Tascam Portacapture X6

Portable Multitrack Recorder

The Portacapture X6 makes Tascam's touchscreen approach to mobile recording more portable and affordable than ever.

CHRIS TIMSON

I had the privilege of reviewing Tascam's Portacapture X8 a year ago (*SOS* May 2022) and thought it a fine piece of kit — I was sufficiently impressed to part with my own money and buy one. Consequently, I was very willing to give its newer, smaller stablemate the X6 a try when offered the chance. It's very tempting to review a device like this in terms of its differences from the earlier model, but that would be doing the X6 a disservice so, instead, I shall consider the X6 on its own terms and then discuss the differences later.

Overview

What we have here is a portable recorder that can record up to four separate tracks simultaneously, plus a stereo mix track based on the first four (hence the '6' in the name). That's two from the in-built mics and two from the balanced XLR inputs on the left-hand side. Like the X8, the X6 is capable of 32-bit floating-point A-D conversion and recording, the chief advantage of which is that even if you pay no attention to the preamp gain you can capture a clean signal, whose level can be adjusted in post-production.

At the top of the recorder, the in-built mics provide inputs 1 and 2. These are not detachable but they can be rotated to form either X-Y or A-B stereo arrays. Directly below, on the front panel, is a very small speaker. As ever, no high-fidelity prizes for this but it's a useful tool to confirm that what you recorded is what you thought you recorded. Below that is the 2.4-inch colour touchscreen that, as with its big brother,

lies at the heart of this machine's functionality.

At the bottom of the front panel, below the screen, is a set of transport buttons, and the stop control doubles up as a Home button for the software GUI. A thumb wheel is used for fine adjustment of input levels and virtual faders, and a Mark button sets markers on the recording, to facilitate fast navigation. There's also a useful menu button that I wish had been included on the X8 as well (oops... I said I was going to avoid comparisons!).

The left-hand side of the recorder has inputs 3 and 4, the aforementioned XLR microphone sockets. These are, of course, capable of supplying 48V phantom power. Next to those are two 3.5mm TRS mini-jack sockets. The first provides two channels of line input as an alternative to the XLR inputs 3 or 4, or it can be configured for the connection of a mono or stereo mic using plug-in power, again as an alternative to the XLR inputs, and useful for lavalier mics and the like. The second provides a stereo line output to other equipment. Together, these two sockets can provide connectivity to a video camera if required, and there are configuration settings to support this usage. Next there's a headphone socket and, finally, a pair of plus/minus buttons

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Tascam Portacapture X6
£345

PROS
- Really easy to use.
- App-style interface caters for various uses.
- Optional Bluetooth adaptor and Android/iOS app.
- Good onboard mics and preamps for external mics.
- 32-bit conversion and recording.
- User presets a promised future enhancement.
- Can be used as an audio interface.
- Good price.

CONS
- File management and naming a little basic.
- The smaller screen can mean precise finger work is needed.
- SD card, external PSU and Bluetooth adaptor aren't included.

SUMMARY
A great-sounding, easy-to-use portable recorder that supports external mics and multitrack recording, and doesn't cost a bomb.

that control the volume of the headphone socket and the internal speaker.

The right-hand side has a slot for the micro-SD card (not included; up to 512GB micro-SDXC models are supported). There's a USB-C port that both acts as an external power inlet (you'll need to provide your own PSU for that) and caters for file transfer to/from a computer. There's also the on/off/hold switch. The end just has a slot for the optional Bluetooth adaptor, and peak and recording indicators. Underneath, a quarter-inch threaded insert enables mounting on a camera tripod; if you'd prefer a mic stand then adaptors are widely available.

The Portacapture X6 comes with a decent, printed 'get you going' manual but if you want to really learn the ins and out of this machine you'll need to download the full reference manual from the Tascam website.

Launching Into It

Just like its older sibling, the main way you interact with the Portacapture X6 is less via the physical controls and more through the touchscreen, in an approach that owes an awful lot to smartphone design. This means that you can get quite a long way with this machine just by touching icons and seeing what happens. Just like a smartphone, you start with the Launcher, which presents you with a set of 'apps' that give you access to all the functionality of the machine. You get exactly the same set of apps in both the X6 and the X8, with the exception of two minor apps that are missing on the X6: a tuner and a metronome. In my review of the X8 I gave quite detailed descriptions of each of the apps and I commend that review to you for the full monty; for this review, I shall give just brief descriptions of each one.

Browse: I don't think I can be too brief with Browse, though, because to use it you have to understand the X6's filing system. Browse is where you can list and play projects, delete and rename projects, and obtain basic information about them. You can also create new folders here (to a depth of two) to contain projects. So, what's a project? It's all the files associated with a single recording. Multiple recordings are multiple projects, so if you want to keep all the recordings associated with a single real-world project, then you should create a folder to hold them. But you have to remember to change into that folder before you make your recording, and that's something that I kept forgetting to do! It's the same for the X8, and one of the few things I don't like so much — I'd much prefer something like the set of files for a single recording to be called something like a 'take' and a project to be defined as a collection of related takes.

