Focusrite Forte

The wonderful world of the interface sits at the very hub of audio setups with manufacturers choosing to endow them with different levels of control and physical interface. ROB JAMES

Since Apple decided to largely abandon FireWire there has been a flush of USB audio interfaces and at the high end USB 3 devices with generous channel counts. A little lower down the food chain USB 2 models are appearing like ceps in autumn and one of the more recent examples is from Focusrite. The two in, four out, UK£333 (+ VAT) Forte arrives with breakout and USB cables, a wall-wart PSU, a getting started guide and a registration card. Registration on the Focusrite website is required before you can access drivers, software and documentation, and it's all reasonably smooth but a little time-consuming. The bonus Midnight plug-in suite of ISA110 EQ and ISA130 compressor modelled from the original Focusrite Forté console is a separate install. OS support is 32-bit or 64-bit Windows 7 or 8 and MAC OS Lion or Mountain Lion.

The handsome solid aluminium casing surface is finished in lightly textured silver with an inset smoked plastic section in which there is a small OLED screen and four touch-sensitive icons. Below, the rest of the surface is dominated by a large control knob/switch. The knob is solid metal with tiny concentric rings machined into the surface to make finger operation less slippery and heavy enough to give some flywheel effect. The knob feels a little bit wobbly but this is deceptive as the rotary feel is excellent and the Shaft encoder is robust enough as is the knob itself. It's the plastic interface between the two that gives rise to the wobble and this may well be intentional to avoid undue strain from heavy handed operation. Long rubber strakes on the bottom prevent the unit sliding about as you use it.

A ¼-inch headphone socket is on the 'south' while at the 'north' end the rest of the sockets are a concentric 5V DC power connector (the 5V wall-wart power supply is included but is only necessary when phantom powering a mic or mics although it also increases the maximum level available from the headphone and line-out sockets), a USB B Socket for the computer connection, a latching input loom connector and two ¼-inch jacks for Line out right and left. On the right-hand side a Kensington lock slot may help you retain your investment. The breakout cable terminates in two XLR microphone inputs and two ¼-inch balanced jack line/instrument inputs. Conversion goes up to 192kHz 24-bit and the remote controlled mic amps are the latest Focusrite RedNet design with a heritage all the way back to the original Forté consoles.

The knob and switch along with the touch-sensitive mode icons are used to navigate menus, for parameter entry and to control the main input and/or output gains. Although quite small the OLED screen is high resolution, very bright and Focusrite has made good use of the space available to display relevant information and to make menu navigation as easy as possible. The mode icons — Input, Main Output, Headphones and DAW — have modes of their own. A short touch selects the mode and a longer one opens the relevant menu. For inputs and outputs a second short touch toggles between channels.

The Forte Control panel application is arranged neatly with input strips on the left, monitor mixer in the middle and the two stereo output strips on the right. Input and output gains are rotary while the mixer faders are linear. Input selection between mic/line/instrument is toggled by a single button per input and a further button switches 48V phantom power. Below the input level bargraphs and controls three buttons switch a High-pass filter at 75Hz with 12dB/octave slope, a 10dB pad and phase reverse. Channels can be linked for stereo. On the output side the two stereo strips feed the line outputs and headphone outputs respectively.

Maximum output level is +16dBu with the external PSU, significantly lower without.

DAW control supports Cubase 9, Logic 9 Pro, Pro Tools 10, Ableton Live 8, GarageBand, Studio One 2, FL Studio 10, Sonar X1, Reaper, Reason 6, iTunes and Windows Media Player with varying levels of comprehensiveness although to be honest, I found this of limited use since you are restricted to one parameter at a time on the knob and one on the button. It's an interesting extra but not the main *raison d'être* of the Forte.

For testing I used Pyramix Native. Everything worked as expected and the noise floor is surprisingly low. The bright and reassuring default screen on the OLED display shows six meters for the inputs, main and headphone outputs. A quick touch or two on the relevant icon brings up the controls and adjustments are made easily and without fuss. Equally, the same adjustments can be made on the Forte Control panel. The controls quickly become natural whichever interface you use. A built-in digital mixer offers very low latency for recording and again, this is intuitive in use. Just as important, a lot of thought has gone into the ergonomics. The unit can be used for playback on speakers or headphones with just the USB and audio output cables attached. The breakout cable latches (thank you!) and is labelled clearly. The Midnight plug-ins are a valuable bonus and I look forward to exploring their capabilities more fully in the future.

Reviving the Forte name gives this new interface a lot to live up to. The chief virtues are the convertors and mic pres and at this price level there is absolutely nothing to complain about and they will give some much more expensive examples a good run for their money. The noise floor is very low and there is plenty of mic gain. The outputs are equally impressive — black silence to the point where I wondered if the unit was working until the first track came up. Forte looks the part; It isn't too big and feels right too. I found it was often easier to use the Forte Control panel than the icons and knob but having these for gain and volume control is very useful, as is the meters display. If you are looking for a stereo USB interface with an excellent performance-to-price ratio put Forte on your shortlist. ∎

PROS Low noise; excellent convertors and mic pres; simple and easy with good ergonomics.

CONS Knob is a little bit wobbly; OLED screen could be bigger; DAW control is basic.

EXTRAS The Scarlett 2i4 is a two-in, four-out USB-powered interface featuring two

Focusrite mic preamps with mic, line and high-impedance instrument inputs. It has dual TRS/XLR front-panel inputs and is USB bus-powered. It shares several features with the existing 2i2 model, with the addition of two more outputs and enhanced zero-latency monitoring.

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