# Focusrite Saffire 56

**Is it an interface, a router, a mixer, a preamp or a convoluted preamp?**

**JON THORNTON** says it's all of these and more.

There was a time when a company like Focusrite only really had to concentrate on analogue in the development and manufacture of its product line. While this is still very firmly at the core of what it does, it's had to add to its list of core competencies to keep pace with demands, expectations and possibilities of newer technologies. So add to the list, in no particular order, A-D conversion, audio streaming over FireWire, software control and, in Focusrite's case, some very clever DSP applications like Dynamic Convolution.

With such significant investment in either developing its own expertise in these areas or simply by licensing it from elsewhere, there's no surprise that once it has debuted in the higher-end product offerings it will inevitably trickle down to the lower end through higher volume products. The question is, does this simply result in products that end up being a hotch-potch of technologies and features built to a price point; or are the end results genuinely compelling and useful?

In the dock to try to answer this case is the Liquid Saffire 56 — whose name immediately suggests some hybrid of the company's Saffire audio interfaces and dynamic convolution 'Liquid' technologies. As for the '56' — well that alludes to the fact that this unit offers 56 channels of I-O to your DAW. Which it does. Kind of.

At its most basic, the Liquid Saffire 56 is a FireWire based interface solution for any DAW that supports Core Audio or ASIO. What you get are eight analogue inputs, each of which can be switched between a line level input on balanced TRS jack or a mic level input with associated preamp on XLRs. You also get ten balanced analogue outputs, also on TRS jacks. The nice thing here is that two of the mic inputs feature 'Liquid' dynamic convolution processing, allowing their responses to emulate one of ten classic preamps. But even the most mathematically challenged among us will quickly work out that 10 + 8 doesn't equal 56 — so where does that number come from?

The answer lies in the additional two light-pipe I-Os on the rear panel, which give another 16 channels of digital I-O to the unit. A SPDIF I-O on phonos adds another two channels of I-O, which brings the total count to 26 inputs and 28 outputs by my reckoning — still two inputs shy of the promised 56, but I'm sure they'll turn up…

The key to understanding what seems like a very convoluted (pardon the pun) set-up is to realise that the unit ships with an extremely flexible and powerful piece of software called MixControl, which acts as an additional layer of routing and mixing between your DAW and the outside world. Installation of this and the LS56 drivers was painless and straightforward, with the Saffire appearing neatly in Logic Studio using Core Audio. When selected as the audio I-O, all of the available physical inputs on the LS56 appear as options to feed track inputs, and these will always appear as such regardless of what the MixControl software is doing. The extra digital inputs start to make more sense at this stage as it's easy to envisage expanding the number of analogue inputs by getting hold of another outboard unit, such as the OctoPre with a digital output card, and plugging it into one of the light-pipe inputs. The MixControl software at this stage acts in conjunction with the front panel controls to select line or mic input for all eight inputs, with the added option of instrument level (high-impedance) for inputs 3 and 4 for use as DIs. The software also enables the selection of individual Liquid emulations to be applied to mic inputs 1 and 2, with a choice of nine presets and a flat setting. The emulations have names that allude to the actual devices whose responses have been sampled, and will be familiar to Liquid Channel users. You also get the option of increasing the amount of harmonic distortion added by each emulation, the effect of which changes subtly depending on the emulation chosen and the amount of gain added.

In use, the standard mic pres sound like most Focusrite designs at this price point — reasonably quiet, open and ever so slightly 'glassy' in the high frequencies. The Liquid emulations offer some good sonic alternatives to this and manage to sound quite similar to both originals I was able to compare them with (Millennia and Neve 1073) and the emulations from the original Liquid Channel. I say quite close because they aren't quite as gob-smackingly close as the original Liquid Channel no doubt because the LS56 doesn't have the raft of electronic and transformer balanced initial input stages to switch between, instead relying on an electronic input stage with input impedances that vary according to the emulation chosen.

Gain for all eight channels is set via hardware controls on the front panel. LED indicators also show the input source for each channel (line, mic or instrument — selected in software), and additional switches select phantom power, high pass filters, pads and polarity reverse on various channels. Somewhat curiously, these functions aren't offered consistently across all eight channels, some appear on some channels and some on others. It's not a big deal, but it is the first real indication that this unit has been built to a price point.

Also on the front panel is a set of eight small LED bargraphs, which can be set (via the software) to show the analogue input levels or the ADAT or SPDIF inputs. A monitor level control and associated Dim and Cut plus two headphone sockets and associated level controls completes things.

Once more, the function of these output level controls works in conjunction with various options that can be selected in software although at this stage the capabilities of MixControl complicate things somewhat. A routing page shows all available physical outputs, and pull down menus allow sources to be selected to feed these outputs. The choices here are the 28 available output streams from the DAW, the signals appearing on the physical inputs of the LS56, or one of eight stereo or 16 mono mixes that can be generated by the MixControl software.

These mixes come courtesy of a software mixer that features level control, metering, pan for stereo sources, and PFL/Solo/Mute on each channel added. Available sources for the mixer are DAW output streams and the physical input signals, and each mix can contain up to 18 of the possible 40 sources on offer.

A monitor section in the software allows the assignment of an overall level control and associated mute/dim functions to any combination of the ten analogue outputs, which allows some to be used as a stereo monitor feed, for example, leaving others untouched for use as sends to other devices. Or you could set up a basic 5.1 monitoring controller. The two headphone outputs effectively mirror whatever is routed to outputs 7/8 and 9/10. Oh, and I found the missing two inputs. Two destinations on the output routing page are designated Loopback 1 and 2 and whatever source is selected here feeds the final two input streams to the DAW, allowing recording from one application to another for example.

The end result is a device that offers a huge amount of flexibility for tracking, zero latency monitoring, mixing, etc. and there are several presets that do just that. For location work with a laptop, or as the centrepiece of a DAW-based studio with no other mixing/monitoring capabilities this makes a lot of sense. But ultimately this means that, with the added layer of software routing and mixing, as a straightforward I-O there may simply be just too much flexibility — there's a lot to get your head around to use the unit in even the most basic way.

You've got to balance this against the price point though (around £579 inc. VAT). A device this capable would have been unthinkable at this price even a couple of years ago. There's an awful lot here for your money — the only real question is whether you need it all. ■