

# Edirol FA-101

With this Firewire interface, Graeme Hague has found new meaning to the words 'sweet FA'.

Reviewing equipment for AudioTechnology has its perks. I dispatch some review items from my studio somewhat begrudgingly – they've earned their place and a gap is left after their departure. Meanwhile, other bits of gear really do need to be pried from my arms with a crowbar or I've simply got to reach into my pockets – they're simply that good. Such is the case with the FA-101... Roland's not getting this one back.

The FA-101 is a 10-input/10-output audio+Midi interface connected by any Firewire port – either four- or six-pin. The first eight channels of input and output are interfaced via ¼-inch TRS jacks, leaving channels nine and 10 as the digital (optical) ports on the front of the unit. I'm pointing this out because some interfaces can offer a kind of liberal interpretation of how many

trolled by your DAW. A bit of experimenting is needed to find what your software drivers will allow. Latency is minimal and, as always, mostly dependent upon your computer's processing grunt. A stereo/mono option will fill your headphones from a single ¼-inch output jack with its own volume. Also on the front panel is a switch to activate the digital ports and a selector for the sample rate.

No surprises on the rear panel. Midi In and Out are provided, a global phantom power switch and – a thoughtful touch – a grounding terminal. It's worth noting there's a second Firewire port for daisy-chaining an external hard drive. Finally, there's a selector that determines if the FA-101 is powered from the included adaptor or straight from the Firewire bus, with an 'Off' in the centre.

But how does it *sound*? Well, I've been researching these sorts of devices for a while with a mind to buying (or refusing to return) one for myself, and while you can always get more bang for your buck with regard to functions and capabilities, I've often doubted whether the source of everything, the humble preamps, also improve with the price. I'm happy to report the preamps in the FA-101 sound excellent to me. There's a colouration – intended or otherwise – that nicely belies the digital nature of the unit, while monitoring via the rear outputs into a mixing desk delivers a very clean signal.

So, I'm impressed with the sound; there are plenty of simultaneous inputs to satisfy a project studio; and there are a few clever extras... All too good to be true?

Before I grumble about anything, playing with the FA-101 has highlighted to me that, like any complex hardware (or software, for that matter), you need to apply a bit of thought into making it work best for you and integrating it properly into your existing setup. The plug-and-play nature of these devices suggests you'll get brilliant results without even trying, but in reality there's a bit of give and take to consider. For instance, the maximum level of signal in the headphone output is comparatively low measured against a dedicated amplifier or an auxiliary send (admittedly this is with high impedance, professional 600Ω headphones). It works fine with guitars, keyboards and the like, but when you're tracking a vocal it's hard to provide the kind of overriding level that singers often like. The answer, readily available (you'd expect) to anyone interested in this kind of interface, is to provide monitoring from the FA-101's rear outputs through your



channels they support depending on what's connected. The FA-101 houses a genuine eight analogue-balanced channels in each direction, using sample rates from 44.1k through to 96k at 24-bit. It's only at the dizzy heights of 192k that the digital ports and channels seven and eight are no longer available.

The inputs allow for plenty of variation. I was particularly impressed with the small gain pot on the rear panel for channels seven and eight which can compensate for devices that might be a bit low in signal, like keyboards, CD players or – heaven forbid – a cassette deck. On the front, Input One is a standard Neutrik combo connection with its own gain control. Input Two is the same, except with a high/low impedance switch to plug in guitars and such. In what's becoming a common approach to monitoring these types of interfaces, direct monitoring of the first two inputs is adjustable in balance between your tracking software (including a processed input signal, if you like) and a direct feed from the source. There's a switch which allows monitoring of other input channels too, con-

mixing desk instead. Also, that facility of having a variable balance between your software and the input signal will probably mean you have to rethink your approach to bussing and output levels coming from your DAW too. Nothing serious, just a different mixing recipe to suit not only the FA-101, but any of these kinds of interfaces.

Another minor quibble is the FA-101's inability to 'hot' change from one sampling rate to another. To alter from 44.1k to 48k, for instance, all your software, and the FA-101, have to be powered down, before you can increase the sample rate and boot everything up again. And no, your DAW software can't do it for you. If you're aware of this, it's no big deal. However, I did come to grief when my project was 48k and 24-bit, but a track from a reference CD was the standard 16-bit/44.1k. I couldn't play the latter at all with the FA-101 set to 48k. Annoying, but three minutes up-sampling in Cool Edit Pro fixed the problem. That's what I mean about read-justing your thinking when you use these devices. The kind of high-quality, versatile performance provided in one package like the FA-101 might need a trade-off somewhere, or a different approach to some things.

Lastly, though I'm not convinced it was the fault of the FA-101, I couldn't get the interface to work off bus-power alone – although all the manuals and internet searching insisted it could. I had to have the

240V adaptor plugged in at all times. I suspect this is a lesson relearned; that not all computers, and in particular motherboard configurations, are the same. For some reason my IEEE 1394 (Firewire) six-pin port wasn't supplying any, or enough, voltage to power the interface. Always bear this in mind when you're looking to buy this type of hardware. Your PC might be the weakest link (Mac owners feel free to be smug here).

At a recommended retail price of \$1,295 the FA-101 isn't the cheapest interface in town, but neither should it be. With the amount of simultaneous connections and quality components, it's actually great value. By the way, you also get an attractive metal casing, signal routing options marked clearly on top, plus all connections, switches and pots are rock solid – a unit that will take a bit of carry-bag abuse. All in all, the FA-101 is an impressive bit of gear.



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### **Price**

- *\$1,295*
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