Preview: Prism Sound Lyra (online only)
Audio Interfaces

Reviews : Computer Recording System

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How many of us have coveted the glorious Prism Sound Orpheus interface but wished there was a more affordable version? I know I have! A couple of years ago someone uploaded a Photoshop-ed 'mini-Orpheus' concept on a well-known pro-audio forum that generated a very enthusiastic response, and while Prism Sound denies that thread lead directly to its new Lyra interfaces there is an uncanny resemblance! Sound On Sound was given an exclusive sneak preview of the first production units in advance of the official product announcement on October 12th. At the time of this preview the software was being fine-tuned while the hardware production lines (in the UK) were in full swing, and a detailed review will appear in the pages of SOS very soon. The Lyra interfaces should be in the shops well before Christmas 2012.

The Lyra is available in two forms with different I/O options, but both are genuine 'baby' Orpheus interfaces. By that I mean that they employ exactly the same mic preamps, converter and clock circuitry as the Orpheus, and very similar control software. Naturally, that means that the Lyra interfaces achieve exactly the same exemplary levels of technical performance and audio precision, but there are also a few small but worthwhile operational and engineering improvements too. The main difference, though, between the Orpheus and the Lyra interfaces – aside from the obvious reduction in size, cost and I/O – is that these interfaces connect via USB 2.0, rather than FireWire. The internal DSP platform is also brand new, using a more powerful ARM Cortex-based processor and audio DSP which will underpin future high-end products currently working their way through Prism's R&D department. Damn! I think I have to kill you know I've told you that…

The two new Lyra interfaces share the same physical case, which looks just like a scaled down Orpheus. It's 1U in height and slightly wider than half-rack width, and although it appears to have mounting points for rack ear extensions it is intended to be used as a stand-alone, mains-operated desktop unit (neither Lyra can be bus-powered). The front panel carries a scaled down version of the Orpheus' recessed display section with the same distinctive colour bar graph metering and LED status lights. To the right are a large assignable volume encoder knob and a smaller headphone level control with an adjacent full-size headphone socket. A mains on-off push button completes that side of the front panel, and you'll be pleased to hear that the (very low-noise, in-house designed) universal mains power supply is internal. To the left of the display section is either one or two instrument input sockets, depending on the model.

The Lyra 2 is described as a two-in/four-out interface, supporting sample rates up to 192kHz, and is intended for the discerning audio professional that requires flexible interfacing but with less overall I/O than the Orpheus. Its two input channels can be connected via two XLR mic inputs on the back panel (with a selectable phantom, pad, and Mid-Side decoder), two front-panel high-impedance instrument inputs, or two rear-panel balanced TRS line inputs. DSP-based RIAA de-emphasis is available to cater for turntable inputs if required, and Prism Sound's 'overkiller' protection limiter is also included.

On the analogue output side, there are four floating balanced TRS outputs (plus the front-panel headphones), and apparently the headphone amplifier has been improved over that in the Orpheus to provide more 'oomph'. The DSP mixer control software is based on the Orpheus control software, but with enhanced functionality and revamped graphics. The foldback and direct monitoring facilities are much the same as the Orpheus, with fader, pan, mute and solo on every source channel, and the front panel volume control can be assigned to any output channel. However, the main outputs can now be fed from either the DAW's buses or the Lyra's inputs, and the required input source is selected manually instead of the auto-selection method employed in the Orpheus.

In addition to the analogue I/O, stereo S/PDIF digital audio in and out can be connected via coaxial (RCA-phono) and optical Toslink I/O, with sample rate conversion and Prism's four SNS noise shaping facilities

on hand. The Toslink ports can also be configured to receive and output ADAT signals, while wordclock sync in and out is catered for with a pair of BNC connectors.

All this analogue and digital interfacing is familiar from the Orpheus, of course, and although there is no MIDI interfacing at all, there is the surprising and intriguing addition of an AVB port – basically a standardized layer-2 Audio-over-Ethernet interface. AVB stands for 'audio video bridging' and its use and implementation is defined by the IEEE 802 technical standard. The key points of the AVB interface are that it is designed to ensure precise synchronisation and low latency between devices, with optimised data traffic flow for AV networks. In short, it is the future for computer audio interfacing, and although the AVB port won't be functional in the first iteration of Lyra software it does hint at interesting future possibilities! All in all, then, the Lyra 2 boasts 12 physical inputs and 16 outputs – plus whatever the AVB port allows in the future – which is pretty impressive for a two-in/four out interface!

On release, the Lyra will interface with the host computer via a class-compliant (UAC2) USB 2.0 interface, with both 32 and 64-bit Prism Sound ASIO drivers for Windows (WDM drivers to follow), and native Core Audio operation for Mac OS X. I'm told that the round-trip latency is slightly lower via the new USB 2.0 interface compared with the Orpheus' FireWire connection – although that was no slouch! (By the way, Apple's Firewire-to-Thunderbolt adapter has been thoroughly tested for enabling the Orpheus to work perfectly with the latest Macbook Pro computers.)

The simpler Lyra 1 interface is described as a two-in/two-out interface, and is aimed at the quality-conscious musician. It shares the same underlying platform and technology as the Lyra 2, but has substantially reduced interfacing, and only supports sample rates up to 96kHz. The Lyra 1 model lacks the AVB port, wordclock I/O, ADAT and coaxial S/PDIF interfacing of its more expensive sibling, although it does retain optical S/PDIF in and out (still with SRC on the input side). On the analogue front it has only two rear panel analogue balanced line outputs, while the two inputs are restricted to a choice of mic or balanced line on channel one, and instrument or balanced line for channel 2.

Clearly these Lyra interfaces are very attractive in a great many ways, providing genuine Orpheus standards of performance and quality in more compact and convenient physical forms, and with some intriguing future options. As a result, they will undoubtedly appeal to a great many potential users who just don't need – or can't afford – the more expansive I/O facilities of the flagship Orpheus. But that brings us to the thorny question of cost; and at this point I should remind you that the Orpheus is currently listed at £3,294 (including VAT). So when I tell you that the Lyra 2's list price is provisionally set at £2,220 (inc VAT) you'll appreciate the very significant saving over the cost of an Orpheus – and as the Lyra 1 is provisionally priced at £1,620 (inc VAT), even more so for the simpler model. (These prices are subject to change and will be confirmed at the official launch at the AES Conference and Exhibition in San Francisco at the end of October).

Being realistic, though, we are all aware that there are several attractive and very competent two-in/four-out interfaces on the market at the moment from a range of highly respected manufacturers selling at a fraction of the cost of the Lyra interfaces, so the competition is extremely tough. Prism Sound justifies the Lyra's pricing on the grounds that these interfaces maintain the benchmark of converter resolution and overall audio performance set by the original Orpheus, and the Lyra 2 is also future-proofed with the AVB port. There's certainly no doubt that these are premium products from a premium manufacturer and, moreover, Prism Sound products traditionally enjoy extremely long and reliable product lives with superb manufacturer support. Furthermore, these Lyra interfaces certainly won't be out-performed in any significant way, ever, and the USB 2.0 interface is also compatible with USB-3 so there's no risk of computer incompatibility for a good while either. These arguments make a good case for investing – and I think it is a genuine investment – in a Lyra interface, but will that be enough in these straitened times? My heart and my ears say yes, very emphatically…