

PreSonus ioStation 24c

NIGEL JOPSON enjoys a hands-on experience



This feature-packed interface and control surface first caught our eye back in January at NAMM in Los Angeles: the controls from PreSonus' FaderPort V2, together with a 2x2 USB-C audio interface. Two XMAX mic preamps and 24-bit, 192kHz A-D/D-A converters, headphone and line outs. Another eye-catching feature is the price: just under the magic \$300 point in the US, and typically around £260 in the UK.

For around £100 more than the FaderPort, what do you get? Two mic/line inputs on Combo-XLRs with 48V, two balanced line outs on TRS with level and mute, a headphone amp capable of driving supposedly 'difficult' cans like Sennheiser HD600, and a source-playback balance control. One of the main annoyances with entry-level interfaces is their pathetic amount of preamp gain. The ioStation is truly unusual in offering up to 80dB of mic or instrument gain. The dynamic range (>107dB A-wtd, min. gain) and harmonic distortion (<0.007% 1kHz, min. gain) may, on paper, be matched by competing units; in actual operation, however, the ioStation can be used with the input gain at 50% or less, and the lack

of noise/hiss on quiet vocal recordings is refreshing. The maximum input level at min. gain (+16dBu) is also 3-6dB better than many competing desktop interfaces, and the resulting lack of overload benefits instrument amp recordings.

Sounding good

This is not the D-A for a mastering engineer, but I compared to my benchmarks (ten times or more expensive) and a couple of similar-price D-As. The problem with budget D-A is that cluttered, loud mixes get 'shouty' — then you don't mix guitars loud enough; also, bass may be less than solid — then you mix too boomy! Andy Wallace's mix of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is a tough test, and I'm pleased to report on the ioStation it sounded round in the bass, with slightly recessed upper mids and a feathery top end. A-B testing between converters, it seems ioStation had been voiced for energy-intensive rock; its sound will encourage attention to detail at the low end, and not force unwarranted cuts around 2-4kHz. Certainly very usable in the context of a production room or edit suite.

PreSonus encourage product registration in order to download Studio One Artist software, plus content including Ableton Live Lite, tutorials from Melodics, 6 virtual instruments, and 9 plug-ins. I downloaded the Universal Control App, which updated ioStation with the latest firmware. For Windows users, Universal Control allows management of ASIO driver settings, and enables 'loop back' — for example to record audio from a video game for a livestream.

By default, ioStation controls are configured for PreSonus' own excellent DAW, Studio One (review, *Resolution* V19.4). For use with Pro Tools (HUI) the Next button is held while powering up, and then the Touch button pressed. For Logic (MCU) the Next and Mute buttons are pressed. The controls operate in a straightforward manner: Fader, Solo, Mute and Arm function for the highlighted track. Transport controls work as expected, with an added bonus: pressing and holding the Loop and Rewind button simultaneously sets the Logic cycle start point at the current timeline position, and pressing and holding the Loop and Fast Forward buttons simultaneously sets the cycle end point at the current timeline position. Anyone who learnt their trade using a tape autolocator is going to appreciate this.

Robust buttons & smooth fades

When the Pan button is illuminated, the central encoder on ioStation's surface is track pan, when the Channel button is illuminated, the

encoder and Prev/Next buttons move between mixer tracks. I've always found moving around the Logic mixer particularly tedious on laptops, and the ability to race down a huge session's faders with the encoder was great! I also found I could move around Logic's mixer without staring at the screen too much (always a blessing), because the fader 'clicks' as it zips to a new position, giving the clue that you've moved 4-tracks to the right (or whatever).

Talking of faders, I was particularly impressed with the smooth curves this 100mm motorized fader generated. I've never been a fan of the wonky and wobbly level moves generated by many encoders, but even when this baby was in Touch mode to update, the resulting level drives were pretty smooth.

My favourite function, and saviour of my much-hammered laptop keyboard, was definitely the Scroll feature. Of course, on a pop song you've put your markers in... but being able to zip back and forth through the song bars with the encoder, or shuttle back and forth in increments with the Prev/Next keys, was a real winner for me.

I am a tape-era engineer, and my first thought when transitioning to working entirely 'in-the-box' was to rush out and buy a large multi-fader control surface. Like many of my peers, I followed a familiar arc with 'surfaces': disappointment at discovering they didn't quite do what it said on the tin; rage at the amount of money wasted, and finally, resignation to work entirely with mouse and keyboard.

What I discovered with the ioStation 24c was that it wasn't so much the faders I'd missed, but the classic transport controls, and a better method of scrolling and selecting track functions (especially on a laptop). Combined with nice preamps for quick overdubs and a serviceable D-A, the ioStation makes a powerful case for its position on your desk. With its well-made illuminated controls, and at a super price-point, the ioStation 24c is a winner. 🏆

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Truly useful control functions, robust controls instantly configured for all major DAWs. 80dB of mic/instrument gain from 2 preamps. Amazingly good value.

CONS None at this price, although if it stays on my desk I'll need to start using a left-hand mouse!

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