

CLOUD CL-ZI ■ ESI AUDIOTECHNIK U168 XT ■ DPA DM6000

CLOUD MICROPHONES CLOUDLIFTER ZI VARI-Z INSTRUMENT DI AND MIC ACTIVATOR

Cloud Microphones's new Cloudlifter CL-Zi (\$379 street) is a well-built, steel-chassis box featuring a variable impedance knob (labeled "Z") and high-pass filter (HPF) to allow tone shaping through the manipulation of impedance loading. Most importantly, it serves as a phantom-powered microphone preamp as well as an instrument DI. As such, it is a superb tool for the professional-level working musician as well as a great recording and live sound I/O tool for any audio engineer.

When engaging the HPF switch, the CL-Zi's smooth variable tonal control ranges from a 150 ohms/4 kHz roll-off frequency to a 15k ohms/70 Hz roll-off frequency with 6 dB per octave slope. This wide HPF allows the CL-Zi to act as both a surgical cleaning tool as well as a creative tonal box, useful on instrument or miked sound sources.

I/O includes a combo XLR/quarter-inch input and XLR output, the latter of which should be paired with 48 V phantom power. The CL-Zi features a three-position gain switch, allowing for minimum gain (3 dB/instrument, 6 dB/mic); more gain (6 dB instrument, 12 dB mic); or the



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maximum gain available (15 dB/instrument, 25 dB/mic). According to Cloud, this allows players to access clean gain and a lower noise floor for various studio or stage applications—e.g., an electric guitar via amp modeling or an acoustic guitar, bass or keyboard direct.

In use, this "clean gain/lower noise" claim certainly proved to be true. Whether during recording or in live performances, stringed instrumentalists using the CL-Zi absolutely loved it, too. In particular, acoustic

musicians utilizing pickups claimed that it sounded "most natural," and the HPF allowed them to dial in hot, tight signal to FOH.

I also used the CL-Zi with dynamic and ribbon microphones both in and out of studio confines with great results. It effectively boosts signals when used alongside high-gain condensers, allowing better mic level matching, literally, across the board. Suddenly, a ribbon you may not choose is hotter, thus more detailed, rivaling condenser choices that may



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be just a bit too bright or edgy for particular sound sources. That, and the variable HPF knob allowed lots of creative sculpting of microphones, too. It's a fun tool.

Based in Tucson, AZ, all of Cloud Microphones' products are made regionally from start to finish, creating jobs and benefiting small businesses around Tucson, Phoenix and in the Navajo Nation. While I don't buy products based on where they are made, this is certainly a feel-good perk of buying anything from Cloud's superb lineup.

ESI AUDIOTECHNIK U168 XT 16-INPUT USB INTERFACE

ESI Audiotechnik GmbH—a branded and OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) pro audio design/manufacturing firm since 1998—is now shipping its 24-bit/96 kHz-capable U168 XT audio interface (\$499.95 street), featuring what are arguably a recordist's most commonly needed I/O at very attractive price points. Having used a wide range of USB I/O units, I was happy to find such an affordable, well-built 1U box with precisely what I find myself needing in most of the laptop, site-based multitracking sessions that I do. And at this price, I expect the U168 XT would serve a wide range of users well, notably those who may need a secondary I/O for on-the-go tracking situations, as described below.

Mac or PC-ready, the U168 XT provides four microphone preamps via front-panel XLR inputs with phantom power, two of which are switchable Hi-Z instrument inputs (with XLR/TRS combo jacks); 16 line inputs and eight line outputs via quarter-inch TRS, all on the rear panel; S/PDIF

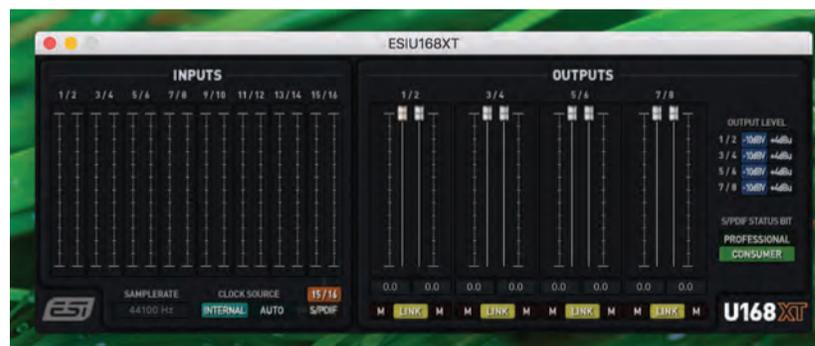
I/O via RCA connectors; dual headphone outputs with individual gain adjustment; L/R mix outputs via quarter-inch TRS; 16 channel MIDI I/O; and USB 2.0 port.

The unit came with an eight-track version of Bitwig Studio music creation/performance software, GK Amplification 2 LE bass amp simulation, ampLion Guitar amp simulation, and a license for Stanton's Deckadance LE software. Though I did not use these packages, opting just to get running with my preferred DAW (Logic Pro X), these offerings are a good bonus for fledgling recordists. It also ships with an installation DVD, though as my new Mac Book Pro comes DVD-less, downloading and installing the driver from ESI's website was quick and easy.

The software control panel for the U168 XT is simplistic, clean and intuitive, offering detailed and useful metering, clock source and input and output selection parameters. Following a quick setup taking no more than a minute or two, I was up and running



While ESI Audiotechnik is a virtual unknown amongst pro audio types, I expect that will soon change with products like the U168 XT on its roster.



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with the hardware unit, accepting a combination of XLR (dynamic and condenser microphones) XLR combo (instrument) and line-level sound

sources. The front panel "on" light glows red until connected via USB to a DAW's CPU, then glows green. Other

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