The Lark Ascending

Mike Williams hits the high notes with his assessment of the Lark 16-bit sound card from Wild Vision.

Last Autumn, Computer Concepts and Wild Vision (in which CC has a majority stake) announced the development of the Eagle multimedia card and the Lark sound card. The former was reviewed in RISC User 7:5, and now we have the opportunity to assess the Lark, designed by Wild Vision but sold under the Computer Concepts label.

Up with the Lark

With all multi-functional cards like the Lark, it can be initially confusing establishing just what the card does, so let's start by making that clear. Looking at the back of the card you have four connectors: MIDI, Headphones, Audio and Microphone. That means the Lark can be connected and used with any MIDI instrument, a keyboard for example; you can plug in a set of stereo headphones; it provides a high quality (see later) stereo input/output which can be connected into any hi-fi system via an amplifier; and you can connect any suitable input device like a microphone to capture and sample sound directly. Sound internally is converted into 16-bit digital format, comparable to the quality of many CD-players. Still not sure? Well in simple terms, the Lark will considerably enhance the sound quality of your computer whatever the source, and it is worth noting that the Lark will recognise Replay, Armadeus, SoundSynth, DataVox and Desktop Tracker files, plus Amiga, PC and Sun formats as well as its own. If you make frequent use of any sound or music software and you want better quality than the Archimedes is capable of in its own right (using just 8-bit sound) then a card like the Lark is essential.

The Lark is a well made standard size expansion card of the quality one would expect from Wild Vision. It will fit the A3000, the A300 and 400 series, the A540, A5000 and the Risc PC (but not the A3010, A3020 or A4000, nor the A4). The board is supplied with the latest version of CC's AudioWorks software and manual (reviewed in RISC User 7:4), and the manual for CC's MIDI module which also formed part of the Eagle card. There is also a cable for connecting to the Lark's 15-pin MIDI socket, and this cable terminates in individual DIN sockets for MIDI in, out and thru connections, as with the Eagle card. In this review we will concentrate primarily on the Lark's 16-bit sound capability.

Figure 1. AudioCtrl's preferences window

Installation and Setup

Fitting is quite straightforward in all cases, the only critical step being to ensure that the ribbon cable connecting the Lark to the computer's motherboard is plugged in the right way round at both ends - unfortunately the connectors do not automatically constrain you to the correct orientation. It is also possible to connect the computer's internal speaker as an additional output device for the Lark, but this speaker cannot cope with the full dynamic range of the Lark, and this is very much a second best. Its output is also restricted to mono only.

Once installed the manual takes you through some initial steps so that you can ensure that all is working correctly. At this stage it may be helpful to use headphones connected to the stereo jack socket on the board, but beware, this is to the higher European specification and you may need an adaptor as I found (available from CC on request) for converting to the Japanese standard which seems more commonly used (and used on the Archimedes itself).

At this stage you will need to use the AudioCtrl utility, part of the AudioWorks suite. This enables you to set user preferences (see figure 1) for your set-up, and to play samples. The Lark option appears once the Lark card has been installed, and the consequent Lark mixer window is shown in figure 2. The stereo sliders (synchronised or manipulated

independently) can be used to adjust gain or volume:

Input: gain (up to 23dB)
Monitor: volume (for mixing input with output)
Internal: volume (mixing internal sound source to output)
Output: volume (of Lark s synthesised sounds with output)
Aux: volume (of signals from any other expansion cards, e.g. Eagle)

Each of of the sources can be muted entirely. Setting these to their maximum, as shown, allows any source to appear in the output when selected on its own, while varying these settings allows you to determine the mixing of sound from these three sources when required.

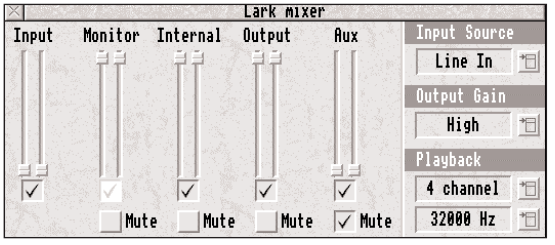

Figure 2. Setting the gain and volume on the Lark s inputs and outputs

The Lark mixer has three other groups of settings:

Input source for choice of line input, or microphone with high (+20dB) or low gain.

Output gain (high, medium or low)

Playback (number of channels and frequency of sampling)

It is also necessary to use the General option from the Audio preferences window to select the Lark as the playback and recording device (figure 3). The Events and MIDI options are as standard for AudioWorks. If that were not enough, there are sixteen different hardware links on the Lark card itself. Few of these are of any concern, and once set as required can be ignored. Note that one of these links provides for an auxiliary input for internal connection to other boards. A3000 users will also need to change two links so that the Lark works correctly with their machine.

The Lark in Use

Sound is very subjective, and what you hear also depends on the equipment you are using and the environment in which it is being used. I connected the Lark s output to a NAD amplifier and RAM speaker enclosures. CC provide on disc a collection of sound samples, which can be tried by dragging and dropping on the AudioCtrl icon on the icon bar. First results were encouraging, so I moved on to the Piano application supplied which allows you to play MIDI files. A number of examples of this type are also included. I can only say that the quality of sound from these was first rate - very clear with good bass.

I also tried a number of standard Maestro files. The sound quality was better through the Lark and good speakers, but that would be true if the Arc s stereo output socket were connected directly to a hi-fi system. It also reveals the relative paucity of sound created with Maestro using the standard voices.

Since the Lark was installed for review purposes on a Risc PC, I also tried out some music supplied on this machine in the form of Replay files. In this case the sound quality was more disappointing, without the same clarity, and less of an improvement over the same sound played through the computer s own speaker, though this may reflect on the original recording rather than Replay and the Lark.

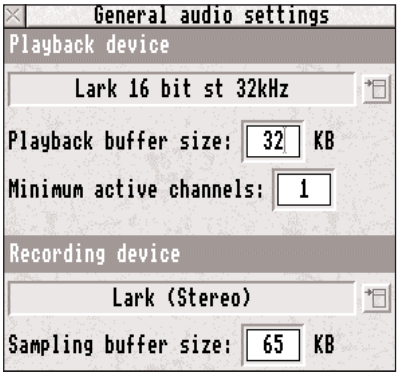

Figure 3. Selecting the Lark as the playback and record device

I also experimented by recording samples of stereo sound from various sources via the same amplifier (the Lark can be set to sample sound at frequencies up to 48KHz), and was again impressed by the high quality of the resulting sample when played back. As far as the manual is concerned, hi-fi buffs seeking a detailed specification of the Lark s sound capabilities will be disappointed, but the manual provides all the information that most users will need, and contains an excellent trouble-shooting section.

PRODUCT:

Supplier	Computer Concepts Gaddesden Place Hemel Hempstead Herts HP2 6EX Tel. 0442 63933
Price	£199.00 ex. VAT

In conclusion, I have to say that I was greatly impressed by the quality of sound produced by the Lark from suitable sources, and could not fault it. However, as I said before, sound is a very subjective medium, so take your own criteria into