

Digigram VX882HR and UAX220

If you run a computer then you'll be needing a means of getting the sound in and out of it in a professional and robust manner.

Digigram has had plenty of experience in this business and builds them well. **ROB JAMES** investigates two.



THE PC CAN BE a truly professional audio tool. The accent is on the 'can'. As the Editor recently pointed out, computers are now a commodity item, built to a price, but this is not a great recipe for a machine you are going to earn your living on. As with the PC itself, so with the soundcard. The old mainframe computing adage, 'garbage in, garbage out' or GIGO was never truer. Domestic soundcards and built-in

sound chips are designed mainly for entertainment and reproduction and real-world performance figures can make shocking reading. The environment inside a PC is electrically noisy and distinctly not conducive to maintaining professional standards with analogue audio unless stringent measures are taken to guard against interference. To put it another way, the sound card must be properly engineered for the purpose and that is expensive. If done properly, the results can be impressive. At UK£1999 + VAT the VX882HR/BOB 8 combination certainly isn't bargain basement but the price is reasonable for the standard of engineering.

Digigram does not have a terrifically high profile outside broadcasting circles but it has been making professional computer sound I-O solutions for many years. The VX882HR is the latest in a long line.

Perhaps the most useful formats for much of the work done today are two channels in and out and eight channels in and out. The former for obvious reasons and the latter both for surround work and to provide access to external processing. This unit has 8 channels of I-O in analogue and digital flavours. For now, this is only available to PC users, Mac drivers are currently unavailable.

VX882 HR headline features are four AES-EBU

stereo inputs with hardware sample rate converters (up to 96kHz) and four AES-EBU stereo outputs (up to 192kHz). There are eight balanced analogue mono line inputs, eight servo balanced analogue outputs, one AES-EBU stereo sync input (up to 192kHz in play and record), one Word clock I-O (up to 96kHz), one video sync input, and one SMPTE/LTC sync input. The AES/EBU sync connection can also be used for audio I-O.

The analogue converters all operate at up to 192kHz 24-bit. The 'servo balanced' analogue outputs automatically adjust the output level to accommodate balanced or unbalanced signals.

Obviously, the main context for this card will be the applications you intend to run. Drivers are provided for Digigram np, DirectSound and Wave, although I could find no trace of an Asio driver in the current release. I'm guessing Asio may require specific application support. A software development kit is available.

If you use the DirectSound drivers the Windows DirectSound Control Panel gives access to volume, balance, muting, clock and input selection. The card operates at up to 192kHz. Although the digital inputs are limited to 96kHz this can be sample rate converted to 192kHz.

The card itself is a hefty, short length, Universal PCI 62-bit/66MHz with backwards compatibility for 32-bit/33MHz 5V PCI and support for the PCI-X slots



found mainly on Xeon workstation motherboards and not to be confused with the latest PCI-Express slots. Construction is tidy and dense. There are three PCBs and evidence of considerable effort put into screening. Two on-board connects cater for linking to a second, companion board and inter-board sync.

I happened to have a PCI-X slot free, so that is where it went. Installation is pain free once you've killed Windows' attempts to do its own thing. Apart from the drivers, the installer also adds a couple of Applets. A very simple two channel recorder/player, Digigram Play/Rec, and the Digigram Control Centre. This provides diagnostics and some settings for the drivers. Apart from setting the buffers if your application doesn't do this, the rest are probably safer left alone. The card can access the usual Windows sound sources, the DC/DVD-ROM drive, Media Player, etc.

Physical connections to the outside world go via a 62-pin Sub-D socket — not a cable I would want to make. Digigram offers two options for break out — a cable that divides into two branches, analogue and digital plus

sync with XLRs for audio and AES-EBU sync, BNCs for Video and Word clock sync and a phono for timecode. The alternative is Digigram's BOB 8 breakout box. This connects to the card via a 62-pin Sub-D cable. With this number of possible connections the break-out box is a much neater and more robust solution.

With the BOB 8 the VX822 is a convenient, professional solution for PC audio I-O with high sample rate capabilities for those who need them. ■

PROS A professional mix of features; good breakout box; well engineered.

CONS Drivers could be better; no Mac support.

Contact

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UAX220 USB audio interface

The UK£360.00 (+ VAT) UAX220 is a very different creature. A cigarette packet-sized blue plastic box with six flying leads, the unit is supplied with a neat handbag for protection when not in use.



It is literally plug-and-play on Windows XP, Linux, and Mac OSX. There are no drivers to install, it uses the USB Audio drivers installed with the operating system. The UAX220 provides two channels of balanced I-O on XLRs plus a 1/4-inch jack headphone monitor with volume control and Direct monitor push switch that simply connects the analogue inputs to the outputs. Power is supplied by the USB (1.1, 2 compatible) connection. It currently operates at 48kHz but a sample rate conversion is automatically applied by the operating system if required. Other sampling rates up to 48kHz are available for Windows XP users through a firmware update application available for download from the Digigram website. The UAX220 will be ideal for people on the move with a need to work with audio on several computers.

PROS Ridiculously simple; monitoring; convenience.

CONS Lack of mic pre limits utility for reporters; doesn't feel very professional.