All the files in a project share a common filename that's derived from a root name you can specify (otherwise it defaults to 'Tascam_'). There will be a mono audio file for each active mic, or a stereo file if two mics are stereo linked. There will also be a file for a mix of the active mics. New projects will take the current root filename and increment a number to identify it uniquely, eg. 'Tascam_0023'. For naming things there is a neat on-screen virtual keyboard.

ASMR: ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. This means it does pretty pictures while making »

◾ The Portacapture X6 can capture two external mics, with the XLRs capable of delivering phantom power and the stereo mini-jack input capable of plug-in power.

» normal stereo recordings. Well, who'd have guessed that!

Voice: A quick and easy way of making voice recordings for interviews and the like. As an example of the use of the thumb wheel at the bottom of the recorder, you can tap on the gain display and adjust it with some precision by using the wheel. This behaviour is widespread through the GUI and always worth trying.

Music: For making stereo recordings of musical instruments. It provides a number of presets to adjust dynamics and suit different instruments (piano, guitar, stringed instrument and so on).

Manual: This one is, for me, the key app. It's where every setting can be tweaked and you have complete control. It uses a mixer metaphor and is pretty straightforward to use. Facilities include, among other useful things, a simple compressor and EQ. However, the smallness of the touchscreen and number of different parameters you can change using this app mean you have to be pretty precise with your finger... though I did find a very usable workaround via Bluetooth, of which more in the separate box.

Field: This is another stereo recording app that this time offers a set of presets appropriate to field recording tasks, such as City, Nature, Bird etc.

Podcast: Though obviously not the equal of dedicated podcast hardware, this app nevertheless offers a number of useful facilities to aid in the creation of podcasts.

General Settings: Here's where you set all the useful stuff like bit rate and dual recording.

Sounding It Out

All this is good stuff but not worth a fig if the recorder doesn't make decent recordings, since that is its entire *raison*

d'être! In my review of the Portacapture X8, I set up a shootout between the X8 and a pair of Neumann KM184 mics, and was surprised and pleased at how close the quality of the X8 recordings came to the KM184s — it's one of the main reasons I bought my X8. For this review, I thought it would be interesting to compare the X6 with the X8 directly. My working assumption is that the two recorders use the same preamps, but it's much less certain that the mics are the same since the X6 mics are not detachable, and are also slightly smaller. I was keen to see if anything had been lost in the design changes.

As you can see in the photo, I mounted the X6 and X8 next to each other and set them recording using the Manual recording app, with similar settings in both cases. I recorded one instrumental tune (fiddle and concertina) and one unaccompanied vocal harmony song together with my wife Anne Gregson. I transferred them to my DAW (Logic Pro X) but, apart from normalising the volumes to make comparisons easier, I did no other processing on them. I then had a listen...

On the instrumental tracks, I couldn't hear any difference at all. In fact, I put
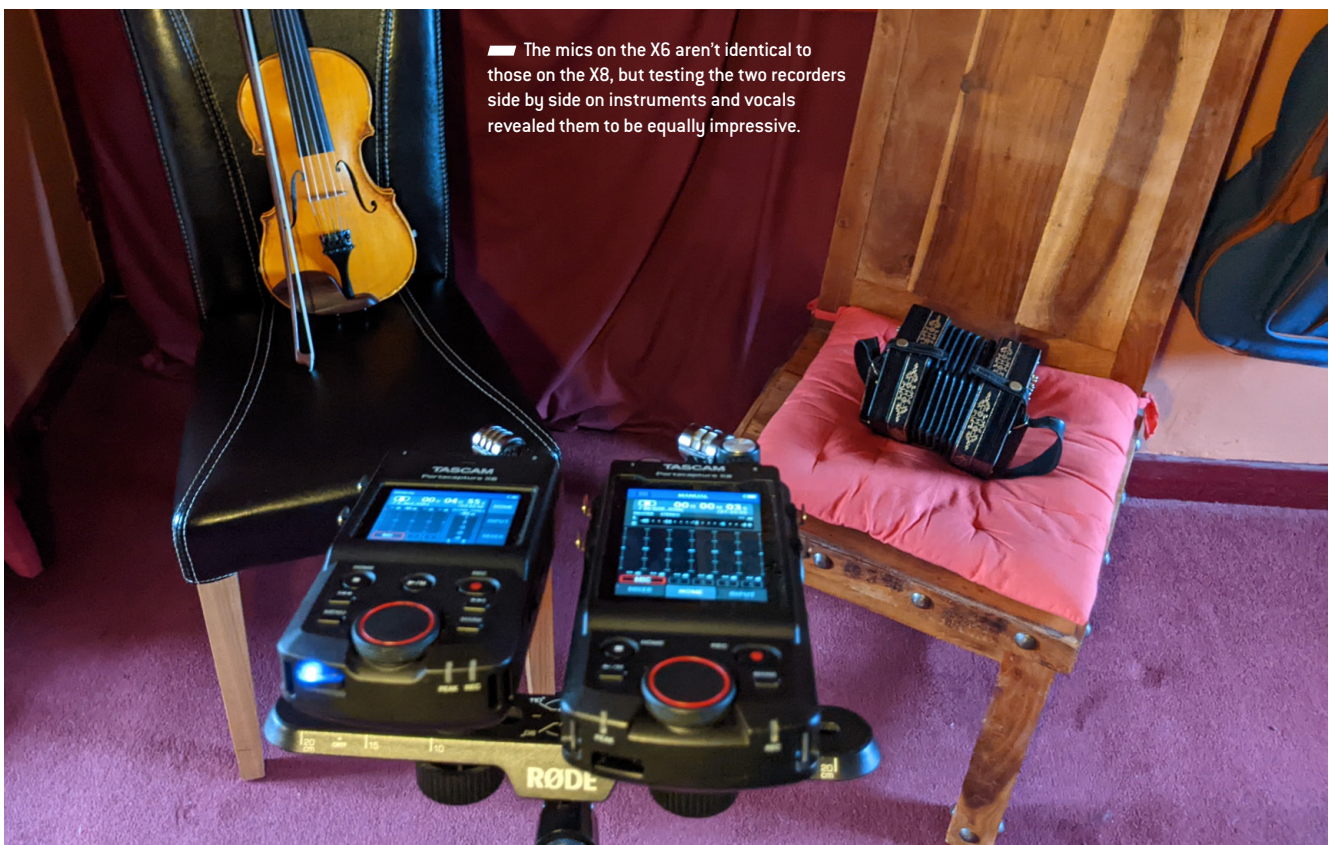
◾ The mics on the X6 aren't identical to those on the X8, but testing the two recorders side by side on instruments and vocals revealed them to be equally impressive.

