



## M-Audio ProFire 2626

Adding value to the notion of a FireWire interface with extra bells and whistles is what this new box is about. **ROB JAMES** says that it also takes the brand further up market than it has ventured before.

FireWire, i-Link, IEEE1394, whatever you want to call it, has been around for some years now. It promised much and in some applications at least, for example digital video, has actually delivered. Audio manufacturers were quick to jump on the bandwagon of a cheap and wide interface. Unfortunately, most audio implementations have been plagued with niggling faults and in some cases total failure to operate in a useful manner. It may be that the technology is finally maturing, albeit with a number of caveats. It is no great trick to send a couple of channels of even high definition audio in close to real-time down a FireWire link but lots of channels increase the risk of failure or, at the very least, problems. M-Audio is no stranger to the FireWire arena and its latest offering, the ProFire 2626, pushes it close to the top edge of the performance envelope. However, this unit is a great deal more than a simple way of getting a decent number of audio channels into and out of a computer.

As the name implies, the UK£408 (+ VAT) ProFire 2626 offers a maximum of 26 concurrent SD channels in each direction between audio interface and computer. It can also be used standalone as an A-D/D-A convertor or A-D plus SPDIF format convertor. Also in the mix are eight preamps with Octane technology, a user assignable master volume control and on-board mixer and router.

Each mic preamp has a 75dB gain range and a -20dB pad accessed by simply pulling the gain knob out. The knobs themselves feel a mite 'plasticky' and rough around the edges but this soon wears off. At first I found the unusually long length a touch off-putting but, rather like a long handled screwdriver, this seems to give finer control in operation. 48V phantom is available, switched in blocks of four inputs.

The main eight analogue inputs can be found on the rear of the unit with Combo XLR jack sockets for mic and line. Channels 1 and 2 also have front panel instrument ¼-inch jack inputs with a push switch to determine whether the XLR or Instrument input is active. The ¼-inch line input sections of the Combo connectors are not routed to the preamps, however, the unit does sum the ¼-inch jack line-level input of the Combo socket with the front-panel

instrument-level input. Although this does not alter impedances or levels, it is possible to record audio from both inputs simultaneously. A point to watch if you are using the line-level inputs together with the instrument jacks.

The aforementioned mic inputs are commendably quiet with very low distortion and a usefully wide gain range. Hardware metering is limited to a pair of LEDs per analogue input channel, green for signal present and red for clip, not ideal but adequate. After the eight gain pots come two headphone sockets with volume controls and the rather clever assignable master volume control. The headphone outputs take the analogue line out 1&2 and 3&4 respectively. The eight ¼-inch jack main analogue outputs are to be found in a block on the rear panel along with the two FireWire ports, four optical Toslink ports for up to 16 channels of ADAT I-O, with the alternative of SPDIF on one pair, and the 15-pin Sub-D breakout connector. Smux and Smux IV support up to 192kHz but the number of channels and returns from the DAW are reduced accordingly and the specific returns dropped differs between Macs and PCs.

A breakout cable is supplied with MIDI I-O, coaxial SPDIF I-O and BNC Word clock I-O. Power supply is an external in-line brick and the rear panel connector is non-locking. Last item of front panel interest is the blue power LED. It lights solid with power on and a valid clock (internal or external) and flashes in the absence of sync.

Although a great deal of the hardware and software appears at first glance to be self explanatory you will soon discover that there are hidden depths and a few 'gotchas' in some scenarios. Fortunately the user manual is a model of excellence and covers everything you will need to know in depth and with clarity. I used the ProFire with a Mac and a variety of applications including Pro Tools M-Powered 7.4 at the end of the review period. ProFire is quiet and elegant. In combination with M-Powered it may well be all that many applications require. Just add mics, instruments, hardware and/or software, and an amplifier and speakers for monitoring.

One key to success with FireWire in the audio context seems to be, 'moderate your enthusiasm'. In other words, just because it is theoretically possible

to stuff 52 or more channels of SD audio down one FireWire link doesn't mean you have to. It is likely to be a whole lot more reliable if you don't stress it to the maximum. M-Audio tacitly acknowledges this by recommending that although there are two FireWire ports, only one should be used and other FireWire peripherals such as hard drives should be connected to an alternative socket on the computer. Similarly they also suggest that the software Control Panel is used to reduce the number of software returns to minimise the demands placed on the FireWire bus and decrease the amount of system resources used. This function also differs slightly between the Mac and PC implementations due to the different ways in which the two platforms handle audio. Also worth mentioning here is that you should always use ASIO drivers in PC applications in preference to WDM, if available. Performance is almost invariably better.

The software supplied is pretty and useful. The ProFire is versatile and the software enables it to be configured easily for widely differing applications, such as stereo tracking or 7.1 surround mixing. In the latter scenario the master volume control can be used as master monitor volume. The DSP mixer handles up to 18 ins and 16 outs and can provide virtually zero latency monitoring for tracking. Inputs are sourced from hardware and the software returns, i.e. DAW outputs. Destinations can be hardware or DAW input streams and the router allows inputs and outputs to be reconfigured without physical patching although this can give rise to confusion if you are not careful. I have looked at a lot of FireWire audio boxes and the ProFire is far from shabby in comparison to units at twice its asking price. ■

**PROS** Price/performance ratio; versatility; relative simplicity if you don't deliberately make life complicated.

**CONS** In HD (96kHz and 192kHz) modes complexity increases; rudimentary hardware metering; not much else at the price

### Contact

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