

Mac PC What is it? FireWire audio interface and monitor remote PRICE: £808

CONTACT: Source Distribution, 020 8962 5080 www.presonus.com INFO: FireStudio, £649; MSR, £159



computer music PERFORMANCE

PRESONUS FireStudio + MSR

With the new MSR remote control at its side, PreSonus reckon you'd be hard-pushed to find a more flexible audio interface solution than their FireStudio...

► SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC: Pentium/Celeron 1.6GHz, 512MB RAM, Windows XP SP1, FireWire port
Mac: PowerPC G4/Dual 1GHz or any Intel CPU, 512MB RAM, OS X 10.4.x, FireWire port

► TEST MACHINE

Mac: Apple Mac Pro dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.9, Logic Pro 8

With in-the-box production now standard practice for most of us, the role of the humble audio interface has moved on considerably. Whether it's higher sample rates, multiple mic inputs or latency-free direct monitoring, it's clear that our demands have moved on as well. Some manufacturers have done a better job of addressing these issues than others, and US company PreSonus are definitely one of them. With an ever-expanding range of boxes, they've cottoned on to the fact

that many of us will quite happily ditch patchbays and wires in favour of software-controlled routing and monitoring, assuming, of course, that it all works together nicely.

PreSonus' combo of the FireStudio audio interface and optional Monitor Station Remote (MSR) is their latest and probably most ambitious venture to date, combining a 26-channel FireWire interface with a hardwired control room remote. No big deal, you might think, but factor in their Control

Console routing software, and you're effectively looking at the basis for an all-in-one recording, monitoring and foldback system – all you need is some decent host software (Cubase LE is bundled, along with other cutdown programs). We're reviewing the FireStudio and MSR as a complete system, though it should be noted that they are sold separately.

Spec-tastic

Like a few of the better-spec'd interfaces, the FireStudio rack unit

uses its FireWire interface to deliver 26 simultaneous ins and outs. You'll have already spotted the eight mic inputs on the front, and these double as TRS jack inputs as well, with the first two also acting as instrument DI's. The remaining 18 channels are provided on two pairs of ADAT connectors and a single RCA S/PDIF. The maximum sample rate is 96kHz, which means that the FireStudio can use the SMUX protocol to deliver eight channels over a pair of ADAT cables.

On the output front, the back panel has eight balanced analogue connectors on TRS jacks with an additional main stereo output. There's also a single headphone out on the front panel. Other connectors include MIDI In/Out, Word Clock In/Out, a second FireWire connector, an auxiliary input on phonos and an Ethernet port for the MSR.

For maximum fidelity, PreSonus have opted for fully discrete class A mic amps (the same XMAX ones you'll

find in their DigiMax converter). On the first two channels there are also pre-converter analogue insert points. three modes – Track, Mix and Surround – reconfigure the FireStudio's outputs to provide various monitor matrix options. Track is the simplest, with one pair of speakers (A) available from the main stereo outs, leaving 18 routable outputs free to which you can, in theory, route nine stereo submixes. Mix mode adds two further, switchable stereo speaker outputs (B and C) on outputs 5 to 8. Finally, Surround commandeers the first six channels for 5.1 monitoring, and you can switch each channel in and out from the MSR.

In addition to the main mix, both the S/PDIF input and the rear panel auxiliary can be auditioned from the monitor section. It's powerful stuff, but easy to use – having monitor levels, dim, mute, mono and all the talkback options to hand is very convenient. And while some interfaces do offer a similar multitude of routing options, it's not always as easy to put them to effective use without reconfiguring



▲ You can create up to nine mixes from the 18 hardware inputs and 18 software channels

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them all the time in software, and so the MSR is a fine solution to this.

Remote control

The Monitor Studio Remote adds considerable functionality and flexibility to an already impressive interface. Designed specifically for the FireStudio, its Ethernet link acts as both control and audio connector. Panel controls include talkback facilities and two additional headphone levels. However, its real forte lies in its monitoring options.

Operating in conjunction with the Control Console software, the MSR's

High fidelity

It's clear from the preamp design that the FireStudio has audio quality high up on its list. We were very impressed with this end of things, and also by the use of JetPLL jitter reduction (a technology licensed from TC Applied Technologies). Clocking problems can let down a soundcard, so it's great to see this on a more affordable unit.

On the downside, we're a bit disappointed that only eight of the 16 ADAT channels currently appear in the Control Console (PreSonus say they're

working on a solution to this). Plus, although the MSR monitor matrix options are excellent, there doesn't appear to be a way to trim individual channels, so you have to level up your monitors using their own controls. In hardware terms, the lack of phase reverse, level pads or proper meters may annoy some, and for high-end users, the lack of 192kHz operation may be limiting.

On the software front, we did encounter the odd crash, which seemed to stem from FireWire device conflicts, and selection of the additional headphones from within the Control Console was a little unpredictable. However, the build quality of the hardware is excellent, so let's hope that PreSonus soon polish the software up to the same standard.

The FireStudio is a very high quality device that offers so much that it's hard not to be impressed, and the MSR is simply a must-have. PreSonus are also offering a series of rebates at the moment, and if you buy the FireStudio before 31st January 2008, you'll be entitled to a free FaderPort controller, offering a further reason for 'going PreSonus'. **cm**

▶ ALTERNATIVELY

MOTU Traveler
N/A » N/A » £695
Close in price, and includes the excellent CueMix software and other features such as battery powering, but four mic amps only

RME Fireface 800
N/A » N/A » £859
More expensive, but this one is a highly regarded unit and a serious competitor. Only major downside is that it has just four mic inputs

VERDICT

- FOR**
- + Lots of inputs and flexible routing options
 - + Excellent integration of MSR
 - + Top quality mic amps
 - + Jitter control via JetPLL
 - + Talkback facilities with MSR

- AGAINST**
- Currently only 18 inputs on Control Console
 - No phase reverse on the mic inputs

The FireStudio itself is a top-notch audio interface, and the MSR is a well-thought-out companion that enables you to make the most of it

RATING



Console yourself

Unsurprisingly, the FireStudio's Control Console uses a similar routing concept to other manufacturers, and this means a software-driven routing engine within the hardware that enables you to combine signals from physical inputs with those of the DAW outputs.

Control Console splits this task between two tabbed pages. The first is a straightforward matrix (the outputs/router), which gives you access to 18 virtual connections made between physical inputs, outputs, DAW channels and the software mixer. The second page is the mixer itself. Here, you can build up to nine simultaneous mixes from 36 audio streams (ie, 18 hardware ins and the 18 software outs available to your DAW).

You'll notice that eight streams are missing from this, and that's because, so far, the second ADAT connection isn't included in the mixer or the router. We understand that this will be rectified at a later date. Obviously, this doesn't actually stop you using the extra ins and outs – you just can't route them through Control Console, which is



▲ Here, Mix mode is enabled on the MSR, reflected by the matrix view certainly a pain if you're trying to record more than 18 tracks with full foldback.

Finally, the Assign buttons on the outputs/router page route audio to the headphones and the main outputs.