

3.5-mm adapter, which, owing to its length and size, could damage the jack); a spare four-pin microphone plug; a spare power connector; a spare 7.5-A fuse, a mobile microphone holder (plus hardware) and a small hex wrench to remove or tighten the knobs. A minor gripe is that Ten-Tec used the 3.5-mm jack for the key in the first place, especially when most transceivers use the 1/4-inch jack. Then again, most QRP transceivers are really tiny and use the smaller jack.

By the way, Carl Moreschi, N4PY, offers a PC control program (a version of his Pegasus/Jupiter control software) for the Argonaut V. It's on his Web site, www.ralabs.com/n4py.

Who Wants One of These?

There's a sort of "spiritual connection" between some amateurs and Ten-Tec gear than can defy objectivity at times. For example, one fellow posted his opinion

that the Argo V was "more radio" than the original ICOM IC-706. At the very least, that's a very highly debatable issue given the capabilities of the latter radio.

Anyway, a lot of folks will buy the Argonaut V simply because it's from Ten-Tec; the Argonaut moniker alone will sweeten or perhaps clinch the deal for others. The 20 W suggests QRP with an edge, but it's a great power level for those who enjoy the slow lane, and it's demonstrably plenty of power to work DX, even in a contest environment. It's also sufficient to also enjoy casual contacts, and, as a bonus, you don't have to worry as much about RFI issues. We didn't try taking the Argonaut V on the road, however. There just did not seem to be any particular advantage. It might be a great rig to take to the field, although it does draw 7.5 A in transmit at full output (about 1.0 A on receive with the volume control wide open).

Current Argonaut V owners seem to have registered few complaints. Some have noted the lack of an RF-gain control. Owners have also offered helpful suggestions, such as one to use the memory feature to store frequencies in each band to permit moving more easily from band to band.

Overall, we found the Argonaut V to be a capable little transceiver that's easy to use and incorporates a lot of handy features in a compact, well-constructed package.

Manufacturer: Ten-Tec, 1185 Dolly Parton Pkwy, Sevierville, TN 37862; 800-833-7373; sales@tentec.com; www.tentec.com. Argonaut model 516 transceiver, \$795; with optional temperature-compensated crystal oscillator (TCXO), \$849; model 308 fan kit, \$15; model 309 mobile bracket, \$19.95; model 937 matching power supply, \$89; model 705 desk microphone, \$99.95.

RIGblaster Pro

By Steve Ford, WB8IMY
QST Editor

Is there such a thing as an "ultimate" transceiver/computer interface? Perhaps not, but West Mountain Radio has introduced a strong candidate for the title in the new RIGblaster Pro. The RIGblaster Pro certainly has every bell and whistle I could imagine, plus some I didn't even think of. Of course, with such versatility comes increasing complexity. The "Pro" part of the model name should be taken at face value. This unit is designed for amateurs who have (or want) complete computer/radio integration and don't mind taking the time to become familiar with a full-featured interface. If all you care about is a simple box to link your sound card to your radio so that you can operate PSK31 or other soundcard modes, the RIGblaster Pro is gross overkill. But if you want to make your computer and radio true partners in a high-performance multimode station, the Pro is a godsend.

Microphones, Headphones and LEDs

The RIGblaster Pro is housed in a flat metal box about 8 inches long, but only an inch thick. The front panel features an 8-pin microphone jack, a 1/8-inch auxiliary mic jack and two headphone jacks—1/8 and 1/4 inch. The purpose of the auxiliary mic jack is to allow you to plug in a

headset microphone without having to unplug your main mic. When the headset plug is inserted, audio from the main mic is interrupted automatically.

The output level control is conveniently located on the front of the box for easy access. Tweaking this little knob to adjust transceiver drive is easier than grabbing your PC mouse and calling up your software audio mixer screen.

The LEDs are informative and serve as valuable troubleshooting tools when necessary. Just by glancing at the LEDs, you'll know that sound is reaching the Pro from your computer, that the FSK keying signal is active for RTTY and so on.

Then there is the PROCESS toggle switch and LED. Contrary to what you might think, the RIGblaster Pro does *not* have an internal speech processor. However, you can do a very nifty thing with the Pro's PROCESS function, as we'll see later.

Built-in Rig Control

Using computers to control amateur transceivers has become quite popular. Most modern transceivers have computer-control ports and, with the right software, your computer can become a versatile tool for either local or remote manipula-

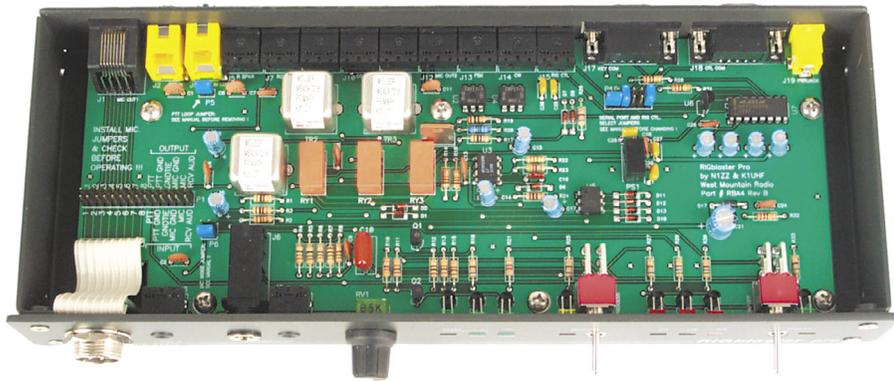
tion of your radio. The catch is that you usually need a hardware interface to do the signal translation between the computer's RS232 serial port and the transceiver's TTL port. This means an additional purchase and another device dangling from your PC.

