PreSonus FireStudio & MSR

ROB JAMES finds out what makes the FireStudio, the latest multichannel FireWire recording interface from PreSonus, such hot stuff. It's all to do with the optional MSR.

I EEE 1394, FIREWIRE, iLink: call it what you will, this serial interface has been phenomenally successful. For DV video and even the later high-definition variant, HDV, FireWire has proven to be robust and mostly reliable (the only caveat is that 'hot-plugging' has been known to lead to the premature demise of camcorders and other devices). The interface has also proved popular for external hard drives. However, I've never been totally convinced by FireWire as a real-time audio interface. Especially in the PC world, there are just too many variables. Therefore, being confronted by yet another FireWire audio and MIDI interface does not usually fill me with enthusiasm. However, PreSonus have come up with an interesting new twist. The FireStudio (UK£552.34 + VAT) also has an optional monitor controller, the MSR or Monitor Station Remote (£135.32 + VAT), that transforms what would otherwise be a rather mundane offering into something completely different.

FireStudio is a shallow-depth 1U rackmount. Alloy sculpture extends beyond the front panel to the rack-ear side plates and makes this a rather handsome unit. PreSonus immediately gains some Brownie points for the locking low-voltage connector for the in-line power supply. This is a simple but robust threaded collar addition to the normal coaxial plug; other manufacturers please take note. Half of the front panel is dedicated to Neutrik combo XLR/Jack sockets for the eight channels of analogue mic/line input (1 and 2 are either mic or instrument with line-ins on the back panel). Each analogue input has a gain/trim pot and clip LED. Two pushbuttons switch phantom power to inputs 1-4 and 5-8. There's a headphone output jack and pot and a Main Level pot that affects the Main Output jacks on the rear panel. A pushbutton power switch and bicolour sync LED complete the front panel.

At the rear, aside from the aforementioned power connector, there are two FireWire sockets, the second provided for daisy-chaining a second unit. There are the usual two MIDI sockets, plus two BNCs for Word clock I-O and four Toslink optical sockets for the 16 channels (at 44.1kHz/48kHz) of ADAT I-O. SMUX is supported for eight channels at higher sample rates. ADAT Channels 9 to 16 are currently only available to the host DAW software; they do not appear in the Console Control application (of which more in a moment). A pair of phonos handles SPDIF I-O at up to 96kHz and a further pair of phonos supply a domestic analogue input for comparison purposes. This only works with the MSR, for which the RJ45 Ethernet control socket is adjacent. The rest of the audio connections are all 1/4-inch jacks: a balanced pair for

the main output, eight more general-purpose outputs, and two more for line inputs 1 and 2, adjacent to Preamp 1 and 2 outputs for convenient insertion of external processing.

Installation is a lot easier than the FireWire devices of yore, but it is vital to follow the instructions and carry out the process in the proper order. The FireStudio's inputs and outputs will then appear in the usual way as sources and destinations in your host application. A Control Console application is included which broadens the possibilities considerably. You can use it as a matrix router between analogue and digital I-Os. Up to nine monitor mixes of all inputs and playback streams can be created and stored so that different musicians hear only what they need. Sends and returns can be set up for any input for insert purposes, and mixes can be sent to multiple outputs for comparison.

FireStudio can also operate in standalone mode

without a computer. Settings made in the Control Console application are stored in flash memory. Therefore FireStudio can function as a simple 8-channel A-D and D-A convertor. Standalone mode can also be used to make a confidence backup of a live recording at the same time as recording via FireWire; if the computer goes down, the unit will still route signals to the alternative recorder. It's worth noting that the FireStudio's headphone output levels are more than generous, which is often not the case on such interfaces. All works as it should; so far so good. But, as I hinted in the introduction, the really interesting part begins when you have the optional MSR.

MSR is a small (180mm deep by 130mm wide and 40mm high) desktop unit. The small top-panel pots control headphone outputs 2 and 3 (on the back of the MSR) and Talkback level. The larger one, unsurprisingly, controls the main monitor level. Immediately above this the first three buttons select stereo sources. C is latching for guide tracks, while A and B are mutually exclusive. The remaining six buttons in the central block are speaker channel mutes when in surround mode. To the left, three buttons select the monitor source from a choice of Aux main or SPDIF. To the right, Monitor Mode selects switch between Track, Mix and Surround. Either side of the volume pot, four buttons access mono and mute functions, a -20dB Dim and the rear-panel XLR, which is designed for users to attach an external dynamic mic for talkback purposes. The large latching Talk key in the centre at the bottom of the MSR control panel accesses the talkback mic, and also automatically invokes the Dim function when pressed to avoid howl-round.

I have long felt that what many people really need in a do-it-all DAW peripheral is mic and line inputs, monitor outputs, metering and some hardware means of controlling the monitoring, levels and transport. The FireStudio, when coupled with the MSR, ticks a number of these boxes, but not all of them. The basic unit provides the I-O and phantom power, and the MSR adds monitor control including mode, source selection and talkback, plus a useful extra pair of headphone outputs. Another component, hardware control of levels and transport, can be had with the addition of a further PreSonus product, the FaderPort. MSR is the same shape and size, and the two units look the part side by side.

Instant and intuitive monitor control makes a huge difference. Although most of the MSR's functions are available one way or another on screen in the host DAW or the Control Console software, this is a poor substitute for real buttons. Together FireStudio, MSR and FaderPort are a great deal more than the sum of their parts. For under a grand you get the essential I-O and the equally important control.

While I remain sceptical about the overall suitability of FireWire as a professional audio interface, I am impressed by this latest offering from PreSonus. For those without bottomless pockets, this combination offers a cost-effective way of getting the essentials. ■

PROS Useful blend of features; well priced; stylish.

CONS Questions remain about the suitability of FireWire as a multichannel real-time audio interface; button feel on the remote takes a bit of getting used to.