



Tascam FW-1804

With up to 18 simultaneous audio inputs and MIDI connectivity, Tascam's FW-1804 certainly looks like a serious FireWire audio interface. Mark Cousins gets connected.

KEY FEATURES

- 18-in/12-out audio interface
- 24-bit A/D and D/A converters; sampling frequency up to 96kHz
- Four balanced XLR/TRS mic/line inputs with switchable phantom power (+48V)
- Four additional balanced TRS line inputs
- Analogue inserts on inputs 1-4
- Guitar-level input
- Ten digital inputs and outputs
- Balanced stereo line output with level control
- Headphone output with level control
- Two MIDI inputs and four MIDI outputs
- Word clock in/out
- Footswitch jack

FW-1804

Manufacturer **Tascam**

Price **£479**

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Around two years ago, Tascam took the very logical step of combining three fundamental components of today's computer-based studio: the FireWire audio interface, control surface and MIDI interface. However, as good as these products are, most musicians don't seem to relish putting all their eggs into the one basket. Equally, if you already own one or more of these components, the all-in-one solution offered by products such as this isn't all that appealing.

It is, therefore, not particularly surprising that Tascam has recently taken the decision to release just the FireWire audio interface as a separate product. What is surprising, though, is that the unit comes in at under £500, despite offering 18 simultaneous audio inputs, four MIDI outputs and zero-latency monitoring. So, where's the catch?

If you've been reading the small print carefully, you will have noticed that despite its numerous inputs, the Tascam FW-1804 is less well endowed in respect to its outputs – just two analogue outputs (doubling on

headphones), and ten digital outputs split across ADAT and S/PDIF. By not providing the corresponding analogue outputs, the Tascam FW-1804 can clearly compete in a more competitive price bracket, enabling users to make smart decisions on what they do and don't need from an audio interface. Take the Focusrite Saffire, for example: it has a reduced number of inputs in preference to the ability to run simultaneous monitor mixes and the ability to work with surround sound

share the same monitor mix. What's more, having the extra inputs also enables you to run extra hardware synths and effects units into the FW-1804, which can then be mixed (without latency) via the FW-1804's control panel mixer.

Another distinctive aspect of the FW-1804 is the number of MIDI Ins and Outs. Rather than just a single In and Out (as with so many other FireWire audio interfaces), the FW-1804 comes with two MIDI Ins and four MIDI Outs,

THE FW-1804 APPEARS TO BE AN EXCELLENT WAY OF REJUVENATING AN OTHERWISE AGEING STUDIO.

mixing. This is all fine – until you want to record more than two signals at the same time.

Fire engine

The Tascam FW-1804 is pitched at musicians wanting to record a number of tracks simultaneously and who don't mind using software-driven monitoring from a single stereo output. Certainly, if you're recording bands or working with multiple microphones, the FW-1804 offers a highly competitive solution for getting sound into your computer – although you'll need to be aware that the band and the control room will probably have to

which should be more than enough for most studios still running an assortment of MIDI equipment. Indeed, we still find it surprising that so-called professional FireWire interfaces continue to provide multiple audio ins and outs, but only a single set of MIDI ports. If you're looking for a combined solution, the number of MIDI ports on the FW-1804 could easily be a deciding factor, saving you at least £50 because you won't have to buy a separate MIDI interface.

Big is better

Unlike other modern takes on the FireWire audio interface, the FW-1804 avoids any temptation to try to be

Measuring Up

If you can live without such a large number of inputs, one of the best FireWire interfaces in this price bracket is the Focusrite Saffire (£349). Unlike the FW-1804, the Saffire can handle multiple monitor mixes and includes support for surround mixing. Most interestingly, however, the Saffire also includes integral DSP effects for the application of compression and EQ before the signal hits your sequencer. If you really can't function without all the ins and outs, the Edirol FA-101 (£429) is a good choice, with eight analogue ins and outs alongside digital I/O. The Edirol, however, lacks the flexibility of the mixer control software, with all the inputs being summed to the main outputs.

METHOD SPOT

If you need to run more than one monitor mix you could always use the alternate sides of the stereo outputs to feed two separate headphone amps in mono. Configuring this on your sequencer shouldn't be too hard: just use two aux or buss sends from the existing tracks, separately routed to outputs 1 and 2. Setting this up on the FW-1804 is slightly trickier, however, but you'll need to do this only for monitoring the inputs. The trick is to use both the pans and faders: if the singer wants to hear more vocals, for example, increase the vocal fader and pan it slightly towards their set of headphones.

