

M-Audio Ozonic

Derek Johnson breathes in this Firewire Audio/Midi interface & controller.

Now this is good.... The 'bung it all into one box' ethos of cheap and cheerful USB hardware has come to Firewire, courtesy of M-Audio. Though not exactly 'cheap', this eminently affordable package offers no less than four audio ins and outs, Midi I/O and a pretty comprehensive compact master keyboard/Midi control surface. Read on!

Control Zone

If you've experienced budget compact USB controllers before, be prepared for the unexpected feeling of sturdiness in Ozonic. On the face of it, a similar feature set to M-Audio's USB-equipped Ozone audio interface/Midi controller is on offer. Closer examination reveals a large, bright LCD for straightforward editing, double the audio I/O and a lot more assignable knobs, sliders and buttons. Ozonic also works as a stand-alone controller too, so it can access hidden parameters in hardware Midi instruments and effects units independently of your computer.

The keyboard itself offers 37 full-sized keys, complete with velocity sensitivity and aftertouch. The latter can be assigned to any Midi controller, as can the back panel sustain and expression pedals. Add these to the front

and program change, and can transmit independent pitch bend, mod wheel, aftertouch and pedal data. And don't think you have just 37 notes to split into three either: the keyboard can be transposed over the full Midi note range.

Going Deeper

The arrangement of knobs, sliders and buttons is fairly tidy, encouraging a logical approach to custom assignment. For example, there are nine sliders which could be eight faders for a mixer, plus a master fader. The eight knobs could be pan pots. Alternatively, the sliders could be used as two sets of four-stage envelope controls, with the knobs perhaps assigned to filter cut-off and resonance, and perhaps LFO parameters, on a virtual synth. Buttons can be mutes and solos, or mode selectors. A handful of buttons are labelled as sequencer transport functions but the assignments can be over-ridden if you wish.

Creating these assignments is easy on Ozonic: the big LCD is a great feature, and the special edit mode turns the 37-note keyboard into a set of parameter access switches. Even easier, though, is M-Audio's Enigma application, which is dedicated to providing users with a quick graphical approach to the assignment of Midi

data to Ozonic controls (it also works with other M-Audio devices). It works brilliantly, courtesy of included parameter assignments for dozens of devices, and is free – though you'll have to download it first.

On the subject of software, there is more: M-Audio has slipped in an 'Adapted' version of Propellerhead's Reason virtual studio. Don't get too excited though: it's cut down and fixed in what it can provide, but is certainly not to be sniffed at if you're new to this desktop music caper. The

software provides a mixer, delay, reverb, SubTractor synth, ReDrum drum module and an NN19 sampler. It can make a great noise nonetheless, and lateral thinking will stretch its application further.

Audiophile

The remaining controls are split between audio chores and various system tasks. For example, the 10 buttons that surround the joystick select, in two banks, the 20 on-board configuration memories (which include GM, Propellerhead Reason devices, Native Instruments plugins, Steinberg's Halion and more). Other buttons enter edit mode and activate a 'snapshot' option, amongst other choices.



panel controls, which include sundry knobs, sliders and buttons, plus pitch bend and modulation wheels, and the total is 40 sources. The switches and other controllers differ slightly in what they can generate, but between them can transmit continuous controllers, RPNs, NRPNs, program changes, bank select, note ons Midi Machine Control functions and system exclusive messages to your target Midi software or devices.

The most unexpected controller is Ozonic's joystick; it's a bit slippery, but nevertheless it can have four Midi destinations assigned to it, adding a nostalgic feeling of real-time control. Another surprise is the way the keyboard can actually transmit data in three zones: each can have its own note range, Midi channel, transposition



The audio ins and outs, at the rear, all feature 24-bit/96k converters. The input complement is configured as a phantom-powered XLR connector, a Hi-Z instrument jack, and two line level 1/4-inch jacks. The first two inputs also benefit from level pots on the front panel, complete with signal and clipping LEDs. The four outs are arranged as pairs of balanced and unbalanced jacks; they bring the audio back from your host software which can be mixed with audio coming *in* to the interface. There's also a headphone socket alongside it.

Back to the top and the remaining audio controls govern level in some way. A pair of sliders, for example, control the level of the two stereo audio streams coming from the host software. There's also a headphone level knob, plus a further knob that adjusts the monitored balance of the two stereo returns (could be useful for lap jockeys in a live situation).

There's also a separate monitor control, though what this *really* does is adjust the level of incoming audio: set up your host audio recording software correctly and this is the knob that gives you easy zero-latency monitoring while recording. Nice!

Worth a quick mention is the Midi I/O: it's independent of the Ozonic's master keyboard/Midi control surface functions. We'll also have a nod at the single Firewire socket (two would have been better), and the power input jack, for use with the supplied PSU when bus power isn't available.

The Real World

And what about using the Ozonic with your own software? No problems: it integrates with most software on the Mac or PC – even ProTools, courtesy of the new 'M-Powered' version of that software.

Both Midi control and audio functions worked as expected, with neither experiencing any real compromises: this is one well thought-out device! The hardware monitoring control meant latency was not an issue during recording, and I love the flexible routing of returning audio. Though Ozonic doesn't push the Firewire connection particularly hard, it was nice to know that it wouldn't choke, as a USB-equipped device might do in similar circumstances. I was also impressed with the audio hardware: mic, line and instrument inputs all kept noise to a minimum, and the output was quality all the way. Nice to have the balanced output option for a final mix, too, whether to external mastering, sub-mixing or house PA.

As a controller, Ozonic also scored. There are tons of controls for such a small device, and if none of the presets works for you, creating a new profile from scratch is easy – and Enigma makes it even easier.

Size really doesn't matter with Ozonic: hook it up to a notebook and you have the perfect portable music setup. It proved to be the ideal companion to a host of software, as a controller and audio out for Propellerhead Reason and Cakewalk Project 5, as much as with audio recording apps.

There's little to moan about, really, considering what you get for the money. I could mention the lack of digital I/O, wish the zones could be velocity switched, and wonder why Enigma isn't on the Ozonic driver CD. But I won't: I'll dwell instead on the great audio quality, flexible I/O, and the huge fun that can be had with so many Midi controllers. A top effort all 'round.



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