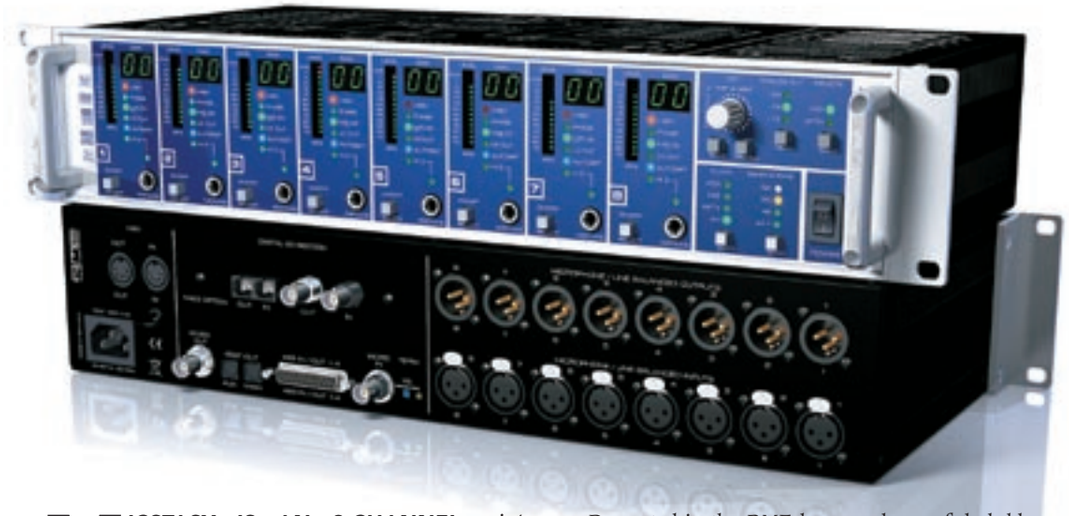
RME Micstasy

RME has one of the most comprehensive ranges of convertors and computer interface cards, all of which 'play nicely' together. It has added a multichannel mic preamp. ROB JAMS drops an E and enters Micstasy.



MICSTASY IS AN 8-CHANNEL mic/line preamplifier and analogue to digital convertor. It combines features familiar from other RME products such as Intelligent Clock Control (ICC), SyncCheck and SteadyClock with some interesting innovations. Perhaps the most significant of these is dubbed AutoSet but more about this later. The box is fully remote controllable via MIDI or, if the option card is fitted, MIDI over MADI. A free Windows application can be downloaded from the RME website. All the status displays are also returned to the controlling device and local functions apart from the Remote switch can be locked out using the software. MIDI remote is also compatible with Pro Tools, although facilities are more limited thanks to the more restricted protocol, e.g. gain cannot be adjusted in 0.5dB steps.

Analogue in to analogue line out is available simultaneously with analogue to digital outputs so Micstasy can obviate the requirement for a separate splitter box. Analogue input gain range is a spectacular 85dB, from -56.5dBu to +30dBu. Despite this, noise is astonishingly low throughout.

Rather than compromise the excellent performance figures by fitting a conventional analogue limiter, RME has chosen to use the digital control of analogue gain to implement a variation on AGC, AutoSet. When invoked, signals exceeding the preset threshold result in the input gain being reduced to the point where peaks are contained. Threshold level is adjustable in four steps (-1, -3, -6, -12dBFS) in the set-up menu. The gain reduction applied is reflected in the Gain display and gain can still be adjusted manually with AutoSet active. Once AutoSet reduces the gain the value is retained until the function is switched off. Gain reduction is pretty quick, around 20dB in 10ms. This introduces the possibility of momentary clipping but, in practice, I found this to be inaudible.

As you would expect, channels can be linked to avoid image shifts. Channels link to the left and separate groups can be set up, for example Channel 5 linked with Channel 4 and 3, Channel 8 with Channel 7 and Channel 6. Thus it is possible to have four independent stereo groups and two groups of multiple channels.

Decorated in the RME house colours of dark blue and silver, the UK£2552 (+ VAT for MADI version; £2297 + VAT standard) 2U is busy back and front. Each of the eight identical channel strips has a two-character alphanumeric display showing the current gain setting and a 13-segment LED bargraph with switchable peak hold. LED indicators show +48V phantom, Phase, MS decoding, Lo Cut, AutoSet active, and Hi Z (high impedance for the front panel jack). A single non-latching button selects the channel and turns functions on and off and multiple selections are allowed.