Not so with the RIGblaster Pro. The Pro features a *built-in* RS232-to-TTL interface that will work with ICOM, Yaesu, Kenwood and Ten-Tec transceivers that support computer control. The Pro also offers serial port pass-through for radios that support direct RS232 control (newer Yaesu and Kenwood transceivers).

Dual Serial Jacks

When you look at the rear panel of the RIGblaster Pro, your eyes are drawn immediately to the dual DB9 serial jacks. Considering the fact that most sound card interfaces sport only a single serial jack, this may seem puzzling. The answer to the mystery is that the RIGblaster Pro is designed to handle *two* serial lines from your computer *simultaneously*. A typical use for this feature might be with the popular *WriteLog* contesting software. In a RTTY competition, for instance, you can have *WriteLog* doing radio control on COM 1 and FSK keying on COM 2. With





An interior view of the RIGblaster Pro. Note the shielded transformers.



The rear panel of the RIGblaster Pro is festooned with input and output jacks.

the dual serial inputs, the RIGblaster Pro brings everything together in one box and allows you to sort the functions accordingly.

The RIGblaster Pro also gets quite a bit of mileage out of a single serial port in some situations. If you happen to be running *HamScope* or *MixW* software, you can control your transceiver push-to-talk function for PSK31 and other modes, and CW keying, on the same serial port.

Installation and Operation

The RIGblaster Pro comes with a detailed manual. You need to read the instructions carefully, then determine which modes you wish to operate and how you wish to do so. The answers will be different for everyone, so I can only offer my own station as an example. I wanted to be able to use the Pro's capability in several applications:

- Rig control for use with *WriteLog* and *TRX Manager*
- CW keying
- FSK RTTY
- PSK31, MFSK16 and slow-scan TV
- *Echolink*
- *WSJT* (for 6-meter meteor-scatter fun)
- SSB and FM with either my standard microphone or a headset mic.

The first step is to open the Pro and install the jumpers for the microphone, COM port and rig-control blocks. The

manual shows several microphone jumper configurations, depending on the radio you own. The jumpers have to be set correctly so that the microphone pin assignments on your radio ultimately correspond with the pins on the Pro's front-panel microphone jack. It is important to note that the Pro connects to your rig's mic jack through an RJ45 telephone-style jack on the Pro's rear panel. My ICOM IC-706 also uses an RJ45 jack, so making the connection was relatively easy. Other radios may require adaptors.

Like most computers, my mongrel machine has two COM (serial) ports. The Pro package includes one DB9 serial cable, which I ran from COM2 to the Pro for rig control with *WriteLog* and *TRX Manager*. With another cable I dedicated COM1 to PTT (push to talk) control for my *MixW* software for CW, PSK31 and MFSK16, as well as my *Echolink* and *WSJT* applications. I also set up *MMTTY* and *WriteLog* to use COM1 for FSK RTTY keying.

The Pro includes independent, fully isolated CW, FSK and PTT keying outputs. This means that once you've installed the RIGblaster Pro, you won't need to swap cables to transition from mode to mode. You can jump from CW to FSK RTTY, to PSK31, for example, by just loading the proper software. The Pro does the rest.

I plugged my computer speakers into

the Pro and connected the audio lines to and from the PC. (The thoughtful folks at West Mountain Radio not only include a generous number of audio cables, they add a set of color-coded adhesive labels maintain order in the cable chaos.) My microphone connected to the front-panel eight-pin jack and the wall-wart power supply (included with the Pro) plugged into the rear panel. Total setup and installation time: about 30 minutes.

The RIGblaster Pro worked perfectly from the moment I applied power. It was a pleasure to hop from one program and mode to another without pulling cables and throwing switches. And speaking of programs, the Pro package includes a CD with an astonishing number of freeware and shareware programs. Most of the applications are for *Windows*, but there are *Mac* and *Linux* applications on the CD as well.

But what about that PROCESS switch? Well, if you have audio processing software on your computer—such as the software found on the RIGblaster Pro CD—you can toggle the PROCESS switch and route your microphone audio through your sound card *before* it is applied to your radio. This allows you to use the software to process your audio characteristics in any way you desire. I also used the Process function with my headset microphone in contest operating to send the mic audio through the computer for virtually seamless live/recorded voice keying. I was even able to use the Process function to route the headset through my computer for nonham uses such as voice chats with *Windows Messenger*.

Conclusion

Is the RIGblaster Pro for everyone? No. As I stated at the beginning of this review, you don't need a RIGblaster Pro for basic computer PTT keying. But if you consider your computer an essential part of your Amateur Radio experience regardless of mode, the RIGblaster does a superb job of integrating all of your activities in a way that adds substantial enjoyment and convenience. Some may find the Pro's price tag a little intimidating, but I found the per-dollar value to be quite good, especially considering the quality of design and construction. The RIGblaster Pro is definitely the Rolls Royce of interfaces.

Manufacturer: West Mountain Radio, 18 Sheehan Ave, Norwalk, CT 06854; tel 203-853-8080; www.westmountainradio.com. \$299.