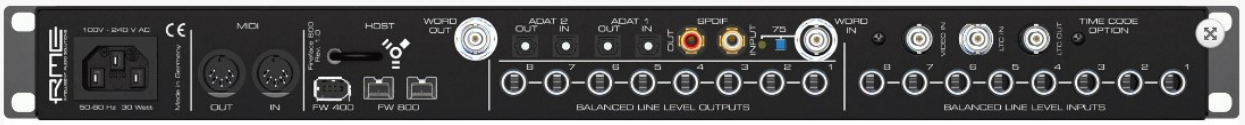
RME Fireface 800 & the KRK VXT8's

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 10, 2008

A while back I reviewed, positively, the KRK VXT8 monitors using the MOTU Traveler. Since then, I've had the opportunity to replace the MOTU Traveler and work with the RME Fireface 800.

The RME Fireface 800 is an audio card that connects to either the PC or the Mac using the Firewire connection. With this approach, you no longer need to install an audio card inside your computer.

The Fireface 800 is actually more than an audio card. It's also a mini-mixing board in a single space unit. Starting with the back of the unit, going left to right, there's the three-prong electrical connector. To the right of that is a pair of MIDI In/Out Ports. This gives you a couple of options. If your MIDI keyboard can connect directly to the computer via USB, you can use that connection. Or you can run the MIDI In/Out of the keyboard to the MIDI In/Out of the Fireface 800. In a larger studio, this saves a MIDI port on your hardware MIDI interfaces.



The next section has Word clock out, and below it, two options for Firewire connections. The first connection is the standard Firewire 400. The next connectors are for the newer Firewire 800 which doubles the speed of transfer. If you're on either a Mac PowerPC or PC, you'll get the standard Firewire interface. If you want Firewire 800, you'll need a PCI card which ranges in price from $49 to $69US. On the new Power Macs, the Firewire 800 comes with it standard.

The next section contains the audio outputs. The Fireface 800 generously gives you eight balanced outs, along with two (2) ADAT connectors for both In and Out. So on the back panel you can have 32 audio ins and 32 audio outs total. There's also SPDIF and Word Clock out. The final section contains eight balanced line ins, along with Video In, and LTC In and Out as a time code option. LTC stands for Linear Time Code.

Says RME, "The TCO (time code option) module is an optional extension for the Fireface 800 option slot.

"The little module provides the Fireface with a Word Clock input and offers a synchronization to LTC and video. Thanks to SteadyClock™, the TCO not only extracts absolute positions from these signals, but also a very clean low-jitter word clock. Thus a sample accurate timecode synchronization to audio or video sources is assured."

The Fireface 800 enables you to connect two ADAT systems, and up to four systems with audio outs. Counting the sequencing/digital audio system, that's seven (7) computers that can be connected to the one RME Fireface 800 card combining ADAT and stereo options.

I have one small system dedicated to strings with an RME 9652 audio card connecting directly to the Fireface 800. The richness and detail in the strings makes the investment well worth it. But if you can't afford the Fireface 800, do the next best thing and get the Fireface 400.

The front of the audio card gives more options. On the front panel, you can connect up to five additional instruments, effects, or mics. There's even Phantom Power. Each connector lets you control volume (also called gain).

Installation
This feels like my soapbox, but the installation instructions for the Mac were not clear. I even had someone smarter than me look at it, my wife, who has her Master's in Film Composition while I have but a Bachelor's degree.

What could have been handled in 5-10 minutes took about 30.

