



RME

Babyface

RME's latest offering is a portable USB 2.0 audio interface. Mike Hillier plugs it in to see how it fares.

Babyface

Manufacturer **RME**

Price **£469**

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RME has brought a considerable amount of innovation to the digital audio world, developing A/D and D/A converters that stand up alongside the best in the industry, incorporating developments in clocking, jitter protection and audio drivers to give the end user a rock-solid interface for recording. Until now, however, the company has focused on studio and project studio recording facilities, providing interfaces in rackmount enclosures or as PCI cards. With the Babyface, RME is aiming to bring this level of quality to mobile setups.

Given the diminutive size of the interface itself, the Babyface comes in a surprisingly large box (even the padded carry case it comes with looks like it's been designed for an interface two or three times the size). The extra space is used to house the breakout and USB cables and is nicely

Key Features

- USB 2.0 portable audio interface
- 2 balanced XLR inputs
- 2 balanced XLR outputs
- 2 stereo 1/4-inch headphone outputs
- Hi-Z jack input
- MIDI I/O

compartmentalised (it includes a carry handle should you need it). The Babyface itself is roughly the size of the Apogee Duet, and with its single large knob is somewhat similar in design, though the hardline minimalism of the Duet's design has been softened by RME, which has opted for a sleek, bevelled blue casing with two buttons alongside the large knob and twin LED meters that stick up above the main knob flanking the five LED status lights. The Babyface's sleek stylings are more

headphone output and MIDI I/O. In addition to these channels the Babyface also has a 1/4-inch Hi-Z input on the right-hand panel, alongside another 1/4-inch headphone output. There are some minor differences in analogue I/O terms compared with the Duet (which has two 1/4-inch Hi-Z inputs in addition to the two XLR mic inputs on the breakout cable) yet only a single built-in headphone output. The crucial difference between the two, however, lies in the digital I/O.

Alongside the 15-pin DIN port on the rear of the Babyface are two optical TOSLink ports, usable as ADAT ports with SMUX or as S/PDIF optical at up to 192kHz. This provides up to an additional eight channels of I/O, bringing the total to ten-in/12-out (the headphone output on the breakout cable can be assigned to analogue outputs 3 and 4). Compare this to the Duet – which has no additional I/O beyond the analogue options on the breakout cable – and the Babyface starts to look a bit more grown-up.

The other major difference that might tempt you towards the Babyface rather than the Duet is the choice of USB 2.0 via FireWire for interfacing with your DAW. While FireWire is arguably more suited to digital audio, both protocols are more than capable of handling the traffic load. USB, however, has one distinct advantage in that it is a more common feature on laptop computers – even if FireWire is present, it is commonly in the non-powered, four-pin version. Ironically, considering how much Apogee worked with Apple to design the Duet, the Babyface is more suited to being taken on the road with a non-FireWire MacBook.

What's more – and crucially, to many users – the Babyface works under both Mac OSX and Windows OS, unlike the

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McLaren racing car than Apple laptop, but it's still an attractive solution when it's sitting on the desktop.

Babyface assassin

Like the Duet, the Babyface has most of its I/O on a breakout cable, which connects to the interface via a 15-pin DIN cable. The breakout cable has two XLR inputs, two XLR outputs, a 1/4-inch

Apple-only Apogee Duet. We had no problems running the Babyface from a single USB port, but RME has included a twin USB cable for connection to two ports should one port not provide sufficient power (which is the case with many laptops).

Using RME's own low-latency Hammerfall USB audio core, the company claims that the Babyface can

achieve latency values as low as 48 samples under Windows and 14 samples under Mac OSX. We were actually able to achieve this in Ableton Live 8 on our Mac, although in testing with Pro Tools 9 we were able to get down to only 64 samples, slightly slower than the 32 samples we can achieve with our 003. This, however, is likely to be an issue with Pro Tools' new Core Audio interfacing and may be fixed with a future update to either Pro Tools or the Babyface itself.

