Mac **PC**

What is it? Affordable 24-bit/96kHz FireWire audio interface

PRICE: £62

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▶ SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, Windows XP SP2, FireWire port

Mac: G4 800MHz, 512MB RAM, OS X 10.3.9 or later, FireWire port

▶ TEST MACHINES

Mac: G5 Dual 2GHz, 1.5GB RAM, OS X 10.4.3

PC: Athlon XP 2500+, 1GB RAM, Asus A7N8X (using integrated FireWire), Windows XP SP2

BEHRINGER
FCA202

VALUE FOR MONEY

PERFORMANCE

▶ ALTERNATIVELY

M-Audio FireWire Audiophile
cm72 ≫ **9/10** ≫ £199
Larger and much more expensive, but offers increased connectivity

Edirol FA-66
N/A ≫ N/A ≫ £279
Offers higher sampling rates (up to 192kHz), mic preamps and integrated mixing

FireWire audio interfaces aren't usually this cheap. Have Behringer produced the bargain of the year, or is the FCA202 too good to be true?

Every now and then, a product breaks new ground in terms of price against performance. Behringer's FCA202 would appear to be just such a product: it's an entry-level (but also high-quality) FireWire audio interface that commands a ridiculously low price tag.

Until now, budget-conscious desktop musicians have had no choice but to open up their computers and install a PCI audio card. Although this isn't exactly a taxing operation, some cheap PCI cards can introduce noise (caused by interference picked up from the computer's digital circuits) when they're plugged into certain PCs.

The FireWire-based FCA202 isn't hampered by either of these problems. It's very easy to install and offers extremely quiet audio operation – all the sensitive audio circuits are outside the PC. Although usually more expensive than their USB-based cousins, FireWire audio interfaces offer increased functionality, lower latency and more stable operation.

The FCA202 features one unbalanced stereo input and a balanced stereo output – the connectivity is provided on four quarter-inch jacks. The unit has two FireWire connections, so other devices can be daisy-chained on the same port, while the front panel sports a headphone socket, a headphone

Timing is everything

Latency – the delay between a computer generating sound and it appearing at the output of your audio interface – is a crucial consideration. The amount of latency produced is determined by the quality of your audio interface's drivers and the quality of the hardware itself.

The FCA202 achieved a respectable latency figure of 8ms on the Mac and an impressive 4ms when connected to our test PC. The difference in latency performance between the two platforms can be explained by the

driver arrangements. Mac users can simply plug in the FCA202 and use it without having to install any drivers at all (the standard CoreAudio drivers do the trick). PC users, on the other hand, can install the device-specific drivers, which enable optimal performance.

Unfortunately, the current ASIO latency setting is actually misreported to the host application in Windows, which may cause synchronisation problems in some software packages. Hopefully, this issue will be resolved soon in a driver update.
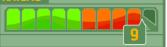
volume control and two indicator LEDs. The entire unit can be locked down (using a standard Kensington-style security cable) to prevent theft.

Pinning things down

The device ships with both types of FireWire cable, so it can be used immediately with both 4- and 6-pin host ports. Unfortunately, the supplied cables are quite short; this makes them ideal for portable use, but potentially restricting at home. A wallwart power unit is supplied and must be used when the FCA202 is connected to a 4-pin FireWire port.

It may be a cheap interface, but the FCA202 is extremely well built. It's heavy enough to stay put with trailing cables attached, but not so weighty

that you wouldn't want to carry it around with you. Audio performance is equally solid – the sound is detailed and well balanced and has a perfectly controlled low-end. What's more, the built-in headphone amp is capable of driving more demanding cans to high volume levels without any sign of distortion at all.

Three software packages are included in the bundle: a cutdown version of Ableton Live 4 (featuring four audio and two MIDI tracks), Kristal and Audacity. The minimum system requirements are typical for a device of this type, but do be aware that your OS needs to be relatively up to date.

The FCA202 represents amazing value for money. At this price, it will surely sell by the bucketload. **cm**

⏻ VERDICT

FOR
+ Bargain!
+ Sounds great
+ Well made
+ Easy to use

AGAINST
– Minor latency issue (Windows only)
– No MIDI ports
– Bundled leads are short

Its connectivity may be limited, but the FCA202 redefines what a budget audio interface can be

RATING

9