



Apogee Symphony I/O

There's always a compromise to be had when it comes to interfaces, says **STEPHEN BENNETT**, but could Apogee have come close to compromise-free perfection with its Symphony I/O?

IN MY EXPERIENCE, no matter what audio interface you buy, there are still compromises to be had. Get one with a PCIe card for ultra low latency? Can't use it with a laptop. Get one with ultra high quality converters? Doesn't have enough inputs and outputs. Get one for your Pro Tools HD system? Can't use it to its full potential with Nuendo. Apogee has a deserved reputation for high quality interfaces and, with its AD/DA 16x units, full compatibility with Pro Tools HD. Its latest interface, the Symphony I/O, appears to be an attempt to consolidate the company's long experience in interface design to produce a product that appears to be the ideal candidate as a central hub of a modern digital studio – but is it, as first appears, all things to all pros?

Overview

The Symphony I/O is an Apple Mac-only expandable interface capable of capturing audio at up to 192kHz at 24-bit resolution (USB connections are limited to 96kHz). It can be used either with Apogee's own Symphony 64 PCIe cards (a small format PCIe card with two multi-pin outputs, each providing 32 channels of audio for Symphony I/O racks), Avid's Pro Tools HD cards (Mac and PC versions supported), in Standalone mode just as a A/D D/A converter or using the USB connection – all switchable from the front panel via what Apogee calls the Audio Interface Mode (AIM) technology. There are versatile and user selectable input and output configurations, and multiple Symphony I/O units can be connected to increase the physical input, and output counts. The Symphony I/O benefits from Apogee's C777 clock technology and the company says it's the best sounding converter it has ever made – which is quite a claim from a company renowned for its audio quality!

The Hardware

Housed in an elegant 2U 19 rack mountable box the Symphony I/O's front panel is uncluttered. Two push-to-click soft knobs select and control the parameters displayed on the OLED panel which is itself situated underneath a panel containing a bank of clear, programmable 10-segment LED bargraph meters and a large sample rate display. A power switch and two independent headphone sockets complete the picture. You may be wondering what

headphone sockets are doing on an interface that's so obviously meant to be tucked away in a rack or machine room? Well, that's part of the unit's flexibility, as we'll see later.

The rear panel sports a multi voltage IEC mains connector, wordclock connections, and USB and Ethernet sockets – the latter, intriguingly, not in use at the time of writing. The Symphony 'Main' multi-pin socket is for connection to Symphony 64 PCIe, Symphony Mobile Express/34 cards or Avid HD PCIe cards, while the 'Thru' socket is there for you to add another Symphony I/O for extra physical ins and outs. The unit has fan assisted cooling which, though much quieter than the one on my Avid 96 I/O, is obviously noisier than something that relies on convection cooling – but it is temperature controlled and therefore shouldn't cause much of an issue (and didn't during the review period). The rest of the rear panel is dedicated to the feature that gives the interface its name – the I/O module slots. I/O obviously stands for Input and Output – and there's plenty of choice, available.

The I/O Modules

Currently, Apogee has four I/O modules available, two of which can be installed at the same time. They have the following configurations: eight channels of analogue I/O with eight channels of AES I/O, eight channels of analogue I/O with up to eight channels of Optical I/O, 16 channels of analogue outputs with up to 16 channels of digital inputs, and 16 channels of analogue inputs with up to 16 channels of digital output. A microphone pre-amp module has also been announced that, sadly, wasn't available at the time of review. It provides eight

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THE REVIEWER

STEPHEN BENNETT has been involved in music production for over 25 years. Now based in Norwich he splits his time between writing books and articles on music technology, running his own Chaos studios and working in the Electroacoustic Studios in the School of Music at the University of East Anglia. He's also a filmmaker with several music videos and short films to his credit. www.stephenjamesbennett.co.uk



► microphone preamps, four instrument inputs, and eight balanced insert points. It works alongside one of the analogue I/O cards and is apparently based on Apogee's Trak 2 mic pre-amp design, so it should be up to the job.

Analogue inputs are via Tascam format D sub connectors (apart from the instrument inputs, which are on quarter-inch Jacks), while the various digital interfaces are on D sub, XLR, RCA, or optical connectors depending on which I/O cards you have fitted.

The Maestro 2 Software

Apogee supplies a different version of its Maestro software for the Symphony I/O than its older interfaces, but if you've used Maestro before, you'll have no issues with this one.



Right at the end of the review period, the full release version 4 was announced, with full support for OS X Lion. During the review I used the Beta release of the same software and had no problems installing and running it on 10.6 Macs.

Version 4 brings, amongst other goodies, the USB recording mode (limited to one Symphony I/O unit) and the ability to

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hang up to four of the interfaces off a Pro Tools rig. Though the set-up parameters can be accessed from the Symphony I/O's front panel (handy in Pro Tools mode), I found it much easier to do everything through Maestro 2.

