



iZotope Spire Studio £349



A standalone digital multitrack recorder for the post-millennial musician, designed by one of the biggest names in audio software

> A curveball release by top-tier software developers iZotope, Spire Studio is an audio interface and eight-track recorder with a built-in microphone, aimed at singer-songwriters and bands looking to capture ideas and even final takes on the go. The wirelessly connected Spire Music Recorder iOS app (free on the App Store; the Android version is in the works) opens it up with the addition of crude editing, effects processing and mixing; but crucially, this battery-powered box of tricks is capable of truly standalone multitrack recording, for up to four hours on a full charge.

In Spire

9cm tall, weighing 0.72Kg, and with just five buttons to negotiate, Spire Studio is a handsome, reassuringly solid piece of electronics. The touch-sensitive RGB LED ring on top gives visual feedback (level metering and track counts), and serves as a headphone output level control. The mic is a small

omnidirectional condenser that sounds surprisingly good, but two combi XLR/jack inputs with Grace Design preamps and phantom power are round the back for plugging in more serious alternatives, and/or your guitars and other instruments. Two minijack headphone outputs provide zero-latency direct monitoring.

Spire Studio packs enough storage for six hours of 24-bit/48kHz audio, and the multitrack recording process is ridiculously quick and simple. First, press the Soundcheck button and

“This battery-powered box of tricks is capable of truly standalone multitrack recording”

play or sing at the loudest level you're likely to reach to have Spire Studio set the optimal input gain (oddly, you can only adjust this manually via the app), then press Record and do your thing. With Track 1 down, hit Record again to play it back from the start while recording your next part onto Track 2; then again for playback of Tracks 1 and 2 while recording to Track 3, etc, up to eight tracks. When two inputs are active (using In 1 disables the internal mic), two tracks are recorded at a time.

The use of the LEDs to show track activity is quite ingenious, too. Recorded tracks are represented by blocks of colour, stacked up in the LED ring from right to left, pulsing with their volume levels when played back.

Everything is stored automatically as it's recorded, but you need to be very sure you're finished when you hit the New Song button or turn Spire Studio off, as doing either archives the current eight-track Song, making it inaccessible until the unit is synced to Spire Music Recorder.

“We love Spire Studio’s sound quality, I/O, ease of use and liberating wirelessness”

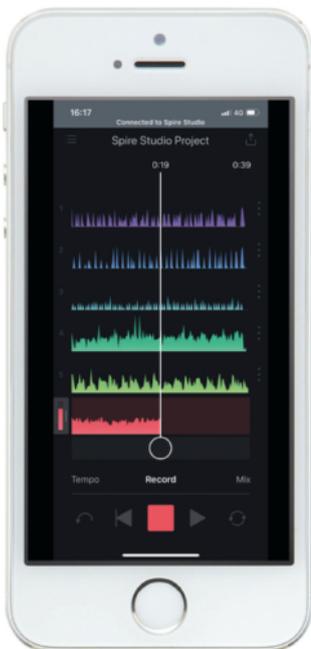
App dance

Linking Spire Studio to the Spire Music Recorder app is a cinch. Spire Studio hosts its own 2.4GHz Wi-Fi network, to which the device running the app has to connect. The use of Wi-Fi ensures a fast, reliable link, but also prevents your iPhone or iPad from joining any other network while you’re using it. A fair trade-off, we’d say.

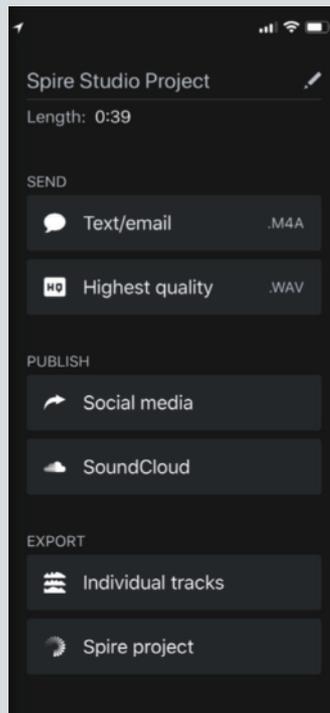
As soon as Spire Music Recorder is connected to Spire Studio, the first thing it does is automatically sync with it, pulling all unsynced projects over to the iOS device and adding them to the app’s Song list. It then taps into and extends Spire Studio with a graphical interface and transport control for the multitrack recorder, rudimentary track editing and mixing, a metronome, the ability to apply effects, and file export/import (see *Export duty*).

