ART TubeFire 8

If you are a manufacturer of outboard equipment at any level, it seems that you need to have some form of 8-channel mic preamp in your product range these days. JON THORNTON finds his way through the permutations available on this box.

In the interest of product differentiation we've seen any number of takes on the available permutations of the 8-channel mic pre-amp — with or without dynamics processing, with or without digital interfacing options, with or without some form of internal summing mixer, solid-state or valve based designs — you get the picture.

Throwing its hat into the ring with the TubeFire 8 is ART. The short summary, based on the above, is: valve-based design, basic summing capability, no dynamics processing, and built-in A-D/D-A conversion using IEEE 1394 for interfacing with a computer. So far so good, but nothing that really reaches out and grabs you — until you see the price (UK£449 inc. VAT). With a street price a little below that, you're looking at £50 per channel for mic preamplification, with an 8-channel FireWire interface thrown in. All of which leaves you looking for the catch…

First impressions of are of solidly built unit, weighing in at just under 6kg and tightly packaged into a 1u. Front and rear rack mount points are provided and that's sensible given its weight. The next thing that strikes you is, given the presence of all those tubes, a marked lack of any form of ventilation — which makes its name seem a little prophetic and slightly alarming. In reality, the unit doesn't seem to run that hot and, yes, there are actually four socketed Chinese 12AX7s inside, each doing the duty for two input channels.

Inputs on the rear panel are via eight XLR / ¼-inch TRS combo connectors, the two input options per channel only differentiated by the input impedance (6.4kohms for XLR and 20kohms for the TRS jack). Each input channel has an associated balanced output on TRS jack, with operating levels switchable between +4dBm and -10dBV. Two 6-pin FireWire 400 ports and external Word clock in and thru on BNC connectors (no switch for internal termination on the input though) complete the rear panel.

On the front panel, each of the eight inputs has a gain control (ranged between +20dB and +60dB), a -20dB pad, a LPF (100Hz at 6dB/octave), and an output level control that incorporates up to 10dB of additional gain. Additionally, the first two channels have a high impedance input on the front for DI use. A four segment LED bargraph meters the signal — somewhat curiously the first three segments show signal post the output level control (and therefore just pre the A-D stage), while the final clip indicator shows signal clipping at both the preamp stage and the output stage. This sounds strange in theory, but works reasonably well in practice. The dual gain stage also means that you can determine whatever relationship you like between 0dBFS and input gain — particularly if you want to drive the tube stage a little harder in the search for some 'crunch'. Phantom power is switchable, not per channel, but in blocks of four channels at a time — the first real sign of cost-cutting/front panel real estate saving.

At this point, it's worth looking at the A-D/D-A facilities available, all of which are centred around that FireWire connection. Hooking the unit up to a computer is relatively painless and trouble-free (at least it was on a Mac, I didn't have the opportunity to try it with a PC). PC users will have to install a supplied driver to see the interface, Mac users can just plug and play, with most functions available through the Audio MIDI Setup application in OS X. The TubeFire's own internal sample clock is set by software only (in this case AMS) and selecting the desired sample rate from a pull down menu lights a corresponding front panel LED. One slightly curious thing about this is that it 'stacks' — in other words all of the LEDs light up if 96kHz (the highest supported rate from a choice of four) is selected. ART's claim is that this makes it easier to read from a distance, something I'm not so sure about. The cynic in me also spots that the bargraph employed here is the same as the one used for signal metering…

The unit can also be synced to an external Word clock source. Setting this up when using a Mac requires a dedicated piece of control panel software, whose only function is to select either internal or external Word clock for the connected unit. PC users find this function as part of a more wide-ranging control panel application. Setting the unit to external Word clock results in no indication on the front panel of the device though and the manual simply tells you to set the sample rate of the unit (using the software panel) to the rate expected via the external clock input, and this is what is displayed on the front panel. So, it's perfectly possible to set the unit to expect 44.1 kHz externally, feed it 48kHz and get absolutely no visual indication of a mis-clock — not something I'm terrifically happy about.

Assuming, though, that everything is happy clockwise, getting audio into and out of an application is very straightforward and I had no problems with the bundled copy of Cubase LE that ships with the unit. And it's the fact that the connection between application and TubeFire is duplex that accounts for its final bit of functionality. At the far right of the front panel is a very primitive monitor mixer. Four latching pushbuttons determine what appears on the balanced outputs on the rear of the unit. In logical pairs, this can be either a pair of preamplifier signals or a pair of the eight outputs available from the computer. The selected permutation of inputs and returns is also internally mixed together, and available as a headphone mix on the front of the unit. A centre-detented level control allows this mix to be either mono (turning left) or stereo (turning right). In stereo mode, odd channels or computer outputs are panned hard left, even channels hard right. This sound neat, but the control isn't terrifically smooth in terms of level adjustment — you get a great deal of level increase in the first 20 degrees of turning, and then not much difference for the remainder of the control's travel. Perhaps this has something to do with the manual's advice that the headphone jack could also be used to provide an unbalanced line level signal for monitoring purposes. A dedicated, balanced mix output would have been far preferable.

In use, the TubeFire performed more or less as I expected in most areas, but slightly better in others. The preamplifiers are perfectly adequate, although they get noisy very quickly when exploring the upper reaches of gain available — quiet recordings with low output ribbons are not really going to suit it. You can also choose to drive the tube stage gently or hard, with varying amounts of colour as a result although, again, there's a very fine line between warmth and unpleasantness here. There's nowhere near the degree of 'driveability' and control that something like the SPL Gainstation has in this respect. The surprise, though, was the A-D/D-A on offer. Considering that this feature is almost 'thrown in', the quality here is great particularly the lack of HF brittleness and the ability to capture LF detail and depth. That's something that cheaper convertors often suffer from.

I found myself in two minds about the TubeFire. At one level it's very accomplished and works well. It also feels very solidly put together and is cheap as chips. But for some users there are those little niggles, like not knowing whether your clock is valid, or the lack of a balanced mix output. For some users these won't be an issue, and if so on price alone the TubeFire 8 is worth checking out. As the saying goes: you pays your money… ■

PROS	Well priced; solid build quality; very nice sounding A-D conversion; useful monitor section.
CONS	Lack of balanced mix output; a little noisy when stretched; some uncertainty about clock status.

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