

October 2011 Update to Focusrite Scarlett 8i6 and 18i6 Review

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Here's some good news resulting from dragging my feet in returning the review units to Focusrite.

Problems with the Flea Powered Netbook Computer Resolved!

Focusrite was in a bit of a hurry to get these units back so I didn't spend too much time fussing with the netbook since my initially disappointing results were quite inconsistent, from trial to trial and between the two units. Just as I was about to pack up the units and ship them back, Tech Support e-mailed me a link to a new beta driver, Mix Control, and firmware update bundle to try. I loaded it up in hopes that it would solve all, or at least some of my problems. It appeared to solve a few, but at first try with the netbook, I still couldn't get a satisfactory recording or playback every time.

With this update installed, I experimented further with buffer size even though the crackling, stalling, and poor recording when it worked at all sounded more like a clock issue than insufficient buffering. While I was initially working on this review, increasing buffer size helped neither recording nor playback with the netbook. This time around, I discovered that with a sufficiently large buffer, I could consistently play a properly recorded file. If I decreased the buffer size, I could make it sound grungy, or even halt playback entirely. And with the buffer set large enough so a file would play cleanly, I was also able to record cleanly and consistently.

Using an hour-long four track recording as a test, the 18i6 performed satisfactory with the buffer set to 6 ms or greater. Curiously, the 8i6 required at least 10 ms of buffering in order to work reliably. Throwing all caution to the wind, I set the buffer to 10 ms and recorded two continuous hours of eight tracks glitch-free using the 18i6, Reaper, Windows XP, and a flea-powered computer.

I don't know if this success story is a result of the driver update or if I just never used a large enough buffer initially (if so, mea culpa), however, the bottom line is that I now feel confident that I can use this compact rig for multitrack capture. A large buffer is of course of no consequence for live recording, which is the purpose for which I had hoped to use this setup, so I'm a happy boy.

A Pleasant 8i6 Surprise

I discovered purely by accident (I closed up the netbook computer while I still had audio going through the Scarlett) that the 8i6 does indeed pass audio from the front panel inputs to the monitor and headphone outputs without a USB connection as long as it's powered. Maybe this came along with a firmware update or perhaps it always worked this way and I just never tried it because I believed the book.

This means that the Scarlett 8i16 can function as a stand-alone mic preamp! In addition, if you set up a mix when connected to the computer then pull the USB cable (or shut down the computer), it'll retain that mix. However after cycling power, be a plain stereo preamp. Not a bad bonus, though.

The 18i6 works a little differently in this "broken" state. It continues to pass audio with the established mix if the USB connection is broken, however, once power is removed and restored, it's dead until it sees the driver.

Controls

The issue of the sample rate not following what's set in the DAW project has at least partially been fixed with the Mix Control update that I received just before returning the review units. I could see the sample rate box change from 44.1 kHz when opening a new project at 96 kHz, but it was still necessary to close and open the Mix Control panel to see a change to a lower sample rate. They're on the right track with this one, though.

After this update, I didn't encounter the loss of control from Mix Control that I had observed during a long session, and this was specifically one of the problems which this update addressed. On occasion, however, the Scarlett would not be recognized if it was powered up with USB connected before the computer was ready to go.