

Welcome to round two of the Ensoniq Soundscape review. For those of you that didn't see our review in Issue 5, let me recap the high points. When first installed the firmware software that controls the Soundscape was in early development and left much to be desired. Sound drivers for each sound type (midi - sound blaster - etc.) had to be loaded manually to get the sound card to work. We also experienced several problems getting the Soundscape to sit in the IRQ slots available on the test machine. Fortunately for Ensoniq, the sound was incredible.

In round 2 we have taken a different approach and used the latest software upgrade for this great sounding board. This time the Soundscape was installed in a wide open AST 486. By wide open I mean that this computer has *nothing* else in it. There was no original sound card, no CD-Rom drive, 1 hard drive, and a Plain Jane video card.

I was pleasantly surprised at how much easier the sound card was to install this time. The install software ran smoothly, and it selected the 2 IRQs the Soundscape needs to run without any trouble (mostly due to the lack of anything else being in the machine). Yes, the Soundscape takes 2 IRQs for sound. One is for Soundscape emulation, and the other is for the Soundscape itself. There is also a 3 IRQ needed for this card, but that only comes into play if you are running a CD-Rom off of the card.

Speaking of CD-Rom, the cd-rom support on the Soundscape is limited to 3 proprietary cd types. A newer sound board from Ensoniq now adds IDE control to it, but still no SCSI.

The new firmware upgrade eliminates the need to manually load and unload the different sound drivers. This is all finally handled by the card and software itself. This was a major complaint the last time we looked at this card. I'm glad to see this fixed.

As last time though, the sound is simply incredible. It is going to be very hard to beat this card for pure sound quality. With its native Wavetable support, you just can't beat it. Of course, with a card like this you will need to get a very good set of speakers. I would look at the Jensen Power speakers as a low end speaker for this card. If you're gonna spend \$300 for a sound card, you can afford the \$150 for a great pair (or more) of speakers.

With the follow-up support from Ensoniq with the creation of new software, and the overall sound quality, the Soundscape has made a major move from also ran to top finisher. Just be sure to install the Soundscape before you install anything else on your system.