

# MACKIE Control C4

Mackie's latest control surface – the Control C4 – includes an impressive 32 V-Pots and four LCD scribble strips.

**Mark Cousins** looks beneath the surface.



#### MACKIE CONTROL C4

Manufacturer **Mackie**

Price **£1,099**

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Since Mackie first developed Logic Control, software musicians and engineers have enjoyed an altogether more tactile working environment than that offered by a QWERTY keyboard and mouse. Control surfaces have become one of the most desirable pieces of hardware for any modern studio, from top-of-the-range Pro Tools control surfaces such as ProControl, to the smaller, more cost-effective MIDI fader banks offered by the likes of Evolution.

Logic Control – and its later incarnation, Mackie Control Universal – clearly pitched itself between these different systems, incorporating many of the professional features found on expensive control surfaces (Penny and Giles faders, for example), but at a price that wasn't out of the range of the smaller studio.

#### Effective communication

One key area that has eluded many control surfaces is a meaningful way of interacting with plug-ins or software instruments. What makes plug-in control from a control surface so challenging is that the associated pots can have any number of applications – one minute it's an EQ boost, the next it's an LFO speed control, depending on the plug-in selected. Without a suitable legend, comprehending the role of each software-assigned pot can be

difficult, short of constantly referring to the computer's monitor – the very thing you're seeking to remove yourself from. Thankfully, the C4 has an LCD scribble strip to inform you of the parameter value and type assigned to a particular pot, unlike cheaper pot-based control surfaces such as Behringer's BCR2000. But does this approach provide a more effective means of working with an audio workstation and its associated plug-ins?

#### Support and setup

Although the Mackie Control Universal has now been widely adopted by many audio recording platforms, the C4 (at the time of writing) is fully supported only by Logic Pro 7. Updates for Sonar 4 have been promised and undoubtedly Cubase SX, Pro Tools and Digital Performer (among others) will follow in time.

In keeping with Mackie's other control surfaces, the C4 uses MIDI to communicate with your chosen sequencer. Usefully, this means that any multi-channel MIDI interfaces in your studio still have a relevant application, especially if you're using several control surfaces simultaneously. If you're less endowed in respect of MIDI ports, the lack of USB connections – as found on some other control surfaces – might be a frustration.

Installing the control surface within Logic Pro 7 is a breeze – simply power up the unit and Logic Pro 7 should automatically recognise and install the C4 correctly. An important thing to check, however, is that the C4 isn't grouped to any existing control surfaces, but is

running independently. Taking a quick look in the Control Surfaces preferences should confirm this (Preferences>Control Surfaces>Setup). Ideally, the C4 should be positioned below any existing Mackie/Logic Control(s) so that it functions as its own control-surface group rather than being simply an extension of the main Mackie Control.

#### Instant feedback

Having been won over by the original Mackie Control (it's hard to imagine using Logic Pro without it), we were keen to see what the C4 could offer. With 32 V-Pots rather than the standard eight included on the Mackie Control, editing and manipulating plug-ins, EQ and instruments became a far easier task. The sharp LCDs and illuminated V-Pots are clear and easy to read, even in relatively dim studio lighting. As with the Mackie Control, the angled presentation of the top LCD is good, but is unfortunately missing on the lower LCDs – this sometimes resulted in us having to hunch over the device to see what was going on.

Towards the bottom of the C4 are a series of buttons, principally used to change the various display modes of the C4 and navigate the assorted software pages and channel strips. In its default mode (no assignment active), the C4 works as an expanded version of

#### METHOD SPOT Making your mark

Using the Marker Assignment button, you can create a series of markers to define important segments of your Logic Pro 7 arrangement – like a verse or chorus, for example. In the Marker mode, new markers can be placed on-the-fly by pressing the Create button on V-Pot 31, and deleted using V-Pot 32. Defined markers can then be viewed on screen from Logic Pro 7's new Global track and navigated easily by using V-Pots 1 to 30.

Placing the C4 below an existing Mackie Control will create an independent control surface group. This is the best way to run the C4 for a conventional session.



the currently selected channel strip's plug-ins. As an example, selecting a track in Logic Pro 7's Arrange window (or another Mackie Control) that has an EQ active will update the C4 to display the relevant controls and parameters. Interestingly, by pressing the Lock button, the currently displayed plug-in parameter set remains active, even if another channel is selected.

## More assignments

Activating the Chan Strip Assignment button changes the C4 to display a complete overview of the current channel, including channel EQ settings on the top row, inserts (plug-ins) on the second row, and aux sends on the third row. Using the aux send levels is a real joy in comparison to the convoluted method adopted by the Mackie Control: all eight aux send levels are easy to view and balance without having to scroll through several software pages. Finally, the bottom row doubles up the usual channel-strip functions, including volume, pan, automation mode and group assignments – areas that the Mackie Control already excels in.

