review

Focusrite Voicemaster Pro

It's currently the flagship of the Platinum range, this box arranges an assortment of interesting processing in a voice channel style that will take on all comers in its class. GEORGE SHILLING says it's ridiculously cheap.

THIS UPDATED VOICE CHANNEL is the flagship of the Platinum range, and ironically seems to have more LEDs, knobs and connections than anything in the vastly more expensive ISA range. The front panel layout sensibly divides the different sections in a fairly clear way, and the knobs' pointers are excellent. Pushbuttons enabling each section have hidden LEDs that light when activated. The Line, HPF and Process Bypass buttons are also similarly equipped, but stupidly the Phantom Power button is not.

The mic preamp is uncharacteristically dull sounding for a Focusrite – ISA range models tend to have exaggerated high-end detail to my ears, but this unit exhibits none of those traits and sounds slightly dark. However, clarity is there and with a touch of EQ everything is present and correct, if a little less involving compared with more expensive units. There is a useful front panel mic input XLR in addition to the one on the rear, and an instrument input appears here too.

There is a steep variable HPF that sounds smoother than the 18dB/octave figure might suggest. Selecting the Line input also changes the Gain knob into a +/-10dB trim, although a little bit more leeway might have been more useful in a project situation where +4dB/-10dB issues are sometimes encountered.

Progressing along the signal path and front panel in a left-to-right fashion, we next encounter the Optical Expander which works well enough, featuring variable Threshold and Release – useful for eliminating background noise.

Next is the rather unusual Vintage Harmonics section. This emulates the old trick of recording with Dolby A and playing back without it for that extra sparkle. This is very convincing, with two separate bands and variable thresholds, and lots of LEDs to indicate what is happening. There is a Depth switch for a really over-the-top effect, and a button to shunt this process after the compressor, which is normally up next.

This is an optical compressor with two fixed ratios, two attack times, and variable threshold and release knobs. It sounds pretty good on vocals and other instruments, and can be set subtly with a very fast release for an optical compressor. This section can be switched to appear in the chain after the forthcoming EQ.

Before the EQ is a section labelled Tube Sound with two knobs, one for Tone and one labelled Drive, with a scale of Cool to Warm. The Tone knob seems to affect the entire signal, not just the Tube effect as claimed in the manual, so it is best just to treat this as an extra EQ control, dulling the top-end when turned left (rarely desirable) and adding a subtle sheen over to the right. The Drive knob has an associated tri-coloured LED that indicates how much Tube Effect is occurring. This was surprisingly good when used subtly – it uses a FET to introduce 2nd, 3rd and finally 5th order harmonics as the knob is turned to the right. It can get a tiny bit fuzzy, but used carefully it adds a smidgen of richness that might help to poke a vocal through a noisy mix.

The Voice Optimised EQ is rather unconventional, with only +/-8dB available on the 'Breath' band with preset shelves at 10k and 16kHz, a fixed mid band at 1.3kHz with – 12/+8dB, an 'Absence' variable cut of up to 10dB at 3.9kHz, and a 'Warmth' bell curve with a narrower cut than boost band, variable between 120Hz and 600Hz. It actually all works pretty well, although I wasn't totally convinced about the two chosen mid frequencies. For real rescue-jobs, you might want a bit more range and control, but on good recordings it sounds sweet.

The fully-adjustable de-esser is claimed to be from the ISA 430, but I found its release a little slower than is desirable, although it worked well enough.

The Output section features a fader knob, and a Peak needle-meter with overload LED, optimised to show dBFS for digital recording, although the scale is a little hard to read against the blinding blue backlight.

A useful Process Bypass button instantly removes all processing sections. Below this is the Latency-Free Monitoring section. This comprises a headphone output and three knobs for balancing the mix and setting levels. On the rear are jack sockets for you to plug your mix through (with sockets to take it back out to continue its journey to your amplifier), and also a mono FX send and two jacks for FX return. Many project studio operators will find this feature useful – especially those without a patchbay or multi or parallel sockets or leads. Or indeed, even those without a mixing console.

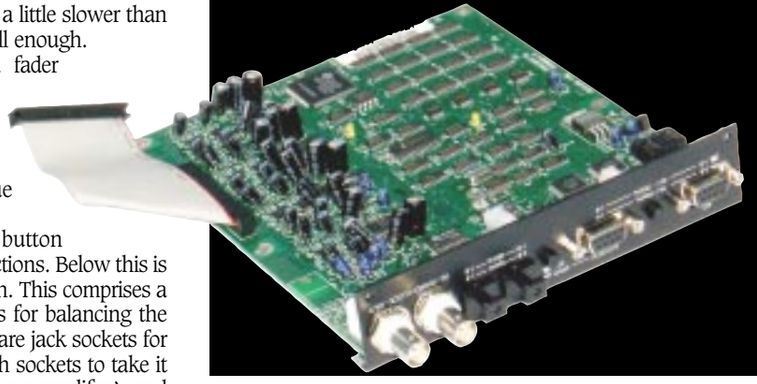
The rear panel also includes Insert Send and Return jacks, which appear immediately after the input section before processing. Line input is a TRS jack socket, and output is available on a – 10dB TRS jack, and two +4dB XLRs, one labelled 'Pre-De-Esser', which means it also avoids passing through the output fader knob.

An optional Digital Board provides 24-bit SPDIF output at sample rates up to 96kHz and even includes a Word Clock BNC. This costs extra, but the main unit is ridiculously cheap considering the features present (under UK£400 inc VAT) and at this price the sound quality is remarkable. ■

PROS Lots of features; good connectivity; price.

CONS No stereo link; no 48V LED.

EXTRAS Focusrite's ISA428 8-channel A-D convertor is now shipping. Operating at sampling rates up to 192kHz it includes a soft limiter optical circuit design that prevents digital overs.



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