

# Focusrite ISA One

Focusrite's ISA One is a curious beast. In part, it's because its form factor means that from a distance you could easily mistake it for a bench power supply or a portable welder. But it's also because it offers a collection of features that at first glance you might never have considered useful.

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The ISA One is primarily a single channel mic preamplifier. Based around the same topology as the proven and highly regarded ISA110, it features the original Lundahl LL1538 transformer on the input side. Rather than being consigned to a rack though, the ISA One is designed to be taken directly to wherever the action is — hence the welder-like case design complete with carrying handle, and the fact that it comes supplied in its own compact flightcase.

The look and feel of many of the front panel controls will be utterly familiar to anybody who's used other units in the ISA range, and the core of the unit is very straightforward. Coarse gain is applied via a 4-position stepped control, which works in one of two ranges (0–30dB or 30–60dB) selected by an illuminated pushbutton. A continuously variable trim control gives another 20dB of gain, meaning that there's an impressive 80dB total gain on offer. A selection of other illuminated pushbuttons offer the usual phantom power selection, polarity reverse, a high pass filter (75Hz@18dB/octave) and the activation of a balanced insert point, accessed by a pair of TRS jacks on the rear panel.

The transformer employed on the microphone input can be toggled through a number of different taps by another front panel button to allow input impedances of 600, 1.4k (the original ISA110 value), 2.4k or 6.8kOhm. Another pushbutton cycles through three input options for the main signal path — mic level, line level or instrument level. Balanced microphone and line level inputs appear on the rear panel (XLR for mic, and XLR and TRS jack for line inputs), while the high impedance, unbalanced instrument level input is located on the front.

It's at this stage that the ISA One starts to differ somewhat from a more conventional device. The DI input has its own gain control, with +10 to +40dB of gain on offer. It also has a choice of two input impedances (470kOhm and 2.4MOhm), and a useful 'pass through' output on the front panel for sending a guitar DI onwards to an amp, for example. Selecting

the instrument input as the source routes it to the main output and enables it to be metered on the prominent VU meter. But even if it isn't selected as the main source, the DI section remains active and has its own dedicated balanced output on the rear of the unit. This means that a DI source could be recorded via this output, while the 'pass through' is sent to an amp. A mic on this amp could then run through the mic pre, which feeds its own, separate output.

In this kind of situation, the metering provided is quite comprehensive. The signal selected as the main source is displayed on the mechanical VU meter and



on a LED peak meter. A second LED peak meter normally shows the level of the dedicated DI output. Both peak meters and the VU meter can be calibrated to different operating levels. The VU meter defaults to 0VU = 4dBu. Pressing the VU Cal switch on the front panel changes this to any value between 0VU = +11dBu and +26dBu — the exact value is set via a small pot on the rear of the unit. A similar pot sets the operating level of the peak meters between 0dBFS = +18dBu to +26dBu, although this trimmer is permanently in circuit.

These options become important if the optional A-DC board is fitted. This gives two channels of output at sample rates up to 192kHz on a choice of 9-pin D-Sub, optical ADAT or optical SPDIF. The first

of these two channels is always the currently selected main source. The second channel is, by default, the dedicated DI output. However, a balanced line level input (TRS jack) is available on the rear panel and if a source is plugged in here it replaces the DI signal on both the second LED meter and the input to the second channel of the A-DC. The D-Sub output can be switched for AES or SPDIF operation, and can work in single and dual-wire modes. External Word clock input and output are also provided on BNCs.

The final string to the (UK£424 + VAT) ISA One's bow is in the provision of a headphone monitoring section. By default, this simply gives a volume control and allows monitoring of any active signals. This means that if a single microphone is plugged in and selected as the source, then that is what you will hear. But if either the DI signal path or the external input mentioned earlier is connected, then the headphone output will contain a (non-adjustable) mono mix of this plus the main source. A temptingly labelled 'Cue Mix' button next to the headphone volume control promises to add a little more flexibility, but in fact doesn't. Activating it allows the headphone amp to pick up a stereo signal from yet another pair of balanced inputs on the rear of the unit, but there is no way on the unit itself to set a balance between source and backing, for example. The best way to describe this is simply to regard it as a foldback amplifier, the mix for which would need to be sourced from a DAW or a mixer.

In use, the sound of the unit will yield no surprises to anyone who's used other devices in the ISA range. The mic pre is quiet, clean and nicely neutral with just a touch of HF brightness. The switchable input impedance works well here too, with the lowest settings able to pull some additional LF weights out of dynamic and ribbon microphones. The DI stage impressed me as much as anything else — my current favourite is a Radial JDV, and the ISA One's DI matched it in most respects. Particularly useful is the ability to drop the input impedance of the DI when working with sources like synths.

But it's the feature set that continues to puzzle me, as I'm still not entirely sure of the application that the unit is aimed at. As a solution to minimum signal path recording of guitars it works well, particularly for recording both a DI and mic feed. And if you're short on decent headphone foldback amps, it has its uses here too. Yet I can't help thinking that, for the solo recordist, some extra flexibility in the monitoring section would be a welcome addition. ■

**PROS** High quality mic preamp; excellent DI capabilities; flexible metering and digital output options.

**CONS** Monitoring section could use more flexibility; variety of signal path permutations on offer a little confusing at first.

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