Focusrite Saffire

Audio interfaces may be falling out of the trees now but there's still a little room for clever packaging and price breaking.

JON THORNTON appraises a box that has 'be-all' aspirations for the low end of the market but also has pro applications for location work.

ALTHOUGH IT'S BEEN available for a while now, the Saffire is Focusrite's take on a small, affordable audio interface. Using FireWire as its connectivity solution ensures that it supports the largest range of computer platforms, and also makes it eminently useful as part of a portable recording solution in conjunction with a laptop. This is an increasingly crowded marketplace, however, which means that something special is needed if it's going to stand out from the crowd.

Although Focusrite has been involved in this sector for a while, partnering with Digidesign to develop the analogue side of the Mbox, it's not altogether surprising that one of the few platforms the Saffire won't support is Pro Tools. Unsurprising because the Mbox serves as much as a dongle as it does as an audio interface for Pro Tools LE. Users of Logic, Cubase, Nuendo or indeed any DAW platform that supports ASIO or Core Audio shouldn't have a problem though. Saffire ships with a version of Cubase LE included, and it was this that I used for the review.

At its simplest level, the box is just an audio interface, offering two analogue inputs and an SPDIF digital input, and eight analogue outputs together with a single SPDIF digital output. Sample rates up to 192kHz are supported. For UK£350 this isn't an altogether bad deal, and eight outputs even means that surround mixing up to 7.1 would be a viable proposition. There is, though, much more to the Saffire than this, at the heart of which is a certain amount of onboard DSP, a GUI that runs on the host computer called SaffireControl, and the additional hardware controls on the front of the unit.

Two XLR sockets allow microphone level signals to be input to the device. Phantom power is available on these inputs via a front panel switch, and gain controls are available at the top of the unit together with a three-stage LED meter. Plugging in a TRS jack to either of the two line-level inputs on the front panel overrides the microphone input, and these inputs are individually switchable between line level and high-impedance inputs for electric guitars. Two headphone outputs, each with their own level control, and a monitor level control with dim and mute buttons complete the front panel.

And it is these that start to illustrate the intention of the device. Focusrite's assumption, I guess, is that most prospective purchasers will either be looking for a convenient location recording solution, or won't necessarily have the additional studio ancillaries in terms of a mixing console, mic preamps or additional FX to make music tracking an easy proposition, and so they have built this functionality into the unit.

To really get to grips with this, we have to look at the SaffireControl GUI. Launching this brings up a window that looks relatively crowded at first glance, but once you get to grips with it is fairly straightforward. At the top left are controls for the two analogue inputs. The onboard DSP allows the insertion of a compressor and EQ or amp simulator plug-in across these inputs prior to the signals being fed into the DAW. Because the DSP is based in the Saffire itself, this means there are no CPU overhead or latency issues. Processing order here can be switched so that the compressor is pre or post EQ/Simulation,

and all of the processing has the option of working in one of two modes.

The first allows full control of all parameters, and the second toggles through a selection of presets for the compressor or EQ based on typical sources. In this mode, the full parameters are greyed out, and some more 'user-friendly' parameters appear, which in effect just adjust certain parameters. For example, picking the acoustic guitar preset for EQ brings up four parameters labelled 'body', 'boom', 'clarity' and 'lightness', which really just adjust the gain of each of the four EQ bands whose centre/turnover frequencies and responses have been preset. Selecting this option for the compressor presets threshold, ratio and time constants, and leaves you with a single parameter labelled 'amount'. In practice, these preset options work rather well, and are certainly good starting points for less experienced users — personally I preferred to just dive in.

The quality of the EQ, compression and simulation on offer here is also good, as are the mic preamps. They aren't necessarily going to replace your favourite hardware and software solutions, but they are perfectly adequate, and in the case of the preamps nicely quiet.

A further section of the GUI window shows stereo faders, which address the levels of the first ten tracks of the DAW. These effectively overlay their gain settings onto the levels already set in the DAW when the Saffire is connected, and form the basis of setting up a playback mix for monitoring purposes. The bottom half of the control window allows inputs 1 and 2 (analogue) and 3 and 4 (SPDIF) to be balanced and mixed with this monitor mix, and then sent to a pair of outputs. Along the way, the analogue inputs can also have onboard reverb (individual reverbs for each input) applied to them, again with no host CPU overhead. The monitor mix from the DAW can either

be the generic mix set up earlier, or a custom mix of the first ten tracks of the DAW can be set-up for each of the output pairs.

Although the output pairs feed the logical outputs on the back of the unit, outputs 5&6 and 7&8 also feed the front panel headphone outputs. Any or all of the analogue output pairs can also be switched to have their output level controlled by the front panel monitor level pot — useful for surround monitoring.

In all, this adds up to a very flexible tracking and monitoring system, if one which is a little confusing at first glance. Focusrite has thoughtfully provided a mode switch, labelled Sound Card and Track, which while it doesn't alter the basic functionality of the unit, sets routing and mix levels in Sound Card mode such that each output is simply a direct output from the DAW. A 'Float' function also ensures that the GUI is constantly floating over the DAW application, meaning that constant switching between applications isn't necessary in normal use.

There is a lot for the money here. A slight disappointment is that the onboard DSP is only available for input sources — you can't access it in mixing if your CPU is maxed out although you do get the same processing supplied as VST or Audio Unit plug-ins for use at the mix stage if you want them. And while many professional users will probably not need the routing and mixing capabilities for tracking purposes, this is a very flexible system for location work. Adding a stereo mic pre with a digital output option that could feed the SPDIF input would double the number of useable inputs, which would really make it an attractive proposition. ■

PROS	Flexible routing and mixing options; onboard DSP and processing for tracking; useful number of outputs; lots of functionality for the money.
CONS	SaffireControl GUI a little busy at first glance; no way to access onboard DSP in mix stage; only two analogue inputs might be a little restrictive for some users.
EXTRAS	Focusrite's Saffire Pro 26i/o FireWire interface has 24-bit/192kHz processing and software control for 52 channels

of I-O (26 in, 26 out). Combining eight channels of preamp with eight analogue outputs and 18 digital I-O (two SPDIF and 16 ADAT at 48kHz), as with the original Saffire the unit can be bus-powered or powered via an external PSU. SaffireControl Pro provides a control application of a similar format to the original SaffireControl but also has talkback. The front panel provides two independent headphone outputs.

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