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Presonus Firestudio 2626 Review

August 12th, 2010 by Brandon Drury

About The Author

Brandon Drury quit counting at 1,200 recorded songs in his busy home recording studio. He is the creator of RecordingReview.com and is the author of the Killer Home Recording series.

First off, I want to point out that this is only my personal experience with one single Presonus Firestudio. You can count on your experiences being quite different....hopefully better. I suspect my experiences may have been different if they would have grabbed a different one from the shelf.

Secondly, it's worth noting that my rig is setup about as good as a person can get. My computer is totally optimized, dedicated for recording, and I didn't even use internet on it until a few months ago. (The amount of time needed to activate the numerous amounts of plugin and software I review became staggering so I decided to take a gamble and plug the thing into the web.) I've catered to all requirements from Presonus. I'd guess the average home recorder is not using such an ideal system.

Third, I record day in and day out for money. If my rig goes down, I lose cash. Period. I expect greater performance than most.

What Is It?

The Firestudio is an audio interface with 8 analog ins (with preamps), 8 analog outs, up to 16 total channels of ADAT ins and outs, and S/PDIF. It normally sells for a street price of $599-699, give or take.

For more details, check out the official Firestudio page.

What They Got Right

Tons of I/O
For those of you who don't get excited by military-grade acronyms, I/O stands for inputs and outputs. The Firestudio is well equipped for this task if you use ADAT ins such as the M-Audio Octane or Presonus Digimax D8 http://www.recordingreview.com/blog/mic-preamps/presonus-digimax-d8-review/ . There aren't many people who are going to need more than 26 simultaneous inputs and there aren't much more affordable solutions than the Firestudio in this department.

Sounds Alright
The preamps in the Firestudio 2626 do not compare to Neve, Great River, etc. No shit! I think this is a no brainer. Are they acceptable for a person who doesn't want to spend the price on a new car for 8 preamps? Definitely!

What you really want to know is how the preamps in the Firestudio 2626 compare to other interfaces out there. People rave and rave and rave about the sound of the Yamaha MR816. I've used that interface a ton in the past month and even made myself use it's

preamps. I'd give a SLIGHT edge to the MR816, but those pres didn't blow my mind either. (For what it's worth, no preamp blows my mind! My Martech MSS-10 doesn't suck. End of story.) For a person wanting to get in at this price point, the Firestudio 2626 is not going to turn heads with it's sonics, but neither does the highest of high end systems either. So if the Firestudio's price makes sense, it's sonics are more than adequate.

I want to note that I use the S/PDIF input with my high end pres and Mytek converters for all my overdubs and the Firestudio 2626 sounds as good as anything in this situation.

If you are really worried about the sound of the Firestudio 2626, you may want to check out The Interrogator Sessions in Killer Home Recording. You'll hear it up against numerous other preamps ranging from Great River to Martech to Manley to an M-Audio Octane.

Excellent Routing
Without a doubt, the routing on the Firestudio 2626 is definitely one of its selling points. They got that right. Its DSP routing matrix (which does take a bit to get used to and does have some redundancy going on in not-so-intuitive areas) allows you to route any signal to any output you choose. I must admit that they've spoiled me in this department.

Routing the main outputs from Cubase to my 4-channel crusty/trusty Behringer headphone amp, my Mackie HR824 monitors which essentially serve as a miniature PA system, and to Focal monitors via S/PDIF out into a Mytek DA96 have made life easy. When I tried out the Yamaha MR816, it was very frustrating when I couldn't do this. In fact, I had to rethink my whole setup. I never quite got it where I wanted even with the Control Room features in Cubase 5. So I'd give the routing possibilities in the Presonus an A+.

Routing the stereo out to multiple sources is one thing, but I'd guess most people don't need this. Being able to route the individual stereo mixes for headphones is another. As a headphone mixer, this thing is extremely powerful and highly recommended. I generally don't need a bunch of specific mixes for individuals in live band situations, but when I have, the Firestudio has pulled it off extremely well. If they added reverb and maybe compression to their features list, I'd say they had this perfected.

What They Screwed Up

Again, these are my own experiences, for whatever they are worth. I'm not sugar coating this. If you can't handle the truth, YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH! (Sorry, I'm not good at typing good Jack Nicholson impressions.)

