Focusrite Clarett 8Pre | £720

Focusite come to dine at the Thunderbolt audio interface table with a new 18x20 model. ***Jono Buchanan*** pours himself a large glass of Clarett

INCLUDES AUDIO

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WHAT IS IT?

A Thunderbolt audio interface offering high-quality preamps and conversion

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 Wonderful preamps, based on the famous Focusrite ISA design

2 Tons of analogue I/O with ample capacity for digital expansion

3 Bundled Red suite effects offer high-quality EQ and compression

SPECS

Supported systems: OSX 10.9 Mavericks or 10.10 Yosemite
Sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz, 192kHz
I/Os: 8 analogue inputs, 10 analogue outputs, 2 headphone outputs, Stereo S/PDIF In/Out, 8 channels of ADAT I/O, MIDI In/Out, Word Clock Out

Manufacturers have finally accepted that the Mac's high-speed port of choice is to be Thunderbolt, and are now lining up with audio interfaces supporting this protocol. Focusrite's Clarett range promises four interfaces using Thunderbolt, with the 8Pre, on review here, offering specifications below the top-of-the-range 8Pre X but above the more compact 2Pre and 4Pre models. Perhaps mindful of the bundled software packages on offer from rivals such as UAD, Focusrite also include the Red 2 EQ and Red 3 compressor software, to give your effects library a quality boost.

Points of Clarett-fication

The 8Pre is a 18x20 interface and a quick tour of the front and back panel accounts for this generous specification. At the front you'll find the first two of the eight combi preamp channels, placed here for easy access when the unit is rackmounted. Focusrite's history as a preamp designer of repute needs no introduction and, as the design here is based on the legendary ISA preamps, the sound quality produced across all eight analogue channels is beautiful. Via the Focusrite Control Panel software, you can enable an 'Air' option for the pres too, which emulates the transformer behaviour of the ISA design, providing a sweeter, brighter response to high-frequency content. 'Air' is available on a per-channel basis.

Round the back, you'll find the remaining six input preamps, as well as ten 1/4-inch line outputs. In terms of digital specification, there's stereo S/PDIF in/out, as well as an extra eight channels of digital I/O via optical ports, which speak the language of ADAT. You'll also find MIDI In/Out 5-pin ports here, as well as the all-important Thunderbolt connector. As with some rival Thunderbolt interfaces, no connection cable is included in the box. This trend is becoming frustrating; for this price, I think Focusrite – and their competitors – should be saving purchasers this additional expense.

The front panel provides ladder LEDs for the eight inputs and the monitor outputs, while the latter also features its own front-panel level dial, alongside Mute and Dim options. There are two headphone ports with independent volume controls, whose mixes can be configured via the Control Panel software.

Red army

The inclusion of the Red 2 EQ and Red 3 Compressor plug-ins is welcome, as they represent pleasingly faithful recreations of their hardware forebears. To stress, these plug-ins don't draw on any processing power inside the 8Pre, but run natively instead, which means you can continue to use the plug-ins when your 8Pre isn't connected. The downside is that, of course, they will tax your computer's CPU. They both sound wonderful and are likely to be a substantial cut above the native plug-ins your DAW provides.

The 8Pre represents a solid and impressive audio interfacing solution from a company whose reputation for high-quality mic pres and pristine signal conversion will be enhanced by the arrival of this range. It's a breeze to use, with driver installation provided once your product has been registered. Thereafter the Control Panel software is unfussy and helpful, while the unit itself allows you to drive the most important parameters – mic gain, phantom power enable (in two blocks per four channels), headphone port output levels and more – directly from the front panel. The Thunderbolt connection provides lightning-fast interfacing and, even with eight channels running simultaneously, latency is unlikely to poke its unwelcome head into your recording workflow. This leaves you with warm, crystal clear recordings courtesy of the sumptuous preamps and the option to further process these through two high-quality effects plug-ins.

The UAD Apollo 8p system is perhaps the closest competitor, with a balance between the higher cost of this set against the ability to run a raft of emulated plug-ins via its onboard processors. If you don't need that provision, the Clarett offers a winning combination of exceptional preamps and pristine audio interfacing. FM

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

Exceptional preamp and audio interfacing within a rock-solid Thunderbolt interface.

FutureMusic Platinum Award