

Tascam FW-1884

Tascam has collaborated with Frontier Design to create a control surface/FireWire audio-MIDI interface that combines a number of highly desirable functions into one, sensibly sized and priced unit. **ROB JAMES** gets a handle on it.



IT IS OFTEN PERFECTLY OBVIOUS what something is at first sight. If it has a leg at each corner, smells like a wet dog, shakes itself and soaks you, wags its tail and barks, then the chances are it's a dog.

It used to be just as easy to identify the function of a piece of pro audio kit. If it was covered in faders, knobs and buttons and had a bunch of I-O on the back it was probably a mixer. Digital technology and especially the rise and rise of the computer have made things a lot more confusing. We have control surfaces that look like audio mixers but are simply computer remote controls. Then there are mixers that also function as control surfaces for computer hosted workstations.

But what is this looming out of the winter mist? It's the Tascam FW-1884 Control Surface/FireWire audio-MIDI Interface. This is a new type of hybrid. Simply put, it combines a DAW remote control surface, audio

and MIDI I-O and a monitor mixer. All this links to a computer DAW via a single FireWire cable.

At UK£1299 (inc. VAT) the FW-1884 offers a lot for the money. If more control strips are needed, there is an expander unit, the FE-8 sidecar at UK£999 (inc. VAT), which offers another 8 strips. Up to 15 (!) of these FE-8 expanders can be added to make a very large console indeed. Brackets are supplied to solidly lock the units together and the FW-1884 end-cheeks can be removed and replaced at the extremities of the linked units making it look 'all of a piece'. The surface is airy and spacious with quiet touch-sensitive motor faders and decently sized transport controls.

Installation on a PC is pretty much par for the course. Under Windows XP the driver software must be loaded

first with the FW-1884 disconnected, or at any rate switched off. Then, after a reboot, the FW-1884 is switched on. Windows will 'discover' several new devices and semi-automatically install the drivers.

Apart from the system drivers, required to allow the unit to communicate with the computer, a control panel is also installed. Here, there are three tabs to access pages that affect parameters of the FW-1884 and how it interacts with the computer. Of these, the Settings page is the default and is where, among other things, the Control Protocol is selected. Control Protocol is crucial to satisfactory operation as a remote control, as I discovered. Audio latency is also set here. Clock source and sampling rate can be altered here or from the control surface.

The Routing page enables the optical output and coax output sources to be set and SPDIF input routing. The MIDI Programming page is used to programme the control surface when it is in MIDI control mode.

Unpicking exactly what the FW-1884 can do, and what it might be best suited for, is not quite so straightforward. So, let's get the easy bits out of the way first.

Whether or not the unit is connected to a computer, there is full any to any MIDI routing between the four inputs and outputs. As an audio interface the FW-1884 offers up to 18 channels of input and output (8 analogue, 8 digital ADAT plus a 2-channel SPDIF) at 24 bit, 48kHz. At 96kHz the ADAT I-O is reduced to 4 in 4 out.

In Monitor Mix mode, it functions as a standalone 18 into 2 summing monitor mixer, although this is not as simple as it might appear.

Once the DAW is connected you can monitor the FW-1884's 18 audio inputs or the 8 channels returning from the DAW or both together at the touch of a couple of buttons. But, on the control surface, you can only control the level of the local inputs, not the DAW returns.

In this mode, Mutes and Solos are activated when the relevant keys are depressed but de-activating them only occurs on 'key-up', i.e. when the key is released, analogue mixer style. Great if you wish to un-mute a bunch of things together and a nice touch. This mode is ideally suited to recording with negligible latency monitoring.