EQs on both tracks and watched the displays and could see little difference between them either. I thought I could hear a slight difference between the vocal takes — the X6 seemed a little weightier — but again the EQ's analyser showed very similar things happening. Either way, and in both cases, I would be happy to use the recording.

Sibling Rivalry

So, how do the X6 and X8 compare beyond the sound, which we've already established is comparable? I'll starting with the elephant in the room: size. When I reviewed the X8, I felt that as a handheld recorder it was approaching the limits of usability. With a set of batteries installed, mine weighs nearly half a kilo, and after a short while carrying it in your hand you definitely begin to feel it. The X6 weighs less (378g), and it's the same width as the X8 (so still fairly chunky) but I've found that the lower weight does make a real difference over time.

Of course the touchscreen is much smaller on the X6 than it is on the X8, but the designers have got round this in some clever ways — for instance the aforementioned X6 menu button, which replaces a menu icon on the X8's screen, thus freeing up a bit of screen space. They are also assisted by the fact that there are two fewer recording channels but they've shown a lot of ingenuity in remapping the screen objects in each app to fit the available space. In fact the only app where I felt significantly constrained by screen space was Manual.

Sync Or Swim With Bluetooth

The X6 uses the same Bluetooth adaptor as the X8 (the AK-BT1). This costs about £27 and, in my opinion, if you have an Android or iOS device to act as the controller then it is an essential purchase. The Tascam Portacapture Control app, which I'm pleased to say runs on Android as well iOS, gives you full control of both the X6 and the X8 using the same GUI, but laid out on a much larger screen — and remotely at that! This is particularly useful for the Manual app, as you can imagine. This app, which is free to download, is common to the X6 and X8, and those elements of the X8 GUI that aren't present on the X6 are greyed out.

The Bluetooth adaptor is available separately and allows communication with a free iOS/Android remote control app.

However I found a neat workaround for this via Bluetooth, as described in the box.

Finally, of course, the X8 has the two extra XLR inputs. Whether this is important to you only you can say, but I think this might well be the main deciding factor for many people who need to choose between these two recorders.

Future Features

Tascam say that there are a number of enhancements in the future for the X6, but the one I find most interesting is the idea of user presets. In fact, this is something I'm quite proud of because I suggested the idea to Tascam while reviewing the X8 and they took it up enthusiastically, implementing it in an update to the X8's firmware, and it works well. I'm pretty certain that the implementation will be much the same for the X6 as for the X8. The idea is that if you have a setup that you use frequently, a particular external microphone at a particular gain, or perhaps a specific setup for a podcast, then you should be able to save it for future use. This idea is commonplace in DAWs but I hadn't seen it in portable recorders before. You can save up to three user presets for inputs that are shared across recording applications, three for recording apps, and three for the whole unit.

The bottom line, though, is that Tascam have done it again. The Portacapture X6 is already a practical, easy-to-use field recorder and one that's capable of high-quality recordings. Like the X8 it works well, sounds good, is very easy to use, and is available for a very reasonable price. It deserves to sell well. ▰▰▰
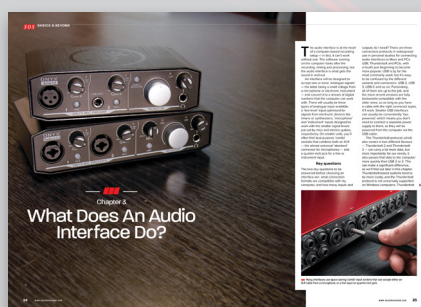
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