There's also an option to connect a 5V DC power supply but, if required, you'll have to purchase this separately, as Tascam don't provide you with one themselves.

The front panel is rather busier. Here you'll find two recording channels which both offer combi XLR and 1/4-inch inputs. Phantom power can be globally switched on for both via a single switch but otherwise the controls for each channel are independent. These include a Gain dial, as well as the option to switch between Mic/Line and Instrument inputs. LEDs light green when a signal is detected for either channel, while another lights red if you over-cook levels into Peak territory. To the right of the inputs, the output section provides independent Line Out and Headphone monitoring level dials, while you can balance signals between live input monitoring and the return signal coming from the computer. This makes it easy to balance volume for singers and instrumentalists against the track to which they're adding their recording, without the need to create a balance in your host software. This is further enhanced by Tascam's promise of latency free recording. Feature-wise, that's your lot. Simple, compact and with a bare minimum of fuss.

Get yourself connected

Setting the unit up to work with your computer is similarly quick. I tested the 2x2 with a Mac and it required no further mandatory drivers; plug it in, select the interface via your host's audio preferences and you're good to go. That said, a driver is required for PC users and there are advantages to downloading the Mac equivalent too, as the Software Panel it provides allows you to readily configure parameters including recording quality, which is





offered at settings up to 96kHz at 24-bit resolution. Tascam's mic pres are designed for low noise, with a signal-to-noise ratio of 101dB, which Tascam claim out-performs almost all other interfaces at this price range. Certainly, performance here is impressive with a warm, clean sound achieved when recording both instruments and vocals. The only obvious limitation here is the provision of just a pair of input channels, so if your requirements go further but you like the sound of the 2x2, its bigger brother might suit you better.

The 4x4, as its name suggests, has not only four inputs but two additional outputs. It provides exactly the same build quality and a similar feature set to the 2x2, though there are a couple of differences. The 4x4 is not USB buss-powered, so an external power supply is provided in the box. The 4x4's additional two outputs are found on the

Hardware And Software Truths

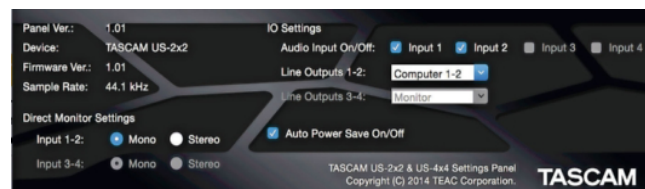
Also new to the US range is the 16x08, which packs eight microphone inputs, a further eight 1/4-inch jack inputs and eight separate analogue outputs into a single 1U rack space, with the same preamps and AD/DA conversion.

Tascam run the risk of confusing customers by the array of options

within their US range. On the website the three new interfaces are listed but around these are older designs with alternative specifications, eg the US-1200 with six inputs and two outputs, and the US-366 with higher sample rates and onboard DSP. The 2x2, 4x4 and 16x08 are the flagship 'new' products,

with their uniform, all-metal cases the tell-tale sign if you're scratching your head.

Head to the software page too for links to firmware updates, manuals and download links to the free Sonar LE and Ableton Live Lite software and to the Tascam Settings Panel application.



SPECS

Up to 96kHz/24-bit recording
Support for Windows and Mac OS X
USB 2.0 computer connection
+48V phantom power for all inputs
Two switchable high-impedance inputs
Microphone preamp gain range of 57dB
Balanced analogue TRS outputs
Headphone jack
Separate controls for line and headphones output volumes
MIDI I/O
USB class compliant 2.0 support

Bundled software: SONAR X3 LE/Ableton Live Lite 9

ALTERNATIVES



Focusrite Scarlett 2i2 USB Audio Interface

£109

Focusrite know a thing or two about building mic pres and there are two packed into this low-cost, ultra-portable interface.

<http://uk.focusrite.com>



Native Instruments Komplete Audio 6 Interface

£169

Six inputs, four outputs and a generous software suite which borrows over 3GB of content from NI's software product ranges.

www.native-instruments.com



Mackie Onyx Blackjack

£132

Mackie's preamps justify its inclusion here. Easy as pie to use with great-sounding audio capture and conversion guaranteed.

www.mackie.com

The key ingredients are here: high-quality preamps, warm, open signal conversion, plug-and-play operation

back panel, while the front panel offers a second headphone port so that two pairs can be connected at once. A little disappointingly, phantom power is still only switchable on/off for the 'whole' device – while this makes sense on the 2x2 interface, I'd have preferred the 4x4's inputs to be switchable in pairs.

From PC to Mac to iOS

Alongside connections to computers, Tascam's iOS know-how is built into these devices too, with direct connections to iPads and other iOS devices offered via Apple's Camera Connection Kit (sold separately), meaning that if you're looking for a tactile, flexible front-end for ultra-portable recording system, both interfaces pack an impressive punch.

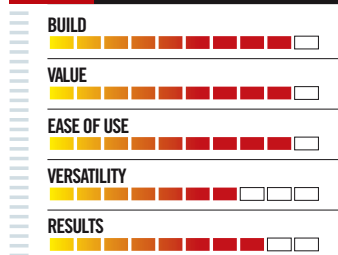
Only you'll know which of these two designs suits your recording needs but I'd have no hesitation in recommending either as great examples of just how much audio interfacing quality is available for relatively little outlay these days. Consider that purchasing either of Tascam's newbies also provides a licence for Ableton Live Lite and Sonar LE and, if you really are on a shoestring budget, your sequencing needs are at least initially met too.

It's a buyer's market for interfaces of this type right now, with many

manufacturers offering comparable specs to those offered by Tascam's US range, so it's worth checking out the competition too.

But the key ingredients are certainly here, with high-quality preamps, warm, open signal conversion and immediate, plug-and-play operation, particularly if you're working on a Mac. If you're shopping for an interface with modest I/O and just such a level of immediacy, Tascam's new US series interfaces should certainly be added to your 'must try' list. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



Rugged design matched to an immediate, plug-and-play interface – what's not to like?

