



## APOGEE DUET

Apple and Apogee sing a two-part harmony with this new audio interface.

**Text:** Brad Watts

► After plenty of fanfare during the last few years, the partnership between Apogee Digital and Apple Computer is finally yielding the ‘totally integrated’ hardware that’s been promised. The Ensemble interface reviewed this time last year, was (and still is) a very nice unit. The preamps and converters are all of a quality you’d expect from a company that trades solely on the back of its audio conversion expertise. This technology has now trickled down into a smaller audio interface from Apogee, the Duet, or to fit in with the Apple nomenclature, the very unassuming lower-case ‘duet’.

The Duet is Apogee’s travelling – and highly portable – desktop audio interface, which utilises the same design ethos, and no doubt much of the internals, found in the Apple-oriented Ensemble interface. Aesthetically, the Duet will look and feel snug alongside your MacBook or otherwise Mac-centric audio devices. The finish is remarkably similar to the finely granulated surface of a MacBook Pro and, to be honest, looks pretty darn sexy – a bit like an oversized iPod. The underside sports the typical Apple-esque rounded edges and corners, with the top panel retaining square edges. There’s but one control on the top surface of the Duet, a large shiny chrome rotary encoder. We’ll investigate the encoder’s multiple uses shortly, but first let’s go through the Bauhaus-like set of I/O the Duet offers.

Connection to the host Macintosh is via Firewire 400 and the unit is completely bus powered. Some would contend USB connection to be ample for the Duet’s two in/two out topology, but Firewire is definitely a better choice for isochronous audio I/O, both for achieving minimal latency



The business end of the Duet: two connections and you’re away. Firewire and the breakout cable – it keeps things tidy.

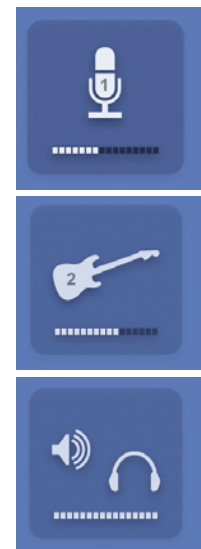
figures and a more desirable level of jitter. [See box item for more on isochronous design]. Besides which, the Duet will deal with sample rates up to 96k – both in and out – a feat virtually impossible via USB 1.1.

Toward the front of the Duet is a single headphone output, the output level of which is linked directly to the main outputs. The headphone output can be muted (or left open) when muting the main outputs, but, even so, this shared volume control makes it impossible to set up a separate monitor mix in the headphones. According to Apogee this has been a necessary dictate of economics – another set of D/A conversion could have sent the Duet into the \$1000+ range (AUD, of course). As it stands, the Duet seems attractively priced, especially when combined with Logic Studio or Logic Express. With Logic Express you’d have your DAW and interface needs licked for around a thousand bucks. Not a bad proposition at all.

Meanwhile, back at the connectivity ranch... The rear panel sports the single aforementioned Firewire 400 port and a 15-pin D-sub connector. This attaches to the supplied breakout cable and provides two instrument ¼-inch jack inputs, two XLR mic inputs and two unbalanced ¼-inch jack outputs. The entire breakout cable concept does make me shudder slightly, as breakout cables are inevitably of the injection moulded plastic design, and thus highly susceptible to breakage; usually right where the cable meets the moulded plastic connector. As some consolation, Apogee actually includes the breakout cable in the Duet’s warranty, so you’re not completely lost if your cable goes south during the first 12 months. Supplying such a cable does strike me as odd though, especially since Apogee sells high quality cables for their other more upmarket systems. My guess is that they’ll have a superior option available soon.

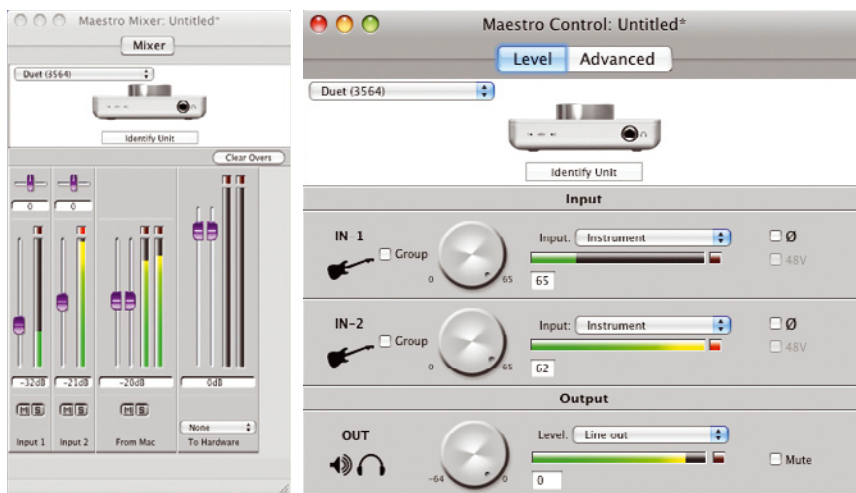
### MAESTRO

The software driving the Duet is Apogee’s Maestro control software. The program seems relatively bulletproof and is compatible with both OSX 10.4 and 10.5. I had no dramas installing the software in Leopard (10.5.1) and was quite



The Duet’s rotary encoder presents translucent pop-ups on screen to highlight an action in much the same style as Apple’s own pop-ups that appear when changing the system’s volume, brightness etc. The Duet will even show a microphone icon or a guitar icon depending on how you have the preamps set within the Maestro control panel.

