

Focusrite OctoPre LE

Take a unit that helped to define a genre and then strip it back and make it cheaper — is that 'Lite' or a different box altogether?

JON THORNTON wrestles with another OctoPre.



I'M NOT A GREAT FAN of the 'LE' tag, as it implies that somehow you're being short-changed, or at very least compromised on features and performance in favour of price. The original OctoPre (UK£552 +VAT) is a smart little unit, featuring 8 channels of mic preamp each with a clever and simple to use dynamics processor to aid the process of tracking to DAWs. The OctoPre LE (UK£297 +VAT) is also, fundamentally, an 8-channel mic preamp — so what has changed to earn it that LE designation?

Starting with the front panel, the most noticeable difference is the absence of any form of dynamics processing — this is a preamp pure and simple. Each of the eight channels has a rotary gain control, a switchable high pass filter (12dB/octave at 120Hz) and a single LED indicating signal clipping. The first two channels have the ability to switch their input impedance to a lower level of 150ohms rather than the standard 2.5kohms, and the first input channel alone has the addition of a phase reverse switch. Phantom power is available but with a single switch applying this globally to all channels rather than individually per channel.

This lightening of the feature set on most of the channels clears a lot of front panel real estate, and this has been used for 8 line level inputs on 1/4-inch TRS jack sockets. Plugging anything into these inputs automatically overrides the XLR mic inputs on the rear panel and alters the gain range of the amplifier accordingly. The first two channels are also capable of accepting a high impedance source from an electric instrument via these inputs, selected via a switch on the channel in question, which makes for quick and easy Dling.

The rear panel houses 8 XLR sockets for mic level inputs, and balanced line level outputs on 1/4-inch TRS Jacks. An external power supply feeds the unit via a 3-pin connector. In the current day and age a unit like this really can't survive without some form of digital interfacing, and this is offered as an option. Currently the only option is a card providing ADAT lightpipe interfacing at sample rates of 44.1kHz or 48kHz. Front panel controls allow the selection of sample rates, or the selection of an external TTL Word clock or 256x Superclock. Word clock output

is also available on the rear panel if the OctoPre LE needs to be configured as the master clock source.

Interestingly, the digital card has a lightpipe input as well as an output — in other words the card has A-DC and D-AC capability, which is a useful bonus. Not only does this allow the unit to synchronise to an embedded ADAT clock, but the analogue outputs on the back of the unit can be switched to output the 8 channels of ADAT format input, rather than the output of the preamps. This means, for example, that the OctoPre LE can be providing eight channels of input to a DAW digitally, while simultaneously providing up to 7.1 monitoring from the DAW.

It's obvious so far that the OctoPre LE has undergone a significant feature cull when compared to the original. Fortunately, this doesn't seem to have extended to the quality of the preamps themselves, which are based on the designs of Focusrite's Green range. There are no surprises here, as on a variety of different microphones the unit proved capable of resolving good levels of detail, with the kind of transparency and openness that most people will associate with the Focusrite brand. Not a device that is gong to add a distinctive sonic character to a sound, it nevertheless extracts a useful amount of information from most sources with no fuss and little in the way of unwanted noise.

A subject I haven't touched on yet is metering, as this is one aspect of the unit I found a little strange. As mentioned earlier, each channel has a single LED indicating clipping, set at +22dBu, which corresponds to 0dBFS at the A-DC stage. The unit also has a circular mechanical meter, calibrated in dBFS, with

an associated switch that allows it to toggle through each of the eight channels to show peak signal level for that channel. The clip LED on the channel being metered illuminates to show which one is currently selected. Although the ballistics of the meter seem reasonably fast, and the meter undoubtedly shows the ballpark that a signal is in, I can't help thinking that I would have been more comfortable with even a relatively coarsely stepped LED bargraph in this particular application.

Overall, the OctoPre LE is most definitely a 'Lite' version of the original — to the extent that it's almost a different beast entirely. Yes, corners have been cut and features omitted, largely in the interest of saving costs. This has been done with obvious thought though, and I can see the target market that Focusrite has for this box — the front panel inputs, clever D-AC and A-DC capability, and the implication that some functions are only ever going to be used on one channel at a time — these all point to a home in any small project studio. The preamps themselves are certainly up to the job, and you get a lot of them for your money. But in other applications, for example live recording which the original OctoPre excels in, you'll need to decide whether you can live with the limitations of global phantom power, only one phase reverse switch, and a 48kHz limit on the A-DC. ■

Contact

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PROS

Cheap; preamps faithful to Focusrite values; useful D-AC capability.

CONS

Metering; not all features available on every channel; 48kHz limit on A-DC option.

EXTRAS



The original OctoPre provides 8 channels of Focusrite Class A mic pre and compression routing directly to a DAW via eight analogue outputs or a choice of optional converters. Each channel's compressor/limiter circuit has a 'warm-sounding' compressor that 'morphs' into a brick wall limiter.