



Focusrite ISA Two

We've seen the original ISA preamp represented in a number of different permutations and it now comes as a twin. **JON THORNTON** enjoys the double.

There's a reassuring familiarity to Focusrite's ISA Two as you unpack it from the box. The colour scheme (blue, grey and yellow), knobs (chunky yet somehow still svelte) and pushbuttons (momentary action, illuminated) all tell you that this may be the new kid on the block, but it knows its place in an already well established family. It was a bit of a no-brainer really — the ISA preamp range already includes eight-channel, four-channel and single-channel variants in the form of the ISA828, ISA424 and ISA One. So the only missing piece in the channel count demographic had to be a two-channel offering.

Starting with the rear panel, each of the two channels has a mic level input on XLR, a balanced line level output also on XLR, and a balanced line level input on ¼-inch TRS jack. Two additional TRS jacks provide separate balanced insert sends and returns on each channel. The insert send permanently carries the channel output, so could also be used as an additional output if needed.

Moving to the front and at the far left are two unbalanced high impedance inputs on ¼-inch jack for DI purposes. Each of the two channels then has an identical set of controls occupying the middle of the front panel, with the two output level meters located on the right hand side. A pushbutton switch toggles between microphone, line and DI inputs, with a small LED lighting to show the current selection. While the DI input impedance is fixed at >2MΩ, the transformer balanced microphone and line inputs can be switched, again via a pushbutton, that steps through four options. The lowest setting on offer is 600Ω, and the highest 6.8kΩ with a couple of intermediate steps including the 1.4kΩ value employed in the original ISA110 design.

Coarse gain for both microphone and line level inputs comes courtesy of a four-position rotary switch with 10dB steps. For line level signals this gives a gain range of -20 to +10dB. For microphone level signals only, this is coupled with an additional range switch that allows steps in a range of 0 to +30dB or +30 to +60dB. A continuously variable trim control gives an additional 20dB of gain to microphone and line level signals, and also acts as the single gain control for DI inputs (+10 to +40dB). It's an arrangement that will be very familiar to existing Focusrite users, and has the benefit of keeping front panel controls to a minimum. While

the ranges for each mode are labelled neatly in concentric arcs around each control, it can be a little confusing at first — and a touch hard to read for those of us whose close vision isn't what it used to be...

A final rotary control sets the turnover frequency for a switchable high pass filter, which applies an 18dB/octave shelf in a range between 16Hz and 420Hz. This is, I think, one of my favourite features. Most preamplifiers offer some sort of HPF capability, but one or two fixed points is no match for the flexibility of a continuously variable range. I don't know why everyone doesn't do it. The usual additional functions (polarity reverse, phantom power, filter in/out and insert in/out) are served by illuminated pushbuttons sensibly distributed across the panel, and finally a pair of eight-segment LED meters shows the final output level (post gain, trim and insert if selected). These are calibrated with reference to dBFS, which is slightly odd perhaps for a device that is wholeheartedly analogue but I guess that the thinking here is that these days the output of a box like this is more likely to find its way straight into an A-D stage of some description than anything else.

To help in this regard there's a thumb-operated trim pot on the rear panel. This trims the output level so that 0dBFS on the meter corresponds to anywhere in the range +16dBu to +24dBu — ensuring that the metering and output level corresponds with your external A-D converter of choice. This is an opportune moment to point out the one thing the ISA Two doesn't have compared to the rest of the family is no facility for an A-D conversion option. It seems a strange omission given that even the shoebox shaped single channel ISA One has this option.

In use, the ISA Two is delightfully straightforward. Tiny lettering and deteriorating close vision aside, there's plenty of space for fingers to find their way around the front panel and the various controls seem to fall naturally to hand. Sonically it will hold absolutely no surprises to anyone familiar with other preamps in the ISA series. This isn't entirely surprising as the transformer-based design employed here dates back to 1985 — its first incarnation was as the ISA110, the front end for the monumental Forte recording console.

It's a sound best described as transparent but trying hard not to be overly so. The addition of the transformer means that sonically it never sounds as

brutally honest/unflattering (delete as appropriate) as a Millennia or Benchmark design. Instead it delivers quiet, fuss-free gain while adding a touch of glassiness to the highs and a hint of 'tubbiness' to the low end. There's also a degree of tweaking to be had by playing with the variable input impedances on offer. In truth, I couldn't discern much difference on any of the settings with modern capacitor microphones but with passive ribbons and some dynamics, lowering the input impedance can add some (sometimes useful) colouration to the sound.

With a Royer 101 passive ribbon (p28), I found the most natural sounding setting to be 1.4kΩ, which as it happens was the default value for the old ISA110. It goes to prove that some things just work and are best left well alone. And that really sums up the ISA Two for me. I'm glad that Focusrite hasn't felt compelled to add a raft of fiddly little features and signal path options but instead clearly see this as a classic design subtly repurposed for the modern world (think of those meters). What you get here is exactly what you need — no more, no less. And what you do get just works; exceptionally well. ■

PROS

Straightforward layout; classic Focusrite sound; well built; perfectly formed feature set.

CONS

No digital output option; rotary control legending can be confusing at first.

EXTRAS

Focusrite has posted an update to its Saffire Mix Control mixer software that



comes free with all Saffire PRO and Liquid Saffire FireWire audio interfaces. The highlight is compatibility with Mac OS v10.7 but other updates include improved performance under Pro Tools 9, and a streamlining of the snapshot loading and saving process. There are also bug fixes.

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