



# Steinberg CC121

£313

PC

MAC



With Cubase now featuring advanced hardware integration, it's time to assess the spiritual successor to the venerable Houston controller

## System requirements

**PC** Pentium 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, Windows XP/Vista (32-bit), USB port

**Mac** G4 1GHz / Core Solo 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, OS X 10.4, USB port

## Test system

**Mac** Apple Mac Pro dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.11, Cubase 4.5.1

> Hardware controllers - love them or loathe them, they've become a significant part of the computer music landscape. And although styles vary considerably, it's hard to argue that a unit purpose-built for a particular application doesn't have considerable benefits - thankfully, this is the path chosen by Steinberg for their new CC121 controller. Sporting the same 'Advanced Integration' tag as their new MR interfaces, the CC121 is the result of a synergy between the teams at Steinberg and their parent company Yamaha. Also like the MR, the CC121 requires the new AI-equipped versions of Cubase, meaning only version 4.5 or the included, slimmed-down Cubase AI will work with it. Unsurprisingly, given that the last dedicated Cubase controller from

Steinberg - Houston - failed to take off, they've shied away from such a grand design this time around, and the CC121 is both compact and, at just over £300, reasonably priced.

## Silver bullet

With only Cubase to cater for, the CC121's features are very specific. The left-hand side is dominated by a 100mm touch-sensitive, motorised fader, which is accompanied by a rotary pan controller. At the bottom are two Channel Select buttons for switching back and forth through mixer channels. Also on the left-hand strip are eight backlit function buttons that match Cubase's VST Channel settings: solo, mute, automation read and write, track arm,

“The CC121 is an extremely well conceived controller. It’s compact and reasonably priced”

monitor, instrument edit and effects edit. The middle section of the CC121 is dominated by 12 rotary controllers and six buttons dedicated purely to Cubase’s built-in Channel EQ. Below these you’ll find the transport controls.

The controls we’ve mentioned so far are ‘hardwired’ and can’t be reassigned. However, that’s not the case with the right-hand section, the main feature of which is the amusingly named AI Knob. Although you can just use this as a jog wheel, its AI-specific feature is far more impressive – point at a control in Cubase with your mouse and the dial is instantly assigned to that parameter. What’s more, by using the lock button, you can move the mouse cursor away and still keep the assignment. To round things off, at the top right are four configurable function keys and a single rotary encoder – see the *Fully functional* boxout for more details on these.

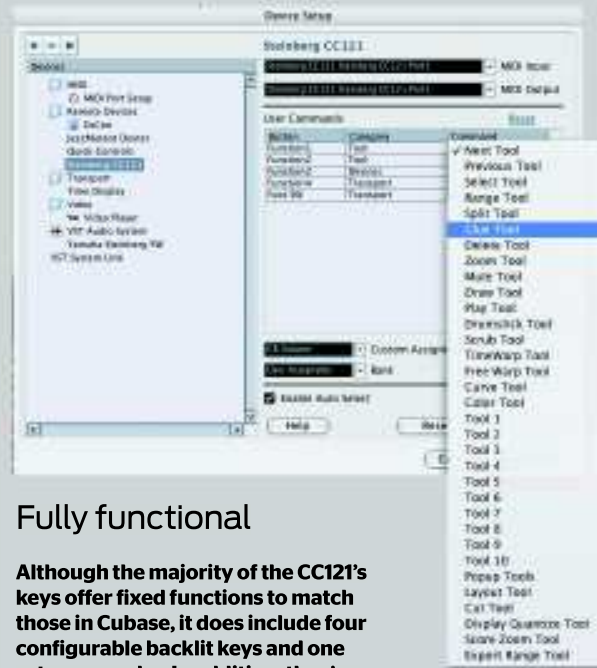
On the technical front, the CC121 needs a standard USB connection (ie, not via a hub or peripheral) and is bus-powered. However, the motorised fader requires more juice than the USB connection can supply, so there’s also an additional PSU included. Round the back you’ll also find the power switch and a socket for the optional footswitch (which can be assigned as another function – start recording, for example).

