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PreSonus Firebox

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6-in/10-out 24/96 FireWire audio and MIDI interface

By Dave Nagel

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Summary: The PreSonus Firebox is a 24-bit, 96 kHz FireWire audio interface that includes six audio inputs (two instrument/mic preamps, two mono line in jacks and two channels via S/PDIF) and 10 audio outputs (six analog mono line outputs, two channels via S/PDIF and two channels via the stereo headphone jack), as well as MIDI I/O. The box's front panel offers two mic/intrument preamps with separate trim controls and 48V Phantom power, a 1/4-inch headphone jack with volume control and a main level adjustment dial. There are two balanced, 1/4-inch line-in jacks on the rear, as well as two 1/4-inch jacks for main out and four for line out. It also offers two FireWire ports (the extra one for daisychaining additional units) and a DB9 connection for a breakout cable that offers two channels each of S/PDIF I/O and 1x1 MIDI I/O. The unit can be bus-powered for mobile recording, but it also includes an external power adapter.
Manufacturer: PreSonus Audio Electronics (http://www.presonus.com)
Platform: Mac OS X and Windows
Price: $250 to $300 (street)
Users: Home recording studio users, amateur musicians, garage bands
Recommendation: Buy

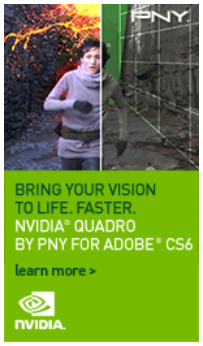
PreSonus' Firebox has been on the market for more than a year now, so I'm not exactly the first one out of the gate with a review. But it was a long and circuitous route that eventually brought me to it, and, now that I've had a chance to use it--initially under duress of a sort--I feel compelled to share my experience, albeit a bit late in the race. For a sub-$300 audio/MIDI interface, the Firebox offers surprisingly clean sound and flexible routing options and should do the trick for anybody setting up a home studio on a budget.

Now, here's the situation that brought me to the PreSonus Firebox in the first place. 2006 has proved to be, so far, a total disaster for me in terms of my computer equipment. I'm on my eighth hard drive in as many weeks. I've burned through two graphics cards and am now on my third. And I've been through three internal audio interfaces, most recently my G5's base sound card, which was probably a good thing to be rid of anyway, since you can't record anything good through that piece of junk. Out of necessity, I replaced my graphics cards and hard drives. But I was determined not to burn through another internal audio interface. Even though I think I have the problem with my G5 under control, I'm not ready to risk throwing away a lot of money on another PCI-based solution. Besides which, PCI/PCI-X is out, and anything I'd buy now wouldn't work for me when I eventually upgrade later this year to an Intel-based Mac. (That's a good reason for anybody on the Mac to avoid PCI/PCI-X audio interfaces at this point.)

So, essentially, I was looking for something temporary--just something decent to tide me over for now so that I could get some recording done without the risk of losing more hardware and, preferably, without spending a lot of cash at this point, as I'd intended to go balls out later this year when I have my Intel Mac and when audio equipment manufacturers move the good stuff to PCI-Express.

I knew from the start I wouldn't be going with anything USB. With the way I practice and record, I can't deal with any latency. So FireWire was what I needed. Then, on top of that, I needed an interface that could accommodate my mics (instruments and condensers), as well as line input for my guitars, bass and other electric instruments. And preferably something with at least four analog inputs so that I wouldn't have to swap out cables whenever I want to record a new part to a composition.

In terms of specs, the PreSonus Firebox fit the bill nicely. The only two things left to do were negotiate the price down at my local Guitar Center (final price: $245 plus a free guitar stand and half off a mic stand, both of which I needed anyway) and then get it home and make sure that it was actually viable for my needs (in other words, make sure it wasn't a piece of junk).



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In short, it exceeded my expectations on every front: noise, vocal and instrument clarity, headroom and flexibility. It's a great little box that I do not intend to abandon even when I begin tricking out my home studio with higher-end gear down the road.

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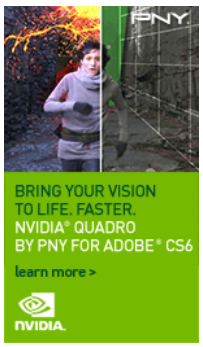
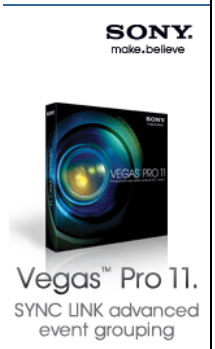
Firebox hardware
The first point to make about the Firebox is that it is truly a plug and play device. There are no drivers whatsoever to install on the Mac (as it should be). Just plug it in with the included FireWire cable, and it works. In fact, I didn't even have to do any manual switching to use this device for input because the audio software I was running when I plugged it in (Apple's





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GarageBand, for the record) recognized it as a new audio device and configured it for input automatically. (Under normal circumstances, you'd need to select this device for input in either the Sound control panel in System Preferences or in AudioMIDI Setup.) Firebox can be operated through FireWire bus power, but it also includes an AC adapter for external power.

For control of specific features, Firebox does come with two utilities for the Mac, which we'll get to below, but they aren't required for basic operation. (Incidentally, it also ships with Steinberg Cubase LE.)

In terms of specifications, Firebox is a 24-bit, 96/88.2/48/44.1 kHz FireWire audio interface that includes six audio inputs and 10 audio outputs, as well as MIDI I/O.

