

M-AUDIO PROFIRE 2626

Eight Pres and 26 I/Os for Under a Grand?

by Jeff Anderson

Not even five years ago, I would have laughed had you told me that I could get eight pres and 26 x 26 I/Os for less than a grand . . . and I'm still skeptical about the kind of audio quality possible at a "prosumer" price point. But old-school preconceptions shouldn't inhibit my playing with new-school products, so I tried to keep my prejudices at bay as I started working with M-Audio's new ProFire 2626 interface.

OVERVIEW

The 1U ProFire 2626 is a Mac/PC-compatible FireWire interface, featuring eight mic pres with M-Audio's Octane technology. As a standalone unit, it can function as an analog eight-channel mic/line preamp (the user can choose whether the analog ins, including mic pres, are routed to both analog and digital outs or just the optical outs, which allows the optical ins to be routed to the analog outs), or as an eight-channel 24-bit/96kHz converter (four channels at 176.4/192kHz). Additionally, the unit provides 26 x 26 I/O through multiple simultaneously-available connections.

Utilizing an onboard DSP mixer and router, the ProFire 2626 lets you select from 52 streams of audio, then send them to each of the unit's 26 outputs via stereo pairs. You can configure the unit's 26 audio inputs as desired to have up to 18 input channels simultaneously. Use the internal clock, or slave to an external clock.

The rear panel has eight XLR ins for the pres and eight TRS 1/4" line ins that bypass the mic pres, eight 1/4" TRS balanced outs, and two complete sets of optical I/O. These let you chain extra pres with ADAT light pipe outputs to your system. There are also sets of coaxial S/PDIF, MIDI I/O, and a BNC word clock I/O, all accessible via a breakout cable.

48V phantom power is selectable by groups of four (i.e., channels 1-4, 5-8). Each of the preamps offers



M-Audio's
ProFire 2626.

55dB of gain and has a -20dB pad. Furthermore, the ProFire 2626's front panel sports a user-assignable master volume knob, two 1/4" unbalanced TRS ins, and two 1/4" balanced TRS headphone outs, each with their own volume knob.

IN USE

The ProFire 2626 sounded too good to be true, especially in regards to Pro Tools M-Powered compatibility. Sure, the ProFire 2626 is compatible with nearly every major DAW, but I'm sure many of you wondered what I did: Is there now a way to utilize over 18 I/Os with Pro Tools that doesn't require taking out a second mortgage for an HD rig?

Sorry, but no. As is clearly noted on their website, "96kHz and 18 x 18 I/O maximum with Pro Tools M-Powered." Can't say I'm surprised, though. . . .

Nonetheless, I definitely enjoyed working with the ProFire 2626. The pres sound good—not much color, fairly transparent. As a one-stop solution, this unit is a great deal, but just used as a standalone outboard box, I found the pres clear enough to warrant running drums, guitar, and vocals through it on a rock session without even hooking it up to my computer . . . and I have many, many boutique pres in my collection from which I can choose.

Using the ProFire 2626 with a wide variety of DAW software on both a MacBook Pro, and a Windows machine running XP, I became quite fond of the DSP mixer application; it allows adjusting all your routing within just a few simple windows. The ability to route your signals any way

you desire is incredibly cool, and once you've adjusted the settings, you can save everything, make presets customized for your studio, and recall on demand. The implications of this on your workflow should be pretty apparent—it saves a lot of time and headaches.

CONCLUSIONS

The ProFire 2626's functionality and versatility kinda scares me. As a studio owner who's spent a lot on pres, A/D converters, etc., units like this make me feel like I've wasted a lot of money. I mean, what's next? Large format consoles for \$5,000? It's not that far of a stretch when you consider that you can get 26 ins and outs for under a grand *and* eight pres that sound pretty damn accurate. While the ProFire 2626 is not entirely without limitations, this is definitely one of the best deals for small studio owners I've found yet. 🎧

PRODUCT TYPE: FireWire interface with eight preamps and 26 x 26 I/O capabilities.

TARGET MARKET: Small studios seeking a one-stop interface solution with multiple pres and lots of I/O.

STRENGTHS: Great value. Lots of I/Os. Good-sounding pres. Can slave to external clock. User-friendly DSP mixer. Bundled with Ableton Live Lite 6.

LIMITATIONS: Full I/O capabilities not utilized with Pro Tools M-Powered. 48V phantom power is set in groups of 4.

LIST PRICE: \$899

CONTACT: www.m-audio.com