M-Audio
ProFire 2626 £479 PC MAC

M-Audio aren't messing about with their new flagship FireWire audio interface, but can it uphold the company's reputation?

> There's no denying that the run-of-the-mill two-in/two-out audio interface adequately covers the needs of most computer musicians. But for engineers who need to record a full band, a drum kit or an ensemble of any description, two mono inputs and a single headphone output just aren't enough to capture the desired sound – a more comprehensive audio interface with mic preamps is very much called for...

Is this the 1U need?

Enter the ProFire 2626, a 1U rack-mounted FireWire audio interface boasting up to 24-bit/192kHz audio quality. The eight analogue combo inputs on the back of the unit can either be used as XLR mic inputs or ¼" line-ins, and are equipped with M-Audio's award-winning Octane preamps, which boast a 75dB gain range. There are also eight ¼" outputs, which should be more than enough for the average project studio. On the digital side, there are two pairs of ADAT connections for a further 16 ins and outs. A breakout cable combines MIDI, word clock and S/PDIF connections, the last of which takes connectivity up to an impressive 26 ins and outs, hence the unit's name. Power comes via an external PSU (FireWire bus power isn't available).

On the front panel are two instrument inputs (channels 1 and 2) that are ideal for recording guitars. The inputs all have 20dB pads, which is activated by pulling the dial out. Phantom power is available on all channels and split into two selectable sections (channels 1-4 and 5-8). There are also two headphone outs that mirror the signals at outputs 1/2 and 3/4. The volume knob on the front can be assigned to control any combination of pairs of analogue outs, including all at once, for 7.1 surround fans.

The 2626 can also be used as a standalone eight-channel preamp or AD/DA converter. When the converter is switched off, the 2626 becomes a standalone mic preamp, with which each preamp input has its own output.

If there's downside to the 2626, it's that unlike M-Audio's new Fast Track Ultra, it doesn't have any built-in effects. It would have been nice to see a basic channel compressor for configuring a more solid monitor mix. What it does have, though, is a frighteningly flexibler channel mixer (see *Routin' tootin'*).

We gave the ProFire 2626 a thorough test. We recorded electric and acoustic guitars, vocals and even a full drum kit, and the results were great.

This interface is clearly overkill for the engineer who wants to record one instrument at a time or add the occasional vocal to their tracks. But for anyone looking to branch out into more diverse recording situations, the ProFire 2626 would make a superb investment. **cm**

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System requirements

PC 1.6GHz, 512MB RAM, FireWire 400 port, Windows XP/Vista
Mac G4 1GHz, 512MB RAM and FireWire 400 port

Test system

PC HP Pavilion 2.8GHz, 1GB RAM

Alternatively

ART TubeFire 8
cm125 >> 8/10 >> £399
Great sound and tube-based mic pres, but not as flexible as the 2626

PreSonus FireStudio+MSR
cm121 >> 9/10 >> £808
The FireStudio itself can be had for £649 and features eight mic pres

Verdict

For Eight high-quality preamps
Superb audio quality
Impressive signal-to-noise ratio
Great flexibility via mixer/router
Separate headphone mixes
Standalone operation

Against No built-in effects
Mixer/router could be daunting for some

If you've got the money, then this is a mighty fine audio interface, with flexibility to match its sonic prowess

9/10

Routin' tootin'

The 2626's onboard mixer/router is most impressive. The 18-channel mixer allows you to mix signals from the 26 hardware inputs and 26 'software returns' (ie, outputs in your DAW) to produce its main output. There are also seven stereo aux sends that can be used to create custom mixes for band members, for example. All of these setups can be saved as presets for instant recall.

The router determines which audio streams appear at the 26 physical outputs, all arranged as stereo pairs. The available source streams here are the main mixer out, any of its seven auxiliary sends, and any of the hardware inputs or software returns.

All this choice could leave you confused at first, but it's worth bearing with, as the ability to dial in up to eight stereo mixes, create sends to external hardware and so on is certainly not to be sniffed at!