MIDI Control Mode is also relatively simple. When selected, the FW-1884's encoders, faders and most of the keys, may be used to control external MIDI devices

The hardware



The control surface consists of 9 fader strips with rotary encoders and input trim pots for the 8 analogue inputs. LEDs indicate signal present and clip. Three analogue level controls deal with Solo/PFL bus output level, Monitor Bus output level and Phones level. Three further encoders and four buttons are labelled with EQ functions. Their actual function is dependent on the DAW application and the Control Protocol. Transport Controls are reassuringly big and the jog/shuttle wheel is reasonably smooth. Other buttons on the surface function in various ways depending on the application while the remainder are fixed function, such as the Mode buttons.



via the four MIDI outputs. In this mode there are four 'banks'. In other words, the 8 strips can control 32 virtual strips via the Bank keys. The Master strip is global across all banks and modes.

Now we come to the most potentially problematic mode, Computer. The basic conundrum is not unique to the FW-1884, it afflicts all third-party hardware controllers and it goes something like this. The control surface manufacturer decides on a set of hardware controls. The DAW software manufacturer decides which parameters will be externally controllable and what useful information will be output, for example, meters. Unless there is a reasonable fit between these two lists and the controller is supported by the DAW application in 'Native' mode, no matter who actually implements this, results are likely to be less than satisfactory from the user's perspective.

In this case there is native support from several software packages, such as Logic, Sonar and Digital Performer, but not yet for others, including Steinberg's Cubase and Nuendo. For the moment at least, Steinberg users are obliged to use Mackie Control emulation or possibly Mackie HUI on the FW-1884 and the DAW. This is not very satisfactory and is likely to lead to considerable frustration. For example, the three encoders and four switches above the master fader labelled with EQ functions are not implemented in the Mackie control emulation. The alternative, using the encoders above the input faders as a horizontal 'strip' together with the Aux keys is not exactly intuitive.

The FW-1884 is a rather odd beast. It combines a number of highly desirable functions into one, sensibly sized and priced unit. However, the combination seems to offer rather less than the sum of its parts. The FireWire implementation appears to be fine with no timing or audio hiccups; the convertors are neutral and follow in the footsteps of Tascam's previous acclaimed convertor technology. The motor faders and switches are all satisfyingly tactile and the controller functions do not require the user to memorise complex modifier key sequences, unlike some, but...

The real sticking point is the lack of visual feedback. At least half the point of full-size hardware control surfaces for DAWs is to remove the imperative to look at a computer screen. With this unit, in the absence of metering beyond the stereo LED meters on the monitor bus output and, perhaps even more importantly, any indication of the virtual position of

the encoder knobs, a screen is vital.

The FW-1884 can only be recommended if this is unimportant and also with the proviso that a native control-surface driver is available. It isn't quite a 'curates egg' but it comes close. For mixdowns and especially sound for picture work, unless the control surface is natively supported by the DAW application, the compromise alternatives of Mackie HUI or Mackie Control (where supported) are likely to prove frustrating due to unintuitive mappings and the number of redundant hardware controls. I am sure native support will soon appear for Steinberg software.

Near zero latency monitoring, no MIDI delays that I noticed, and a generous number of inputs make the FW-1884 a good candidate for recording. It is also fine as a DAW audio and MIDI interface. ■

PROS

Good FireWire Audio and MIDI interface; high quality convertors; uncluttered.

CONS

Remote Control function can be frustrating if Native support is not available; lack of visual feedback, especially on encoders.

TASCAM, UK:
Tel: +44 1923 438888
Website: www.tascam.co.uk

The rear panel is busy but not crowded. Headphone out and footswitch are 1/4-inch jacks as are the 8 analogue monitor outputs, the 8 line inputs (all TRS balanced) and channel inserts are unbalanced following the usual TRS convention.

Eight XLRs deal with the mic inputs. Phantom power is switched in two groups of four and line input 8 has an impedance switch to suit guitars. Word clock in and out are BNC and coaxial SPDIF I-O is on two phonos. Two Toslink connectors provide 8 channels of ADAT optical input and output. There is no built in TDIF interfacing but Tascam manufactures the IF-TAD, TDIF-ADAT bi-directional interface at UK£195 (inc. VAT). Eight DIN sockets provide four MIDI inputs and four MIDI outputs. Two 6-pin FireWire sockets allow for daisy chaining expander units.