The software provides a clean, easy to understand interface (unlike some other multi-input interfaces) and I found I was setting various parameters and routing inputs and outputs within minutes and without recourse to the manual.

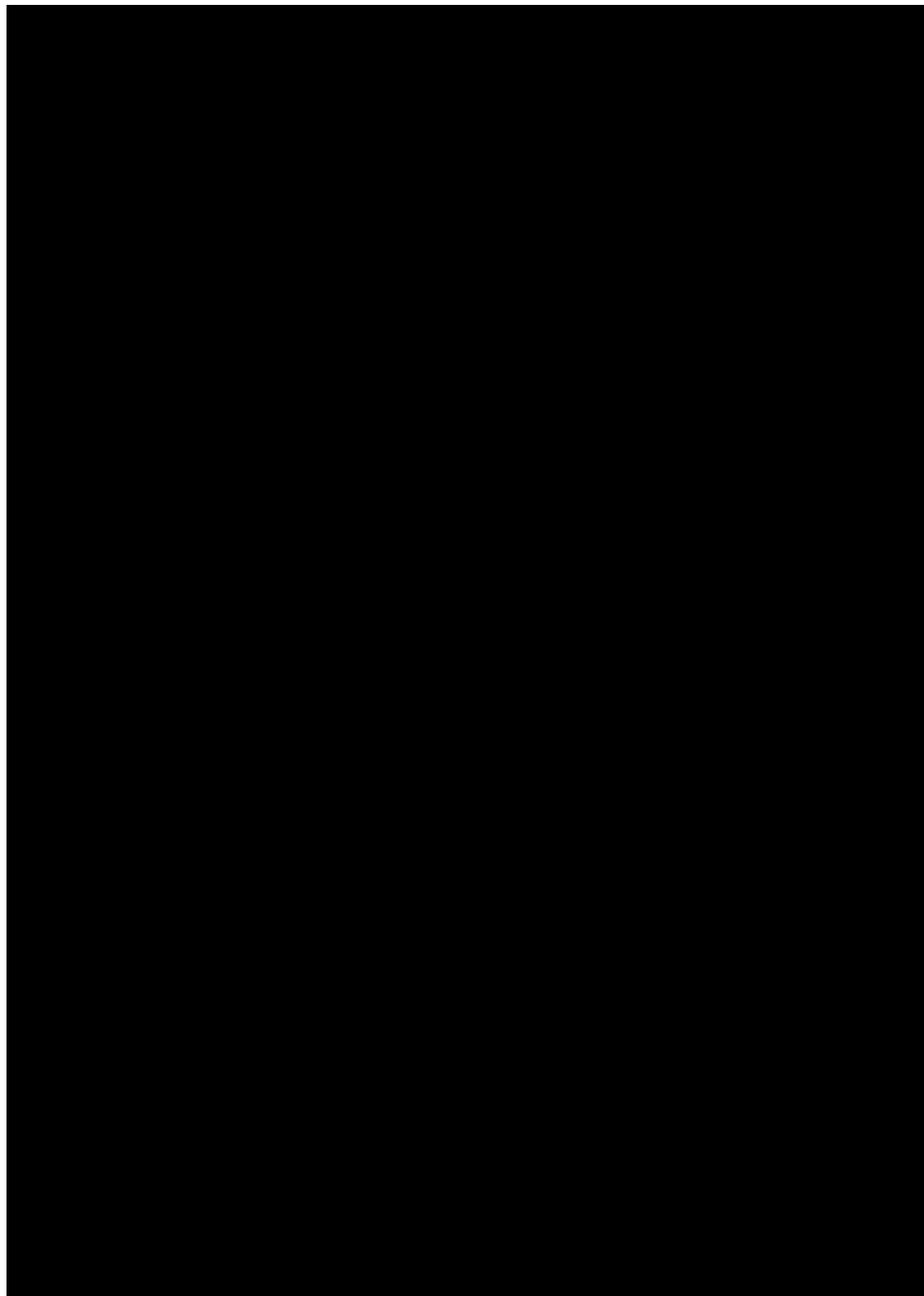
The latest version allows you to create a low-latency direct monitor mix – but only in USB or stand-alone mode. I assume Apogee will eventually incorporate this feature when using the Symphony 64 card in a future update but, as its PCIe allows you to work at much lower latencies than USB, it may not be much of an issue – especially if you're working with a mixing console.

