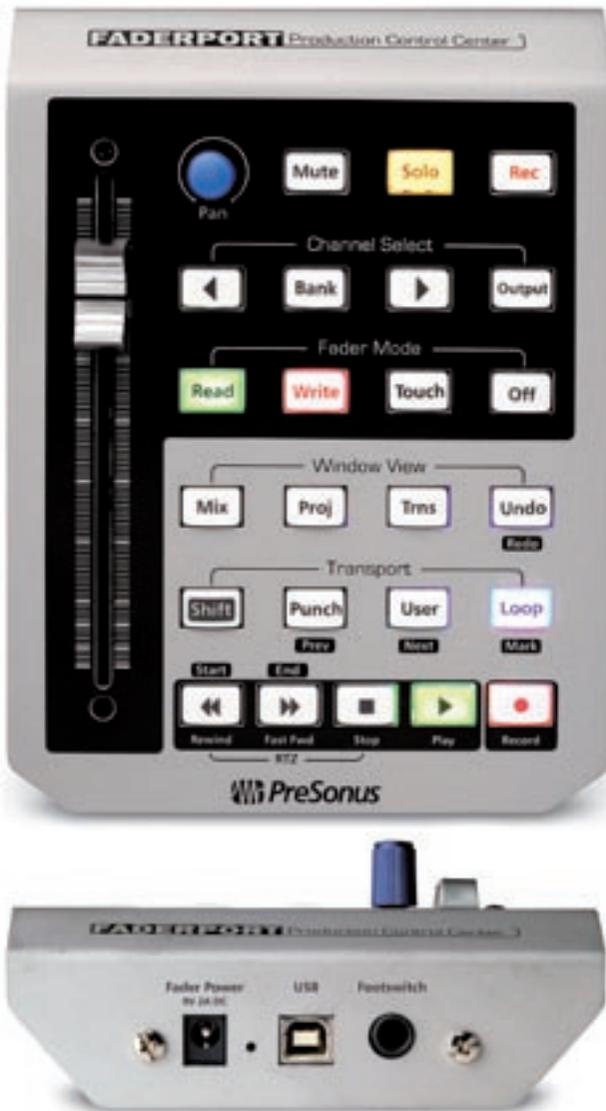


Presonus FaderPort

Sick of mixing with a rodent? **ROB JAMES** tries to alleviate his RSI with Presonus's affordable mini-controller.

We have a little become familiar with performing everyday mixing tasks using a computer mouse, often in combination with keyboard shortcuts. However, just as it is possible to bang in a screw with a hammer or open a paint tin with a screwdriver (*Or a hammer. Ed*), it works a whole lot better with a purpose-made tool, and so it is in the audio and video world with faders, knobs and buttons. Now, I'm a self-confessed control freak, and I've always found the mouse to be a poor (paw?) substitute for the real thing. However, conventional hardware control surfaces are not necessarily the answer. Sometimes less is more and this principle is equally applicable to controllers. Certainly a 'knob per function' control surface is highly desirable in some circumstances but, with today's operating practices and workflows, it can be total overkill — and that's without considering the cost. Middleweight hardware control surfaces are frequently more trouble than they are worth because of the inherent compromises. It is a lot harder to get to grips with eight or nine faders and associated controls as a window on a much larger virtual console than a single control strip. Keeping track of what is going on becomes a feat of mental prestidigitation worthy of Mr Memory.

There have been single-strip controllers before, but Presonus' new toy the FaderPort (UK£109.78 + VAT) distills the essentials, without trying to be too clever, at a highly attractive price. For starters, at a mere 180mm deep by 130mm wide and 40mm high, it doesn't hog valuable work surface space. The gently raked top and back is a single sheet of metal imparting a sense of solidity to the whole. The fader is a touch-sensitive, motorised ALPS 100mm-throw item with 10-bit resolution that translates into 1024 steps; enough to avoid zipper noise. This fader is the real McCoy with the same dual-servo belt-driven mechanism that you will find on many expensive consoles. The pan



rotary controller is a shaft-encoder with the same blue knurled knob found on other Presonus devices, and none the worse for that. The buttons are less satisfactory, at least on first acquaintance. They need a firm press and have a short travel, which is fine for selection but initially off-putting as transport controls. In operation, this impression quickly dissipates to be replaced by gratitude for their positive action.

Around the back there are just three connections, a four-pin USB socket, a low-voltage power inlet for the motorised fader and a 1/4-inch footswitch jack for hands-free punch-ins. The unit itself is powered via the USB connection with fader power supplied by a wall wart. With the fader on the left, the top row has the pan knob, Mute, Solo

and Rec-enable keys. Next down comes the Channel Select row with left and right 'shift by one channel arrow' keys and an Output key. If the channel shift keys are used in conjunction with the Bank key the focus is shifted in 8-channel increments. In the Fader Mode row, Read, Write, Touch and motor Off keys control automation. Dedicated keys toggle Mixer, Project Panel and Transport Control Panel panes on and off. Last key in this row is Undo which is also Redo when used with the Shift key in the Transport row which also has Punch User and Loop keys with Shifted functions of Previous, Next and Mark, respectively.

The transport keys themselves are where they belong at the bottom with Rewind, Fast Forward, Stop Play and Record. Stop and Rewind together give Return-To-Zero and Shift + Rewind/Fast-Forward give Start and End. In HUI Control mode (for use with Pro Tools, Logic and the like), the Output and User buttons don't do anything.

Installation can be as simple as plugging the FaderPort in. For applications that only support HUI, that's it; the necessary drivers are installed

automatically. If there is a dedicated driver, then this needs to be copied and installed. I used Nuendo and here it's a simple matter of dropping a DLL file into a folder. Application set-up obviously differs according to the software of your choice, but in Nuendo at least, it only took a few seconds. If you wish to customise the control assignments, there is a dedicated window. For Nuendo the driver comes ready-programmed: Shift + Mix toggles the top part of the Mixer on and off and Shift + Transport switches the metronome on and off. Personally, I would resist the temptation to map too many other controls to key combinations, in the interests of keeping it simple.

Protocols are hardware controllers' Achilles heel. Although Mackie's venerable HUI protocol is something of a *lingua franca* it isn't particularly comprehensive and many current applications do not support it. The Rolls-Royce solution is a purpose-written controller driver for each specific application. This takes time and therefore money to implement and thus frequently produces a 'chicken and egg' situation where neither the hardware manufacturer nor the software author wants to write drivers unless they think it will result in more sales. For the moment, the FaderPort has purpose-written drivers for Steinberg's Nuendo and Cubase (albeit only on the PC), Cakewalk's Sonar 6 and Mark of the Unicorn's Digital Performer. Other applications, including Digidesign's Pro Tools, are supported via the HUI protocol.

In operation I found the FaderPort completely intuitive and a very valuable addition to the mouse and keyboard; but then for all except the most forensic of level changes a fader will always be my weapon of choice. If you have any fader jockey skills whatsoever, writing automation this way is a lot better than mousing around with an on-screen fader and infinitely preferable to dragging points on a rubber band. At this price, as long as the audio or video application you use can be persuaded to support it properly, the FaderPort is a winner. ■

PROS

Elegant simplicity; price; brings about a real productivity boost.

CONS

Limited native driver support for the present; button action takes a while to get used to.

EXTRAS



The Presonus FireStudio FireWire and MIDI interface also has an optional monitor controller, the MSR or Monitor Station Remote, and these two can be combined with the FaderPort to create a complete system of I-O and control.

Contact

PRESONUS, US:

Website: www.presonus.com

UK, Source Distribution: +44 20 8962 5080