One of the most surprising aspects of the C4's operation is its Function button. With the Function button active, the C4 displays a series of customisable 'general' controls – from views (SMPT time ruler, grid views, event floats and so on) on the top row, to tool selection (Scissors, Glue and so on) on the third row. To some extent, this page performs little that can't be achieved by keyboard shortcuts, but in a way it is clearer and easier to remember. Adding your own functions or modifying the existing set can be easily achieved using Logic Pro 7's Controller Assignments page (Preferences>Control

## RELATED TECHNOLOGY Controller assignments

Each pot and assignment button on the C4 sends a unique MIDI event, which Logic Pro 7 has been pre-configured to interpret in a given way. Now that Logic Pro 7 has added a Controller Assignments page, any MIDI control surface – and indeed the C4 – can be customised to work in complete harmony with the controls and features of Logic Pro 7. Creating a new assignment can be as simple as moving the required plug-in parameter in Logic Pro 7, selecting Preferences>Control Surface>Learn Assignment, and moving the appropriate V-Pot. The Controller Assignments page is also completely integrated, with a revised Key Commands window that now provides unparalleled access to the control of every Logic Pro 7 function via keyboard shortcuts and control surfaces such as the Mackie C4.

Logic Pro 7's new Controller Assignment page enables you to customise or augment every single function of the C4 control surface.

Surfaces>Controller Assignments), with current assignments found under Transport/V-Pot Overlay>Mackie Control C4 Function.

Navigating your mix using only the C4 can be a little tricky, even with the supplied Track button (this updates the display so that you can select a track from the 32 displayed on the V-Pots) and the Track L and R buttons, which switch tracks incrementally. Slot Up and Slot Down buttons move between the various plug-ins and instruments inserted across the selected channel. When particularly large instruments or plug-ins are selected, the Parameter Bank switches provide an essential means of moving between the various pages – the ES2, for example, having at least six pages of parameters!

## The software dilemma

So, having waited so long for the Control C4, does it really deliver the promise of complete, tactile plug-in control? Well, in this respect, the results were slightly less intuitive than expected – although this isn't entirely the C4's fault. The problem lies in the size and complexity of many software instruments – and in some cases, audio plug-ins. In these situations, editing on the C4 involves navigating pages of abbreviated parameter names and controls organised in a seemingly random way. This made editing less inviting than the C4's enticing pots would suggest. Additionally, the implementation of third-party Audio Units was occasionally patchy (although, again, this is the fault of the plug-ins, rather than the C4), with a few exceptional cases displaying unnamed parameters – or none at all.

On a more positive note, instruments such as NI's FM7 worked well on the C4, with its first 32 parameters designated towards a simplified editing system – this made patch creation reassuringly hands-on. In the future, this has the potential to be adopted by other plug-ins, particularly those in Logic Pro 7, placing important controls (filter cutoff and resonance, for example) on the first few V-Pots.

If you have enough money to spare, an alternative option is to buy several C4s and use the Split feature to spread the instrument's 'panel' across several control surfaces. For now, however, there remains some merit to the mouse and a well-designed software interface.

## The professional's choice?

Not surprisingly, the real joy of using the C4 lies in everyday tasks with Logic Pro 7, particularly if you're working in conjunction with the existing Mackie Control Universal. Features such as the Function and Chan Strip Assignment buttons have brought significant improvements to the speed and efficiency with which you can work in Logic Pro 7, and make the experience similar to that of a full-scale professional console. In many ways, it is these features that set it apart from other, non-LCD-driven interfaces that provide little more than just 'tactile' controls. At £1,099 the C4 certainly isn't cheap, but given the quality of what's on offer – and certainly in comparison to luxury systems such as ProControl – it offers good value for money.

As the performance and sound quality of the home studio becomes increasingly nearer to that of the professional studio, many users will place even greater value on the quality and versatility of the user interface they work with. In that scenario, the C4 (alongside the Mackie Control Universal and XT Expander) represents one of the finest examples of control surfaces currently available. ■■■■

## SUMMARY

### KEY FEATURES

- 32 V-Pots
- Four backlit LCD displays
- LED rings for pot positions
- MIDI connectivity
- Support for Logic Pro 7

### WHY BUY

- Superior integration with and support for Logic Pro 7
- Immediate tactile control of many plug-ins and instruments
- Ideal expansion for existing Mackie control surfaces
- Clear display of parameter types and values

### WALK ON BY

- Large plug-ins and instruments can be confusing
- Certain parameter abbreviations can be cryptic
- Occasionally poor integration with third-party plug-ins

## VERDICT

The Control C4 is an excellent companion to the Mackie Control and Logic Pro 7 – although some of larger plug-ins could be better organised.

