Fig. 1. All the iD14's physical controls are available from the top panel.

AUDIENT

iD14

RAISING THE BAR FOR AFFORDABLE USB AUDIO INTERFACES

BY MIKE LEVINE

These days, you might think that a compact USB 2.0 audio interface would hit the market with a resounding yawn, what with all the buzz around units equipped with faster formats such as Thunderbolt and USB 3.0. But the reception for the iD14, a tabletop interface from British console maker Audient, has been anything but sleepy. Because it has preamps like the ones in Audient's consoles and Burr-Brown converters, and is expandable via an optical input, the iD14 offers users a level of quality not usually found in interfaces at this price point (see Figure 1).

Mike Levine is a multi-instrumentalist, producer, and music journalist from the New York area.

STRENGTHS

High-quality mic preamps and converters. Excellent-sounding DI. Easy workflow. Eight-step metering. Individual phantom power switches. iD Mixer software. Low-latency cue mix. ScrollControl.

LIMITATIONS

Phantom power requires external power supply. Only one stereo main output for monitors.

$299
audient.com

AROUND THE UNIT

The iD14 has two input channels, each with an analog mic/line combo input, and similar features to its bigger brother, the iD22 ($599), minus the monitor control functionality. Channel 1 also has a 1/4" instrument input. The rear-panel optical input allows you to connect an external preamp with up to 8 channels of ADAT at 44.1 or 48 kHz, 4 channels of ADAT at 88.2kHz or 96kHz (SMUX), or 2 channels of S/PDIF TOSLINK between 44.1 and 96 kHz.

For outputs, the iD14 is equipped with 1/4" TRS jacks (referred to as Main Loudspeaker Outputs) and a stereo headphone jack. There are input level controls for channels 1 and 2, as well as a 48V phantom power switch for each. Additional channel functions, such as phase reverse and -10dB pad, are available via the free iD Mixer software (Mac/Win), which extends the iD14's capabilities well beyond what's available on the physical unit.

Another key feature is the oversized rotary encoder, which has three Mode buttons below it and can be used for controlling output volume: Press the speaker button and the encoder controls the main outputs; press the headphone icon and it controls the headphone output. Pressing down on the encoder mutes whichever output is selected. When an output is muted, the light underneath its button blinks, making it easy to see what's going on. The front panel also includes 8-step LED ladder meters.

In the middle is the iD Function button, which allows the encoder to mimic the control functions of the scroll wheel on your mouse. Audient calls this ScrollControl mode. Anything in your DAW or other software that your scroll wheel controls, the encoder can control, too. Many DAW and plug-in functions can be controlled by hovering the pointer over a button or slider and then turning the scroll wheel, so it's cool to be able to do it from the iD14's encoder. When you use the iD14 in tandem with the iD14 Mixer software, the iD Function button can also be set to control several other features. I'll go into that more, below.

The iD14 runs via bus power, unless you want to access its phantom power, which requires you to use the included 12V power adapter. So unless you exclusively use the DI or line inputs, or mics other than condensers, you're going to need to plug the iD14 into the AC outlet.

YOUR ID PLEASE

In the iD Mixer software, each input channel has a level control and a pan knob, phase and pad switches, and a Cue section with its own level and

pan controls. Three mixes are available—Main Mix, Cue Mix, and DAW Mix—and you can route your choice of these to each of the two physical outputs on the interface (main or headphone). The DAW Mix passes the signal directly from your DAW, bypassing the iD software's input-channel volume controls. DAW Mix mode is useful if you're setting up cue mixes from within your DAW, rather than using iD Mixer's excellent low-latency Cue features.

A software talkback system is also included with iD Mixer. But unlike using a hardware console or monitor controller, you have to provide a mic and use one of the input channels for it, so its usefulness is rather limited in a 2-input interface. If you expand the system via the optical input, then it becomes a lot more handy.

The functionality of the iD Button on the top of the unit can be programmed from inside the software. Mono lets you toggle between stereo and mono output to check compatibility. Mono+Polarity cancels the center channel letting you listen to the sides of the mix. Dim drops the level by 15 dB, and Talkback toggles the talkback on and off.

IN THE STUDIO

I used the iD14 in place of my main interface for a couple of months and was impressed with the clean sound of the preamps. The results were consistently good, both for vocal and miked-instrument recording. I was also pleased with the sound of the instrument input, which was crisp and full on the direct guitar and bass tracks I recorded through it.

When I first read about the iD14, I wondered what its performance would be like in terms of latency, considering it was a USB interface rather than a Thunderbolt or FireWire unit. But I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of latency with the iD14. When using the Cue Mix, which takes advantage of the system's low-latency DSP monitoring feature, I could even record my guitar with the buffer set as high as 512, which is very impressive.

Even though I didn't find much need for Scroll-Control, I did take advantage of some of the additional modes available via the iD Function button, such as Mono and Mono+Polarity.

When I needed more inputs, I appreciated the unit's expandability. Audient provided an ASP800 for this review, which I connected to the iD14's optical input to bring my input count up to 10 (see the sidebar below: Add 8 with the ASP800).

So for about $1,000 between both units, you can have 10 channels of Audient mic preamps along with an interface—very impressive. The biggest limitation to the system is the lack of outputs; you only have the main and headphone outs. If you wanted to use more than one set of monitors, you'd need to also get a monitor controller. (I suppose an inelegant workaround would be to feed one pair of speakers from the headphone output using a splitter cable.) Of course, you could always opt for the iD22, which has multiple outputs.

FOURTEEN IS THE TICKET

As a low-cost interface, the iD14 is hard to beat; priced under $300, it ups the ante in terms of quality. And when used in combination with the well-designed iD Mixer software, you get a flexible and full-featured workflow to go along with the impressive sonics. On top of that, the optical jack provides expandability on the input side.

The iD14 is so reasonably priced that it would also make a good portable interface to use with a laptop recording rig. Nice work, Audient. ■

Add 8 with the ASP800

Although you can expand the iD14's input count with any mic preamp offering an optical connector, it works really well with the Audient ASP800 ($799). In addition to eight channels of mic/line combo inputs, 1/4" DI inputs are available for channels 1 and 2, as well as coloration options (see Fig. A).

I would have gladly done without one of those DI jacks if it meant Audient could have fit one of the combo jacks on the front. As it is now, you always have to go to the back of the unit to connect cables to the combo jacks, which, depending on the placement of your rack, might not be so convenient.

Each channel has its own buttons for 48V phantom power, a -10dB pad, and peak and signal indicators. Additionally, channels 1 and 2 include Audient's HMX and Iron tone coloration features, which can be switched into the signal path and adjusted individually on both channels to change the characteristics of the audio.

HMX is a tube-saturation emulation, and its knob changes the balance between Sweet and Thick. Iron, which is a transformer-based circuit, is designed to replicate the "coveted transformer 'zing' of British audio in the 1970s." Its knob lets you dial in Sparkle, Growl, or a combination of the two. Both of these tone circuits are subtle, but are nevertheless audible. I found them to be well suited for character tweaks when recording acoustic guitar, bass guitar, electric guitar, and vocals. Audient says the Iron circuit, in particular, is excellent for drums and other sources with strong transients.

I was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to get the ASP800 working with the iD14. Other than plugging the optical cable in, the only adjustment I had to make was to set the ASP800 as the clocking source. The additional inputs showed up in the iD Mixer software without any other configuration necessary, and they were fully integrated into the system. The only controls of the ASP800 that I couldn't control using the software were the HMX and Iron circuits.

Fig. A. The ASP800 connects to the iD14's optical input, adding eight input channels (two with DI and coloration features).