After using the Presonus Firestudio for 2.5 years, I can say that, without a doubt, my Firestudio has been totally unreliable. If it were a woman, the cops would have found her dead in a ditch a long time ago. (Don't ask me why I have a higher tolerance for audio interface problems than woman problems.) My most reliable era required me to leave my recording computer and Firestudio on indefinitely. Simply turning the computer off could cause problems. We'll get to that.

Loses Sync
I may have great luck with the Firestudio for a month. The, for no apparent reason, and with no obvious change in my system, the Firestudio would lose sync with the computer and the little red light would begin to flash. This phase of random working and not working would last between 3 days and 3 weeks and then the unit would work flawless for a while. For this period, I would be hijacked from my recording computer indefinitely. The solution?

This is where it gets interesting. There is no solution because there is no clear, obvious problem other than the damn thing simply going on strike. I wish I could have fed it $5 bills to work. I would have gladly done so on many occasions. It would be the extortion scam of the century, but maybe then Presonus could afford to build a product I can freakin' count on.

The solution is to restart the computer and see if that fixes it. When it failed, I'd turn off the Firestudio and restart the computer. I'd try turning the computer and Firestudio off for 30 seconds and firing them both up. I'd try turning the Firestudio on and then the computer. I'd try turning on the computer and then the Firestudio. Nothing.

Hell, just last night I had to end a session 2 hours early (lost time and lost money!) because the stupid thing wouldn't sync up. 4 hours later, nothing changed. NOTHING! I fired up a mix with no trouble.

A person may want to blame this on user error. Luckily, I've been doing this long enough to KNOW it's probably user error. That's why I've became pretty damn good at tracking down my screw ups. In fact, I'd go so far as to say I'm awesome at finding my screw ups. To this day, I can find no pattern and no trend. When the Firestudio 2626 wants to be a damn woman, it becomes a damn woman. (Note: A "damn woman" is opposed to a "nice woman" who deserves bunnies and chocolate.......and a bunch of wild screwing.)

I have noticed that if the power button gets pressed somehow (you'd be surprised how many times this has happened accidentally even though it's recessed in my rack) with Cubase running, all hell breaks lose. Trying to get it to sync up after that, even with 15 restarts is nearly impossible. The best solution I've found is not to care. Turn everything off, make a sandwich, and see if there is a Star Trek rerun on.

Just for the hell o f it, I killed the Yamaha MR816 with Cubase open. Cubase immediately says, "Hey! Where'd the interface go?" When I turned it back on and told Cubase to calm down (by re-selecting the Yamaha driver) all was well. This is clearly a Firestudio-specific situation. No doubt about it. I award Presonus minus a billion points for this one.

Chews Up CPU Power

I remember when my M-Audio Delta 1010s went to the audio interface dumpster in the sky and I switched to the Firestudio 2626. The first thing I noticed was the fact that I was suddenly out of CPU power on mixes that had plenty of headroom before. I got used to it, upgraded to a Quad Core, and never thought about it much. Now that I had a chance to use the Yamaha MR816 for a month, once again, I'm finding that the CPU meter FLYING up on mixes where it really shouldn't. The Presonus Firestudio is definitely a CPU hog.

Actually, not only is it a CPU hog, it's a ram hog as well. Okay, maybe not a HOG. Maybe I'm too geared towards 2001 RAM standards, but I can't accept an audio interface requiring 40MB of RAM. I can't figure out what it's doing that would require such RAM usage. While 40MB is not the end of the world in the an era when most of us have 4GB, the designers of the Firestudio clearly knew that audio a zero-tolerance, high performance kind of ballgame. The fact they pissed away 40MB of RAM when other interface companies do not says something and I don't think it's a good something.

Multiple Control Panels

This one ain't the end of the world, but it's always bugged me. I never understood why they chose to use two control panels. One control panel allows you to change latency, clock source, etc. Then if you make a few clicks in that control panel, you'll get to a new control panel that allows you to control routing, individual mixes, etc.

What I never understood was why they broke this up. They all should have been under one control panel with maybe a few tabs added. It's entirely unintuitive and I always feel like I waste 4 seconds every time I need to make a change.

I always mix at 2048 samples (high latency) and track and much lower latencies. I usually have 8 projects going on so it seems like I need to change the latency for every session. Pushing a bunch of buttons and going through a bunch of menus to do something super simple is annoying.

I'm shocked that this has not been addressed as they have released updated drivers. End of the world? No. Annoying? Definitely!

