

MOTU 896 Firewire audio interface

Avoiding many of the problems involved in breaking the audio out of the back of your computer, Firewire promises convenience and scalability. However, interfacing to the user is at least as important as the method of interfacing to the tower of power. **ROB JAMES**



THE USE OF GENERAL purpose PCs and Macs for audio is often a messy business. A serious number of physical I-O channels has always meant an internal interface card, generally impractical with laptops if they are to remain portable. Even with desktops, the hassle of removing the lid is often accompanied by dire threats about voiding the warranty. Deciding which slot to use can be a lottery and sometimes the card will need to be moved from slot to slot until it eventually works. We put up with all this nonsense because of the indisputable utility of the DAW, but wouldn't it be great if you could simply plug in an external interface just like 'real' hardware?

A number of manufacturers have produced fairly successful USB interfaces which 'plug and play' but

these are all constrained by bandwidth. Firewire has been pressed into service, but usually in proprietary form requiring, guess what? A dedicated PCI card.

Real Firewire audio interfaces have taken time to appear. Offerings from Swissonic and Metric Halo were among the first. The 896 joins MOTU's initial 828 Firewire interface. With multiple 896s any Firewire equipped Mac or PC can have up to 72 channels (at 48kHz) of audio interface without opening the case. The 896 offers 8 mic or line level analogue inputs plus ADAT I-O, an AES-EBU stereo I-O with sample rate conversion, and additional analogue stereo main output, an enticing blend for many applications.

The software runs under Windows ME, XP or 2000. Installation is trivial. Run the installer and plug

the 896 in (or power it on). Asio, standard Windows WDM and GSIF drivers are included.

Once installed, the 896 appears in all the usual menus. I used it with a number of software packages including Wavelab, Sound Forge 6.0 and Vegas Video Lite. The two Firewire sockets allow up to four units to be daisy chained. This includes the 828 although, since this only has one Firewire socket, it has to be last in the chain or you will need a Firewire hub.

Thanks to mic preamps and phantom powering, it is perfectly practical to use the 896 with a laptop, mics, and headphones to record high quality audio on location. Back home, add a monitor controller and, if you are mixing 'inside' the workstation, the 896 may well be all the audio interfacing you'll ever need.

The converters are well up to current standards which means it will take critical listening tests in a good environment to tell them apart from esoterica costing many times the price.

I found the flexible metering to be a big boon and the sample rate conversion on the AES I-O was very useful for adding CD material to 48kHz projects or for producing a 44.1kHz version of a 96kHz project. There is no dithering and all outputs are permanently 24-bit, so dithering will have to be done by the application software. At 96kHz, the ADAT I-O is disabled. A pity, I would like to see ADAT interfaces used at high sampling rates for four channels.

I have never liked the idea of analogue audio in close proximity to the electrically noisy environment inside a PC, although recent cards have made big advances. MOTU's 896 avoids the problem. There are other advantages. A single interface can do several jobs since it is easy to move it between machines. It is a scalable solution. If the 72 inputs and outputs you get with four 896s are insufficient, you may well be able to use another Firewire bus with an additional interface card.

Taken as a whole, the 896 is an elegant and cost-effective solution to a problem that has been with us since the dawn of the DAW. The 896 is even better value for Mac users, since it comes bundled with MOTU's AudioDesk software. ■

Nuts, bolts and software

On the front panel of the 2U box the first block of eight, 10-segment, bargraphs is dedicated to analogue inputs, the second is programmable with three LED indicators to remind you what you're looking at. The Main Out pair are dedicated and the AES-EBU pair have LEDs that indicate input or output. A block of 12 LEDs show the global sampling rate, SRC rate, and source. Eight pots control analogue input trim level, each with an adjacent toggle switch for 48V phantom powering. Two pots control the Main output level and headphone volume. Two jack sockets connect stereo headphones and a footswitch, programmable to emulate any QWERTY keyboard shortcut on pedal down and up, such as punching in and out of record.

Eight, 24-bit analogue line outputs on XLRs, are individually switchable between +4dBu and -10dBu. The eight analogue inputs use Neutrik combo TRS/XLR sockets for Mic and Line. Each input has a three-position switch selecting between +4dBu fixed, Line (which has a trim range of around 30dB using the pot on the front panel), and Mic with an approximate range of -37dBu to +5dBu. Further XLRs cover Main analogue out and AES-EBU I-O. Wordlock I-O is BNC, ADAT is Toslink and a 9-pin D-Sub for ADAT sync. There are two IEEE1394 6 pin Firewire connectors.

MOTU Firewire Audio Console, is used for set up. The General page sets sampling rate, clock source, pedal programming, and provides a choice of the type of Wave sync to allow for legacy MME applications. The second page, 896, switches ADAT I-O on or off and determines which input pair, if any, will be passed through for 'Cuemix Plus' no latency monitoring. Further menus determine what the programmable meters will display, whether the AES-EBU meters show input or output, and set global meter clip and peak hold times.

PROS Versatile; well thought out; cost effective

CONS ADAT I-O only works at base sample rates; no dither; Mac users get a better deal

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