

Buzz Audio ARC 1.1

Just when you thought that all bases had been covered as far as the outboard channel strip was concerned, along comes Buzz and it's built an ARC. **GEORGE SHILLING** goes down under with this analogue recording channel.



G'DAY. MY ONLY previous encounter with New Zealand's Buzz Audio was an excellent sounding optical compressor with big knobs and minimal controls. So I was quite surprised when I first took a gawk — there are 18 rotary controls and 23 toggles crammed on the 2U front panel. The rear is no simpler, with nine XLR connections and two jack sockets — and yet this is a mono unit. An all-encompassing voice channel, the ARC includes elements from previous Buzz units, along with features said to be inspired by suggestions from 'audio professionals from around the globe'. This ambitious company has quietly developed a very fine reputation. The ARC, like other Buzz products, is well-built and assembled using quality components — there are no surface-mount chips in here, mate.

The unit comprises a mic/line preamp, EQ and compressor and each section's input and output may be accessed separately from the rear panel. I therefore first tested the preamp in isolation. The mic amp claims exceptionally low noise and with no pad sounds consistent across the gain range. Instead there is a 15dB boost switch for use when recording distant conversations of neighbouring sheep farmers using a ribbon mic. Beaut. With a large condenser, the mic preamp's character is neutral and sounded biggest with the Load knob fully clockwise, although the effect of this knob was subtle. Even at this setting, it lacked the warming enhancement I get from my own Neve-style preamp but clarity was supreme. The phantom power circuit features 'soft stop/start' — a nice touch. With a ribbon mic the Load knob dramatically increased the level output when turned fully to the right, the extra 15dB gain switch was useful, although there still seemed to be less gain than was available from my own preamp at full tilt. But the ARC's mic preamp sounds great with exceptional detail.

So on to the rest of the ARC, and here some time is necessary for familiarisation due to the rather complex panel layout. Some study of the manual is required and thankfully this is comprehensive and good-humoured without being patronising or irritating (which is probably more than can be said for this review!)

Following the mic preamp section is a line input section with a separate Gain knob, a 10dB pad to prevent input overload, and selection between the balanced rear panel input and the front panel mono jack, which is high impedance for electric guitar and bass. There is plenty of gain here for the weediest of Stratocasters and my dodgy Squier sounded clear as a bell, particularly enhanced when flipping in the Tranny circuit in the following Output section, where a



deliberately crunchy transformer is available for subtle colouration of the low frequencies. This also added back the warmth I was missing from the mic preamp. The output section includes an Output Gain and a Polarity switch, although I might have wanted that on the mic pre section if using it in isolation.

The EQ consists of a High Pass filter, High and Low Shelf sections and two Mid Bands. The panel layout is somewhat jumbled. Each band includes a three-position toggle, where In enables the band on the main signal path, Ext switches it to the separate EQ In/Out on the rear panel, and SC sends it to the compressor as a sidechain shaper. There is no 'Out' setting, but by sending it to the sidechain and setting the Cut/Boost knob to the centre détente the band is effectively defeated without degrading any audio signal.

The Filter is 12dB/octave continuously variable from 25 to 450Hz and the High and Low Shelf sections claim 17dB cut/boost. The High Shelf features a selector labelled Tight or Broad that affects the steepness of the curve, which is set around 12kHz. On the Broad setting the slope is very gentle and affects mid frequencies also while in Tight mode it could be used as a 12kHz low pass filter. The Low Shelf features a fairly shallow shelf with selectable frequencies of 60Hz or 120Hz with an inductor used for a tighter bass sound. The Mid Bands feature huge continuously variable frequency bands by virtue of x10 toggles and are fully parametric, with

bandwidth adjustable down to wah-wah pedal values. Interestingly, these bands are designed based on Steve Dove's CAPS network, proposed in *Resolution's* spiritual ancestor *Studio Sound* back in 1981.

The Compressor uses an opto-sensor with a soft-knee circuit and switchable settings for Attack, Release (both including Auto settings) and Ratio, plus variable Drive, which acts like a Threshold control. This is a very versatile and musical sounding compressor that can be routed to pre or post the EQ or switched out of the main path onto its own dedicated rear panel connectors. When set with a fast attack, the compressor can seem fairly invisible, when set slower it sounds appealingly punchy. The Auto release setting generally seems fairly fast, the whole character of the compressor is very fluid, with none of the syrupy pumping sometimes associated with optical or vintage units. There are plenty of bright LEDs on the gain reduction meter for a good indication of what is occurring, alongside a Level meter for input or output metering, or Off if the flashing lights are too much for you. Thankfully, the Over LED remains active even in this case.

Finally, a Limiter section with three different Release settings is available for taming peaks, this uses a FET and sounds great.

The ARC (UK£1595 + VAT) takes time to understand but it is undoubtedly worth persisting with as the rewards are a very powerful and comprehensive set of tools with excellent sound quality. You'll be dead chuffed with one of these. Try it before you suck the kumura. ■

Contact

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PROS

High sound quality; clear, detailed mic preamp; lovely compressor; powerful EQ; clever and thoughtful circuitry design.

CONS

Front panel layout slightly jumbled.

EXTRAS

The new Buzz Audio Resonance Equaliser gets its name from the use of switched inductors and capacitors as the reactive elements in the EQ stages. With true Class A discrete transistor amplifiers throughout and individual discrete power supply regulators for each stage, the unit boasts a variable saturation circuit that introduces varying amounts of transformer colour.