Okay Latency Settings

While maybe this one isn't a "screw up", the Firestudio's latency is a bit slow compared to other Firewire interfaces on the market. On a good day I can get 128 samples without too many pops and clicks. I usually have to resort to 192 samples however. For vocals, this is flat out unusable. Latency As Vocal Producing A person can switch to direct monitoring, but then when you need reverb, you need an outboard reverb unit and you'll need to get a bit clever with your sends / returns. It can be done, and is probably worth the trouble. However, on most days it would be cheaper and easier if you could just turn the latency down low enough to make this a non-issue.

I had no problems getting the Yamaha MR816 reliably down to 64 samples as long as I wasn't pushing my rig too hard. The Firestudio was never able to get down lower than 128 samples even with zero CPU load on a Quad core, XP 32-bit rig. It was clear with my hardware and operating system that we had pushed the limits of the Firestudio.

Random Latency Permissions

On some days, I'll start mixing and realize that I still have my latency set to a super low setting and need to crank it up. When I open the menu, the latency may be grayed out, which is a nice way of Presonus to say, "Go F yourself, San Diego." I then have to stop what I'm doing, kill Cubase to get my permissions back, and then restart the mix. I lose 45 seconds because of some Presonus error.

It wouldn't bother me if this was how it was all the time. I could live with being forced to set my latency before opening Cubase. The problem is half the time I CAN change the latency whenever I want with Cubase running. This glitch bugs the hell out of me.

Random Wordclock Changes

This won't affect you guys with simple setups, but it drives me nuts. I use my Mytek AD96 as a master clock. I run that clock into my M-Audio Octane and that feeds my Presonus Firestudio 2626. This is a very common setup. For no particular reason, the Firestudio will switch its inputs to the second ADAT input (which I'm not using). This causes it to lose sync. As long as they menu isn't grayed out I can quickly change this back to ADAT #1. Unfortunately, it is often grayed out. Why? Either way, this is another damn thing I have to think about when I have a billion other things on my plate.

Why Is That Light Blinking?

As a dude who has dabbled in web programming, I know that it's fairly straight forward to develop error codes. If something screws up, a window should pop up and say "Error #554". Then I can look online and see what that means and actually fix it. I don't have to guess and I don't have to look like an idiot restarting a computer 15 times.

I don't know anything about interface drivers, but I suspect that displaying error codes would require one programmer to work one extra week. The fact that they haven't done this means that Presonus is willing to compromise in areas that I flat-out do not believe should be compromised.

It's clear I'm willing to pay more for an interface that makes my life easier. I've certainly paid by going with the Firestudio.

Is It My Fault?

I've really grown to like the eastern philosophy that says, "Everything is your own fault". In this particular case, I've went round and round about what I (I want to emphasize "I" here) could be doing to make the Firestudio work better for me. Simply put, I've got nothing! Nada. Zip. The only thing I know to try is a Windows 7 rig with 8GB of RAM even though it's generally considered a much better idea to stick with the trusty ol' operating system. XP *should* be more stable than Windows 7 right now.

The fact that the MR816 never had a single issue with syncing up (or any other session stoppers) illustrates that my rig is stable.

As An Investment

For hobbyists, the purchase of an interface is rarely looked at as the kind of thing that can pay for itself. However, for those of us who are charging by the hour, when we lose 2 billable hours due to a shitty interface design, that's easily quantifiable cash that we'll never get back. In my opinion, it adds to the cost of the piece of gear causing the trouble. I wish I had only lost 2 billable hours per month. I'd say I've lost dramatically more than that. At 2.5 years, I could have have bought an interface that costs 3x as much as still came out ahead.......Or I could have went on a cruise or tw.

Conclusion

For anyone who is counting on an interface to work day in and day out, there is no way I can recommend the Firestudio 2626. When it works, it's a fine interface at a very good price. Maybe you'll have better luck with the reliability end. However, for me, I wish I would have had the balls to slap a fancy interface on the credit card long ago. 25% interest would have been cheaper than the hell it has put me through and the time it has wasted.

I also want to point out that I paid $700 for mine in early 2008. On Ebay these things are going for a fraction of the price. This poor resale value is semi-common with computer recording gear, but it's definitely common with gear that people want to get rid of. If you are looking for a "nice" interface, at this point, I'd recommend the MR816. It's not perfect, either, but it's a product that I would and have taken to battle.

Brandon

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