## Colour by numbers

Anyone who has any experience of using hardware controllers will be aware that getting connected can have pitfalls. The first big positive for the CC121 is that there’s a dedicated indicator in the top right-hand corner that flashes when you’re properly hooked up, turning solid after you launch Cubase and get full integration. Next up and also a big plus are the backlit channel settings buttons, which are colour-coded to match those in Cubase’s GUI.

In practice, although the colour coding is useful, the simple layout and dedicated buttons make it easy to feel your way around without taking your eyes off your software. This is particularly true for the EQ section, where working with the four dedicated bands is akin to using a traditional mixing console.

As mentioned, the fader is both motorised and touch sensitive, and the sensitivity can be adjusted. Because there’s only one fader, channel selection is done either on-screen or by using the channel select buttons, but you might be surprised that there’s no means to jump between channel types (eg, to quickly adjust auxiliary channel settings) or banks. As mentioned already, if you remove the PSU and run solely on USB bus power, the fader won’t shift to match your settings. With no VCA-style offset mode, using it in this way is pretty pointless. Also, with no indicators or readouts of any sort on the unit, you have to look at the computer screen to be sure of which channel you’ve selected.



Mixing and matching the user-assigned function buttons, rotary encoder and optional footswitch couldn’t be simpler

## Fully functional

Although the majority of the CC121’s keys offer fixed functions to match those in Cubase, it does include four configurable backlit keys and one rotary encoder. In addition, they’ve also included two pre-configured templates for Cubase’s Studio Control and Monitor Control options. Accessible from the Remote Devices tab in the Device Setup screen, these options are self-explanatory, tying in with the Control Room to allow level control and monitor selection. One additional plus is that the encoder is also a push-button (it’s the only one on the CC121 like this) that activates and deactivates the selected Control Room channels.

As well as those two ready-made templates, you can also go for the user-assignable option, giving you individual control over the function

keys and rotary encoder. However, the rotary encoder is limited to four level-based options: metronome, main mix, CR volume and CR phones. The buttons, on the other hand, can be assigned to any of the hundreds of functions available in the category list, ranging from Tools to Edit to Save.

In practice, we found it worked well as a quick route to opening windows or selecting tools, and although many of these functions already exist as key commands, the convenience of having them to hand on the CC121 proves extremely liberating.

The point and control ‘AI Knob’ is a neat idea, but you’ll no doubt be aware that Cubase already enable many parameters to be adjusted using a regular mouse wheel. It’s the Lock mode that proves truly valuable here and is only limited by the fact that support is restricted to VST3 plug-ins and certain Cubase parameters.

## In control?

The CC121 is an extremely well conceived box. It sits easily alongside your keyboard and mouse, working in harmony with them rather than competing. The construction is solid and the unit is heavy enough that it doesn’t slip around on the desktop. The obvious limitation is that it’s for Cubase only, but also, the dedicated EQ knobs seem a bit like overkill given that not everyone likes to use the Cubase’s built-in EQ, and that there are no dedicated controls for any other plug-ins.

Whether the CC121 will meet your needs is going to depend on what kind of user you are, but its integrated design, easy learning curve and compact footprint easily outweigh its small technical limitations. Nice work, Steinberg. **cm**

Contact Steinberg  
Web [www.steinberg.net](http://www.steinberg.net)

## Alternatively

**Presonus FaderPort cm111 >> 7/10 >> £159**

The FaderPort offers good value but lacks full Cubase integration

**Frontier AlphaTrack cm116 >> 9/10 >> £149**

Surprisingly flexible and supports many different applications

## Verdict

**For** Easy to learn  
Mirrors Cubase features  
Compact, yet solid and weighty  
Useful AI Knob Lock option  
Configurable function keys

**Against** No parameter readout  
EQ dials can’t control anything else  
AI Knob limited in applications

Despite some drawbacks, the CC121 wins over in a number of important areas where many controllers come up short

**9/10**