

Sound Cards and Computer Interface Hardware for Guitars

As my interest grows on the subject of using computers for recording purposes or for creating effects or anything your imagination dreams of, it seems like time to Discuss and briefly brake down into terms you understand the options available such as the PCI, Firewire, USB 2.0, Cardbus, USB 1.1 setups. If you are using PC software, get a desktop system. If running Mac software, the Mac desktops do it best. If it has to be a laptop, get a Mac. If it has to be a PC laptop, do firewire, USB 2.0, or a cardbus. Or consider using onboard sound with various adapters and connecting a small preamp to the line inputs.

USB 1.1 Perhaps the most well-known USB 1.1 interface is the Mbox2Mini, which runs Pro Tools LE. If you want to run that, make sure your laptop meets or exceeds Digidesign qualifications, which you can find at the Digidesign site. There is the M-Audio MobilePre USB Portable Audio Interface and Fast track Pro USB interfaces and the original Tascam US 122 which uses USB2.0.

USB2.0 The newer form of USB, based on the 2.0 spec, is theoretically capable of slightly exceeding the speeds and throughput of firewire, so USB2.0 devices can make good solutions for laptops or desktops that sport a USB 2.0 interface. There is a huge world of difference between USB 1.1 and 2.0. Never confuse the two; it's night and day difference in terms of performance.. Also never assume an interface is USB 2.0 unless it specifically says it is. If it just says USB, then assume it is 1.1. Believe me, if it was 2.0, they would tell you. There are more USB 2.0 interfaces out, though it is changing. Some notable USB2.0 interfaces are the Tascam US122L and Tascam US144. There is also a version of the MOTU 828mk2 that is USB 2.0 instead of Firewire. Newer to the scene are the Emu 0404 and 0202, and the Alesis IO2.

CardBus Solutions are for laptops. One way is to get an RME Cardbus solution. The Cardbus connects via a typical Firewire IEEE1394 cable to a breakout box such as the RME Multiface. Because the Multiface handles most of the processing, the CPU's task is eased and good performance is possible. Read more at RME's website. Emu has released the 1616 laptop audio interface. There are other cardbus solutions. Ask yourself one question before going with a Cardbus solution, why get this rather than firewire?

PCI and PCIe PCI (and PCIe for those with late model desktop Macs) interfaces are for desktop systems, not for laptops. Lynx, RME and MOTU on the pro end. Emu's desktop series, M-audio's Delta series, and the Echo series are all respectable. On the inexpensive side the emu 1212M and M-audio 2496 are known performers. Also check out the PCI version of the Emu 1616M. Note to use a PCI card you have to have an open PCI slot on your computer. While I know that seems obvious, nowadays some computers are sold without PCI slots. Believe it, so check!

Firewire Good for laptops or desktops. Motu has released the Traveler, a portable, but full featured audio interface. You can actually power the thing from the firewire port itself, or by battery power which I discuss in the article Beware of Proprietary Connections When Buying Guitar Gear and Equipment, which is good for recording on the road. Heh, you could record Rainy Days on a rainy day! Need something more portable? Check out the PreSonus FP10 FireWire Recording Interface. The Firebox can also be powered off the FW bus. More for professionals are the MOTU Ultralite and the Focusrite Saffire. Examine the inexpensive Firewire Audiophile 2496 and Firewire Solo. Among the newer firewire audio interfaces that hold promise are the Yamaha GO46, the Onyx Satellite, Alesis IO14 and IO26. The Alesis just mentioned have an incredible amount of i/o for the price. A really cool product just arriving now is the Tascam FireOne. As you see there is no shortage of choices. Wanna have a big interface to go with your laptop or desktop computer? You can run the control surface/interface combos such as the project mix, Digi 002, Tascam FW1884 or the Mixers with built in and add on firewire interfaces like the Onyx mixers, the Alesis Multimix firewire mixers and the Phonic Helix FW mixers as well. The most popular picks that balance plenty of features with affordable pricing is the MOTU 828mkII FireWire Audio Interface for my Mac Pro and the Intel-based Macs. For the PC, if one were buying today, the 19th of February, 2008 I would get a RME Fireface 400 FireWire Audio Interface That being said, what does this mean in terms of buying a sound-card or audio interface? Needless to say, make sure there is clear evidence that the product Has:

1. a driver for your OS. Never presume it does.
2. a driver that insists it works with your application, like Logic, Cubase SX or Sonar.
3. a valid website where you can download drivers
4. an updated driver within the last 6-8 months and supports the latest service packs and OS updates.
5. Looks like driver development is something they take seriously for your computer platform. A company with continuous development. A company may make great cards for PC and says we have a Mac driver too!
6. Looks like they have a good working relationship with software makers, and in product bundles. It's all too common for new products to have driver issues. Avoid the latest stuff that came out last week. Let someone else be the guinea pig. Don't hesitate to return products that do this especially if you downloaded the latest update and it still has bugs. Remember to always download the latest driver when you get your interface. Do it first, or don't complain. Read the article "MOTU has Emerged as a Leader in Music/Guitar Software Development" and "Behringer BCF2000 USB/MIDI Controller is a Guitar Players Dream". As other viable sources for information on sound cards and PCI controllers for all of you guitar players.

About the Author

Daniel Lehrman former transmission shop owner. I have a passion for the guitar. I sold the shop and I can populate my guitar blog with anything but the usual worn out stuff. Check out my site at <http://www.guitarplayerscenter.com> Please Share it and or Comment on it.