The box's front panel offers two Neutrik plugs for the mic/instrument preamps. For those who are unfamiliar with this type of plug, it's a combo jack that accepts wither 1/4-inch TRS jacks or standard XML microphone plugs. The Firebox offers separate gain controls for each of the preamps, as well as switchable 48V Phantom power for condenser microphones. Also on the front panel, you'll find a main level knob and a 1/4-inch headphone jack with its own volume adjustment knob (which "goes to 11," for whatever reason). There are also clip indicators for each of the mic/instrument pres, as well as a sync indicator for the FireWire connection.

Firebox front panel, sporting Neutrik plugs, independent gain controls for the two preamps, 48V Phantom power, main level adjustment and headphone jack and level control.

On the rear of the unit, you'll find two 1/4-inch line-in plugs (for four total inputs so far). There are also two main out jacks (for connecting to your monitors) and four 1/4-inch line-out jacks. Your additional I/O comes in the form of a breakout cable connected to the DB9 port on the rear of the unit. This includes S/PDIF in and out, as well as one MIDI in and one MIDI out port.

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You can, incidentally, use all six inputs and 10 outputs simultaneously at full 24-bit/96 kHz quality. And you can configure the unit for zero-latency recording and monitoring, which we'll get to below.

If you ever decide to add more units to your configuration, you can daisychain them through the Firebox's second FireWire connection. (Up to four Firebox units can be daisychained to give you far more I/O than you'd likely ever need in a home recording situation. But it's nice to know that you have the additional flexibility in the event that you ever decide to record an orchestra in your home office. (You never know.)

Firebox rear view (top) plus breakout cable, which connects MIDI and S/PDIF I/O.

In terms of reliability, I have experienced almost no trouble at all with this unit. Once and only once, after leaving the unit idle for a while, I had to disconnect it and plug it back in to kick it into gear because my system stopped recognizing signals coming through it. But that happened only once on the same day I installed the unit. It hasn't happened since. Beyond this, the construction of the Firebox is solid. It's an all-metal case that just feels solid (as it would have to in this tiny form factor with all these inputs and outputs). It's heavy enough that it tends to stay in place when it's sitting freely, even when it has several heavy cables tugging at it. But it's not so heavy that it would be inconvenient to bring with you on the road for mobile recording situations.

As for the quality of the audio that comes through this device, once again, the Firebox exceeded my expectations--and by a fairly wide margin at that. With previous consumer-level and quasi/semi-professional interfaces I've used in the past, there was a palpable dullness that came through in many of my recordings--whether using mics on instruments/vocals or running instruments directly through my preamps. With the Firebox, that dullness is gone, and I get what I consider to be a great sound for the equipment that I'm using in my home setup--certainly better than anything else I've experienced in this price range or lower. This is helped by excellent AD conversion (again 24/96) with preamps offering a bandwidth of 10 Hz to 50 kHz; an ADC dynamic range of 107 dB; and +22 dBu of headroom in the mic pres. (For further hardware specifications, visit http://www.presonus.com.)

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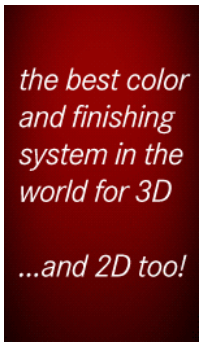

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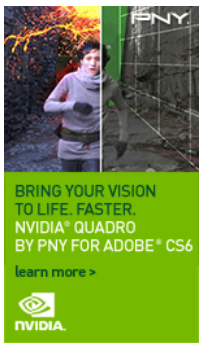
Software

For software, the PreSonus Firebox includes two utilities. The first is called Firebox Control. This software has one simple purpose (at least in the Mac version): to switch on or off the +12 dB boost on the Firebox's four analog inputs.

Level boost switches for connecting quieter devices.

The second piece of software is called Firebox Mixer. This is a utility that allows you to mix the and route the audio signal before it reaches your software, to cut down on latency. And it can be used to configure zero-latency recording and mixing. Setup is fairly straightforward, and details for configuring for zero-latency monitoring and recording are provided in the user manual.



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(Yes, that really is a Mac screenshot.)

The Firebox also ships with an OEM version of Cubase LE, which is a music production suite based on Cubase SX. It offers 48-track mixing with support for recording on all of the Firebox's six inputs. It also offers MIDI recording/editing functionality. The software runs on Mac OS X and Windows systems.

The bottom line

The PreSonus Firebox is a surprisingly versatile device for its size, offering six inputs and 10 outputs via a combination of mic/instrument preamps, line-in and line-out jacks, S/PDIF I/O and 1x1 MIDI I/O. The quality is also exceptional for a FireWire audio interface in this price range. For the features you get at this price point, it's perfect for a hoime studio on a budget or for mobile recording applications. I give it a Buy recommendation.

The PreSonus Firebox is available now for Mac OS X (10.3.5 or later, tested under Mac OS X 10.4.4) and Windows XP. The standard street price is about $300, though I picked up my unit for $245. For more information, visit **http://www.presonus.com**.

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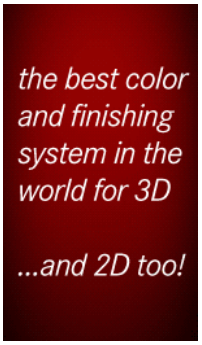

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