

LST LynxONE

PCI mastering card

Price £558

For Great analogue performance > Very stable > Hassle-free audio

Against Can't pull a decent pint!

Verdict The best mastering solution yet encountered for the PC

Words Adam Fuest

It seems that not a week goes by without another soundcard being squeezed into the marketplace, so it is with a certain amount of disdain that we now greet these cards, forever in fear of incomplete software, ugly drivers or just plain, simple, nasty silicon.

It's a jungle out there in PCI land and, as Darwin taught us, survival necessitates adaptation. And so, on the prairies of audio computing, most soundcards are now spawning multiple digital audio connections (so as to facilitate their grazing on the fast-flowing bit stream) and enlarged amounts of DSP (to cope with their more proactive role within audio society).

The manufacturers are presenting us with a bewildering number of options and advertorial plumage, all vying for our attention, with the promise of multiple functions and unprecedented levels of performance all adding to the confusion. So it was with bemused interest that we gazed upon the LynxONE when it arrived.

Overview

The box is small and unassuming but also remarkably heavy. Inside, everything was perfectly packed without excessive wadding - excuse the ramblings here, but the professional sense of modesty that pervades the LynxONE is alluring.

The card itself is a short PCI card, so there should be few problems installing it. On the back of the card are two ports that connect to the two accompanying sets of leads. The first port is for the two In/Out MIDI connections and the coaxial wordclock I/O connections. The cable for it is about 14" long, as opposed to the six-foot-long leads that accompany the second port - why the difference in length?

The second port is for audio. There's a pair of digital inputs and outputs on XLRs and a pair of analogue I/Os, and that's it! There are no additional connections whatsoever - no TDIF connections, no ADAT connections or breakout box connections which, for a card that costs around £600, is radical.

So, what has the LynxONE got? Well, it has a spec to die for, with 24-bit/96kHz performance and a damn fine set of analogue-to-digital converters. Installation, once we read the manual properly, was a doddle. Again, we were surprised to find the drivers and enclosed software all contained on one floppy disk, not the ubiquitous CD-ROM. And, unusually, the software and drivers need to be installed prior to the installation of the hardware, at which point the device is immediately identified by Windows Plug and Play, and the card is recognised.

Once installed, there's only one interface window to deal with, and this is the LynxONE Mixer, which is simplicity itself. The main area has four pairs of stereo faders and corresponding meters, for analogue I/O and digital I/O. Below these are mute buttons and, for the digital inputs, indicators to show that accurate word clock sync has been achieved and whether the AES/EBU or S/PDIF input is selected. Next to these are the output meters and the monitor buttons, offering direct input monitoring when toggled.

To the right of the screen are several option boxes. You can select word clock (internal, external, header and digital), reference clock (Auto, 13.5MHz, 27MHz word clock and super clock), the appropriate digital input signal (AES/EBU or S/PDIF) and either +4dBu or -10dBV. The Monitor Source simply offers analogue or digital inputs and outputs, and the calibration box resets the DC offset on the A-D/D-A converters. There are no options to save the mixer settings, but is that really necessary with a mixer as simple as this?