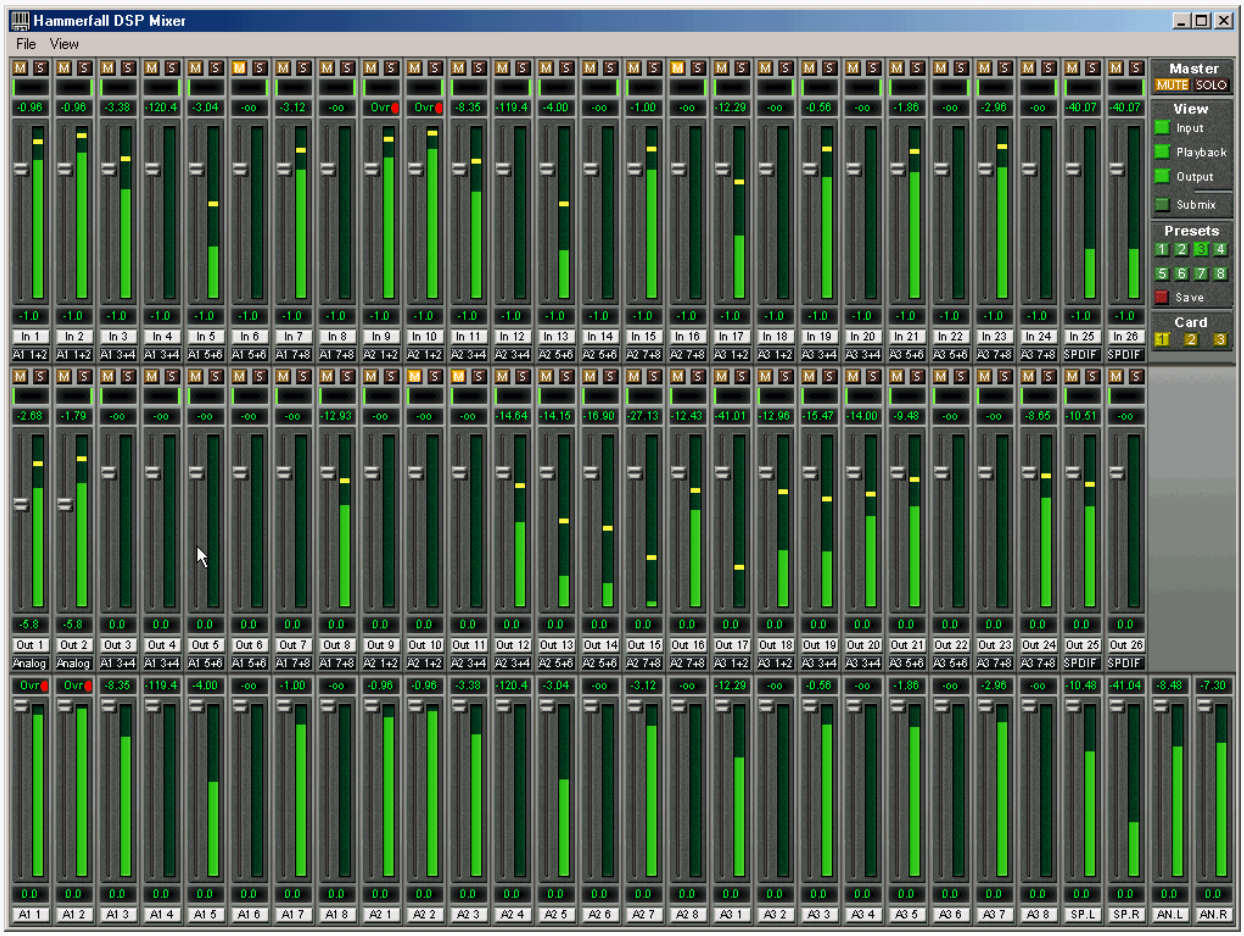
I had two issues with the manual.

First, the manual does not contain a complete graphic of either the front or back panels, but it does have sectional panels. The only place that does have graphics of the front and back panels happens to be the box. The Fireface 800 box does have outstanding graphics. It's just amazingly inconvenient to use.

Second, the manual does not show the number of connection opportunities possible with the Fireface 800 the way the MOTU Traveler manual does. This may be a small point to some, but for many composers who come to recording with ground-zero level experience, or only slightly higher, having such a connection diagram is really appreciated.

The manual has a General section, followed by specific setup sections for Windows and Mac, and finally a section on the Total Mix software which allows for unlimited mixing and routing. This section is a bit of a geek's paradise since RME gives you an engineering schematic for Hardware Input 1 and how the signals are routed.

