

Rupert Neve Designs Portico 5012

Hailing from Wimberley Texas, the 5012 is one of the first of an expanding range of outboard equipment carrying the Portico designation. Offering two channels of microphone preamplification, it carries that most famous of names on its front panel — but does it live up to it? asks **JON THORNTON**



HOUSED IN A HALF-WIDTH rackmount unit (buy two and you get some additional metalwork that enables them to be strapped together and mounted as a standard 19-inch rack unit), first impressions are of a solid piece of kit. The enclosure is folded steel, as are the front and back plates. This impression of solidity is let down by the amount of play there seems to be on the (switched) gain controls, something that is made more obvious by the relative firmness of the pots and switches.

Power to the unit is from an external PSU supplying 12V DC, although the manual claims the unit will function happily from most DC supplies that can supply the required power between 9 and 18 volts — a car battery, for example, could power several units in a remote location. Still, as a relatively high-end piece of studio outboard, the use of an external supply might raise eyebrows in some quarters.

The front panel contains no real surprises. Each of the two channels offers up to 66dB of gain in switched 6dB steps, with a +/-6dB trim control available for fine-tuning. A continuously variable high-pass filter with a slope of 12dB/octave is available with a range of 20–250Hz, as are switches for phase reverse and phantom power. Metering is per channel, and is courtesy of an 8-segment LED bargraph that shows output level on a scale between -30 and +22dBu.

Internally, the circuitry is discrete Class A, which in part accounts for the reasonably hefty power requirements (1 Amp at 12V), but is pretty much expected of a Rupert design. A 'Silk' switch on the front panel reduces the amount of negative feedback employed in the amplifier, resulting in a sound that has a greater harmonic distortion component, but also colours the spectrum in a manner reminiscent of 'vintage' designs.

The inputs and the outputs use transformers, although in a somewhat unusual fashion. While the main outputs are transformer balanced and floating, the inputs are electronically balanced but not floating,

using a 'Transformer-Like-Amplifier' design. This then feeds (post coarse-gain) an actual input transformer, which in turn feeds the remainder of the channel. The advantage, according to the company, is in combining the best of both worlds. This also means that there is a great deal of immunity from hum and RFI when interfacing with other equipment of various vintages and I-O topologies.

I wasn't entirely sure what to expect when the 5012 was hooked up for the first time. On the grounds that seeing what a pre can extract out of an SM57 is as good an initial test as any, this was its first task, on both acoustic and electric guitars. For comparison, a Focusrite ISA215 was used. On the standard setting, the 5012 sounds clean and open. Overall it sounded a touch softer than the Focusrite — particularly on picked electric guitar. While there wasn't a great deal of colouration to the sound, it sounded rich and full without being overblown. This was even more obvious when mated with an AT4050 to record vocals and as a drum overhead — again there was a sense that the HF wasn't quite as exaggerated as with the Focusrite, but this wasn't at the expense of any transient detail, rather an incredibly solid but detailed tone. Engaging the Silk switch changes things. There's a distinct tonal shift — lows remain full and rich, there's a slight brightening to the high end with perhaps a little dip in the high mids. Overall a slightly raunchier sound, and perhaps one that is more reminiscent of the man's earlier designs — but on balance I preferred the standard setting in most cases.

At this stage it's worth pointing out one other feature of the 5012, as it really serves to illustrate where the company is heading with this range. A switch on each input panel allows the signal to be routed to either an A bus for channel 1 or a B bus for channel 2. This routes the signal, pre-mute button, to one of two unbalanced, high impedance outputs on the rear panel. Each bus appears on a pair of normalised 1/4-inch TRS jacks, which would allow

daisy-chaining of these outputs if multiple units are employed. The long-term intention of these buses is to interface with a forthcoming bus amp/monitoring module shortly to be added to the range. Other planned modules include a high quality, 2-channel DI interface, a single channel mic pre with EQ, and a stereo compressor/limiter. Already available is an intriguing tape emulation line amplifier.

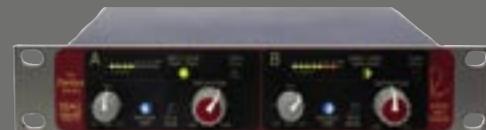
It's easy to see the possibility of configuring a series of these analogue building blocks with exactly the range of features needed into a fairly compact space — the company provides a larger rack unit that allows the mounting of up to eight Portico units in a vertical orientation, very similar to the API Lunchbox without the associated back-plane. They even provide exchange face-plates so the panel legending reads correctly in this orientation.

All of which is very tempting, particularly if the quality of the forthcoming units is as good as the 5102 (list US\$1795). I have to admit to wondering at first whether the Portico range was simply an exercise in badge-engineering. I'm glad to say though, that this is very much the real deal — and stays true to the values and qualities that Rupert has always stood for. ■

PROS A great sounding pre with a very big sound; flexibility in configurations and busing options; compact size; lives up to the name.

CONS Minor niggles with build; external PSU and mounting arrangements a pain in a fixed installation if you only buy one...

EXTRAS The Portico 5042 is a 2-channel 'true tape' emulation and line driver. When the Tape circuit is not engaged the



5042 may be used as a transformer-coupled, high-performance line amp that includes a gain range of +/-12dB. The 5042 incorporates a tape drive circuit that feeds a tiny magnetic 'head' which, in turn, is coupled to a correctly equalised replay amplifier. 'Record' and 'Replay' controls are counter-ganged to keep overall input-to-output level approximately constant; it only changes as it would in a real tape recorder, with changing drive levels to the circuit eventually resulting in saturation. The frequency response and distortion performance of the 5042's tape circuitry is tailored to that of a typical analogue tape recorder

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