

West Mountain Radio RIGblaster Advantage

If you plan to try your hand at PSK31, RTTY, JT65 or any of the other sound-card-based digital modes available today, chances are you're going to need some means to connect your computer (and its sound card) to your transceiver. Many amateurs rely on simple interfaces that merely provide transmit/receive switching and audio signal isolation. They are fine as far as they go, but the trend among more "deluxe" interfaces has been to incorporate the sound device within the interface itself. The advantage of this approach is that it frees the computer sound card for other applications (along with the need to readjust its settings between ham and family uses), and it eliminates the rat's nest of wires between the computer and the transceiver. Having an interface with an internal sound device makes life easier for the digitally active ham, especially if you want the convenience of being able to use the interface anywhere, and with just about any computer.

West Mountain Radio has been making their famous RIGblaster interfaces almost since the day hams began using sound cards to create new digital modes. It was only recently, however, that they introduced an interface with a built-in sound device: the RIGblaster Advantage.

Unique Design

The RIGblaster Advantage is designed to be a flexible hub for your entire station, regardless of whether you intend to operate phone, CW or digital. For example, you may want to use the microphone jack of your transceiver for regular SSB, AM or FM operation *and* as the input for digitally modulated audio for PSK31. Normally this would be a bit of a hassle since you'd have to swap the microphone and interface plugs each time you wanted to switch from voice to digital. With the RIGblaster Advantage, you simply plug your microphone into the



The Advantage rear panel.

interface and connect the interface to the radio's microphone jack. The Advantage switches between the microphone and the internal sound device automatically.

Another perennial headache with sound-card interfaces has been configuring the transmit/receive switching connections and transmit audio lines to correspond to the wiring of the transceiver's microphone jack. This often involves the tedious use of tiny jumper blocks or wires that you must place in the correct positions according to which signals need to go on which lines. The odds of success are usually not in your favor.

West Mountain's solution is to streamline the process with what they call "Instant Setup Connectors." You just choose the connector that matches your particular transceiver brand and pop it into place. It takes all of 10 seconds and you're good to go.

The Advantage connects to your computer through a USB cable. It obtains its power through the same cable, so there is no need to hook up an external power supply. The USB connection creates a virtual COM port for your computer operating system and the Advantage user manual steps you through the process of figuring out the designation (COM 6, for instance) so that you can set up your software accordingly. The Advantage appears to your computer as a sound device, so you also need to "tell" your software to chose it as the default. As with the COM port

setup, this is a one-time operation. I was able to easily configure the Advantage in *Windows 7* for use with *DigiPan* for PSK31 operation and *Ham Radio Deluxe* for multimode applications. I also was able to get it working with *Fldigi* under *Ubuntu Linux*. In each case it was a matter of a few mouse clicks within the appropriate menus.

Speaking of *Ham Radio Deluxe*, the RIGblaster Advantage also includes transceiver control interfacing. Through *Ham Radio Deluxe* the Advantage gave me full access to control of all the functions of my radio.

CW and FSK keying are achieved with relay switching through a dedicated jack on the Advantage rear panel. The Advantage has the ability to perform transmit/receive keying in response to sound alone, such as when your sound card sends AFSK RTTY or modulated CW (MCW) tones, but "hard" COM port keying is almost always the best choice. The Advantage gives you the option — VOX or COM keying — through a front-panel toggle switch.

Smooth Operation

The RIGblaster Advantage is one of the easiest interfaces I've ever used in terms of initial setup and overall operation. They've clearly put a lot of thought into making this product as simple to use as reasonably possible. The only glitch I encountered wasn't the fault of the Advantage. When I attempted to use *JT65-HF* software for *Windows*, the program had difficulty accessing the audio streams from the Advantage and generated errors as a result. Apparently this is a known issue with similar interface designs and will probably be resolved by the software author soon. With all other applications I tried, the Advantage was flawless.

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