

Focusrite ISA220

First came the Producer Pack and now follows the Session Pack, which retains family values but strips back on some of the features and some of the price. **GEORGE SHILLING** finds little to complain about in a satisfying and cleverly implemented heavy package.



FOCUSRITE'S FLAGSHIP ISA430 Producer Pack voice channel has won many fans – two hit-making producers in very different genres both recently told me how much they love it, without prompting. This new unit is a slightly cut-down version, which retains the essential features but enables Focusrite to build and market it for less than the 430.

The 2U box is enormously heavy, and build quality is excellent. The rear panel features separate XLR Mic and Line inputs and a jack instrument input, which is duplicated on the front. There are jack sockets for compressor key input and Dynamic Link, which allows two units to work in stereo. There is an extremely well-featured 96kHz/24-bit digital board with outputs on AES-EBU XLR, SPDIF phono and optical, and two BNCs for external clock and Superclock connection. There is a jack socket input to access the left channel of the converter – the internal signal is normally routed to this – and an XLR to access the right input. Both of these inputs are fed through the switchable fixed-setting three-band limiter.

The front panel features two 16-LED meters, which show the output level after the limiter but before the A-D input. There is a standard VU meter switchable to show input level or gain reduction. Additionally, an Overload LED lights when the signal is 6dB below clipping, monitored at three different points along the signal path.

A four-position knob selects broad (10dB) gain settings for Mic and Line inputs, with a button to switch between two gain ranges when in Mic mode; the highest setting in the low range is the same as the lowest setting in the high range. Next to this is a Trim knob with a 20dB range, this also acts as the sole gain control on the instrument input with a 30dB range. A button selects one of the three inputs.

The mic preamp is similar to the original Rupert Neve Focusrite design and sounds clear and richly detailed, although I have always felt this design to be a little cold and hard sounding in some microphone/singer combinations.

The Bypass button globally removes all processing modules except the limiter. The EQ section has an All EQ Bypass button, along with three separate sections that can be individually bypassed. The powerful 18dB/octave low- and high-pass filters are continuously adjustable over wide ranges that overlap.

The 2-band parametric EQ section will be familiar to previous Blue range Focusrite users, with the famous

x3 frequency sweeps along with gain/cut and bandwidth knobs. The shelving section features four fixed-frequencies for each band. This is a reduction in spec from the ISA430, which features six frequencies for each band, but there is plenty of fun to be had with these nevertheless. All cut/boost knobs have a centre detente. The EQ sounds sweet and enables broad warming and shaping or detailed tweaking. It's very enjoyable to use and works wonderfully, although it is difficult to read the frequency legending, and I was never a fan of the x3 concept – not a particularly logical way to work.

The compressor defaults to the output of the EQ section but there is a button to place it before the EQ. With the compressor switched in, you have the usual selection of controls available, with Ratio continuously variable between 1.5 and 10:1, separate knobs for Threshold, Attack and Release, along with a separate button for an excellent Auto Release mode. There is also a Gain Make-Up knob.

An unusual button appears here labelled Blend. This mixes the uncompressed signal at -6dB along with the compressed signal, an excellent technique that can sound terrific in some circumstances. The compressor can be set to very fast but never sounds nasty and rarely pumps unpleasantly. This is a great compressor for vocals, especially in blend mode.

The optically-controlled de-esser has knobs for Threshold and Frequency along with a Sidechain

Listen button that can help setting up. A varying-intensity LED lights when the circuit is reducing gain. The limiter features a similar LED and an In button. Finally, an Output knob adjusts the level between -60 and +6dB.

The A-D section can be set from the front panel with a selection of clock rates (44.1, 48, 88.2 and 96kHz), bit rate (24, 20 and 16-bit) and external clock for selection of word clock or Digidesign Superclock. A Lock LED is also provided here.

Every section has been impeccably engineered, the only real nuisance I discovered was that all the pushbuttons lose their status on power-down: when the unit is powered up the only button lit is Bypass, even if turned off only for a few seconds. The buttons have very little travel and operate relays, lighting up to show active status.

I enjoyed tweaking the 220, especially using the Line input to process lead vocals in a mixing situation. I was able to rescue a very poorly recorded vocal on a mixing project where the de-esser was invaluable, the EQ transformed the tonal character and the compressor smoothed the whole vocal sound into a pleasant yet powerful tone that sat beautifully in the mix.

Although a few corners have been cut compared to the ISA430, I didn't really feel there was anything missing from the feature list. The overall sound of the unit is neutral but classy and will suit all kinds of situations and styles of recording and mixing, whether for vocals or other instruments. ■

Contact

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PROS

Well-featured; sweet EQ; fast but unobtrusive compressor; Blend button

CONS

Mic pre a little cold and hard sounding; button statuses lost on power down; legending difficult to read on EQ and compressor; very heavy (man)

EXTRAS

The ISA430 combines analogue dynamic and EQ processing and is based on the original ISA130 Class A VCA compressor/expander/gate. The mic preamp is dual-gain and transformer-based, with line and instrument inputs along with phantom power and phase reverse. The 4-band fully-parametric EQ features swept shelving plus high and low pass filters. Class A compression, together with an expander/gate, a de-esser and a multiband limiter, completes the processing.

An optional 24-bit/96kHz digital output board provides AES-EBU, Toslink and SPDIF formats at 44.1 to 96kHz operation with an external word clock.

