Steve Vai On The Voodoo Of Guitar Recording

RECORDING

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GiO by APOGEE

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Apogee
GiO
Guitar, meet Mac

Apogee's high-quality standalone A/D and D/A converters have long been an industry standard, well established in many studios. The company's decision to focus its computer interface line on the Mac has led to a close partnership with Apple, including the development of high-quality interfaces such as the portable FireWire-based Duet (reviewed August 2008) and PCIe-based high-bandwidth interfacing thanks to the Symphony system (reviewed October 2008).

Apogee's newest interface, the GiO, bridges the gap between the guitarist and the Mac with an audio I/O complement and control features well suited to guitar playing. It aims to provide you with everything you need to record guitar and nothing you don't.

Hardware

GiO is a solidly built metal floor pedal, 7 x 18 x 2.5 inches and about 9 lbs. It offers twelve control buttons: five square transport controls in an upper rank, five round stompbox on/off buttons with multicolor LEDs in a lower rank, and two triangular rubber Previous/Next switches at the corners.

Rear-panel connections include USB and three $1/4$" jacks, for a guitar input, headphone output, and expression pedal input. The unit comes with a driver software CD that includes a PDF User's Guide, a 10' USB cable, and a $1/4$"-to-

dual-RCA cable to run the audio output to powered speakers rather than headphones. Guitar in, audio out, done.

If I have a complaint it's that GiO may be just a hair *too* focused—if all you want to do is play and listen to guitar while you operate your floor pedals, then you're all set, but a separate set of outputs so you don't have to recable from headphones to speakers would have been nice, and a second input for a microphone or second guitar would have been even better. In pretty much any Mac DAW or audio program, GiO can be set up to work alongside one or more other interfaces for more control or more I/O options, but you need to be aware going in that you will need a second interface if your needs outgrow what GiO offers.

Software

Technically GiO can operate with any Mac DAW or other program that works with audio and/or MIDI; it sends standard MIDI Control Change messages for its buttons and pedal, and is recognized by Mac OS X as an audio I/O device with one input channel and two output channels that operates at 24-bit resolution at either 44.1 or 48 kHz. If you know how to teach your DAW to recognize input from a new device, it's a matter of seconds to get GiO talking to it reliably—my tests with Ableton Live 8 were flawless, for example.

That being said, GiO isn't advertised as a generic input device; it's intended to work with the latest versions of Apple's music programs—GarageBand '09, Logic 9, and MainStage 2—and those apps come prepared to recognize GiO and put it to work.

I did most of my tests with Logic Pro and MainStage; GarageBand arrived later in the test period and I was able to confirm that it worked as advertised (see the sidebar).

In use

Setting up GiO to work with an Apple music program is as simple as launching the program, opening the Preferences, and selecting GiO as an audio device. Once you've done this, the program recognizes GiO and everything just starts working, including the LEDs on the various buttons, which don't light when GiO is used with a non-Apple DAW. For a product whose main selling point is just how easy it is to use, this is a reassuring and impressive starting point. The guitar input didn't mess with the tone of my instruments, and the audio outs were exquisitely clear and detailed (as you'd expect from Apogee), providing plenty of level for headphones and powered-monitor line inputs.

GiO's transport buttons correspond to all of the transport controls in GarageBand '09 aside from the Loop button. You can record, play, fast-forward, rewind, or jump to the song start with a single touch. The Previous and Next buttons either change the Channel Strip assigned to your active channel (in Logic) or change presets in Amp Designer or your Pedalboard, depending on which window is in front.

The stompbox buttons correspond to pedals in your virtual Pedalboard, either the Pedalboard plug-in in Logic, the floor pedals in MainStage, or the Stompboxes in GarageBand's Electric Guitar tracks. Up to five effects can be turned on or off, and in a neat visual cue, the LED above each pedal glows in a color close to that of the virtual pedal's case—the Heavenly Chorus glows blue, the OctaFuzz glows red, the SpringBox glows white, etc. In MainStage, you get control of only four effects, as the fifth button is always assigned to Master Mute as a "panic button".

The User's Guide walks you through setup for each of the three Apple music programs, and gives hints as to how best to use GiO depending on the setup you choose. Once you've played with it for a little while, it's easy to extend what you've learned to your own setups.

The expression pedal input can be assigned to any parameter in Logic, using Controller Learn Mode; you just select a control on the effect you're working with, move the pedal, and it's assigned. In

MainStage my expression pedal was instantly recognized and mapped to main volume. A separate app called GiOConfig lets you choose a response curve for your pedal; the two choices, Yamaha and Roland, reflect the curves of the popular FC7 and EV-5 pedals. Other pedals will work but you'll have to figure out which of the two curves works best for yours—my pedal was a Zoom FP02, which matched the Yamaha curve perfectly.

In all of my tests, I think the only time I ran into a glitch was when I launched MainStage with a second USB controller already attached to my Mac in addition to the GiO; the program just needed to be told which controller was doing what.

Thoughts and conclusions

GiO did exactly as it was told on the first try with all three of the supported apps, and could quickly be taught to do useful things in other programs as well. Build and audio quality were exceptional and the manual was a breeze to follow—typical Apogee!

Noting my concerns about using GiO as a standalone recording interface, I could see it as a supplementary control device for any DAW user who was already set up with I/O on any app, just to add reliable and easy-to-use foot control and a great-sounding guitar input.

On stage or in a recording studio with another DAW as the main tracking system, a laptop with a GiO, running MainStage, shows a lot of promise as a guitarist's ultimately flexible signal processing chain, with a universe of stomboxes, effects, amp and cabinet emulations, audio looping, and more, all easily accessible with a tap of a foot.

GiO is a specific tool for a specific approach to a specific problem, and it does what it sets out to do very well. If it sounds like it will fit your wish list, by all means give it a shot. ⤸

Price: $395

More from: Apogee Electronics, www.apogeedigital.com.

New Features in Apple GarageBand '09

As part of the new iLife '09 package (comes free with all new shipping Macs, or ordered separately for $79), GarageBand '09 continues in the tradition of getting everyone making music with its combination of user-friendly interface, powerful software instruments and effects, simple looping and editing, and rich content libraries. The newest version, aside from offering support for the Apogee GiO guitar interface, has some other niceties worth mentioning.

Of special interest to guitarists: a new lineup of high-quality guitar effects chains, complete with ten stompboxes and five modeled amps. You can start with one of over 30 preset chains, then customize it by swapping amps and adding or removing stompboxes, up to five in a row—perfect for GiO control.

The new GarageBand includes Lessons, built-in modules with video instruction on playing guitar and piano. The Basic Lessons are free with the program: the first chapter of each (guitar and piano) comes ready to use on install, and later chapters are downloadable from Apple. Each lesson has user-selectable notation styles, loopable sections, a play-along version of its song with mixable/mutable tracks from the teacher, backing band, and your part—you can even slow down playback while you're learning.

A cool upgrade to this feature is the Artist Lessons (downloadable for $4.99 each), which have famous songs taught by their creators (e.g. Sting teaching the guitar part for "Roxanne" or Norah Jones teaching "Thinking About You" on Wurlitzer electric piano), with all the interactive features of Basic Lessons—including, in many cases, the original band's backing tracks.

Finally, Magic GarageBand Jam takes the Magic GarageBand interactive playing experience to a new level, with assignable "backing band" tracks in a variety of music styles that can be shuffled and mixed, arranged and recorded.

A great entry-level music recording program just got even better... especially if you're a guitarist, or are learning to be one.—*MM*