Mackie Control Universal Pro

It's a controller that claims universal appeal and pro sensibilities. ROB JAMES revisits a perennial favourite and finds it tweaked and enhanced.

MACKIE HAS A long and illustrious history in designing and producing hardware controllers for audio and video workstations. The original HUI (Human User Interface) also gave its name to the first protocol to establish itself as a real standard. Some measure of its success can be judged by almost universal DAW support for it today. HUI was followed in 2002 by the Logic Control and shortly afterwards by the Mackie Control Universal using the same hardware but an extended protocol, Mackie Control. This was the first controller to provide truly useful control for a wide range of DAWs and NLEs at an attractive price. Size played a part in its success, not too big or too tall with a well-chosen set of controls and a sensible, open layout. It was also extensible with the addition of one or more MCU XT blocks of 8 faders and later with the Mackie Control C4 plug-in and virtual instrument controller for those who needed the extra control or wanted to make more of an impression.

The one snag was the MIDI interface. All these units just had standard DIN MIDI ports and no daisy-chaining was allowed. Time for an update. The UK£850 (+VAT) Mackie Control Universal Pro addresses the MIDI limitation and for good measure it has had a face-lift. Following the old adage, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' most of the other changes are cosmetic. It has acquired a more angular, harder look. Gone are the muted greys, replaced with silver and charcoal. The top surface is now a single sheet of metal and the front now drops away at a sharp angle instead of the Control Universal's gentle curve. Buttons that used to be round or semi-elliptical are now square or oblong. The jog/shuttle wheel is much taller so you can grip the sides or use 'finger on top' mode.

The most obvious change in dimensions is increased height. One of the most attractive design features of the MCU was its low profile, just 96mm at the rear. This was achieved by using an ingenious dip just before the display section. MCU Pro has a reduced dip with a small upstand. This increases the overall height to 120mm; meanwhile depth has decreased from 440mm to 429mm. The overall effect is to make the screen and counters easier to view without losing the low profile virtues.

Neatly illustrating the detailed improvements experience can bring, the MCU Pro is equipped with VESA mounting pick-up points (yes, the same standards used for mounting screens.) This will make it much easier to mount the unit on a floating arm in, for example, a picture editing room.

By far the most significant change is to be found at the rear. Although you can connect the MCU Pro to a computer using conventional DIN MIDI leads there is a much better option; USB. Since this carries four MIDI connections it enables the three pairs of DIN sockets on the MCU Pro to be used to connect MCU Extender Pro or MC C4 Pro units directly. There are three different control modes to suit a wide variety of targets. When the unit is turned on for the first time the display prompts for a choice of Mackie Control, HUI or Logic Control.

Outside the transport control and fader strips areas the buttons are programmable to suit the target application. Mackie supplies self-adhesive Lexan overlays for Pro Tools (HUI), Steinberg (Cubase/Nuendo), MOTU Digital Performer, Mackie's own Tracktion and Cakewalk Sonar. Further overlays are available for Adobe Audition, Propellerhead Reason, Ableton Live, Sony Vegas, Soundscape and RML Labs Saw Studio. I have no doubt more will be forthcoming if the demand exists.

As with all hardware control surfaces the precise functionality you can expect will depend on several factors. For example, how many functions can be remote controlled, how much work the DAW/LNE writers have done on implementing the protocol and whether or not they have included a means of assigning functions to physical buttons.

There will usually be a certain amount of fiddling about to do with settings and maybe assignments before you arrive at the optimum level of control. Once this is achieved and some familiarity is gained the value of hardware control should become apparent. It also encourages working in a more disciplined manner that can only lead to increased productivity.

Mackie has done a great job of freshening up the Mackie Control concept. The result is neat, handsome and feels very sturdy. If your DAW doesn't have a dedicated hardware controller, the MCU Pro and Pro extenders should be on your audition list. ■

The surface

The 8 control strips are identical with a two row by 55-character LCD display spanning all of them in the upstand. Each strip has a 100mm P&G touch-sensitive motorised fader followed by internally illuminated Select key, Mute key and Solo key, a small green Signal Present LED, Rec key and V-Pot with annular ring of red LEDs to indicate position. A particularly nice touch is the single LED at the half-past six position. This indicates the centre zero point otherwise obscured by the knob. The knob is also a switch, which, among other functions, can return the controlled parameter to its default setting, such as the centre when the V-Pot is in pan mode. The signal present LED is a real bonus and reacts to both Audio and MIDI if the host supports it. The Master Fader can control one of the target application's Master Faders.

Bottom right is a nicely weighted jog wheel, Scrub key and cruciform cursor keys with central Zoom key. Main transport controls are chunky and feel positive. Assignment of all the other buttons on the surface depends on the target workstation.

Power supply is external but in-line rather than the dreaded wall-wart. Apart from the USB socket and three pairs of MIDI DINs there are user switch jack sockets and a further jack for an external control pot intended for functions such as Master volume, depending on the host application. Perhaps a sign of the times, the Kensington security slot, more usually found on laptops, should keep the MCU Pro from wandering.

PROS	MIDI over USB; upstand makes display easier to see; possibly the most compatible controller available.
CONS	Increased height may not suit everyone; not a lot.

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