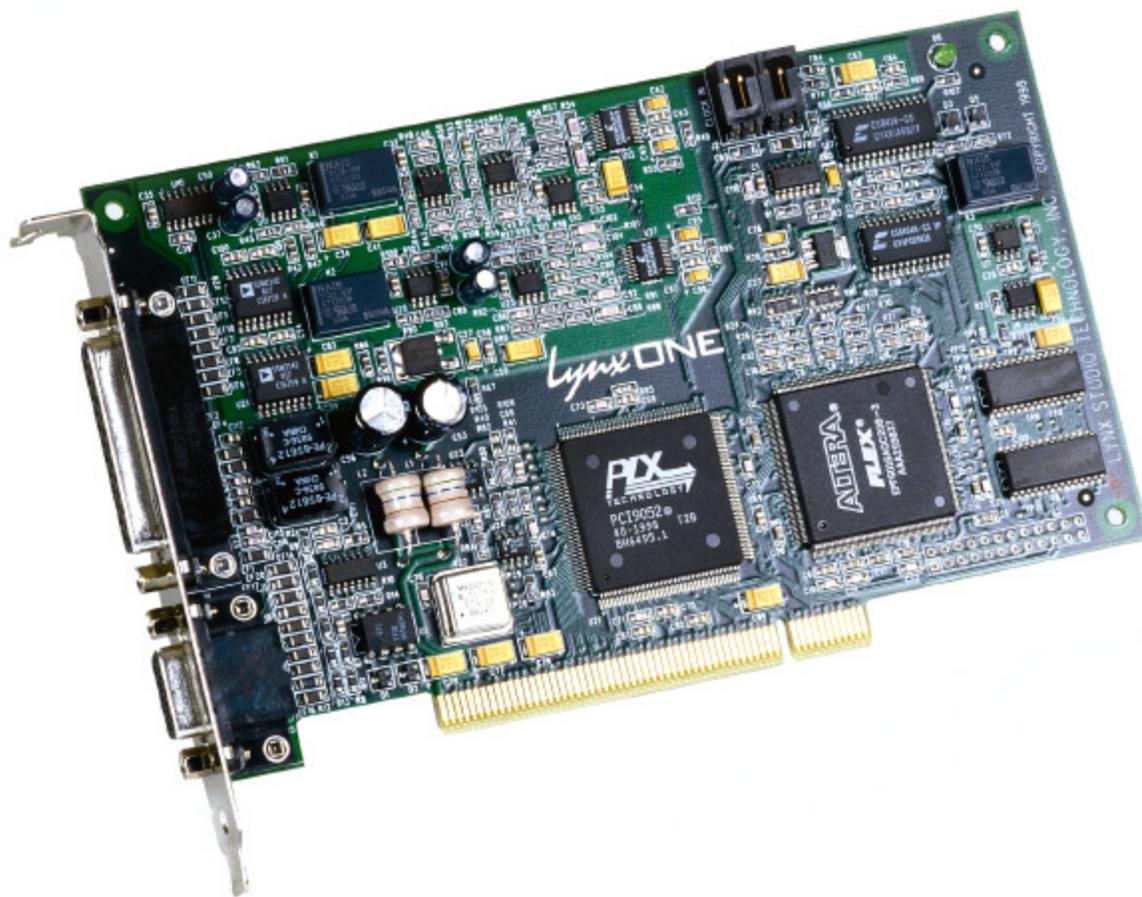
The LynxONE comes with Windows MME drivers and a quick hop to the developer's website turns up some beta ASIO2 drivers that seemed to work very well in Cubase VST 5 and Logic 4.5. But in reality, audio/MIDI sequencing is not what this card is about - if that's what you're after, you will probably want more outputs and inputs than are on offer here. Where this card excels is as a mastering card.

In use

Used with a digital desk, it's obviously very easy to take a digital input to record mixes, but with the additional high-quality A-D converters we were able to run a simultaneous mix into both digital and analogue inputs, inserting analogue compression and EQ into the analogue chain and then monitoring both for comparison. This way it's easy to switch between the different input sources.

And it's an incredibly stable card as well. This was the fourth card to go into our test computer, the other three being a Midiman DIO 2496, an Echo Mona and a SoundBlaster Platinum. Not something we would normally do, but the software for the LynxONE is so stable and well-written that there were no problems at all.

The card has been installed in the studio for the last four weeks and during that time we haven't once mixed on to DAT, 1/2" or any format other than the LynxONE using either WaveLab or SoundForge. There hasn't been a single glitch, crash or corrupted file, and to top it all, the mixes are sounding sweeter and more open than before.



specifications

Frequency response

20Hz to 20kHz,
+0/-0.35dB

Dynamic range

>103dB, A-wtd

A-D/D-A

24-bit, 128X
oversampling

Signal-to-noise

>99dB, A-wtd

Input THD+N

0.0022% typ

Output THD+N

0.0015% typ

Analogue I/O

Balanced XLR x 2,
+4dBu or -10dBV

Digital I/O

AES/EBU or S/PDIF,
up to 96kHz

Sample rates

32, 44.1, 48, 88.2,
96kHz

Bit depth

8, 16, 24 and 32-bit

MIDI ports

2 with in/out

Wordclock

BNC I/O

Verdict

Surely our salvation is finally here, and we can at last stop labelling DATs and splicing tape. The LynxONE, in conjunction with virtually any modern PC and appropriate software, presents at last a really affordable mastering solution for everybody - don't be surprised if this card becomes an industry standard for studios.

It sounds better than DAT and most analogue machines, it's future-proofed with 96kHz/24-bit support and with the existence of good editing programs such as SoundForge, WaveLab and CoolEdit, there's no reason why you wouldn't be able to put together an outstanding mastering package based around the LynxONE for just over £1,000. This is considerably less than many of the high-end DAT machines around and don't forget the low-latency MIDI inputs and output that will enable you to accurately mix in sync - who needs a timecoded DAT machine, anyway?

Yes, you've guessed it, we like the LynxONE - a lot. This one will not be going back to HHB! It is cards like this that reaffirm our confidence that technology can actually come up with the goods. Does the LynxONE have a downside? Well, we really can't say that it does. It doesn't pretend to be an all-singing, all-dancing DSP-laden beast that requires the latest 1.266GHz AMD Thor-Hammer - Beast-Slayer processor. It can't play tennis and it can't mix drinks, but as a computer-based mastering solution, you won't go far wrong.

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