

Mackie Control C4

Hardware control surfaces are a good thing, right? Faders and knobs beat a mouse and keyboard shortcuts every time, right? The last three or four years has seen these statements accepted as the best practice route to enhanced productivity, creativity and possibly Valhalla, besides which, they look cool.

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still being developed and extended today. Mackie also designed and manufactured the Logic Control and Logic Control XT expander using proprietary Emagic technology. However, the Logic Control communicates via standard MIDI connections and it was a logical (pun intended) step for Mackie to develop these surfaces into the Mackie Control Universal line. These, thanks to support from all the major manufacturers, are now compatible with a wide range of applications including, crucially, Logic under its new Apple ownership.

Logic's enthusiasm (with support for both the MCU extender and C4 arriving in Logic Pro 7) persuaded Mackie that the time had come to unleash the C4.

So far, although Mackie is talking about C4 support

for its forthcoming Traktion 2.0 release, the only other application supporting the C4 is Sonar 4 and this is what I used for this review. Cubase and Nuendo support the MCU and MCU expander and it can only be a matter of time before they support the C4.

The UK£850 (plus VAT) C4 can be used standalone but obviously makes more sense partnered with a Control Universal. In this configuration, possibly with one or more fader extenders, you have a more than useful, assignable style mixer control surface. The MCU is stylish and attractive with a large LCD display running across the unit and excellent V-Pots with annular LED position indicators and push-the-knob switches. C4 has 32 of these and four of the LCD displays, one for each row of 8 V-pots. This means simultaneous access to 32 parameters.

The buttons beneath the rows of V-Pot determine what will be controlled. The precise implementation will differ from application to application and, of course, the way the user configures it. In the case of Sonar, getting the C4 working was probably the most drama free control surface install I've experienced. This first version of the Sonar MIDImap leaves a certain amount to be desired but there is the option of editing the .INI file in a text editor if you are feeling brave/competent. There are fairly cryptic instructions contained in the file itself. Updates will soon be available for those of us without the chutzpah, time, or knowledge to attempt it for ourselves.

Each MCU unit needs a dedicated physical MIDI in and out connection to itself. Not a problem if you have a Unitor, Midex 8 or similar MIDI interface. Once connected all that is required in Sonar is to select the relevant control surface, tell it which MIDI

ports you are using and off you go. Initially I had no written information about the Sonar implementation but I still managed to find my way around — to a point. With Sonar the top row of V-Pots can be used as function keys and these are programmable from within the application. At the bottom of the C4, keys perform various functions. There are five groups — Function, Assignment, Modifiers, Parameter, and Navigation. Function and Assignment buttons have associated LEDs indicating status. The Split button has four possible states so three LEDs are used. I do not propose to detail the precise functions of all the buttons since their action will differ depending on the application.

Properly programmed, the C4 is Mackie's famous 'Fat Channel' from the D8B on steroids. Although I have adapted to the vicissitudes of GUI parameter tweaking, nothing beats the instant gratification of grabbing a rotary control and turning. If you adopt a consistent approach to which knobs do what, reaching for the right one quickly becomes instinctive. Much the same applies to the buttons. If you really can't cope with learning what they do, despite what the printed legends say, a little ingenuity will allow you to print your own overlays on film or some manufacturers may supply them as they already do for the MCU.

Mackie seems to be on a roll just now. The digitalXbus mixers are revolutionary and the MCU series of controllers are at the top of the class. The only immediate problem with the C4 is restricted DAW support. If you want the control and flexibility the MCU and C4 combination can bring, and your application doesn't yet support it, start hassling your DAW vendor today or consider a change of DAW. ■

THE C4 IS THE LATEST component in Mackie's bid for domination in the burgeoning controller market. And yet it was announced in March 2003 as an MCU unit, a lot earlier for Emagic's Logic, and has actually been ready to ship for some considerable time. So why the delay? To find the answer we must dig a little deeper into the murky world of protocols and politics.

Many third party controllers rely on communication with the host software via generic MIDI messages and often leave it up to the user to map their functions to the software. This takes time effort and expertise, is frequently frustrating, and the end result is often less than optimal. The alternative approaches are either a completely proprietary protocol that might or might not use MIDI for the physical interconnect with the host, or a control surface specific MIDI template coded by the DAW manufacturer and optimised for the purpose. The reason for C4's late appearance was a complete absence of support from the application manufacturers. Here lies the dilemma, chicken and egg. How can you sell a control surface if it isn't supported by any applications? Equally, if the control surface is not available, what incentive is there for software developers to invest time and effort in producing specific support for it?

Mackie was an early entrant into add-on hardware controller territory. The HUI was not only very popular, but gave its name to an almost ubiquitous protocol,

PROS

The finishing touch to the MCU range; informative; satisfyingly tactile.

CONS

Software support currently limited; still uses standard MIDI connections rather than USB or FireWire.

EXTRAS

Traktion 2 is the first major update to Mackie's recording and MIDI production software. It introduces an enhanced



MIDI editor, more comprehensive keyboard control and the ability to map hardware MIDI controllers to filter parameters. There's also a 64-bit mix engine, improved external synchronisation support, eight aux sends and returns, and integration for Mackie Control Universal and C4 controllers.

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