



MOTU's latest, the ultra-compact UltraLite

MOTU UltraLite

MOTU's UltraLite promises a ton of connectivity in a box that won't break your back or the bank. **TJ Glover** hits the road...

DETAILS

PRICE
£495

CONTACT

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www.motu.com

SPECIFICATIONS

XLR/TRS mic preamp inputs: 2
Balanced/unbalanced 1/4" line inputs: 6
Balanced/unbalanced 1/4" line outputs: 10
Headphone output: 1 (stereo)
S/PDIF inputs: 1 (stereo)
S/PDIF outputs: 1 (stereo)
MIDI input: 1 (16 channels)
MIDI output: 1 (16 channels)
Maximum bit depth: 24-bit
Maximum sample rate: 96kHz
Weight: 1.32kg

THE ULTRALITE, MOTU's latest FireWire audio interface, is essentially a cut-down 828MkII in

terms of both physical size and connectivity. Aimed at laptop music producers and the mobile musician, it's a roughly half-rack unit (8.5" wide, 7" deep) built to MOTU's usual high standard of sturdiness and inspiring as much road confidence as an aluminium box of electronics ever could. Ironically, though, it's not actually particularly light – that's not to say it's heavy, but I was mildly surprised at the weight of the thing when I first picked it up.

Getting it up and running takes seconds: simply install the drivers and CueMix DSP software, plug the UltraLite in and turn it on. The unit is bus-powered (6-pin FireWire only) for maximum convenience and portability, but can also take a generic power adaptor. Just like the 828MkII, the UltraLite is designed to be used with a computer as a multi-I/O

interface, or standalone as a digital mixer. To that end, the front panel plays host to a multi-purpose LCD display and a set of menu navigation/operation push-button knobs, as well as the expected complement of volume and trim controls. The connections also kick off on the fascia, with a headphone jack and a combi XLR/TRS mic/instrument socket located at the left-hand end for easy access that saves you having to reach round the back.

The back of beyond

The rear's where it's all happening socket-wise, though. The UltraLite boasts the same inputs and outputs as the 828mkII, minus the ADAT and two line inputs, leaving us with a second XLR/TRS mic/instrument input, six balanced/unbalanced quarter-inch line inputs, eight quarter-inch line outputs, two main outputs, S/PDIF in and out, a 16-channel MIDI input and a 16-channel MIDI output, and two FireWire ports,

the second for daisy-chaining with up to three more MOTU FireWire interfaces. Considering the difference in size and price between this and the 828MkII, the fact that ADAT is the only thing that's been sacrificed is pretty remarkable, although some might suggest that S/PDIF would have been the preferable forfeit of the two.

The two combi inputs each have their own dedicated 24dB Trim knobs, which step through their range in 1dB increments, as well as 48V phantom power and Pad switches. The latter are tri-positional, offering zero, 18dB and 36dB of instant attenuation.

Right on CueMix

The UltraLite has MOTU's CueMix DSP system inside, endowing it with highly flexible eight-bus mixer functionality and zero-latency direct monitoring. Although it's completely possible to control every aspect of this from the front panel of the hardware itself (which,



The back includes an XLR/TRS input, six line inputs, eight line outputs, two main outputs, S/PDIF in and out, a 16-channel MIDI in and out and two FireWire ports, and... breath

AudioDesk

ALTHOUGH MOTU DON'T make much noise about it, the AudioDesk software that comes with the UltraLite – and, indeed, all their interfaces – is quite something. Based on Digital Performer (and thus for Mac OS X only), this audio-only DAW is more than up to the majority of music production duties, with unlimited audio tracks, 24-bit/192kHz recording and playback (limited to 96kHz with the UltraLite, of course), MAS plug-in compatibility, offline bouncing, scrubbing, crossfading, 20 insert slots per mixer channel, 32 stereo buses, sample-accurate automation, loads of excellent bundled effects, and many of DP's high-end technologies.

As well as making a great introduction to Digital Performer, AudioDesk could easily serve as a serious DAW for anyone not bothered by the total lack of MIDI support. Needless to say, it integrates beautifully with the UltraLite, and even if you've already made your sequencing choice, I'd strongly urge anyone to try this surprisingly powerful application anyway. You might just fall in love with it.



(Above) MOTU's Audiodesk software includes 20 insert slots per mixer channel and unlimited audio tracks.

(Left) With 32 stereo buses and sample-accurate automation, Audiodesk has a lot to offer your music.

incidentally, features 16 fully editable preset slots stored in non-volatile memory), for full operation without a computer attached, it's not exactly ideal from an ergonomic standpoint. Don't get me wrong – full standalone control of an audio interface like this is astonishing (and it works, unquestionably), but no engineer is really going to want to mix using a 'page and cursor' setup on a 16x2 LCD.

Fortunately, for standard computer audio interface usage we have MOTU's excellent CueMix Console software, which operates the UltraLite via a 'virtual mixer' graphical interface. This enables

you to create up to four different mixes on separate tabs in the Console window, with each routed to its own physical stereo output, but all sharing the full range of inputs. So, for example, you could have a primary mix going to the main outs, a monitor mix going to the headphone output for your singer, and a third mix used as an effect send for an outboard reverb or delay. Inputs have independent level and pan settings in each mix, so you can have a single source represented differently for up to four different purposes, all within the one CueMix Console setup.

CueMix Console also enables phase inversion, quick and easy

headphone routing, and control room talkback/listenback, complete with Talk and Listen buttons in the main Console window. You can even remotely control the whole interface with any HUI- or Mackie Control-compatible control surface. All in all, it's a great bit of software, and I only have two complaints with it: the interface is a bit small, and I don't see the need for the four mixes to be on tabs – why not just have them all visible at once, as you can with RME's equivalent, TotalMix?

Stand alone

MOTU sell the UltraLite as "everything you need to turn your laptop or desktop Mac or PC into a mobile 24-bit 96kHz recording studio", and while that certainly doesn't make it a unique proposition, there's no doubt that they've realised the concept exceptionally well. The size and consequent portability of the unit are hugely appealing, and CueMix Console works superbly, whether in conjunction with or independently of your DAW software.

However, while some may find its standalone capabilities useful, no-one's going to be replacing their mixer with it for computer-free engineering, that's for sure. No, the UltraLite customer is going to be using it with a computer, and in that respect it truly excels. The drivers are rock-solid and the preamps and converters are as clean, punchy and generally as high quality as we've come to expect from MOTU. To my mind, MOTU is one of the top three manufacturers of such equipment in the world at this end of the market. The range and versatility of I/O and mixer routing on offer with the UltraLite are more than sufficient for today's average project studio, whether it's mobile or house-bound. **FM**

ALTERNATIVES



M-AUDIO FIREWIRE 1814 £449

18-in/14-out FireWire interface at an excellent price, but without quite the conversion and preamplification quality of the UltraLite.

www.maudio.co.uk

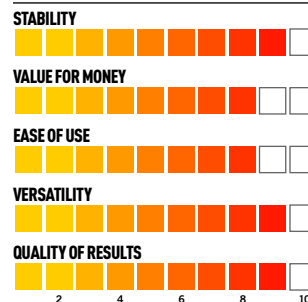


RME FIREFACE 400 £649

Beats the UltraLite on the digital I/O front with the inclusion of ADAT, but at the expense of three line outputs and over 150 quid.

www.rme-audio.com

VERDICT MOTU



Small but perfectly formed, the UltraLite is a rugged interface at a very acceptable price.