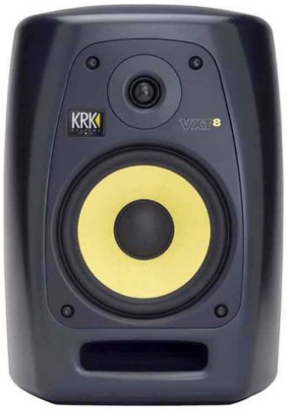
The balance of the manual is dedicated largely to the mixing opportunities using the Fireface Mixer which is based on RME's Total Mix software. Just learning to work the Fireface Mixer is a lesson in itself, and perhaps we'll revisit that one day.



In all this is a very powerful audio package.

Re-Enter The KRK VXT8s

Because of the kind of work we do as dramatic composers, whether film or TV, one thing is guaranteed, we need audio clarity to create effective mixes, especially when audio engineering is a “second language” for many composers.



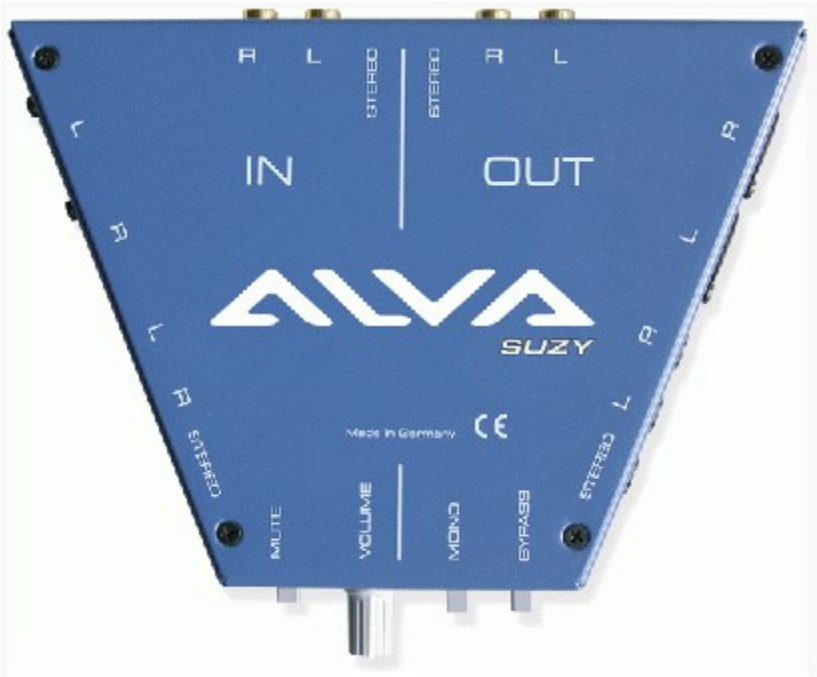
When I first heard the Fireface 800 with the KRK VXT8s, I was so surprised at the aural results when compared to the MOTU Traveler, that in fairness to the folks at KRK, I went back and retested half the pieces from my review in the December 11, 2007 issue.

In every single case, the detail was exceptional. I even listened to MP3s from a Jerry Goldsmith album available from eMusic. Even here, the level of detail compared to before was significant.

I retried samples from the Vienna Strings. And while there was still some edginess in the upper register, it wasn’t as pronounced and angular through the RME Fireface 800.

You’ll have to listen for yourself, but to my ears, the RME Fireface 800 combined with the KRK VXT8s is a magnificent audio combination to be heard.

Protecting Your Monitors With SUZY
Suzy is a great tool to protect your monitors, especially when you're connecting your audio card directly to the computer and bypassing a hardware mixing board.



The front of the Fireface shows what appears to be a master volume knob. But it's not. It's the volume for the headphones. To protect your audio monitors, consider getting SUZY from Alva. SUZY acts as a bridge between the audio card and the monitors. You connect balanced cables from the Main Outs from the audio card into SUZY. Then connect balanced cables from SUZY to the audio monitors. At the end of the sawed off triangle, you see a knob labeled Volume. This acts like a master volume between the audio card/computer and the audio monitors. If your main DAW is also connected to the Internet, this is a great way to protect your speakers when you go to sites that have sound and volume set quite high.

Wrap Up
So there you have it – three pieces for a single system.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.