

# Focusrite Platinum OctoPre

Another multichannel preamp with a thing about the number eight? Possibly, but this unassuming unit represents something of a rethink on traditional functionality and the interpretation of 'wow'.

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**T**HE OCTOPRE IS THE LATEST addition to Focusrite's range of Platinum outboard processing equipment and features eight channels of mic preamp and compressor/limiter in a compact 1U. It might lack the initial 'wow' factor of, say, the ISA430 and doesn't spring immediately to mind as your next 'must-have' purchase, but the truth is that Focusrite has obviously put a lot of thought into this product. The result is ideally suited to a whole host of applications and there is a lot more to it than initially meets the eye.

The front panel of the OctoPre is clear and reasonably uncluttered when you consider exactly how much is going on in the space. Each input channel has an individual phantom power switch, mic/line select switch, and a gain control. Analogue signal inputs are catered for on the back panel by eight XLR inputs for mic level signals, and eight line level inputs and outputs on 25-pin Dsub connectors wired to the increasingly ubiquitous 'Tascam' standard. All channels also feature a switchable high-pass filter with a slope of -12dB/octave that kicks in at 100Hz.

In addition, the first two input channels also have a front panel instrument level input on 1/4-inch jack and a phase reverse switch. Signal present and 'over' LEDs allow rudimentary monitoring of input signals.

The mic preamps are a transistor-based Class-A design similar to that found on other Platinum products. They proved to be very quiet, and sound open and natural at all levels of gain. There is little obvious colouration of the sound, and while they might lack the absolute detail of other products higher up in the range, they perform very admirably indeed. So well in fact, that Focusrite could have been forgiven for leaving things there. But it is with the addition of the OctoPre's two other functions – dynamics processing and digital connectivity – that the application for this unit becomes more obvious.

In addition to the standard analogue outputs, the OctoPre can be optionally fitted with a choice of two digital output boards. Both allow the digital output of

all eight channels at 44.1, 48, 88.2 and 96kHz and these can be dithered to 24, 20 or 16 bits as required. The cheapest digital option gives you two ADAT 'light-pipe' connectors and a BNC input for locking the A-D convertor to an external word clock source if required.

At sample rates of 44.1 or 48kHz, all eight channels are provided on one ADAT connector, and are mirrored on the second connector. At higher sample rates the eight channels are split between the two connectors due to the bandwidth limitation on this type of interface. The more expensive 'full-spec' digital board has all the features of the cheaper board, but adds AES-EBU and SPDIF outputs. These are accessed by a 9-pin D-type connector, which can be broken out to XLR or phono outputs by a conversion cable. Switching between SPDIF and AES-EBU is via a switch on the card at the rear panel. Some users might bemoan the lack of a TDIF option here, although I'm sure that Focusrite could oblige if demand were high enough.

Sample rate and dithering options for both boards are set by front panel switches, which become active when the options are installed. An additional LED shows lock-status if the board is synchronised to an external clock. While they might not be making the likes of Apogee lose any sleep, the converters employed in the digital options sound at least the equal of those employed in budget digital consoles and DAWs, and I encountered no annoying digital sync problems or glitches with the unit in master or slave modes.

Each of the input channels also features a compressor/limiter, which is accessed by a solitary dynamics knob on the front panel. With this control fully counter-clockwise, the dynamics section is bypassed, enabling the unit to function purely as a preamp. Turning it past the click stop immediately brings in a brick-wall limiter with a fixed threshold of +20dBu. Signal limiting is indicated by the illumination of a red LED, and corresponds to 0dBFS at the input of the A-D convertor if fitted, making it useful for catching pesky transients when recording

digitally. As the control is turned further clockwise, compression is progressively applied to the signal. This single control in effect reduces the threshold level, increases the compression ratio and adds gain make-up as it is turned. The amount of compression being applied is indicated by the intensity of a yellow LED.

In practice, this 'one knob' approach to dynamics processing is not as limiting (Hmmm. Ed) as it sounds. Only occasionally do you miss an additional level of control, and it is quite possible to quickly achieve effects ranging from gentle levelling on a vocal to quite vigorous envelope shaping on a kick drum. More extreme settings inevitably lead to some 'pumping', and it is here that you sometimes wish that some control of attack and release parameters were on offer. Nevertheless, its operational simplicity belies its flexibility, and the key to this lies in its internal architecture.

Both the limiter and compressor sidechains derive two control signals based on signal level compared to threshold. One of these control signals has a fast response, and the other a slower response. Audio that passes through the compressor is split into a high and low frequency band, and each band is then passed through an opto based gain control element. The high frequency band is controlled by the fast control signal, while the low frequency band is controlled by the slower control signal. The limiter works in exactly the same way, which according to Focusrite allows the compressor and limiter to act on fast transients by only severely affecting the high frequency part of the waveform. This leads to less intermodulation distortion and therefore a more musical response.

As eight channels of decent mic preamp alone it may well find a home in many studio outboard racks. With the digital options fitted and the stripped down, yet effective, approach to dynamic processing the OctoPre is also ideally suited as an analogue front end to a DAW, or incorporated into a live recording rig in conjunction with a digital multitrack. In the live recording or project studio DAW scenario, I can see the OctoPre becoming a real alternative to, and taking sales from, the more traditional small format stereo mixer. It's not going to be everybody's choice as a compressor/limiter, or everybody's choice as an A-D solution. But when you consider the capability, compactness and price it becomes a compelling all-round package with a 'wow' factor all of its own.

**PROS** Value for money (even with digital options); high quality and smooth sounding mic preamps; compactness; ease of use

**CONS** Compressor functionality may be a little limited for some applications; lack of TDIF option

**EXTRAS** And what's the best kept secret in the Platinum range? It's the **Compounder**. Introducing a curiously high level of innovation in such an 'entry level' dynamics box, the Compounder does ordinary gain reduction and then it does some more. Key to matters is a Bass Expander pot and associated Huge button, which work on the lower frequencies. The results are pretty special.



## Contact

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