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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

A few months ago, in our July 2014 issue, we took a look at the Titan, an 8-channel USB 2.0 recording interface from UK-based Prism Sound. Essentially an update of the company's earlier FireWire-based Orpheus, the Titan boasts an impressive feature set behind its pearl-colored faceplate, starting with eight channels of Prism's renowned digital conversion with sample rates of up to 192 kHz. It then adds four channels of high-quality microphone



Prism Sound Lyra 2 Audio Interface

The power of Prism in a portable package

preamps complete with 18 dB pads and phantom power, a pair of $\frac{1}{4}$ " instrument inputs, Pro Tools compatibility via an MDIO expansion card (scheduled for release in early 2015), onboard Overkiller limiting/peak protection, digital I/O connectivity and more. In other words, it's a complete audio front end for your DAW that's world-class and without compromise from start to finish.

If there's a downside to said excellence, it's the Titan's serious price tag of \$4950. Still well under \$1000 a channel, making it a bargain compared to some piece-by-piece solutions, but a fair chunk of change. Luckily for those of us with smaller track count needs, Prism Audio offers some less-expensive options that don't sacrifice quality in any way. Behold the Lyra 2!

The stars of Lyra

Lyra is the name of a constellation, representing the lyre (Greek harp) of the deceased Greek legend Orpheus, placed in the sky beside him by Zeus after his death. This connection between Orpheus and Lyra is fitting as the Prism Sound Lyra is, like the Titan interface, built upon the architecture of the Orpheus.

The Lyra is a tabletop device (with optional rackmount kit) that is available in two configurations. The Lyra 1 features two channels of analog-to-digital conversion with the option of a single microphone preamp input and/or a $\frac{1}{4}$ " Hi-Z instrument input, plus two channels of digital-to-analog output. On the digital side it has S/PDIF stereo in and out via Toslink optical jacks.

The Lyra 2, which I was sent for review, also has two channels of A/D conversion, but expands the microphone/instrument

input option to two channels of each, and has four channels of output D/A. Its digital I/O includes Toslink optical or RCA coaxial connectors. The Toslink connector supports stereo S/PDIF or 8-channel ADAT, and coaxial RCA-to-XLR connectors for use with AES3 gear are also included. Finally the Lyra 2 adds Ethernet connection—a function that's "coming soon" according to the Prism website but which was inactive on our test unit—as well as Word Clock sync.

The look of Lyra

The front panel of the Lyra is stylistically and functionally similar to the Orpheus/Titan interfaces, only more compact. It is solidly built with a high-end fit and finish. Its thick contoured faceplate is a dark metallic beige color, and its metering panel is vibrant with multi-colored glowing level meters and function indicator LEDs. Like its siblings, it includes a large stepped push-button/encoder knob surrounded by a ring of LED lights to indicate selectable channel volume. Lastly there is a power button, a headphone jack with its own independent backlit volume knob, and the front-panel $\frac{1}{4}$ " instrument inputs.

The rear panel has the remaining I/O described above: two balanced XLR mic inputs, two balanced $\frac{1}{4}$ " TRS line-level inputs, four balanced TRS line outputs, Toslink and RCA digital I/O, USB, Ethernet, Word Clock I/O on BNC connectors, and a standard IEC power cable socket.

Lyra's soft side

The Lyra uses the same drivers and software control panel as the Orpheus and Titan. ASIO drivers are available for both

32- and 64-bit Windows 7/8 and there are WDM drivers for Windows Vista as well; the Lyra works with Core Audio in Mac OS X 10.5 or later.

The software detects which unit is installed and the visible channel count is adjusted accordingly, along with the functions available on display. I had not uninstalled the software after my Titan review, and the Lyra was instantly recognized and passing audio in seconds. Even with a fresh install, the process is painless.

Physical front panel control is limited on these interfaces, but the software gives you full control over input and output choice, sample rate, mic preamp functions and more. It also includes a full-featured low-latency software mixer with pan, mute, level and solo functions. Note that once set up with the software, the Lyra can also function as a standalone converter.

Mic preamps, Hi-Z and more

When I opened this review by saying the Lyra is "same quality, smaller quantity", I meant it. The microphone preamp on the Lyra is the exact same one found in its larger siblings. These are "straight wire with gain" preamps of the ultra-realistic variety; they stand toe to toe with similar offerings by Millennia Media, Grace Design, GML, and John Hardy, to name a few.

Each preamp offers 10 to 65 dB of gain in 1 dB steps; the pres are ultra-quiet with a -120 dBu equivalent noise level. Each preamp features a 20 dB pad, +48V phantom power, an 80 Hz lowcut filter. Each channel also includes an optional RIAA pre-equalization curve on the line



inputs for capturing vinyl direct from a turntable. Specs for the self-switching instrument inputs are similar to the mic pre-amps', minus the phantom power, of course. The unit can be set for +4 or -10 dBu operating levels.

Not only is the Lyra a USB 2.0 interface with specs up to 24-bit/192 kHz, but it will also handle on-the-fly sample rate conversion through its digital outputs, with built in SNS noise shaping curves. This is useful for creating the highest-quality 16-bit/44.1 kHz CD masters and more. I should also note that in addition to the mic pres, the Lyra's conversion and 2-stage DPLL clocking are also the same as the Titan's.

The sweet song of the Lyra

I used the technical term "freaking amazing" to describe the Titan, and I stand by that assessment with the Lyra as well. In our October 2014 issue, I interviewed two well-known mastering engineers from both

sides of the pond, the UK's John Davis (Led Zeppelin, U2, Lana Del Rey) and LA-based Stephen Marsh (X-Men: Days Of Future Past, CSN, Eric Clapton, Alice Cooper); both of them use Prism conversion on a regular basis in their respective rooms at Metropolis and Marsh Mastering. This is because, well... Prism conversion is really pretty gosh darn good. *[Much more emphatic and non-PG language to this effect removed by the Editor—MM]*

Prism Sound knows conversion, and Prism converters are used for some of the most pristine and persnickety mastering and recording jobs around. The conversion in the Lyra, while not necessarily the same as the company's high end Dream and ADA line (in the \$10k and above price class), still sits in a class occupied by Lavry, Benchmark, Apogee, Pacific Microsonics and more, where the decision between one make and another becomes more personal taste and need

than a matter of overall quality. The Lyra yields an exceptionally natural sound, one that I would describe as easy on the ears with zero hard edges or smear.

Conclusions

I started this review by bring up the Titan's high price tag and mentioning the lower cost of the Lyra. Yes I know, the Lyra's initial outlay still represents a significant chunk of anyone's allowance. While there are many 8- and 16-channel devices in a similar price bracket, few if any will rival the Lyra's feature set and sound quality. Simply put, this is a portable tabletop interface for computer-based musicians who are all done with compromising... on anything. ☺

Prices: Lyra 1, \$2350; Lyra 2 (as reviewed), \$3225

More from: Prism Sound,
www.prismsound.com