



Favorite Things

by Stephen Murphy

Sad but true, last month's column marked the completion of the four-part "Building the Perfect Beast" series on configuring and tweaking a cutting-edge XP-based multiprocessor workstation. This month we'll take a look at some of my favorite peripheral products that replace, stick on top of, or sit beside your computer keyboard – you can consider it the "Neighbor of the Beast" column.

The purpose of these products is, generally speaking, to make our lives spent camped in front of computers a little brighter. In my experience, anything that can accomplish that is worth the investment.



Keys to Success

On the low end of the investment scale, but providing a high return, are products from a UK-based company called Editors Keys (the apostrophe is left out to save you money!). The company makes a wide range of inexpensive (\$18.99) keyboard shortcut sticker sets for many audio, video and graphics applications.

Editors Keys has developed key sets for nearly every popular audio workstation program and clearly makes it a point to stay current with the latest software versions

and product ranges. Available audio workstation key sets include Steinberg Nuendo/Cubase, Cakewalk Sonar, Digidesign Pro Tools, Propellerhead Reason, Sony Vegas and Apple Logic Pro.

The standard key set package comes on a single sheet and provides 60 or more clearly labeled, multicolor keycap stickers that affix easily to the designated keys via a handy application guide. New for Editors Keys is a transparent Logic Pro set that allows placement of the stickers anywhere for those who have customized their keyboard shortcut layouts.

I've personally used Editors Keys key sets and can attest to their quality and usefulness. For under twenty bucks, these resilient, waterproof vinyl stickers provide at-a-glance access to all those shortcuts you never bothered to memorize. Despite the fact that the company is in England, ordering from the US couldn't be simpler thanks to a good website and mail delivery in under a week. For more info, visit www.editorskeys.com.

For those willing to invest the cash and/or lacking the patience and steady hands required to apply

colleagues is Logic Keys. The company offers keyboards for two top audio post-production programs: Pro Tools and Nuendo. Several keyboard options are available (standard PS/2 and USB keyboards, "multimedia" keyboards and Apple-style keyboards) and prices range from around \$100 to \$140. For more info visit www.logickeyboard.com.

Piece of the PI

You gotta love P.I. Engineering, and not just because its slogan is "The No Slogan Company." P.I. Engineering is one of those rare companies that infuses its product lines with genuine creativity, flexibility and an accessibility that appeals to DIY-ers, and at the same time provides ready-to-use functionality for those needing an out-of-the-box solution.

The Michigan-based company started modestly in 1993 with its Y-Mouse adapter line. Over the ensuing years, the company has emerged as a leader in "human interface hardware," providing innovative computer input devices whose application is limited only by imagination. Check out P.I.'s website and you'll get a good idea



shortcut stickers, there are a few companies that market custom color-coded keyboards ready for use with audio applications. One such company that has been recommended by several

of what I'm talking about.

For the studio world, the really trick tools are found in P.I. Engineering's X-keys line. X-keys are a range of programmable USB and PS/2 keyboard input devices

that come in a variety of shapes, sizes and configurations.

At the simplest level is the X-keys Stick (\$80), a single-row 16-button device designed to mount above a standard keyboard's function keys. Most of the X-keys products, however, are in the more-traditional desktop keypad vein, and provide anywhere from 20 to 128 programmable backlit buttons (\$100 to \$300). Transparent keycaps provide protection for your custom labels, which are easily created using the supplied label sheets and templates.



The X-keys Pro model is available with an integrated joystick or concentric jog/shuttle wheel (\$230), making them perfect for surround panning and transport duties. Another of my favorites for audio controller applications is the aptly named Button Panel (\$90). This sleek little unit is outfitted with two rows of 14 buttons each plus a rocker switch (perfect for zooming) and four-way navigation pad, all mounted on the angled front of an attractive desktop housing.

The X-keys buttons can be programmed to do nearly anything you can think of, so it is inevitable that the longer you use an X-keys controller, the more creative and complex (and thus labor-saving) your uses will become. Programming the buttons and controllers is exceedingly simple

for basic tasks such as launching key command shortcuts, zooming, transport control and even strings of keystrokes. For more involved tasks, including performing complex functions not provided for by your audio application, a comprehensive GUI macro programming suite called MacroWorks is included.

One of the beauties of the X-keys controllers is that you are in no way limited to default shortcut key layouts as with standard labeled keyboards. They can also be custom programmed and quickly switched to be used with the

variety of software applications we typically use during the course of our work.

For the more DIY-inclined, P.I. Engineering also sells individual components such as the X-keys matrix board, a variety of buttons and foot pedals, and a USB switch interface for connecting up to twelve real-world contact-closure type devices for triggering computer functions. Using these tools, you could create anything from talkback and recording footswitches to remotely located recording/headphone mix control panels or even an entire custom control surface. Put your creative mind to work and visit www.piengineering.com.

PAR Studio Editor Stephen Murphy has over 20 years production and engineering experience, including Grammy-winning & Gold/Platinum credits.