

Simple and functional, with amazing sound for little money, **STEPHEN BENNETT** finds the Apogee Duet pushes all the right buttons.

When Apogee introduced the Ensemble Firewire interface with its reasonably low price and close integration with Apple's Logic software, it caused great excitement amongst those seeking the kind of high quality digital converters and microphone preamplifiers for which the company is known – but without the high price of its flagship units. However, for those who don't need all the bells and whistles and only need a couple of inputs and outputs, even the Ensemble might seem to be a bit of an overkill. For these users, Apogee has introduced the Duet.

Mac's screen which shows a descriptive graphic of what you're actually selecting, and the LED displays show the input levels and chosen channel. It's a nice indication of how well the Duet is integrated with the Mac.

Input to the Duet is via balanced XLRs or 1/4 unbalanced line inputs and the level, phase and 48v phantom power are selected within Maestro. The inputs can be grouped for stereo work and the output can be set at two levels: line, and a -20dB setting, which is intended for instrument amplifiers. Both the stereo and headphone outputs receive the same signal and can be muted by a single control – or separately if you prefer, a feature which

APOGEE DUET

AUDIO INTERFACE



The Unit

The Duet is a small, sleek, anodised aluminium box, which is a perfect cosmetic match for a MacBook Pro – perhaps Apogee should consider making it available in the various MacBook finishes as well?

Its main feature is a nice large knob on the top panel and two LED strips that display various input and output levels. I was really pleased to see a full size quarter-inch headphone output, and there's a Firewire socket on the back for connection to the computer. The Duet is bus powered only, which makes a lot of sense for something so portable, and it worked perfectly on both my laptop and Powermac G5. It's relatively heavy and stays where it's put on a desk, which is extremely important as all the inputs and outputs are on flying leads connected to the back of the unit via a locking D-connector. This is probably the Duet's most controversial feature, but I must say that it worked well in practice and the breakout connector feels very sturdy. Sample rates can be set from 44.1 to 96kHz but the Duet has no digital inputs or outputs, or any means of external synchronisation. The whole thing is easy to stuff into a laptop bag and it screams, "Take me outside and record the sounds of Moose mating. Binaurally."


I was supplied with a software CD for Tiger, but a Leopard version is available from the Apogee website. I installed both versions onto my two Macs and they performed in exactly the same fashion. The CD installs a CoreAudio driver, which allows the unit to be used with audio software other than Apple's, along with Apogee's control software. The most recent news is that with Tiger 10.4.11 and Leopard, Duet employs the class compliant Firewire driver which is part of the OS. Plugging in the Firewire cable automatically loads the Maestro control panel, which I thought was rather nice – though you can disable this action if you want. The software itself (and its counterpart located in Logic if you're using that particular DAW), provides a clear way to access the Duet's settings and displays, but the hardware itself has some nice mechanical touches too. The big knob also acts as a switch and pressing it allows you to choose whether it is controlling master output or the levels for inputs one and two. As you press the knob a small window appears on the

is accessed from the Advanced tab. This section also allows you to set the Gain ranges of the input controls and has settings to change how the level meters act. Surprisingly, but usefully, the Duet can send out up to four MIDI controllers which are modified either by the hardware knob on the interface or the on-screen ones. The Duet can produce a latency free input signal and mix when recording. This worked perfectly and was incredibly easy to set up from within Maestro.

In Use

I recorded some vocals and acoustic guitar into the Duet and the results were clean and neutral-sounding with plenty of headroom. The output into my monitors was also impressive, and both inputs and outputs were easy rivals in quality for my usual (and more expensive) two-channel interface. Listening back to files obtained from the Ensemble confirmed Apogee's claim that the microphone preamps are identical to the Duet's costlier sibling.

Conclusion

To get Apogee sound quality for so little money is nothing short of amazing. Though it lacks the features of some of its rivals, it makes up for it in simplicity and functionality. For those thinking of obtaining a boutique preamplifier to use alongside their current audio interface, it could make more sense to get a Duet and run the two as an aggregate device – and get an extra two input channels into the bargain. For the portable recordist, it's a superb quality interface that leaves no excuse for not obtaining excellent recordings on location. Now, where did I see those Moose tracks again? 

INFORMATION

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