RME Babyface

Small USB and FireWire audio interfaces/controllers are not exactly rare beasts but the release of such a device from German interface maestros RME merits close attention from ROB JAMES

I'm declaring an interest here, as the owner of two RME Hammerfall cards I'm well disposed to the Babyface from the outset. Packaging is somewhat whimsical in comparison to RME's more austere norm. A 'cute'(?) baby adorns the box and the documentation. The Quick Start Guide is titled 'Baby Care for Beginners…'

The Babyface I had was labelled 'Blue Edition', *(Blue for a boy, Rob. Ed)* begging the question as to whether there are other colours in the pipeline, pink perhaps? Apparently a silver version is already available in some countries.

Opening the box reveals a smart, black, padded carrying case with shoulder strap, inside which the Babyface snuggles in its own compartment accompanied by a breakout cable and extender and a special USB cable in the other two sections. There's room enough for a smallish microphone and ear buds to make a mobile recording kit in a bag, just add laptop.

Babyface is, well, cute! The case is a very solid all-metal construction which exudes quality. The detail finish is superb with all edges and apertures radiused neatly. The two recessed Select and Recall plastic buttons are positive in action and the alloy rotary encoder wheel has a weight and solidity that adds gravitas. It also doubles as

a switch. Two, ten-segment LED bargraphs provide hardware metering/gain indication and between them five LEDs indicate Sync, Dim active and the current function of the encoder; Phones level, Out level or In level. The bottom, eleventh LEDs in the meter stacks indicate active phantom power. Two ¼-inch jack sockets on the right hand edge deal with headphone output/analogue outputs 3 & 4 and a high impedance instrument input.

At the rear a 15-pin compact D-sub connects the breakout cable, which provides two XLRs for balanced Microphone/Line inputs, two XLRs for balanced analogue outputs, one stereo ¼-inch jack socket that duplicates the headphones/Line out 3 & 4 socket on the side of the unit, and two 5-pin DIN connectors for MIDI input and output. The remainder of the back panel is populated by two Toslink optical sockets for ADAT/SPDIF digital I-O, a B type USB socket and a power socket. Sampling rates go up to 192kHz at 24 bits. The Toslink ADAT sockets support 8 channels of single speed I-O and double and quad and quad speed SMux for 96kHz and 192kHz use with a corresponding reduction in the number of channels.

Power drain is quoted at 300mA and should therefore be within the bus powering capabilities of most current USB interfaces. If the host PC is incapable of supplying sufficient power then the special USB cable included can be used to source extra urge from a second USB socket. If all else fails, or if a separate supply increases confidence, then RME offers a suitable unit as an option.

The Toslink sockets enhance the utility of the unit considerably. Babyface is primarily a unit for use on the move with a laptop but, thanks to these sockets, it will also have a grown-up life back at base in conjunction with an ADAT A-D and D-A convertor. RME makes a couple of highly suitable units, the ADI-8 QS, A-D and D-A, or the OctaMic II with 8 mic preamps. With this sort of expansion, surround monitoring becomes possible and more ambitious recordings can be undertaken.

Babyface shares a number of components and attributes with the Fireface UFX. Not least of these is the excellent new incarnation of the RME TotalMix application, FX Totalmix, and the DSP. The analogue I-Os use RME's latest circuit design. The result is real-world noise and distortion at vanishingly low levels with the figures to support the empirical impression. Similarly, the mic pres are much better than they have any right to be at the price, although the gain steps for these digitally controlled analogue preamps are a rather coarse 3dB, so you would be well advised to get it right before recording. To be really picky, the gain is a little low for dynamic or ribbon mics with weedy output. 48V phantom power is individually switchable via FX Totalmix. All these settings are adjustable from the Babyface and can be saved and recalled in the software.

Pressing the Select button cycles through the encoder wheel functions. When In is active, pressing the wheel switches between input 1, input 2, both and the input level display. If Out or Phones are active, pressing the wheel toggles Dim. This affects the Main Control Room Out as defined in TotalMix. Recall sets the Control Room Main Output Gain to a predetermined level set in TotalMix or locally by holding the button down for 2 seconds.

FX Totalmix has developed into a very serious applet. Exploiting the DSP power present in the small box it offers full hardware metering, matrixing and mixing plus 3-band EQ with high-pass filter. Unfortunately Babyface drops the dynamics section, i.e. compressor/expander and autolevel which you do get with the Fireface UFX. The EQ is very useable and the independent reverb and echo sections are much better than you might expect. High-pass filters on all the inputs and outputs are a real boon. Internal loop-backs are possible to get the maximum use out of the DSP and the mixer outputs can be routed back into the computer for recording. The routing and matrixing can be a little daunting at first but Workspaces and Snapshots make it simple to switch between set-ups once you have perfected and saved them.

Installation is no trouble and thanks to RME using its own USB hardware implementation latencies are surprisingly low. Of course, a great deal depends on the host PC or Mac. RME maintains a list of tested systems on the website and is compulsive reading if shopping for a computer for audio work. A Core 2 Duo CPU is the minimum requirement along with Windows XP with SP2 or later and Mac OSX 10.5 or later.

Babyface delivers. It's a cute and compact low latency interface and controller for ultra mobile work with the promise of grown-up expansion via the Toslink sockets for more complex applications. Audio quality is unimpeachable and only the most theologically inclined 'golden ears' will find anything to quarrel with. If portability is important for your work, perhaps you need a delivery from the stork. ■

PROS   Beautiful build; sparkling performance; intelligently thought out.

CONS   Mic gain could be greater; analogue gain steps coarse.

Contact
RME, GERMANY
Web: www.rme-audio.de