

Edirol R-4

If you want to do location recording on a budget then your options are limited particularly if you don't want tape.

ROB JAMES test drives a portable 4-channel hard disk recorder that occupies its own price space.

HAVE LONG HAD the need for an affordable 4-channel location recorder. For my purposes, the occasional sound effects gathering session and supplementing on-board camcorder tracks, nothing too complex is required. On the other hand there are some very clear 'must haves'. I'm fed up with the unreliability and maintenance costs associated with DAT and 24-bit recording is essential. So the most obvious requirements are; hard disk and or flash memory storage, 24-bit recording to .WAV files and direct connectivity to a PC/Mac, analogue and digital audio interfaces, a couple of mic pres with phantom power and reasonable battery life.

More than one of the current crop of high-end professional machines could tick all the boxes but would be serious overkill in terms of facilities and especially cost. Until the Edirol R-4 appeared there was nothing that came close to this spec at under UK£3000. On paper the R-4 does what is required and then some at the eminently reasonable price of £935.22 plus VAT.

Photographs can be deceptive, the R-4 is around the same size and weight as a hard-back blockbuster novel and the casing is all plastic. A neat carrying bag with Velcro-ed flaps over the connectors is supplied with the machine and a hard case that takes the recorder and accessories is available as a £126.81 plus VAT option.

At this price there are inevitably some compromises so I'll get them out of the way early. Construction is not exactly rugged, about the same level as a semi-pro camcorder. But in any case, you shouldn't be even slightly rough with anything containing a hard disk drive (*Easier to say than do. Ed*).

The mic inputs would benefit from another 10dB or so of gain, as could the monitor amp, and the mic preamps might usefully be quieter. The analogue switched 'limiter' is, if the manual is to be believed, actually a 3:1 compressor. It has odd time-constants — there is a long hold after an over followed by a very audible release. In any case, Left and Right sidechains are not linked, making it effectively useless for stereo. Editing is fairly rudimentary, but adequate for managing recordings, but it is difficult to be accurate. The built-in digital effects are effective enough but only work at 44.1kHz and 48kHz. It is inadvisable to record with effects and you cannot play back one pair of tracks while recording on the other, so they are of limited value.

Vices detailed, there are compensatory virtues. Four-channel recording is at up to 96kHz, 24-bit onto the internal 40Gb 2.5-inch hard disk. File format is WAV or BWAV. Each recording is termed a Project and can contain mono x 1, 2, 3 or 4, or stereo x 1 or 2, or 4-channel x 1 files. Note, the infamous 2Gb limit applies, but is elegantly dealt with. Projects larger than 2Gb are automatically split into multiple files.

Markers can be inserted during recording and, if you use the BWF format, the markers travel with the files. Projects can be copied onto Type 1

Compact Flash cards for loading into a computer or directly transferred over USB (1.1 or 2.0).

Controls are simple and logical. The sloping front panel has a backlit LCD, internally illuminated transport controls, and input and monitor gain pots. On the top surface the power switch has to be held down for a couple of seconds to turn the machine on or off. A Hold switch locks all controls in their current state apart from the pots. Phantom power is switched in channel pairs and System gets you into the main menus. Navigation is easy using the four Cursor/Monitor select keys with the scrub wheel and Enter/Exit keys. The four analogue input channels are XLR/Jack combo sockets with separate Mic/Line switches for each channel pair. Stereo analogue line out is on phonos as is stereo SPDIF I-O. All or any of the four channels can be mixed down to the stereo outputs but not output in 4-channel form.

The power supply is an in-line type and the jack has a neat cable retainer to help prevent inadvertent disconnection. The R-4 can also run using 8 internal AA alkaline or NiMh batteries although there is no charging facility. Using NiMhs a couple of hours' operation is possible and you could use an external battery pack if longer duration is required. The final socket is enigmatically labelled 'L-Connector' and is the icing on the cake for video use because it's a LANC remote control connection. When used with a suitably equipped camcorder the R-4 will start and stop recording at the same time but there is no timecode though. There are two built-in mics and speakers — the mics are useful for guide-track recording but, as you might expect, pick up mechanical noise from the machine. The speakers are fine for editing speech.

The filing system is straightforward. Pressing the Enter/Find key brings up all existing projects on the screen. Highlighting the required project with the cursor keys and hitting the Enter key again loads the project for playback or editing. Projects can easily be divided, trimmed and combined. Since there is only stereo audio output, the only way to use the R-4 to acquire 4-channel material is to transfer via USB or Compact Flash. Fortunately, transfers via USB are

completely drama free. Simply plug in the R-4 and a Windows XP machine sees it as an external mass storage device. If you feel the need, suitable files can also be moved to the R-4.

I'm not going to pretend this device is suitable for critical classical music recordings or that it will put up with the rigours of life on the road day in, day out. However, as a 4-channel acquisition device for sympathetic use, especially in partnership with video, the R-4 is the only game in town unless you can afford to pay a multiple of the asking price. ■

PROS 4-channel recording; remote control from camcorders; price.

CONS Analogue circuitry could be better; no 4-channel audio output; no 4-channel digital audio input.

Contact

EDIROL, JAPAN
Website: www.edirol.com
UK: +44 870 350 1515

