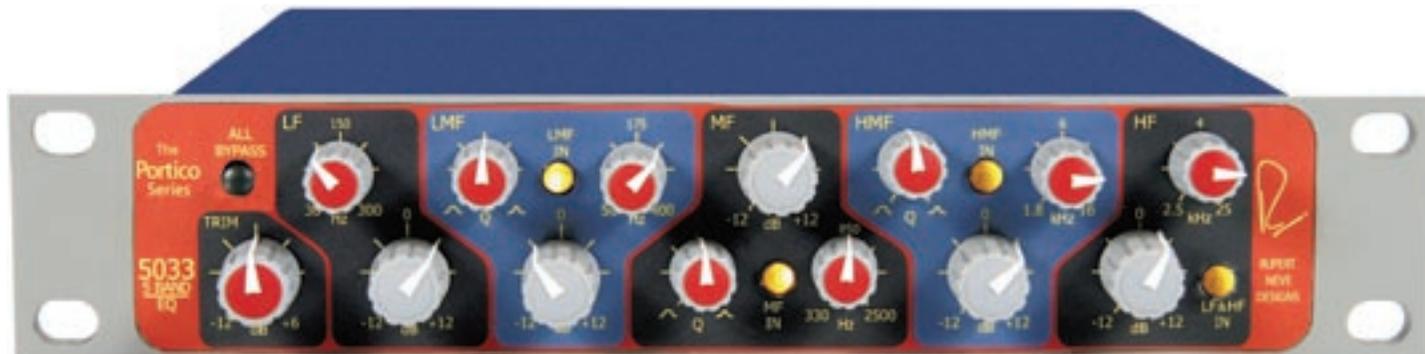


RND Portico 5033

The half width, 1U Portico boxes from Rupert Neve Designs have become an increasingly familiar sight in outboard racks in the last year or two. **JON THORNTON** is smitten with the best EQ he's heard in years.



TRUE TO IT'S word, the Texas-based RND outfit has continued to add to its range of devices at a steady rate and it now encompasses not only the staples of a signal processing diet, but also some more spicy offerings, such as analogue tape emulation and stereo width processing.

The 5033 though, falls firmly into the former category, and is the only dedicated EQ in the range. It's initially distinctive because of the number of bands on offer — three overlapping parametric bands cover the mid range, coupled with high and low shelving bands, to give a total of five rather than the usual four.

The now familiar half-width 1U case is just as solidly constructed as ever, and Rupert's signature printed on the top in silver is a nice touch and means that you never forget its provenance. The rear panel sports a balanced input and output on XLR connectors, together with a pair of TRS paralleled jacks. These (high impedance) outputs allow a number of units to be daisy-chained together to provide a bused signal that is the sum of all of the individual units' outputs. Power is from an external PSU, with a DC input socket on the rear of the unit and the 5033 will happily work with supply voltages in the range 9–18V.

Given the number of bands on offer, the front panel doesn't look as crowded as it should do and is logically laid out. The high and low shelving bands offer 12dB of cut or boost, and sweep between 30Hz–300Hz and 2.5kHz–25kHz respectively. A single illuminated pushbutton by the HF shelving controls switches both shelving bands in and out of circuit.

Each of the three parametric mid bands, by contrast, has its own in/out switch, together with 12dB of cut or boost, centre frequency and variable Q control. The Q in each band can be varied between 0.7 and 5, so you know immediately that this isn't going to be a tool for surgical correction, but then again that's generally not the point with a Rupert Neve design. An overall EQ bypass button and an input trim control (+/-12dB) complete the front panel line-up.

Despite its size, the 5033 is fairly hefty on the weight front, due in no small part to the use of custom wound transformers on the input and output stages. This, together with the solid chassis and shielded DC-DC convertor unit in the power stage, makes for a box that is extraordinarily quiet and virtually immune from RFI in most situations. It also means that it will work quite happily as a high quality line driver with all the EQ bands switched out. But perhaps most intriguing is the effect that this I-O topology has on signals even when the EQ is switched out.

Yes, you'd expect some minor colouration given all of that galvanic action, but switching the insert point on a console in and out with the unit in place makes a very significant difference. A little low frequency enhancement and a real sense of added solidity to the low-mids is the best way to describe it. It's not at all unpleasant — quite the opposite in fact, but you could never describe it as transparent!

In use the 5033 is quick and intuitive. Yes, I know that EQ in general isn't that hard to find your way around, but finding the area of interest and dealing with it just seemed absurdly easy. This is helped by the choice of overlap in all five bands — particularly the mid-range bands, which work between 50 and 400Hz (Low Mid), 330 and 2500Hz (Mid) and 1.8 and 16kHz (High Mid). On vocals in particular, where less is more in my view, having three bands available in that tricky mid range proved particularly useful. It was actually very hard to make things sound bad with the 5033 — even when exploring the limits of the cut and boost in each band things never started to sound too nasty. The overwhelming impression is that although it tends to sound very gentle, it does this while still maintaining a high degree of precision.

In comparison to an Amek 9098 EQ (another Neve design, incidentally), it shows similar degrees of accuracy and control. But the 9098 has always seemed very surgical in its action to my ears — even given the fact that the highest Q settings on its mid bands are actually lower than the 5033's. And the Portico box is just light-years ahead in terms of musicality and smoothness.

I have a CD of 'problem' material that I've gathered through the years — vocals with an inherently nasal quality, kick drums with more cardboard box resonances than a Tetra-Pak factory, you know the kind of thing, and I found myself working through it with the 5033. And the further I got, the more I realised that this is a stellar bit of kit. It's able to deal with the problems not just by excising bits of spectrum, but in somehow doing this while not leaving any noticeable scars behind.

Problems are few; one of the pots on the review unit felt a little less firmly anchored to the circuit board than I'd have liked, and external PSUs aren't everybody's cup of tea. You could also quibble over the lack of a high and low pass filter option. In truth, it would be hard to fit them into the available panel real estate, and the third parametric band really is a much better use of that space.

I've reviewed several of the Portico units since their inception, and they have always been solid,



high quality performers. The 5033 is no exception here, but for the first time there's also that sense of something special and magical — somehow it's more than the sum of its parts. It's not about total transparency, nor about having all the bells and whistles possible. Instead, it's all about useability and musicality. And in that sense, it's simply the best EQ I've come across in years. ■

PROS

Useful and extremely musical sounding EQ; three mid bands give plenty of sonic flexibility; transformer balanced I-O adds something special to signal path.

CONS

External PSU; no HPF or LPF.

EXTRAS

The Portico 5016 is a 2-channel device combining the RND 5012 mic preamp with a DI, which may be used together or independently. A Variable Phase control allows the manual phase-alignment of the direct input source in relation to the microphone input signal.



The 5016 features very short signal paths, minimal negative feedback and custom-designed transformers that, on the DI input, provide ground isolation and the virtual elimination of interference loops.

A continuously swept 12dB/octave high pass filter covers 20Hz-250Hz and the 'Silk' is included along with switches for mute, phase reverse and 48V phantom power.

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