



## RND Portico 5032

Representing something of a medley of two existing Portico units, the 5032 brings together a pre with a slimmed down EQ.

**JON THORNTON** says that on balance it's actually a pretty tidy performer and package.

There's only so much that you can fit into the available real estate of a 1u high, half rackmount width box. You could opt for a couple of channels of well-featured mic preamps. Alternatively, you could fit a rather nice five band EQ into the space. But for those of us sitting on the fence, as it were, Rupert Neve Designs offers a compromise in the form of the 5032.

Based on the same design employed in the 5012 dual mic pre from the same range, the 5032 gives an identically specified single channel of preamplification coupled with a 3-band equaliser. The rear panel offers separate mic and line level inputs on XLR, with a line level output also on XLR. TRS jacks provide the proprietary Portico bus outputs that enable particular summing configurations to be built using a variety of Portico modules, and power is via an external PSU.

All inputs and outputs are balanced using custom wound transformers, although like its sibling the 5032's microphone input is actually electronically balanced, which then feeds a physical transformer (post coarse-gain), and then feeds the remainder of the signal path.

Front panel controls for the mic pre are virtually identical to the 5012. Coarse gain is provided by a stepped rotary control, giving up to 66dB of gain in 6dB increments. A trim control then gives +/-6dB of fine-tuning. A continuously variable high-pass filter (20Hz to 250Hz at 12dB/octave) is provided, along with phantom power and phase reverse switches. Signal metering is via a small eight-segment LED bargraph that shows output level (post EQ) only. The main output can be muted by a front panel button, although this doesn't affect either the meter or the Portico bus output.

Physical inputs (mic or line-level) are selected by another illuminated pushbutton. If the line-level input is selected, it's useful to note that it can access all of the signal chain except for the coarse gain control (trim, HPF, phase, etc.), as well as the rather enigmatically named 'Silk' control. This reduces the amount of negative feedback employed in the output

stage of the amplifier, resulting in a sound that has a greater harmonic distortion component at lower frequencies, but also gives rise to a more 'vintage' tonal balance.

Moving on, the EQ section is a logically laid out, fairly conventional 3-band design, with shelving high and low bands, and single peaking mid band. The low shelf has a fixed turnover frequency of 160Hz with 15dB of cut and boost available, while the high shelf can switch its turnover frequency between 8kHz and 16kHz. The mid band offers a range of 80Hz to 800Hz, with a 10x multiplier switch effectively extending its overall range between 80Hz and 8kHz. Q is variable and ranges from 0.6 to 3.0. A single pushbutton switches all three bands in or out of circuit.

As a mic preamplifier, the 5032 performs identically to a 5012. You have to remember that this is a modern Rupert Neve design, so anybody expecting it to sound like a 1073 is going to be disappointed. In 'default' mode (i.e. 'Silk' switch turned off), the sound is detailed and smooth, with just the smallest hint of 'bloom' around the low frequencies to remind you that those transformers are there. What isn't there is the mid-range crunch you'd associate with something like a 1073, and a much sweeter, more open top end that captures transient detail well, but flatters sources rather than brutally exposing them. Engaging the 'Silk' mode seems to add a little more colouration to the low mids, with perhaps a little less HF extension — more 'vintage' in sound, but still not quite as obvious as a 1073 or the like.

The EQ section, despite its relative simplicity, is a delight to use. The low and high shelves are actually quite surgical in their action, with slopes around the 6dB/octave mark. Used in moderation they work well to slightly thicken or thin out a vocal line, or to add just a touch more 'air' to a drum overhead. Used more aggressively and they can shape the sound in quite an extreme fashion, but still sound reasonably musical.

Range choices for the single mid-band are also well thought out. The default range of 80–800Hz is pretty much where you need it to deal with

obnoxious room modes or cardboard box drum resonances. Flipping the 10x button then puts you right in the frame for some careful de-essing or a gentle presence lift on vocals. In fact, having started out the review assuming I was going to find only three bands of EQ quite restrictive at times, this was never the case. OK, when hugely corrective EQ is needed to dig yourself out of a hole of somebody else's making (*Naturally, never one's own. Ed*), you might just start wishing for another parametric band. But for tracking purposes it's probably all you are ever going to need.

Even in mixdown the 5032 is a useful addition to the outboard arsenal. Remember that the line input is also transformer balanced and has access to the 'Silk' function? It proved just the job for very gently smoothing and calming down a female vocal track that was beginning to sound just that little bit too 'digital' when mixed in the box.

If a single channel of preamplification is all you are ever going to need, the 5032 should be high on your auditioning list. The EQ is much, much more useful than it might appear at first glance, and the preamp, while not the most transparent around, flatters most sources you throw at it. In fact, given the range of rackmount options available for the Portico range, I'd go as far as to say that a pair of 5032s racked together would be more than worth the additional cost when compared with a two channel 5012. ■

**PROS** Flattering, open, musical sounding pre; 'Silk' option gives some tonal flexibility; EQ well thought out and highly effective.

**CONS** Only one channel per unit; very occasionally you might find three EQ bands a little limiting.

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