More important than the super-low latencies, however, is how good the Babyface sounds, something which we gladly put to test. Testing audio playback using pre-recorded mixes (recorded at 24-bit/44kHz with Prism ADA-8 converters) we were very impressed with the quality of the Babyface by comparison to our 003 testing rig. The Babyface D/A gave the signal a tighter response in the low and sub region than our 003, and in the upper regions the stereo width seemed slightly more focused, with more definition than the 003 and a greater sense of depth. The differences were subtle but it's a good indication of the quality that RME has packed into such a small and portable device.

The mic preamps are exceptionally quiet and provide up to 60dB of gain in steps of 3dB, controlled either from the main front-panel knob or from the TotalMix FX software. Like most built-in mic preamps, those in the Babyface are designed to be as neutral as possible, imparting no character of their own on the signal and leaving you with the option of adding character during the mix from EQs or compressors. There's no artificial warming of the signal, just a clean and clear reproduction of exactly what you put in. If you know what you're doing as a recording

engineer this is the most useful type of preamp you could want. However, if you are prone to overloading the inputs, there is no analogue limiting to keep you safe (nor, in fact, is there even an analogue high-pass filter for taking out any sub-frequencies). Instead, RME has built an EQ and reverb/echo sends into the TotalMix software, which can be used to shape the incoming signal digitally if you wish.

Face to face

Although we'd argue that once it's digital you may as well record what you've got and EQ it with your own choice of EQ in the mix, the EQ in TotalMix is actually one of the better digital EQs we've used, so if you haven't invested in third-party EQs for your DAW you might want to consider using those built-in to the Babyface as they're likely to be better than the ones bundled with your DAW. Reverb/echo, on the other hand, is

Measuring Up

There are plenty of small, portable audio interfaces that fit into a similar category to the RME Babyface; however, only a few offer anywhere near the quality that the Babyface oozes. If you will only ever need the two inputs, the Apogee Duet is a worthwhile alternative. Slightly larger but still designed to be portable, the MOTU UltraLite mk3 (around £430) is probably the most well-equipped portable bus-powered interface and connects via USB 2.0 or FireWire.

Echo, all with Delay Time, Feedback and Width controls. As with EQ, we've got a lot more options available to us in our plug-ins folder, but the quality of the reverbs and echoes are impressive and they're more than up to the task of keeping a singer happy during a take.

As well as providing EQ and reverb/echo sends, TotalMix FX delivers a powerful mixing/routing engine powered by hardware DSP in the Babyface. This can be used for creating separate headphone mixes and includes options for M/S processing when recording with an M/S setup. While some monitoring is provided on

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incredibly useful as a built-in tool using onboard DSP, as it enables you to create a wet headphone mix for your singer while tracking the dry signal into your DAW for later processing – all without taxing your host CPU or incurring additional latency problems.

The reverb has seven different algorithm types, including four rooms, a gated reverb, a 'classic' reverb and an envelope reverb (all with parameters for controlling pre-delay, room size and shape), plus high- and low-cut filters. Similarly, there are three echo types: Stereo Echo, Stereo Cross and Pong

the Babyface itself, the monitoring in TotalMix FX is considerably more accurate, providing instant visual feedback of all I/O channels with RMS and Peak levels.

As a portable audio interface, the RME Babyface isn't a cheap solution, but it is a truly professional option and the high quality throughout reflects that. The addition of ADAT makes it a more versatile solution than Apogee's Duet and it could be used as the centre of a project studio rig with ten inputs, while still being portable enough to take on the road when you need it. **MTM**



The Babyface comes in a surprisingly large carry case, but that's to make room for the breakout cable and USB leads.

MTM Verdict

WHY BUY

- + Small and portable
- + Great-quality converters and microphone preamps
- + Bus-powered

WALK ON BY

- Breakout cables aren't always that convenient to use
- Only two analogue inputs

For extreme portability coupled with a strong feature set, the Babyface has to be up there among the best audio interfaces available right now.



Method Spot

Giving a singer some reverb in their headphone mix is a common trick that can help to alleviate performance anxiety and that will help make things sound a little more natural in their headphones than the dry mic signal alone. However, don't go overboard – too much reverb can flatten a singer's performance.