



## Focusrite OctoPre MkII/ OctoPre MkII Dynamic

Focusrite gives its venerable mic preamp a 'double' MKII makeover, even throwing some DAW-friendly dynamics into the mix. **GEORGE SHILLING** is all ears.



When Focusrite introduced the original OctoPre in the early 2000s as part of its Platinum range it soon became a popular cost-effective solution for many requiring multiple microphone preamps in a small package at a relatively low price. There were optional digital output cards for ADAT or SMUX format output of the eight preamps. It even included one-knob compression on each input. The LE version came later as another Platinum product, but this had different mic preamps and lacked the dynamics processing. However, the optional digital card for this model also offered ADAT inputs, which users of budget audio interfaces no doubt found rather useful. With increasing competition from the likes of PreSonus and M-Audio, it was time for Focusrite to rationalise the OctoPre range.

These two new OctoPres are designed to match the Saffire range, with their distinctive blue and black colour scheme. Each unit is a fairly hefty and deep 1U rackmount case, with a thick plastic front panel and neat little covers for the rack bolts. There's no faffing around with voltage selection; they'll automatically work with anything from 100V to 250V. Instead of optional digital cards the convertor circuitry now comes built in as standard.

The standard MkII is essentially a rack of eight mic preamps that can be routed to analogue or ADAT/SMUX (up to 96kHz) outputs for recording. Word clock in is available on a BNC. The MkII Dynamic is significantly more expensive, although both units are low priced — even quite a bit cheaper than their predecessors' original prices (MkII: UK£387.74, including VAT; MkII Dynamic: £587.49). The Dynamic features one-knob compression circuitry on each channel, but like the old LE also boasts ADAT/SMUX inputs. It also additionally features a Word clock BNC out — very handy. On both units the mic preamps are of a similar type to that found in the Saffire range, and with the likes of the Saffire Pro 40 and Liquid Saffire 56 sporting ADAT Optical connectors, these

units will seamlessly integrate with other units in the range to expand capabilities — and, of course, they'll match sonically, so no time will be wasted working out which mic preamp to use!

On both units the rear panel features Neutrik Combi jacks for the inputs. These, of course, don't latch, but I've never had a problem with that, as the connection is fairly secure. It might be a consideration when recording live. On the cheaper version, the first two inputs are on the front panel. On both, Inputs 1 and 2 are switchable for high-impedance instrument input; obviously, these are rather more accessible on the front panel, so in some sense this is an advantage. But if you are not intending to plug instruments in then these two sockets could be a bit of a nuisance, as they are not mirrored on the back. With inputs 3 to 8, inserted TS or TRS jack inputs switch the channel levels to Line inputs, and, on all eight, inserting an XLR sets the gain to microphone mode. In Line mode available gain ranges from -10dB to +36dB. Mic inputs can all provide 48V phantom power in two separate banks of inputs 1-4 and 5-8.

Analogue outputs comprise a bank of eight plastic-surrounded TRS jack sockets, rather than the original's D-connector; while a pair of ADAT optical sockets is provided, these split into channels 1-4 and 5-8 when high sample rates are used, but otherwise mirror each other. On the Dynamic the pair of ADAT Inputs operate similarly.

Towards the right of the front panel of each unit is a meter display using LEDs to show five gain points on each channel. They light at -42, -18, -6, -3, and 0dBFS, with green for the lower ones and yellow and red towards the top. These are useful, though I'd have preferred a little less bunching towards the top end.

At the far right of the front panel are the digital settings, which vary depending on the model. Four sample rates are available for selection with a pushbutton: 44.1, 48, 88.2, and 96kHz. On

the basic model, there simply remains a further pushbutton to select clock source, with a choice of Internal or Word clock, and another LED indicates Lock. On the Dynamic you can additionally clock to incoming ADAT signal, and a further button labelled AD-DA routes the ADAT input straight to the Line outputs, lending the unit a further string to its bow as a handy extra D-AC, when required.

Sonically, the mic preamps are pretty neutral. They lack some of the warmth and character of, say, an API or Neve 88-series; alongside such esteemed company they might seem a tad 'thin' sounding, but at these prices that's a bit of an unfair comparison. In use, they are perfectly adequate, sounding clear, with a good amount of detail. With only +55dB of available gain these won't be natural partners for unpowered ribbon mics, but they sound good and work quietly at full tilt, which is ample in most situations. Even if this results in a slightly lower recording level, it's not so much of an issue these days when you generally record 24-bit.

Legending around the Gain knobs is simply scaled 0 to 10, which looks neater, but I think I'd have preferred to know about the dBs. A 9dB pad button and LED is individually provided on each channel of the cheaper model. This is missing on the Dynamic, but, to be honest, I didn't really miss it; at minimum gain the preamps only provide +10dB gain. I'd have really preferred to have polarity reverse buttons, or even some low-cut filters, as provided on the original OctoPres. But omitting those features is certainly forgivable at these prices. Convertors were compared to a 192 and there was barely any discernible difference once levels were matched.

On the Dynamic model, although you get no Pad, each channel's input gain knob is accompanied by a red Overload LED. The Compressor knob is accompanied by a yellow LED to show when the signal is above the threshold. It also briefly blinks as you turn the knob up from the Off position (there is no click in the knob, but sometimes a little audible blip, especially in More mode, when some auto make-up gain is suddenly supplied). There are two modes. A More button changes the ratio from 2:1 to 4:1; turning up the knob simultaneously lowers the threshold and increases the makeup gain, but the threshold point also varies, depending on the selected mode. The automatic makeup gain errs on the side of caution, but usefully stops the signal disappearing from the mix as the gain reduction is increased. The compression has the character of a typical VCA compressor, such as a dbx 160x. It has a bit of attack, a fairly rapid release, and it sounds pretty smooth for general use.

In summary, both OctoPres deliver perfectly respectable performance, and they undoubtedly provide extraordinary value for money. ■

**PROS** Exceptional value; neutral sound quality; matches other Saffire models.

**CONS** No polarity reverse; legending is tiny; more mic gain would have been useful.

### Contact

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