

Presonus Firestation

Face it, this FireWire business is beginning to intrigue you. You've spotted the implications and you're looking for a way in.

ROB JAMES investigates a FireWire recording interface.



FIREWIRE IS A SEDUCTIVE technology. It promises a lot of bandwidth down a single serial cable with simple plug-and-play operation for audio, video and mass storage devices. Reality is somewhat more complex. The first audio devices to use FireWire hardware used proprietary protocols to connect external converters to an internal sound card. More recently we have seen a trickle of devices using 'standard' FireWire to connect to an external audio interface. Presonus' Firestation is one such but with an interesting twist, it uses Yamaha's mLAN protocol (and drivers). In the current version mLAN is limited to 44.1kHz and 48kHz sampling rates, therefore, so is the Firestation when used with mLAN.

Although Mac drivers have been available for a while, a PC version has only recently arrived. Patchbay and control panel applets are written by Yamaha and currently only work with Windows XP. I had to install the driver and applications twice before

they would 'take'. The mLAN Patchbay and Control panel applications are not particularly intuitive and I am sure later iterations will improve. For example, if a change is made in the mLAN Control Panel you have to press the 'Set' button on the panel AND the Update or Apply buttons in the separate mLAN Patchbay application before the change is accepted.

Patches can be saved and recalled for different tasks. I found the easiest way to do this was to associate the patch files with the Patchbay application and leave them on the desktop.

Just another interface, however pretty, would be unremarkable but Firestation is a lot more than a simple means of getting audio and MIDI in and out of a computer. A 12 into 2 analogue mixer, two mic pres, ADAT and SPDIF interfaces all considerably extend the scope. There are some limitations on concurrent I-O combinations but, once understood, these are not too onerous.

I found the analogue circuitry unremarkable apart from the valve stage, which adds some useful tints to the palette. The mixer is great for 'quick and dirty' mixes without disturbing the DAW settings as well as the more obvious monitoring functions.

If you don't need high sampling rates the Firestation offers a unique set of features at very reasonable cost, especially since it could mean buying one box instead of three. There is no necessity to 'take the lid off' the computer to add an interface card and it can be used with laptops. Two channels of mic pre with a valve stage if you like, plus 12 channels of analogue mixer, ADAT and coax SPDIF interfaces are combined in one unit. Operation is necessarily more complex but not excessively so.

Firestation allows for a variety of working paradigms whether mixing is to take place in the computer or using an external console and processors. It makes an attractive package for workstation users who don't want to be bothered with interface cards or multiple boxes. ■

The detail

Firestation's looks, with machined alloy front panel and electric blue anodised dual concentric knobs, belie the cost. The two mic preamp channels are grouped together on the left with convenient Neutrik combo sockets for mic and line level connections.

Internally illuminated buttons switch 48v phantom power and a 20dB pad. Dual-Path refers to another Firestation feature, solid state and valve drive. Each preamp channel has a dual concentric pot where the outer adjusts the solid state preamp gain and the inner switches in the valve path and adjusts the amount of drive. The single valve is a 12AX7, better known in the UK as the good old ECC83. Rudimentary metering consists of three LEDs, which light at -32, -16 and -3dBfs.

The mixer input section is in the middle of the panel. The first two dual knobs control inputs 1-4, the next two control level and panning for inputs 5-6 and 7-8. The last input knob controls the level of mLAN return channels 1-2 and 3-4. Panning must be done in the PC application.

When the SPDIF input is selected it occupies channels 7-8. ADAT and SPDIF cannot feed the mixer at the same time. The final knob controls the output main and headphone stereo output levels. Five internally illuminated buttons select the various Mixer function switches on the mixer. When inactive, only mLAN returns

1 and 2 appear on the Main and Headphone outputs.

SPDIF switches channels 7 and 8 to SPDIF. When the ADAT mode is invoked, the ADAT input is passed through to the ADAT output. It is also converted to analogue and appears on the analogue line outputs and the mixer. In this mode the analogue inputs are disabled. Selecting ADAT and Mixer enters 'Special' ADAT mode. The analogue inputs are routed to the ADAT output and the ADAT input is routed to the analogue outputs and the mixer. The resultant mixed signal is output on the Main and Headphone outputs.

In both these modes the mLAN returns are not active. ADAT to mLAN routes the ADAT input to mLAN and SPDIF to mLAN replaces channels 7 and 8 with the SPDIF input. The headphone jack is adjacent. Two further buttons select the sync source as internal or external. Sample rate is selected by repeated button presses and indicated on one of three LEDs below. (32kHz is only available in standalone modes.

Analogue input levels can be trimmed with a screwdriver via holes in the top of the unit. Analogue I-O on the back panel is via balanced TRS jacks. There are 8 channels of line in and out, stereo main outputs and mic preamp sends. Line inputs 1 and 2 take precedence over the front panel inputs which allow further processing to be inserted in the mic paths. Two FireWire sockets are provided and a 9-pin D-sub does MIDI and SPDIF via the supplied breakout cable.

PROS

Versatile; can be used 'standalone'; valve sound on mic preamps if required.

CONS

Windows XP mLAN drivers could be a lot more friendly; some restrictions on I-O combinations.

EXTRAS

Presonus' TubePre is a single-channel preamp based around a 12AX7 valve circuit and a



transformer-free signal path. The unit can be used as the primary stage of a live or studio system, as a direct box or in a side effects chain. A dual-servo gain stage design, employing no capacitors, claims ultra-low noise performance.

Front panel controls include gain and tube drive pots for +40dB and +20dB respectively. Switches handle phase reverse, 20dB pad, 80Hz filter, and phantom power.

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