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ESI U22XT and UGM96 Audio Interfaces

Reviews by Mike Metlay

ESI Audiotechnik is a German manufacturer whose audio products aren't as well known in the USA as those of many other firms, but are often very interesting for their unusual configurations. This time around, we're looking at two ESI interfaces, a brand-new contender in the desktop interface race and an ultraportable go-anywhere audio solution.

U22 XT

The U22 XT is a half-rackspace desktop interface in a striking coppery-orange metal case. It includes 2-in/2-out audio conversion at up to 24-bit/96 kHz quality. The front panel sports one mic input with a XLR/TRS combination jack, switchable 48V phantom power, and adjustable gain, and one Hi-Z guitar input jack on $^1/_4$" TS with gain control. A 3-position switch lets you select Mic, Hi-Z, or both inputs (one panned hard left and the other panned hard right). There's a large volume knob for the rear-panel outputs, a $^1/_4$" TRS headphone jack with volume control, and a direct/computer audio mix control for near-zero-latency hardware monitoring. Metering is limited to two peak LEDs. The rear panel is spartan, with unbalanced RCA inputs, a switch to choose between them and the front-panel inputs, balanced $^1/_4$" TRS outputs, and a USB-B port.

The U22 XT comes bundled with Stanton Deckadance LE virtual DJ software and the Bitwig Studio 8-Track DAW. It's a class-compliant USB 2.0 interface that needs no drivers to run on a Mac, although an optional software control panel is included. Its Mac CoreAudio compatibility means that with a powered hub and a Camera Connection Kit, it also works well as an audio interface on iOS devices. For you Linux users out there, we weren't able to test the U22 XT on a Linux machine, but ESI informs us that it's ALSA class compliant and will work on many of the available distributions.

Windows users, however, will find the U22 XT's support software offers some very nice extras that make it stand out from the pack. It comes with a neat little onscreen control panel app with input and output metering and a function called DirectWIRE, which is essentially an inter-application audio patchbay. Without any loopback wiring or extra utilities, you can route signals from any application to any other, allowing you to (for example) easily record the audio output of any program. DirectWIRE supports MME, WDM, GSIF, and ASIO drivers, so it will work with pretty much any Windows program that handles audio.

Audio quality is quite good, with 102 dB signal/noise on inputs and 108 dB on outputs. The U22 XT is bus-powered and light but sturdy, and does its job with no fuss. Users of Windows machines who have to route audio between applications will enjoy the convenience of DirectWIRE, and all users will like how this interface treats their sound.

UGM96

"UGM" stands for "Ultra-Mobile Guitar and Microphone" and "96" of course means 96 kHz, and that pretty much sums up the UGM96. It's a 2-in/2-out audio interface that's about the size of a cell phone cut in half, weighing practically nothing and providing 24/96 audio quality over USB 2.0.

The two inputs are on the front; one is an unbalanced $^1/_4$" TS Hi-Z guitar input, and the other is a balanced $^1/_4$" TRS jack, with two switches (one for 20 dB of gain and the other for high or low impedance) allowing it to handle guitars or microphones that don't require phantom power (you'll need a $^1/_4$"-to-XLR converter cable). The two outputs on the back, each a $^1/_4$" TRS output, can drive headphones or line-level inputs to active monitors (with a splitter cable). A USB Mini-B port connects to your computer; the UGM96 is class-compliant and works on Mac and iOS without special drivers (although it also has an optional control panel app); a Windows driver comes with a control panel app that has input and output metering. It's also bundled with Audified inTone real time effects processing software and Stanton Deckadance LE.

With 98 dB signal/noise on input and 90 dB S/N on output, the UGM96 provides really high-quality audio in a tiny package. (Volume control is done on your computer). There's now no excuse not to have great sound with you anywhere you go.

U22 XT, $129.95; UGM96, $99.95; ESI Audiotechnik GmbH, www.esi-audio.com; dist. in USA by Eleven Dimensions Media, www.11dmedia.com