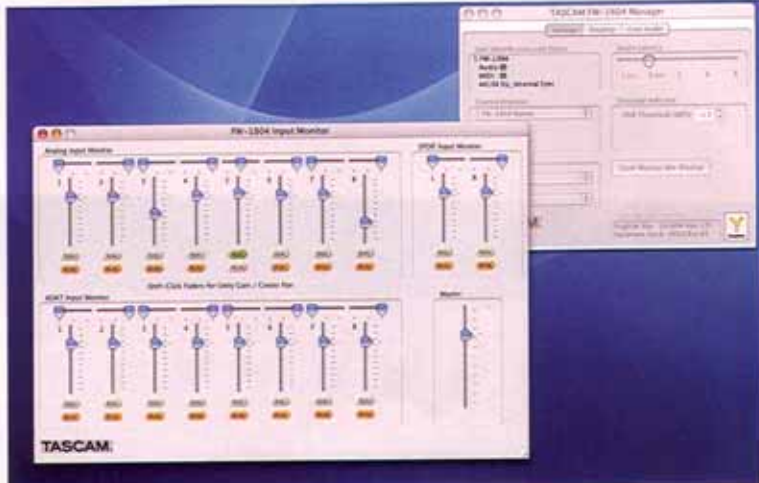
portable or overtly laptop-friendly. The 2U casing means that everything fits in neatly with room to breathe; all the connections to the rear are well spaced and accessible, and the front panel clear and uncluttered.

All of the FW-1804's connections are to the rear, with the exception of the phones socket and a single instrument-level input. The first eight analogue inputs are split between four mic/line inputs and four line-level inputs, with the addition of inserts on the first four channels, plus gain controls for all the analogue inputs to the front panel. Admittedly, this is a competitively priced unit, but it would have been useful to see more mic preamps, given the FW-1804's bias towards inputs.

The bundled software includes Tascam's own (but, unfortunately, PC-only) GigaStudio 24 and Cubase LE, plus the usual collection of drivers and control software for DSP mixing. The Tascam FW-1804 Manager contains all of the elements you'd expect it to – latency settings, clocking and so on – as well as the ability to alter how the interface appears in Core Audio.

Activating the mixer enables you to access the DSP mixing functions so that the inputs can be mixed (in a zero-latency version) with the outputs coming from your audio sequencer. With only one set of outputs to deal with, the controls and application are simple and straightforward, but effective enough for the task in hand. Interestingly, three setup switches on the front of the unit provide additional control over what's being sent to the monitor outputs – computer (sequencer only), inputs or both.

The majority of the FW-1804's I/O sockets are located on the rear of the unit.



The bundled control software is simple but functional, enabling your computer to control the zero-latency mix being fed to the outputs.

We tested the FW-1804 with Logic Pro running on a PowerBook G4. Setting everything up is straightforward enough: simply install the drivers, re-boot and select the FW-1804 in Logic Pro's Audio Hardware and Drivers utility. Running some delicate orchestral recordings through the main outputs revealed a set of competent-sounding converters for a mid-priced FireWire interface – certainly in line with other interfaces in a similar price bracket. The mic preamps provided an adequate amount of gain, although to our ears they are somewhat more brittle than the excellent (but also considerably more expensive) Onyx preamps included in Mackie's Oynx 400F. The gain pots on the front also felt weak and wobbly at times, especially in comparison to the otherwise superb build quality of the unit.

In or out?

Ultimately, whether the Tascam FW-1804 is the right piece of kit for your needs will largely come down to the number of outputs available. In some respects, by providing only the one set, the FW-1804 presents a slight contradiction – an interface with a clear bias towards recording, but a less than adequate configuration for effective monitoring. Even with just one more individually addressable output, the monitoring flexibility could be considerably improved, but if you're happy to share a monitor mix then maybe one stereo output isn't really a problem. Attach a spare ADAT

machine, of course, and you could instantly add another eight D/A converters to provide more than enough physical outputs from your system. As always, every problem has its solution...

Given its price, though, there's a great deal to like about the FW-1804, particularly if you work largely from a single output and don't intend recording above 96kHz. The simplicity of its features enables the FW-1804 to be straightforward to operate, and given the number of MIDI ports coupled with the provision of inserts, it can easily fit into a pre-existing studio setup. Indeed, if you've got an ADAT machine, a couple of hardware synths and some outboard gear, the FW-1804 appears to be an excellent way of rejuvenating an otherwise ageing studio. **MTM**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Lots of inputs
- Plenty of MIDI I/O
- Gain control on all inputs
- Easy to use
- Good rack filler!

WALK ON BY

- Only one stereo analogue output
- Functional rather than glamorous sound

VERDICT

What it lacks in outputs it more than makes up for with inputs. The Tascam FW-1804 could be the perfect solution for those who don't have an aversion to software monitoring.



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