USB Sound Cards - Tips For Choosing the Correct Sound Card

The very first sound cards were circuit based and connected directly to the PCMCIA motherboards of early home pcs and generally had extremely limited capacity - i.e. they had a 3.5mm jack socket out to connect to speakers and generally one remaining 3.5mm socket in to connect either "mic-in" or "line-in".

Since the widespread implementation of Universal Serial Bus in its unabbreviated form, which was apparently known of as early as 1996 and was a joint invention by Compaq, Microsoft, Intel and IBM as well as a few other companies, however this early version was the USB 1.0 and had a limited cache and the speed of data transfer was a limited 12Mbps, meaning it worked in conjunction with a lot of internal devices such as extensions for additional joysticks etc. However, in April of 2000 the USB 2.0 standard was set, which was capable of transferring 480Mbps - 40 times faster that it's predecessor. Also this made it a practicable candidate for hardware devices like external cards to be developed for home studio and professional studio software that were capable of streaming audio in at up to 32bit at 96000 kHz.

Now we have an enormous volume of manufacturers producing these cards of various capabilities, you need to initially decide what you want to use it for - for example, for someone who needed to be able to transfer audio from a Dictaphone or something of that ilk, a £10.00 card would more than suffice, having simple 3.5mm jacks in a clearly labelled box is almost fool-proof and will provide an excellent result with little or no know-how.

If however you are going to use this for a multitude of tasks, for both work and pleasure as I myself do, then you will have to head into the mid regions of the market. Which will provide you for a modest £120.00 with a card complete with all major socket connections that you will find in the professional audio world - XLR (with an option for "Phantom Power" to power hyper-cardiod microphones), 1/4 inch Jack in and out (common with most electric musical instruments - keyboards, guitars and the such), phone in and out (so you can bridge out to monitor speakers into your studio and have several secondary outputs if required and finally a headphone jack on the front. The entire card and all of its features are powered by just one USB Port.

Looking quite hard at these new external devices when I originally took one out of the box, I was initially concerned that perhaps they were a little too complicated for the layman and that perhaps there were too many features on the mid-range cards, and thus might cause confusion. However, the interface is extremely clear in all of the models I have used and selecting the desired socket you have plugged something into on your PC takes moments via a very versatile control panel which will self install by the clock on your taskbar.

Decide what you are going to be using your USB Sound Card for and perhaps take a moment to see if there are applications that you could make better use of by going for a slightly upmarket version.