Tracks are arranged in the app as a vertical stack of crudely drawn waveforms. New tracks are added at a touch, input levels and monitoring status become adjustable, and the playhead can be freely positioned for punching in (but not out). Recordings made via the app are still captured to Spire Studio, but synced to the iOS device in the background at the same time. Track editing functions are limited to just trimming everything to the left or right of the playhead - there’s no way of moving or copying/pasting regions.

The Metronome lives on a dedicated page, and features a useful animated visual along with its click. It supports 4/4, 3/4, 6/8 and 1/4 time signatures, and the tempo is set manually or by poking at the Tap button. It’s a real shame you can’t use it with Spire Studio standalone.



Spire Music Recorder shows your Spire Studio projects, plus effects, mixing and more control



Spire Music Recorder is much better at exporting than importing

Export duty

Being able to record quality multitracks wherever and whenever is all well and good, but naturally you’re going to want to get those songs out of Spire Studio, both as mixes for sharing, and component audio tracks for editing and mixing in your Mac or PC DAW. Happily, Spire Music Recorder can do both.

The Individual Tracks Export option spits out every track in a project at 24-bit/44.1kHz via Dropbox, iCloud, email, AirDrop, etc. Any panning and levelling applied in Spire’s Mix page is baked in, though - the option to just get the raw WAVs instead needs adding. Internally bounced mixes are shared as WAV or MP4 via the same channels, and can also be published to social media and SoundCloud.

Spire projects can be shared and exported as well, a single .spire file containing all audio and Mix settings.

Going in the other direction, import of one up-to-60-minute audio file per project from My Music, Google Drive, iCloud or Dropbox is supported. The one file limit is a puzzler, but even more so is the fact that you can only import that file into a new project, not an existing one. That’s got to be on the update list, but for now, you can fly in a backing drum track, or a guide track for vocal recording.

Despite being configured in the app, the onboard effects (amp sims, reverbs, delays, etc) run within Spire Studio’s DSP, so you can monitor through them with no latency. Being input-only, however, you have to commit to your chosen effect module (just one per track) at the recording stage: you can’t monitor through it without also recording it, and the effects aren’t available at all after recording.

In the Mix page, tracks are represented by a dot in a rectangular XY pad. Move a dot up or down to adjust track volume and left/right for pan. Apart from switching tracks between mono and stereo, and muting them, that’s it for mixing: no compression, EQ, gating or effects. Saying that, iZotope have rather lessened the need for corrective processing by applying subtle but effective noise reduction and compression to recordings made with the built-in mic. This works well, but there’s no bypassing it.

Spire Music Recorder can also be used on its own, recording via the host device’s mic or an audio interface, but minus the effects.

Tower of power

A brilliant idea brilliantly realised, Spire Studio offers enough functionality to facilitate multitrack recording at the repeated touch of a single button, while the app gives deeper control and enables basic prep for export. It sucks that the effects can’t be used post-recording, and more track editing would be welcome, but those are our only major complaints - we love the sound quality, I/O, ease of use and liberating wirelessness of this mobile recording solution. **cm**

Web www.izotope.com

Alternatively

Focusrite iTrack Solo
NA » NA » £123

Compact 2-in/2-out audio interface for PC, Mac and iOS. Needs a DAW to do anything, though

Steinberg Cubasis 2
cm239 » 9/10 » £24

With an interface attached, this iOS DAW is much more powerful than Spire, but far less immediate

Verdict

For Standalone multitrack recording
Seamless integration and sync with app
Good built-in mic and lovely preamps
Zero-latency monitoring with effects

Against Effects are record-only
App offers minimal editing
Very limited audio import

A couple of niggles aside, Spire Studio is a slick, impressive and wonderfully convenient portable recording system

8/10