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The Maestro control panel software provides access to all the Duet's features. Make any changes and the software will force you to save or discard any changes you've made when quitting. Can we have an option to turn this off please?

surprised to see just how integrated the Duet is within OSX. For example, plugging in the Duet immediately starts the Maestro control panel (the option can be disabled). But the interesting aspect of the software is the visual feedback it provides. Raising or lowering the volume, for example, via the Duet's rotary encoder presents a translucent display on screen – in much the same style as Apple's own pop-ups that appear when changing the system's volume, brightness (with laptop models) or indeed the eject symbol that appears when jettisoning optical media. The HUDs (head up displays) don't stop at volume either. A quick press down on the Duet's encoder will switch control to either of the two inputs, with the gain both adjustable via the encoder and displayed on screen with another translucent HUD. The HUD will show either a microphone icon or a guitar icon, depending on how you have the preamps set within the Maestro control panel. Pressing and holding down the encoder will mute output from the Duet, again with a corresponding display on screen. It's highly integrated with OSX and nothing to date has provided this degree of co-operation between Apple and a third-party interface manufacturer. This is indeed the mutualistic [is that Yanklish? – Ed.] design that Apogee has been crowing about for years! Strangely, however, the Apogee control panel within Logic Pro still doesn't remember any settings when reloading a Logic project – weird.

### PERFECT HARMONY?

The big question is inevitably how it sounds, and in this regard the Duet certainly gets my thumbs up. As we know, Apogee is very proud of its audio conversion technology and well it should be. Like the Ensemble, the Duet sounds very good; the most pertinent difference between it and my RME or Digidesign D/A stages being the increased depth of image. Again, like the Ensemble, I felt like reaching in

and giving the stereo image a great big hug [so it's 'cuddly' then? – Ed.]. Although Apogee doesn't actually publish any real specifications for either the Ensemble or the Duet, you can sense the benefits of their jitter reduction techniques and years of conversion experience – very nice indeed.

Audio on the way in is equally pampered. The preamps offer a generous 75dB of gain and sounded fabulous with the various mics I used, ribbon mics included. The sound isn't clinical but it's certainly clean. Reproduction is quite natural and devoid of the 'grain' you experience with typical mic pres found in the majority of inexpensive interfaces. Compared with the few 'generic' preamps I have kicking around in various Firewire interfaces, the Apogee pres present a more solid and rounded bottom end – perfect for stereo recordings and vocals. A guitar straight into the instrument preamps was equally impressive, offering quite usable distortion at high settings – a very big plus in my book. I'd have no qualms recording anything via these input stages.

So is the Duet a winner? Well, if you're an Apple computer user and you're not in need of ProTools, then the answer is an unequivocal yes. If you happen to be running Logic Express or Logic Pro then the Duet is almost a foregone conclusion. The lack of digital I/O is disappointing but there are many other ways to skin that particular cat these days. A lack of separate headphone mix may be a deal breaker for a few folk, but again, there are other ways to attack that particular shortfall. Apogee's predictable solution is to buy another Duet and link two together as an Aggregate device within OSX – plausible, I suppose, but I'd be moving up to the Ensemble for further functionality. As the Duet stands on its own – it's a superb little interface. Hats off. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**Price**  
\$749

**Contact**  
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**Pros**  
Superb integration with OSX.  
Great sounding A/D and D/A.  
Aesthetically, a winning combination with your Apple computer.  
Solid metal construction.

**Cons**  
Excuse me? A breakout cable?  
No alternate headphone mix capability.  
No ability to save settings in the Logic Pro control window on a per project basis.

**Summary**  
For many the Duet will be exactly what the doctor ordered. Great preamps and monitoring in a sexy form factor that will work snugly alongside a MacBook Pro.

### i Asynchronous vs isochronous

Isochronous implies 'at the same time', its derivations being from the Greek *iso* meaning *same*, and *chronos* meaning *time*. While the term is used to describe particular types of data transfer, I've used the term to describe an audio interface's ability to record at the same sample rate as it plays back. In the case of the Apogee Duet, it's completely feasible to be recording at 96k while simultaneously monitoring your audio at 96k. Over the years there have been countless USB 1.1 audio interfaces that claim 96k capabilities, it's only when you get into the fine print of the specifications that you notice 96k playback may only be possible when not recording, or that 96k recording is only available when monitoring at 48k.