

Audient iD22 and iD14 Audio Interfaces

Elegant flexibility and great sound in a small (or smaller) package



Audient is a British audio company that's been making large-format consoles since 1997, and has a variety of standalone products (mic preamps, monitor controllers, etc.) based on technology pioneered in its mixers. With the new iD22 and iD14 audio interfaces, Audient steps into the crowded interface market with designs that leverage its experience with console design while adding new features that ease recording with any DAW.

In this review, I'll primarily be focusing my attention on the more full-featured iD22 and calling out the differences to be found in the smaller and more affordable iD14.

Getting to know the iDs

The iD interfaces are solidly built tabletop boxes that offer analog and digital input and output (up to 24/96) over USB 2.0, along with onboard low-latency mixing and routing control. They're built into solid metal chassis and feature excellent build quality: the converters are high-end Burr Brown units, and the Class A mic preamps are the exact same ones that are featured in Audient's other products, from their best consoles on down.

The iD22 has all of its I/O on the rear panel: two mic/line inputs on Neutrik Combo XLR/TRS jacks, a 1/4" TS high-impedance DI jack that supersedes Input 2, balanced TRS inserts on both inputs, two pairs of balanced TRS line outputs, and a stereo headphone jack. There's also a jack for the 12V external power supply and a USB 2.0 port, plus Toslink optical digital I/O.

The iD14 has its headphone jack and DI input on the front of the unit, and on the rear there are two Combo mic/line inputs, balanced TRS line outputs, one Toslink optical input, USB, and a power jack. While the iD14 can run on bus power from most computers' USB ports, the included 12V supply is recommended, as you can't use phantom power without it.

On the front and under the hood

Each of the iD22's preamps has controls for 48V phantom power, a 10 dB pad, polarity reverse, and highpass filter (12 dB/octave with a 100 Hz corner frequency). All of these features are analog circuitry, and act on input signals before the insert and A/D. They are accessed with a row of small but extremely robust front-panel switches under the input gain knob. The iD14's preamps have individual phantom power switching, but no other analog-side controls; in the iD14 mixer software (see below) you can apply a 10 dB boost (not a pad) for lower-level signals, and a polarity reverse, per input.

On the output side, the iD22 has a large, very smooth main mix volume pot, a smaller headphone volume pot, a 4-stage LED output level meter, dedicated Dim and Cut (Mute) buttons, and three assignable Function buttons. The iD14 has one large push-click encoder and three buttons: one to select main output level, one to select phones level, and a programmable iD button. Its output meters are 8-step LED ladders; the extra resolution is important because they also indicate settings of the main and headphone output levels when they're being adjusted. Both units feature a Status LED that lights green when the unit is powered and has a good USB connection.

Mixing it up

Each unit comes with drivers for Mac OS X and Windows, and a software mixer application that gives access to the full function set in the interface. The iD14 and iD22 have different mixer applications that can happily coexist on the same computer.

As you can see in the screenshot, these are full-function low-latency mixers, with each input color-coded by type—blue for mic/line, green for optical, purple for DAW return—and offering level, pan, stereo link, Mute, Solo, and send level and panning for Cue mixes A and B. The master section has a large LED level meter, Cue Master out levels with Solo buttons that override each other (for quick cue mix comparisons), buttons to view or hide each type of input, and monitor function buttons surrounding the main level knob (which is just for show—HW means it's a hardware-only control). There are buttons for Mono Sum, Polarity Reverse (activate both at once to hear the L-R "Side" audio), Talkback, Alt (the second set of line outs), and Dim and Cut (mirroring the buttons on the front panel). Any of these can be assigned to one of the three Function buttons by the main volume knob for easy access.

Pressing the System button under the main LED meter opens the Setup Strip and Routing panel on the right, sliding the Master section partly over the channel inputs to make room. On the Setup Strip, you can select whether the optical in and out are S/PDIF or ADAT, select your clock source, assign any input to Talkback (when you do this, that input gains a yellow color code and its level fader vanishes), choose whether the Mono signal is Left only, Right only, or a mono mix of both. You can also adjust the relative level of the Alt output (to match gains of different pairs of speakers) and control how much of a volume drop the Dim button causes (0 to 30 dB, default 15 dB).

The Output Routing Matrix determines which signal is routed to which physical output. The two Main Out pairs can each be split into two mono outs, allowing you to feed two separate mono cue mixes and still route audio to the mains and phones. Sources include the Main output of the mixer, the Alt Speaker output (routed to the second set of main outs when the Alt button is pushed), Cue A, Cue B, and DAW Mix (a direct out from your software with no DSP mixing or panning).

Note that the insert returns are pre-A/D, allowing you to place line-level signals directly into the digital domain with no preamp or filtering. Combined with the Cue controls and the spare set of outputs, you can actually put hardware processors in send/return loops, and even process direct outputs from your DAW and bring them back in the analog domain. This is some pretty cool stuff!




In use

If you've been impressed by the flexibility of these interfaces, their audio quality will floor you. Audient really has distilled a lot of its large-format console power into these little boxes. The preamps are clear without being sterile and offer up to 66 dB of really clean gain... not many portable interfaces can do justice to low-output dynamic and ribbon mics, but these sure can! The D/A conversion is exquisite and the main and headphone outs both offer gobs of power for the taking. I've heard digital mixers costing thousands of dollars that can't match the iD interfaces for clarity and detail.

In weeks of use with a variety of DAWs, I only ran into one "gotcha", and that was on iTunes of all things. Audient does warn you that if your software resets itself to a new sample rate (as can happen if, for example, you play back tracks of different sample rates as part of a playlist), the iD will "burp" a few times as it resets itself to the new rate. This won't damage your speakers, but it's startling the first time you hear it. I was sure I'd broken something! Audient warns that you should mute your speakers before doing this, and I'll verify that that's a very good idea.

Conclusions

Audient may be a new name in the interface game, but these first offerings make for an impressive start. The iD22 shines for its handy monitor control features, inserts, dedicated controls, and expanded digital I/O, but if you don't need that level of flexibility and still want Audient quality, the iD14 is truly a cut above the ordinary. 

Prices: iD22, \$599; iD14, \$299
More from: Audient, www.audient.com

The iD14's mixer application looks quite similar to the iD22's, but lacks the Output Routing Matrix and has only one Cue bus, which can be routed to the headphone or main outputs. The iD button's functions are selected via right click and can include Mute, Mute + Polarity, Talkback, 15 dB Dim, and a special function called ScrollControl. When this is selected, the encoder knob becomes a large scroll wheel, allowing you fine control of mouse-over functions in many DAWs, for automation writing, virtual instrument tweaks, and other uses. Precisely what ScrollControl does and how it responds to movements depends on your computer and DAW.

In both cases, the full routing and settings state of the mixer can be saved, renamed, and recalled easily. This lets you save configurations for tracking, mixing, and so forth.

