



Phonic FIREFLY 302

Portable recorders are becoming increasingly capable and ever more affordable. Hollin Jones checks out another contender...

KEY FEATURES

- 2x2 analogue I/O
- Jack and RCA connectors
- XLR mic in with phantom power and level control
- 1x1 MIDI I/O
- S/PDIF I/O
- 24-bit, 96kHz operation
- Power via FireWire
- Cubase LE for OSX and Windows XP

FIREFLY 302

Manufacturer **Phonic**

Price **£85**

Contact **Shure Distribution 020 8808 2222**

Web **www.phonic.com**

Portable recording systems are more popular now than ever, with musicians also becoming increasingly spoiled for choice as far as compact, affordable accessories are concerned. And although Phonic is a company more frequently associated with heavy duty pro-end audio mixers and power amps, its latest offering is an altogether more diminutive portable FireWire interface – the FireFly 302. Small enough to easily fit in a laptop bag, the Firefly is aimed squarely at those on the move or with limited studio space.

On the Fly

The Firefly is sturdy and well-finished, housed in a metal case and supplied with a power adaptor and FireWire cable. Usefully, it can be powered via FireWire, which is usually the preferred method as it means one fewer plug to worry about. Interestingly, both 4- and 6-pin FireWire ports are built-in to the unit, although the supplied cable is of the larger and more snug-fitting 6-pin variety. Drivers are supplied for computers running Windows XP, and

the device works under Mac OSX 10.3.5 or higher simply by plugging it in, with the necessary settings made from the Audio MIDI Setup utility. There isn't a Control Panel utility supplied for Mac OSX, although there is one for Windows XP.

Around the back are stereo analogue 1/4-inch jack inputs and outputs as well as stereo RCA phono ins and outs for trouble-free connection to consumer devices such as turntables, MP3 and CD players. The jack and RCA plugs can't be used in tandem simultaneously, although you can blend, for example, jack input 1 with RCA input 2 (the same applies to the outputs). This is a fairly common feature on devices such as these.

Completing the connectivity picture are an S/PDIF in/out port and MIDI I/O. On the front panel is a headphone socket with level knob, two further level controls for the two inputs, plus an XLR mic input with gain control for connecting a microphone. A phantom power button next to the XLR port enables you to supply power to mics that require this feature, and it still works perfectly even when drawing power via the FireWire cable.

Fire away

In use the FireFly 302 performed very well. With a moderately demanding Reason project open, a buffer setting

of 256 samples at 44.1kHz sampling rate produced a latency of 8ms, which is almost identical to that achieved using a more high-end PCI interface in our studio G5. Audio recording at 24-bit, 96kHz resolution was also straightforward and glitch-free, with the simple but usable LED indicators on the front of the FireFly indicating the presence of signal and any clipping. More accurate level monitoring is performed using the software you choose to record with. The unit coped well with recording from a portable MiniDisc through the RCA inputs and triggering MIDI from an external keyboard. In truth, though, there's not much scope for over-complication with small interfaces as long as they are well designed – and this one is.

A useful addition to the bundle is Cubase LE v1.0.10 for Mac OSX and Windows. If you're on a tight budget, Cubase LE is a surprisingly versatile audio and MIDI sequencer and it's a much more worthy inclusion than a demo of any particular program. True, it's the most basic version of Cubase available, but it's enough to get you started recording and arranging tracks. It's not a Universal Binary for the Mac and it's not officially supported on Intel Macs, but in practice its system requirements are low and the powerful Core Duo chips in the newer Macs mean that it actually runs fairly well even under Rosetta.

On the record

Competition is strong in the portable interface market, but the FireFly acquits itself well and is a solid performer. It's plug-and-play on the Mac and more or less the same under Windows, though it doesn't yet seem to have Vista-compatible drivers. Power via FireWire is very useful and fast becoming the standard for devices such as these, and the addition of a second FireWire port and RCA connectors make it more flexible than some of its competitors. **MTM**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Solid performer
- Attractive price
- Flexible for such a compact unit
- Phantom power
- Power via FireWire
- Cross-platform operation

WALK ON BY

- No Control Panel for Mac OSX

VERDICT

A highly affordable and compact interface that's ideal for those on the move or with limited space.



MEASURING UP
The M-Audio FireWire Audiophile (£199) has six outputs, but an otherwise similar spec. E-mu's 0202 is USB powered and retails for around £100. Behringer's F-Control FCA202 is £65, has FireWire capability and ships with Ableton Live Lite.

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