

Sound Shaper

A new audio interface featuring a valve preamp and cab simulations specifically aimed at guitarists

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AUDIENT SONO GUITAR RECORDING INTERFACE £419

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What You Need To Know

1 An audio interface with a valve? Surely not...

Yep, the USB-C connection to your computer might be bang up to date, but there's some nice vintage technology in the guitar signal path to enhance your sound.

2 There are a lot of knobs for an audio interface...

True, but those six black ones are pretty much dedicated to guitar tone: setting the input to the valve stage, tweaking it with three-band EQ, and setting the drive of a simulated power amp.

3 So, who is Audient anyway?

You may not have heard of the company before, but it is a respected UK brand with over 20 years of history and best known for mixing consoles, audio interface and microphone preamps.

1. Not merely for cooling purposes, you can look through the holes of the front panel grille and see the reassuring warm orange glow of the 12AX7 valve

2. With the software mixer you can set your levels and much more from your computer



As long as it's got a Hi-Z input, you can plug in and record a guitar through any audio interface. Savvy manufacturers, however, have realised that guitar players might desire a few extra features above and beyond the usual array, so have been coming up with interfaces designed specifically for guitar recording.

We recently took a look at the IK Multimedia Axe I/O (in issue 448), which features variable input impedance as well as JFET circuitry in the preamp. Now it's the turn of the Audient Sono, a system that actually puts a 12AX7 valve in the guitar signal path and follows it with three-band EQ and Torpedo power amp/speaker cabinet simulation from specialists Two Notes Engineering.

The Sono is no one-trick-pony – it has all the facilities you'd expect in a decent interface including the dedicated guitar input, a pair of combi XLR/jack mic/line sockets with individual 48-volt phantom power switching for condenser mics, stereo line and headphone outputs each with their own volume control, plus a Monitor Mix knob to let you listen to the input, DAW output or a blend of the two. You'll also find a dedicated To Amp output for reamping, and an optical input so you can add an ADAT expander, such as the Audient ASP880, with more mic preamps to enable you to record up to 10 channels of audio simultaneously.

In Use

Our first setup task was the easy installation of the two associated software apps that are available for free download. One is the actual Sono app where you can have remote control of Sono functions via a GUI, access firmware updates and more; the other is the Two Notes Remote Software that offers a choice of cabinets with various adjustable parameters.

Powering up the unit with the provided wall-wart power supply and connecting it by USB, we quickly got the unit set up as the selected audio interface for our Mac. We chose to start by recording some clean guitar directly into Logic Audio. The main signal you record comes from





3. Traffic light LEDs let you gauge the strength of your signal through the A/D converter, its graduations being 'Signal', 'Some', 'Good', 'Hot' and 'Bad!'
4. Press and hold this button to turn cabinet simulation on and off: once engaged, quick presses will scroll through the three onboard options
5. In the Two Notes Torpedo Remote software you can choose your speaker cabinet and its mic, and move that around in a room of your choice

the end of the signal chain after the cab simulation of the Torpedo processing, but a separate feed to your DAW means you can also simultaneously record a duplicate signal that bypasses that signal processing. This 'No CAB' track can be used later on if you wish to apply some software amp and cabinet simulation to it, or you can choose to send it back out to a real amp and re-record it with a microphone.

Audient believes that the Hi-Z guitar input feeding the valve will give you the same response and feel you'd get from a guitar amp whatever pickups you may be using, and it has to be said that playing through it does feel naturally dynamic,

while the near-zero latency means timing issues are non-existent. The standard clean guitar sound you'll get is clear and sparkly, enhanced by the valve circuitry, which can be driven harder with the input knob to give you a bit more thickness and edge, although not getting into the realms of overdrive. The Bass, Mid and Treble knobs each offer up to 15dB of cut and boost and let you gently shape the sound. Of course, if you want to get more drive, a boost or an overdrive – particularly an amp-in-a-box style pedal between guitar and unit – is the way to go.

After the valve and EQ stage the signal goes through the A/D converter so it can pass through the Two Notes Torpedo

THE RIVALS

The IK Multimedia Axe I/O (£369) audio/MIDI interface is designed for the same purpose as the Sono but doesn't have onboard sound-shaping facilities other than choosing impedance to suit your pickups and optional JFET circuitry in the preamp. It does have a reamping facility, though, and integration with AmpliTube including rear-panel controller inputs for expression pedals and footswitches. For a fully formed sound, the Line 6 HX Stomp (£429) is an amp and effects processor that offers a two-in/two-out USB audio connection for recording. Focusrite's Scarlett Solo (£85) is more basic but considerably more affordable, featuring a mic input, input for guitars, plus monitoring via line outputs and headphones.





power amp and cabinet simulation if engaged. A Drive knob controls the amount of power amplifier saturation and while you get a choice of three different cabinet simulations stored in the hardware, you actually have access to 20 via the connected Torpedo Remote software, which also gives you the option of buying more cabinets from the Two Notes Store. The application allows the final fine-tuning of your main recorded guitar sound; you can adjust numerous parameters such as changing the microphone model and moving its position from close mic'ing of the speaker to further out in the selected recording space – Studio, Hall, Cathedral and so on – for different reverbs if you want to record the ambience.

Recording a guitar direct this way gets you a range of very usable guitar sounds, but you should bear in mind that the signal path of a basic single-valve preamp feeding a simulated power amp and cab setup does not have the versatility of dedicated amp simulations for nuanced driven tones. However, when we placed a quality drive pedal, in this case a RevivalDrive from

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Origin Effects, in front of the unit and made use of the speaker simulation, the recorded results were stunning.

Should you wish to record microphone or line level signals then you can use the two mic preamps, 1 and 2, which both provide excellent sound quality. Input 1 is capable of accessing the guitar channel's signal path (via a rear panel To Valve switch), allowing you to add a little colour to a vocal or a directly plugged-in keyboard, for example. By the same token, the To Amp output is seamlessly set up and, as well as reamping guitars, could be used to send any recorded DAW track to an amp for sonic restructuring and re-recording.

Verdict

With its Audient mic preamps and the optical input to expand your system, the Sono was always going to be a practical, quality unit, but the guitar facilities are what sets it apart. The valve-based preamp, its tone shaping facilities and that power amp and cab simulation will ensure that you can plug in and get a decent-sounding guitar recording at any time – brilliant for getting your ideas down quickly without a lot of messing around. The fact that you have three speaker cab simulations onboard also means that you can always use it without a computer for a bit of practice through headphones. The To Amp output is an invaluable asset for giving any recorded guitar a refresh, too. If guitar features large in your recording tasks, then the Sono is worth seeking out. **G**



AUDIENT SONO GUITAR RECORDING INTERFACE

PRICE: £419

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: USB audio interface

FEATURES: 24-bit/96kHz, dedicated guitar input with valve signal path, power amp/cabinet simulation, dedicated reamping output, 10 ins/4 outs

CONTROLS: Mic Gain x2, 48V phantom power switch x2, To Valve switch, CAB Selector, Monitor Mix, Headphones volume, Output volume, Bass, Mid EQ, Treble, Input, Drive, Output

CONNECTIONS: Standard guitar input, mic/line combi input x2, standard stereo phones output, standard external amp output, standard line outputs (L&R), optical in, USB-C

POWER: Supplied 12V DC adaptor

DIMENSIONS: 229 (w) x 165 (d) x 67mm (h)



9/10

PROS Valve signal path; cabinet simulation; onboard processing to minimise latency; dedicated reamping output; optical input for expansion to 10 simultaneous inputs

CONS Some might prefer a combined audio/MIDI interface