

FLUID AUDIO SRI-2

A Small Interface With a Big Sound

By Mike Levine

Fluid Audio has made a name mainly through its studio monitors, but the company recently ventured for the first time into the busy and competitive audio interface market with the SRI-2, a compact 2-in and 2-out USB interface that's compatible with Mac/PC and iOS. The unit records at up to 24-bit, 192 kHz quality.

Getting the SRI-2 up and running on my Mac was easy. It's class-compliant and is therefore immediately recognized by the Mac OS without the need for drivers. It's also class-compliant on Windows, but, according to the manual, you won't get full functionality unless you download and install a driver from the Fluid Audio website.

TWOS ARE WILD

The angled, tabletop unit is compact and sleekly designed, housed in an impressively solid-feeling aluminum casing. It's completely bus-powered when you use it with a Mac or PC, which is a plus for portability. It's not bus-powered with an iOS device, however; for that application you'll need a micro-USB power supply, which is not included. Fortunately, they are easy to find, and many models are priced in the \$10 neighborhood so it won't cost you much to add one. You'll also need an Apple Lightning-to-USB Camera adapter to connect an iOS device to the SRI-2.

The SRI-2 has two convenient front-panel combo XLR/TRS mic/line/instrument inputs, with globally switched phantom power. A single TRS stereo headphone output is also on the front.

The top panel of the unit is dominated by a large—and I mean large—Master Volume knob, which controls the TRS outputs only. The headphone output has its own, much smaller, volume knob. Each channel has an Input Gain knob for setting levels, a Line/Inst switch and a six-step LED ladder meter. Many small interfaces only provide signal-present and clip LEDs, which leave you guessing about levels, to some extent. The SRI-2's meters have enough resolution to make level setting easy.



The SRI-2 offers solid build quality, simple operation and excellent sound for its price point.

LISTEN UP

The DAW/Input knob on the top panel controls the level of direct input to DAW playback that you hear either from the headphone or speaker outputs, providing zero-latency monitoring. You use the DAW/Input knob to find the right balance between your input signal and the signal coming back from the DAW.

This type of arrangement is pretty common on budget-priced interfaces with one or two inputs and is certainly workable, but it's limited compared to interfaces with built-in DSP-based mixers. What's more, without DSP you have no built-in effects to monitor with. Of course, adding DSP would have likely pushed the cost up significantly.

In the speaker and headphone outputs of the SRI-2, audio coming into input 1 is routed hard left and audio coming into input



The inputs are conveniently placed on the front panel (top) with the speaker outputs on the rear panel (bottom)

2 hard right. While this is a bit unusual, you can press the Sum switch to sum Inputs 1 and 2 to mono in the headphone and speaker outputs, bringing both input signals to the center. The Sum switch doesn't affect the audio coming back from the DAW, which remains in stereo.

The SRI-2 features built-in speaker switching, which is a useful extra that is not typically found on small interfaces in this price range. Although the unit can only output two channels of audio at a time, it has four ¼-inch TRS outputs on the back in two stereo pairs dubbed Speaker A and Speaker B. You use the Speaker AB button on the top panel to switch between them. This arrangement allows you to connect two different sets of monitors and easily swap between them. It also obviates the need for a separate speaker switcher.

FREEBIES

You do get some software with when you buy the unit. In the box are two cards with serial numbers for Steinberg Cubase LE (Mac/Windows) and the Cubasis LE app. Both are feature-limited versions.

If you've never used Cubase before, the LE version for Mac/PC will give you a good sense of the Cubase work-style. The Cubasis LE app,

although limited to four audio and four MIDI channels, is a good way to find out if you want to spring for the full Cubasis app, which is definitely one of the best iOS DAWs around.

CHECKING IT OUT

I used the SRI-2 exclusively on several projects in my studio and was quite pleased with the sound quality on both the input and output sides.

During these projects, I recorded a number of different instruments, including acoustic guitar, Dobro and shaker through the mic inputs—using either an Oktava MK-012 pencil condenser or a Mojave Audio MA-300 tube mic. I also recorded vocals with the MA-300.

I was definitely impressed with the sound of the Class-A mic preamps and the converters. The results were clean, present and on par with the sound quality of other, more expensive interfaces I've used.

"Not only does it offer surprisingly good sound, but also built-in speaker switching, solid build quality and portability. This unit would be great for musicians who just record one or two sources at a time in their studios and who need an inexpensive, high-quality interface."

PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: Fluid Audio

PRODUCT: SRI-2

WEBSITE: fluidaudio.com

PRICE: \$249.99

PROS: Great value; excellent-sounding mic preamps and converters; lots of gain for the instrument inputs; built-in speaker switching; class-compliant on Mac; bus-powered on Mac/PC

CONS: Limited channel count, no expansion options; optional power supply needed for iOS use; phantom power not individually switched

In addition, I used the instrument inputs for electric guitar and electric bass, and I got plenty of level and very clean sonics.

FLUIDITY

I must admit that when I first received the SRI-2 for review, but before I tried it, I wasn't anticipating anything special. I figured it would just be another low-cost, utilitarian interface with okay sound. But its sonics and performance belie its price point. If you can get by with the unit's 2x2 channel count, it represents an excellent value.

Not only does it offer surprisingly good sound, but also built-in speaker switching, solid build quality and portability. This unit would be great for musicians who just record one or two sources at a time in their studios and who need an inexpensive, high-quality interface. It would also work well as a secondary interface for someone with a larger unit in their studio, but who needs a portable model for remote work.

Now that Fluid Audio has broken into the interface market, perhaps the company will consider making an 8-input version in the future. If it had the same mic pres and converters as the SRI-2, added built-in DSP with effects, and was able to keep the cost per channel relatively similar, it could be a desirable product for those needing more ins and outs.

Not to take anything away from the SRI-2. It's an awesome interface for the money. ■