Digigram VXpocket PC Card Digital Audio Interface (review)

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Figure 2. Digigram VXpocket PC card digital audio interface.

tional unit could be an especially pleasant option, and quite affordable at US$ 495.

More information on the MTC Express and the Max/MSP demos are available on the company's Web site (www.tactex.com).

Digigram VXpocket PC Card Digital Audio Interface

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As components have shrunk and processing power has increased, it is becoming increasingly popular to do digital audio—recording, editing, processing, performing—using a notebook computer. The convenience of being able to travel with much less gear is an obvious advantage. Interactive performances can be more engaging as well, as musicians need not be quite so hidden behind desktop computer components and full-sized monitors. One thing that has been lacking, however, is a compact, high-quality interface for importing, converting, and exporting audio. Digigram has filled that gap admirably with its VXpocket audio interface. At a list price of US$ 729, this 24-bit unit easily turns your portable computer into a two channel audio workstation.

The VXpocket is a sleek, credit card–sized PC card (see Figure 2) that pops into the built-in Type II slot that comes with most newer notebook computers, both Macintosh and Windows models. A

single cable that attaches to the card splits into balanced XLR analog connectors (two channels each of input and output) and S/PDIF coaxial digital RCA connectors for digital input/output (see Figure 3). I found that the length of cable provided with the VXpocket is a bit short to allow one to plug into the back of a DAT recorder or CD player without having to re-position the computer or audio devices. The entire cable set is approximately three feet in length, with the break-out portion, containing the individual connectors, being no more than six inches. Of course, this is easily solved by connecting your own cables, but that does start to add to the bulk of your necessities.

Installation is very simple. Digigram has provided ASIO drivers for both Macintosh and Windows (95, 98, NT), and additional ones for Macintosh Sound Manager and Windows Wave (PC users must also have a free IRQ). Version 2.20b and higher ASIO drivers provide 24-bit support, and allow selection of internal or external clock synchronization. An announced upgrade adds SMPTE (LTC) time-code input, which will require purchase of an additional cable. I tested the VXpocket on a Macintosh G3 PowerBook (OS 9.0.4, 400 MHz, 192 MB RAM). When installed, you need to verify that the ASIO driver is placed in the VX folder. Otherwise, the required extensions are added automatically and the con-

trols for the card added to the Sound Manager interface, accessed either through the Control Panels folder or the Extensions Strip. Digigram has also provided its own control panel, an interface that allows the user to select Sampling Frequency (up to 48 kHz), Input level (line or mic), Monitoring, and whether the input and output levels are fixed (0 dB). If the analog gain of the output is not fixed, there is also a slider for adjusting the levels.

One minor problem you might run into is that if you want to monitor your audio at the same time as sending it out of the card to a recorder or some other device, you will have to plug your headphones into the external unit as there is no monitor output on the card. If you are recording onto your hard disk, though, and don't need to send the signal back out to another device, then you can choose to send the audio out of the Macintosh interface and just plug your headphones into the Audio Out on the back of your computer.

The VXpocket works remarkably well. I tested it in several ways, and encountered no problems. I did find, I should admit, that it takes some adjustment to get the input levels set right when plugging a microphone directly into the soundcard. It is necessary to change the settings, and to make sure the input levels are not fixed so that you can adjust the levels. There is no phantom power element built in, so condenser mics cannot be used without their own power source. I found it easier to adjust the levels by plugging the mic into a mixer before sending it into the computer, and this option, while adding to the bulk of your luggage, also enables a wider range of situations to be accommodated (such as mixing a number of sources).

Otherwise, this unit works like a charm. I transferred soundfiles from

various sources to edit on the computer, and saw/heard no glitches or artifacts. In live performance situations, I processed live sounds in both SuperCollider and MSP, and the transfers and conversions ran flawlessly. In short, while the new generation of external audio gear, linked by USB or FireWire (IEEE 1394), is starting to come out, the VXpocket for now stands pretty much in a class by itself.

Digigram has recently released the PCXpocket 440 model, which is an expansion of the stereo PC card to four-channel balanced analog inputs/outputs (US$ 1,069). This, together with the SMPTE time-code feature, should be of great interest to anyone wanting to do multi-channel audio or to incorporate video into their projects.