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VOL. THIRTY-THREE
NUMBER TWO

NOVEMBER 2019
USA \$5.99
CANADA \$5.99

ESI M4U eX and M8U eX USB 3.0 MIDI Interfaces

REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR.

ESI is a German audio manufacturer that designs audio interfaces, monitor controllers, monitoring speakers, and in the case of this review, MIDI interfaces.

For 36 years and counting, MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) continues to be the standard protocol for linking and controlling keyboards, drum machines, sound modules, and DAW controllers. MIDI has gradually moved away from transmission over 5-pin din cables, to living in a USB world. Many modern audio interfaces no longer include 5-pin MIDI ports. Dedicated MIDI patch bays and breakout boxes were all but a thing of the past, that is, until vintage synths, sound modules, and drum machines started making a major comeback—thank you, 1980s resurgence!

Many of us chucked our old MIDI boxes years ago, but now we need them again, preferably with modern sensibilities and computer-based USB control. This is where the new ESI M4U eX and M8U eX boxes come in.

Modern USB 3.0 MIDI interface

The ESI M4U eX and M8U eX offer the same control and feature set, differing only in size and ports count. With metal enclosures finished in ESI orange, the M4U eX is a 4x4 unit with four ports on the front and four on the back, and the larger M8U eX is an 8x8 configuration with eight front and eight rear ports. Both have front-located signal/routing LEDs (8 and 16 respectively) and a function button for placing the unit in standalone mode with pass-through, MIDI thru and MIDI merge functionality. Despite their rack mount sizing, neither enclosure is actually rack mountable.



Each unit is a USB 3.0 device (USB 2.0 legacy mode available). They can be bus-powered or powered with an included wall-wart power supply. When plugged in, each unit becomes a powered 3-port USB 3.0 hub (rear-mounted ports).

The eX units are 100% class compliant (no driver needed) on OS X and Windows 7-10. Multiple units can be ganged and configured via a set of dip switches located on the bottom panel; USB 3.0/2.0 legacy mode can be set and locked here as well.

Ins and Outs – Either/Or!

The feature that piqued my interest at NAMM last year was that the 8/16 ports of the eX models have an auto-detect feature, and don't care if they are ins or outs. This means zero wasted ports when an in and/or out port is not needed for every device.

In use

In my studio, I want all of my synths, controllers, and modules hooked up at all times, ready to play and be sequenced in my DAW (Cubase Pro 10). I installed both units as follows: to the M8U eX, I connected the MIDI ins and outs of my Yamaha EX5 and Roland JD-990 synth modules, and my DSI Prophet 8 and Moog Voyager keyboards (that's 8 ins and outs). Next, I hooked up my Strymon Timeline and Big Sky effects pedals, and Bricasti M7M reverb for use with their online editors for programming. That leaves two open ports. My last two synths, a pair of Moog Mother 32

units, only have MIDI in. In the past, one of these would have been out of luck. With the M8U eX, there were no wasted ports.

My only initial complaint with the M8U eX is that it's not rack-mountable; however, ESI showed rack solutions for both units at Summer NAMM and should have them available soon. If and when racked, an argument could then be made to have the bulk of the ports on one side for a more organized cable layout. As such, once hooked up, I placed the M8U eX out of sight inside my synth rack, since I had no desktop space available.

Along with my synths and effects, I used the USB hub to connect a Keith McMillen QuNexus, an Arturia DrumBrute, and an Expressive E Touche USB Expression Controller. Synth workstation hooked up and complete.

I placed the M4U eX on my desktop next to my computer. With nothing permanently attached, this would be handy for clients who bring in their own MIDI devices, as well as for whenever I test out MIDI-equipped gear. I used the incorporated USB hub for external hard drives, my eLicenser, and iLok 3.

Wrap up

Both the ESI M4U eX and M8U eX are well built, rock-solid boxes with old school MIDI connectivity for days, all with a modern USB 3.0 edge and workflow. Nicely done. ➤

Price: ESI M4U eX \$179, M8U eX \$289
More from: www.esi-audio.com