Perhaps the first thing that struck me on opening the packaging was how sturdy this unit is. MOTU's Ultralite has a reputation for solid construction and, to my mind at least, the Alesis I/O26 is on a par with that. While it is not the most compact Firewire interface that you might buy, I'd have no qualms about taking the I/O26 out of the studio. I didn't do any 'drop' tests with the review unit (!), but I imagine it would be capable of withstanding the usual bumps and bashes that are an inevitable part of music on the move.

The top panel appears uncluttered and well laid out. All eight analogue inputs feature combi-jack sockets that can be used with XLRs or quarter-inch jacks. Gain for all analogue input channels is controlled by a large dedicated knob beneath each input jack and, whatever mode the input is being used in, there seems to be plenty of gain available to accommodate a wide range of source signal levels. Also welcome are the five-segment LED input level meters. As I'll explain later, more detailed level metering is provided by the software supplied with the I/O26, but the physical metering supplied here will be adequate for most users and is significantly better than that found on many compact audio interfaces.

Channels one and two also provide an option to switch between mic and line level and a high-impedance circuit suitable for direct recording of a standard electric guitar or bass. In addition, channels seven and eight feature a switch for selecting between mic/line level and a 'phono' setting. Engaging the latter disables the top panel inputs for these channels and allows a turntable to be connected directly to specific phono inputs located on the rear of the unit. These preamps have a higher gain and EQ properties that are tailored for the output from a turntable. While this might not be a key selling feature of the I/O26, it is unusual and would most certainly appeal to those who use turntables as part of their instrument repertoire.

SOUND ON SOUND

Alesis I/O26 £329

pros

- Very solid construction.
- No-fuss operation.
- Insert points will be welcome for those wanting to patch in outboard processors.

cons

- At this price, none!

summary

The Alesis I/O26 is a very competent multi-channel audio/MIDI interface whose insert points and robust construction give it a distinctive appeal. The audio quality will be more than a match for most home or budget project studios. Highly recommended.

In addition to some useful status LEDs (showing sample rate and activity on the digital inputs) and the meters showing the level on the main outputs, the centre strip of the top panel contains four small buttons at the top and four further knobs. The former switch the phantom power on and off for each pair of input channels. The upper two knobs are separate volume controls for the two headphone outputs, while the lower two comprise a main output-level control (very welcome) and a 'blend' control; the latter provides an easy way to balance between audio being provided from the host DAW and any sources being directly monitored via the I/O26's various inputs, and is a useful addition.

However, for anyone who likes to use external hardware while recording, perhaps the biggest plus point is the insert jacks located beneath the combi-jacks on every analogue input channel. In terms of the signal chain, these are placed after the input preamp but prior to the D-A conversion, which is ideal if you want to patch in a hardware compressor or EQ while tracking. Usefully, the manual also demonstrates how the inserts can be used to enable the I/O26 to act as a series of preamps for an external recorder and how to bypass the I/O26 preamps if you want to use a high-end preamp and route the signal to your DAW via the I/O26.

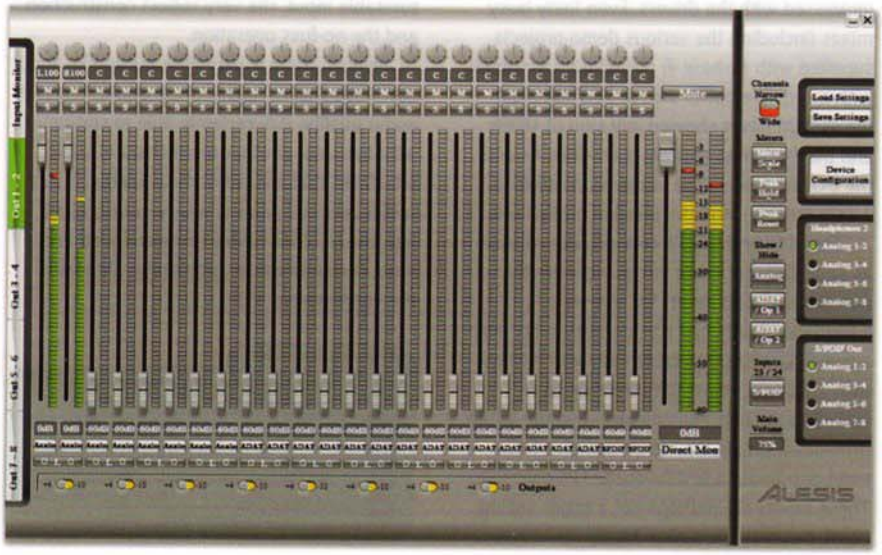
The rear panel is a little busier but also well organised. Two headphone jacks and eight balanced outputs dominate the right-hand side, while the turntable phono inputs, ADAT, S/PDIF and MIDI connectivity occupy the centre area. Two Firewire connectors and the power connector round off the rear panel.

Software Control

Installation of the drivers and Alesis *Hardware Direct Monitoring* (*HDM*) software, and the subsequent connection of the hardware to my test PC, proceeded without any problems. A quick check of the Alesis web site revealed both updated software (v1.0.2.00) and firmware (v1.06) for the unit, and both were easily downloaded and installed. The Control Panel dialogue provides access to a range of key settings, including the buffer size and sample rate. There were some minor differences between the printed manual description of the Control Panel and the latest version of the software but nothing that would cause any significant confusion.

The *Hardware Direct Monitoring* software provides the usual virtual mixing environment. Tabs down the left edge allow the user to toggle between displaying the input channel meters and separate mixer panels for each of the analogue output pairs. These are separate mixes, so it would be possible to provide different monitor mixes via the different output pairs if you so wished. A nice touch is that the second headphone output can be switched to receive a feed from any of the four output pairs; very useful if the engineer needs one mix while running a session but whoever is being recorded wants a different balance in their ears.

The mixer view can be switched between a narrow and a wide display, and it is also possible to hide groups of unused channels. Mixer settings can be saved for later recall and channel names can also be edited. Should you wish, direct monitoring can also be disabled if you want to monitor via your DAW. I'd hesitate to describe the *HDM* application as the prettiest piece of software I've ever used, but overall it does its job in a functional ▶



The I/O26's *Hardware Direct Monitoring* software provides straightforward acccess to a variety of functions and offers much more precise metering than the five-stage LEDs on the unit's front panel.