# Behringer iAXE624 Centauri USB guitar & Guitar Link UCG102 USB interface cable £109 & £39

Not yet into integrating guitar with computer? Behringer have two cost-effective solutions to tempt you *by Trevor Curwen*

Should you want it, plugging your guitar into your computer to take advantage of software amp simulation has become more streamlined of late. Several companies offer products that eschew the conventional hardware audio interface in favour of direct connection to the computer, with the actual interfacing that does the analogue to digital conversion being built into the connecting cable or the guitar itself. Behringer has both types of products available in the form of their iAXE range of USB guitars (including the iAXE624 Centauri on test here) and the UCG102 Guitar Link cable. Both of these come bundled with a version of Native Instruments Guitar Combos amp simulation software and represent two different approaches to accessing it.

### iAXE 624

The iAXE 624 Centauri is the latest USB-equipped guitar in Behringer's range. Looking at it you might think it just a basic S-type guitar and, indeed, it can function exactly as one with its standard three single-coil pickups and jack output. Look closer,

though, and the difference is apparent. In a neatly recessed panel adjacent to the strap button is the USB socket and a stereo headphone socket for monitoring. The A/D and D/A conversion takes place within the guitar, sending clean signal from the pickups along the USB cable to the computer with the sound returning down the same cable from computer to headphone socket. No special drivers are necessary for Mac users as the iAXE works under Core audio and once plugged in simply needs selection from the list of available devices. PC users will need to install the low latency ASIO drivers from the included disc.

### UCG 102

The Guitar Link is a 1.5 metre USB cable with an appendage about the size of a mobile phone on the other end with a guitar input and headphone socket plus headphone volume control and a switch to set the input level to compensate for guitars with high outputs. Operation couldn't be simpler really, you just plug the USB end of the cable into a computer, connect guitar and headphones at the

other end and get on with it, the driver situation being the same as that described for the iAXE.

### Software

Native Instruments Guitar Combos are three separate amp simulations derived from Guitar Rig (the AC Box, Twang combo and Plexi combo) presented here as Behringer special editions –

Combo I, II and III. You get all three with the package and can use all for a trial period of 30 days but only get to keep one of them permanently after that period so, at that point, you have to make the choice of whether you want a Vox, Fender or Marshall-alike as your virtual practice amp.

All three combos have the usual gain and tone controls and come with adjustable effects – treble boost, tremolo and spring reverb for the AC-30-style amp plus a Tube Screamerish overdrive; chorus, vibrato (tremolo) and spring reverb for the Fender. The combo based on a Marshall gets Big Muff- and Rat-style distortion, delay and an on/off reverb.

One feature that all three guitar combos have may be the most important of the lot and that is the 'Tapedeck' facility as found in the Guitar Rig software. Tapedeck allows playback of audio files – with the usual phrase training facilities of tempo adjustment – for half-speed playback without changing the pitch, plus

## The sound from the three-pickup configuration is distinctly Fenderish

### The Rivals

#### iAXE624-BK USB Guitar

USB guitars are a bit thin on the ground as yet. The **JamMate UG-1** (£189) is a similar S-style package that comes with IK Multimedia's AmpliTube Live 2 software. More upmarket is the USA-made **Brian Moore iGuitar** range which features electric, acoustic and 13-pin synth outputs and can have USB fitted as a £200 option.

#### Guitar Link UCG102

There are several interface cables available. **IK Multimedia**'s **StealthPlug** (£79) comes with AmpliTube 2 Live Amp Simulation software while the **JamMate Rock Frog** (£89) comes with the Plexi version of Native Instruments' Guitar Combos. The **M-Audio JamLab** (£59) includes GT Player Express software with amp and effects simulation.

**iAXE has USB and headphone sockets**

transposition and fine pitch tuning if needed. Behringer supplies eight short mp3s of typical guitar playing in various styles, but you can select any songs lurking on your hard drive in mp3, .wav or .aiff format for playing and looping. Also included is a basic metronome and Kristal 16-track music production and Audacity editing software.

## Sounds

As a guitar the Centauri is an entry-level instrument, but it is well put together with no obvious flaws in either hardware or finish. Straight out of the packaging it is playable, but set with a high action that could obviously benefit from a touch of adjustment. Tweaking the bridge saddles for both height and intonation remedies the situation somewhat. The lower action combined with the smooth satin finish maple neck makes the instrument feel reasonably comfortable, although a pro set-up wouldn't go amiss.