In the Set section a single multifunction rotary encoder/switch selects which of these functions is to be altered and sets variable parameters, such as Gain, which is switched in 0.5dB steps. MS encoding/decoding is digital so the analogue outputs mirror the input format. When decoding, even numbered channels are M and odd S. The high-pass filter is a low distortion 18dB per octave design with a cut-off-frequency of 65Hz.

All settings are stored when the unit is switched off and two buttons enable all Micstasy settings to be saved and recalled from any of eight internal memory locations. When saving or recalling, channel 7&8 alphas display SA or RE plus the memory location number. All settings are saved apart from analogue output level, sample rate, sync source and remote. Pressing Save and Recall together accesses the set-up menu. Analogue output level is sequentially adjustable via a button and indicator LEDs between +13, +19 and +24dBu. Maximum output level is +27dBu so there is 3dB of analogue output headroom even when using the hot +24dB setting. Remote control is invoked by a button that steps through MIDI, Option Slot (MADI), and Off. Clock source and Sample Rate are set in the same manner with the choice of Word clock, AES, Option (MADI), and internal. Internal Sample Rate steps through 44.1kHz, 48kHz and double and quad speed for each.

Around the back, 16 XLRs deal with analogue Mic/Line inputs and Line outputs. A 25-pin D-Sub carries the four stereo AES single-wire channel outputs in Tascam pin-out. The channel 1&2 Input can be used as the clock source while two shuttered optical Toslink sockets provide ADAT Main and Aux outputs. SMUX is supported with correspondingly reduced channel count. By using both sockets, eight channels can still be output in double-speed modes. However, only four channels are possible in quad-speed modes. Word clock in and out are the usual BNCs with a small switch to set 75-ohm termination. Two DINs deal with MIDI remote and an option slot accepts the I64 MADI card, which adds coaxial and optical MADI.

With this number of features there is always the danger of the user interface becoming cumbersome or confusing. RME has made a good job of avoiding the pitfalls and the resulting interface is surprisingly intuitive. Transparency and silence are the defining audio qualities.

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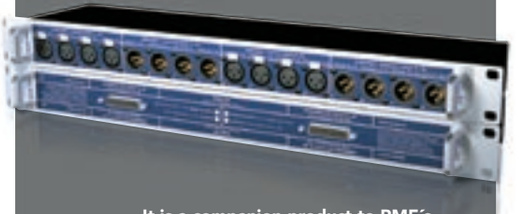
Micstasy is a new entrant in what is probably the most crowded part of the market, mic pre/convertors. Mic preamps are very personal things but this box is certainly well up to playing with the big boys. It has the RME pedigree, something not to be dismissed lightly, and a number of interesting and innovative features. Most notable is AutoSet. I can see this being a real boon in live work. Latency from the Cirrus-Logic convertors is remarkably low, a mere 12 samples at 48kHz. The forthcoming matching RME ADI-8 QS D-A will continue this trend with a latency in the range of 5 to 10 samples. MADI will be of particular interest with multiple remote units and up to eight can be daisy chained to return 64 inputs down a single cable. Delay compensation aligns all signals to sample accuracy.

In the end, choice of front end comes down to three main factors; price, features and sound. The first is dictated by budget, the second depends on what you are trying to do, and the third can only be determined by careful listening. If the first two boxes are ticked, Micstasy will repay handsomely the time and effort invested in a critical audition. ■

PROS Low noise and wide gain range; intuitive; AutoSet.

CONS There are now so many good mic pre/convertors that making a choice is hard; otherwise, nothing significant.

EXTRAS RME's BOB-32 is a universal breakout box for AES-EBU XLR or D-Sub. One side offers eight XLR AES-EBU I-Os and the other provides two D-Sub connectors. The box can be 'folded' in the middle, bringing all connectors to one side. It comes with pin-out formats for Tascam or Yamaha.



It is a companion product to RME´s HDSP AES-32, ADI-6432, Octamic-D, Micstasy, ADI-8 QS, and other devices that use the pin-outs.

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