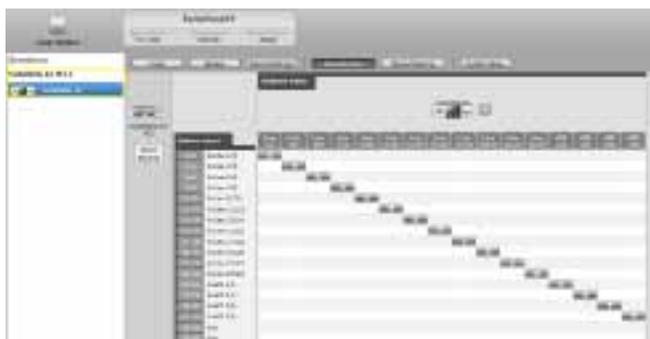
The software can be run in full screen or a minimised form, which allows easy access to mutes, volumes, and other useful stuff – once you'd configured the Symphony I/O for a particular AIM type (which handily remembers all your settings, including calibration and signal routing) this probably would be the way you'd have the software displayed on your monitor.

In Use

During the review period, the Symphony I/O performed flawlessly in all modes. After I'd downloaded the latest version of the driver, Maestro software, and firmware, my first port of call was to connect the Symphony I/O directly to my Avid Pro Tools HD system, replacing the I/O I normally use. To use the Apogee unit with Pro Tools, the USB cable must be connected as well for Maestro 2 control – though in practice, once configured the Symphony I/O slotted in neatly to the Avid system without further recourse to the Apogee software.

Moving across to another Mac Pro fitted with the Symphony 64 card (using the supplied cable to connect to the Symphony I/O interface) allowed me to more easily compare the interface with similar quality units from other companies. I usually use a Metric Halo ULN-2 for these sonic comparisons as it's my 'to go' interface and while its inputs and outputs are limited compared with the Apogee, it should at least give an indication of how it stacks up to the likes of Metric Halo's LIO-8 – which is a more natural competitor to the Apogee unit. Under critical listening conditions the Apogee proved a match for my Metric Halo, and I can't fault its audio quality at all. Converter quality is so good now at the higher end that it's really just nit picking to choose which ones I prefer. Suffice it to say that I'd be happy to record and mix with the Apogee. If you forced me at gunpoint, I'd say the Symphony I/O's





Maestro 2: Symphony I/O in USB audio mode.



Maestro 2: Routing Symphony I/O and Symphony 64 PCIe card.

was using it – which I feel is a pretty good accolade for this type of product.

Conclusion

The Symphony I/O upholds Apogee’s pedigree with respect to audio quality while adding expandability, flexibility, and ease of use into the equation. It works beautifully as an alternative or companion to Avid’s own interfaces in a Pro Tools HD system and just as well as on its own, either with Apogee’s 64 PCIe card or the basic USB connectivity – while its audio quality is at least on a par with its peer competitors.

Its modular nature means that Apogee can update and enhance the feature set when required, and Apogee appears to be a company that listen to its customers – as the incremental upgrades and improvements to the system since its launch demonstrate. To that end, it can’t be long before you’ll see Thunderhighs (sorry, Thunderbolt) on a Symphony I/O.

I think Apogee has got it just right with the Symphony I/O and I’m looking forward to seeing how the system develops over the coming years.

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▶ character was ‘transparent and dynamic’ – but I’d be dancing about architecture, so please don’t.

Maestro 2 allows you to set various Soft Limit modes (-2dBFS, -4dBFS, Soft Saturation and Soft Crush) and this feature is designed to take off the edge when hitting the stops – which may be useful if you’re working in a live situation or to if you’re out to create a deliberate effect.

Talking of live recording brings us to the USB Audio mode. Whipping the Symphony I/O out of the rack, I used it, without problems, to track 16 channels of a live concert with my 2.2 GHz Macbook Pro, using Logic Pro 9.1.4 and a buffer size of 128 (7.8ms).

This capability, combined with the latency free monitoring mode, should mean the Symphony I/O is perfectly useable for those without access to PCIe slots. USB audio has come a long way in the last year or so (as interfaces such as RME’s UFX demonstrate) so while some may be unhappy that it’s not a Firewire socket that’s on there, the USB connectivity is perfectly capable of providing the ins and outs at low latencies without breaking a sweat. The fan noise wasn’t a problem in this situation (but it wasn’t a particularly steamy night, even for jazz) and the two headphone sockets were particularly useful in a live context. The first I/O module’s analogue outputs act as the main stereo monitoring outputs with a default 20dB pad over them – though you can change this if you wish. Altogether, the Symphony I/O felt like a mature product and after a while I forgot I

INFORMATION

- Ⓢ Symphony Base Chassis: GB£1,330.00 (exc.VAT)
- All option cards: GB£1,573.00 (exc.VAT)
- Symphony 64 PCI-E card: GB£715.00 (exc.VAT)

Ⓐ Apogee Electronics Corp., 1715 Berkeley Street, Santa Monica, CA 90404, USA

☎ +1 310 584 9394
 🌐 www.apogeedigital.com

Ⓐ UK Distributors: Sonic Distribution, 3 Hunting Gate, Hitchin, Herts, SG4 0TJ

☎ +44 (0) 845 500 2500
 🌐 www.seelectronics.com