The sound from the three pickup configuration is distinctly Fenderish with familiar sounds available at each of the five selector positions. Not bad at all, and poky enough through an amp for the guitar to hold its own in a band rehearsal situation when not plugged into a computer.

As for that USB connection, both the iAXE and the UCG102 exhibit very little in the way of latency delay and the experience of playing through a computer feels very natural with the sound of the pickup cleanly converted and a nicely produced sound coming back at you. The Guitar Combos software provides three distinctly flavoured and very playable amps, each with just the right amount of effects onboard to dial up a wide range of conventional sounds. Each combo

comes with 32 factory preset patches (plus 32 user storage spaces) selected from a menu that appears on the speaker grille, and these provide instantly familiar tones for rock, blues, pop and several other styles.

After 30 days you are left with just one of the NI amps but if you do need more sounds, both the iAXE and the Guitar Link provide a universal USB connection that will happily work with any of the other amp simulation software on the market. However, with any of the Guitar Combos, anyone learning to play would have instant access to a much wider range of sounds than with a bog-standard practice amp.

## Verdict

If you have a computer and are yet to sample the delights of plugging in your guitar, the UCG102 is probably the most cost-effective way to get started. For less that £40 you will be getting a very effective phrase training and practice facility with a decent-sounding virtual amp – no complaints at that price.

The iAXE, likewise, provides the very same facility plus an instrument with which to implement it. The availability of the UCG102 and the basic nature of the iAXE makes it unlikely to appeal to anyone who already has a guitar. As a first instrument for someone who owns a computer, it offers a real head start into the electric guitar experience at a bargain-basement price. **G**

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## The bottom line

### Behringer iAXE 624

**We like:** Quality amp sims; no-messing computer connection; almost unbelievable price
**We dislike:** Guitar set-up needed
**Guitarist says:** Extremely cost-effective beginner package – just add a computer

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### Guitar Link UCG102

**We like:** Quality amp sims; simple operation
**We dislike:** What's not to like at this price?
**Guitarist says:** The least expensive way to get a computer-based practice and phrase training facility

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## Behringer iAXE 624 Centauri

**PRICE:** £109
**ORIGIN:** China
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solid body electric
**BODY:** Basswood
**NECK:** Hard maple, bolt-on
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inch)
**NUT/WIDTH:** 42mm
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple
**FRETS:** 22, medium
**HARDWARE:** Vintage style vibrato
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm
**ELECTRICS:** Three single-coil pickups with five-way lever pickup selector, volume, 2 x tone. 6.4mm jack guitar output, 6.4mm stereo (TRS) jack headphone socket, USB 1.1 type A
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.6/8
**EXTRAS:** CD, USB cable, chord chart, instruction book adjustable guitar strap and three picks
**RANGE OPTIONS:** iAXE 393 (£109), iAXE 629 Metalien (£133)
**FINISHES:** Black, white
**Behringer +49 2154 9206 0**
**www.behringer.com**

### Test results

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|---|---|
| **Build quality** | ★★★☆☆ |
| **Playability** | ★★★★☆ |
| **Sound** | ★★★☆☆ |
| **Value for money** | ★★★★★ |
| **GUITARIST RATING** | ★★★★☆ |

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## Behringer Guitar Link UCG102

**PRICE:** £39
**TYPE:** USB audio interface with software guitar amp simulation and bundled software
**ORIGIN:** China
**CONNECTIONS:** USB 1.1 plug type A, 6.4mm mono jack plug, 6.4mm stereo (TRS) jack headphone socket
**CONTROLS:** Headphones volume, input level hi/lo
**DIMENSIONS:** 95.6 (w) x 50.8 (d) x 24.6 (h) mm
**WEIGHT:** 92g

**Common Features**
**A/D – D/A CONVERTER:** 16 bit
**SAMPLING FREQUENCY:** Up to 48kHz
**SUPPLIED SOFTWARE:** Native Instruments Guitar Combos Behringer Edition, Kristal 16-track music production software, Audacity editing software
**COMPUTER SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:** See website

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| **Build quality** | ★★★☆☆ |
| **Playability** | ★★★★☆ |
| **Sound** | ★★★★☆ |
| **Value for money** | ★★★★★ |
| **GUITARIST RATING** | ★★★★☆ |