



RND Portico II Channel

Despite advancing years and confirmed 'legendary' status, Rupert Neve shows no signs of slowing down, and continues to do what he knows best: refining audio circuit design.

GEORGE SHILLING admires his recording channel.

Following on from the myriad small format Portico units and the highly regarded 5088 console, a new Portico has been unleashed incorporating technical aspects of both, plus some new tricks, in a conventionally sized 2U. The Portico II Channel is a mono recording channel with comprehensive filtering, EQ, de-essing and multimode compression, along with some enhancing circuitry.

The weighty and extensively vented case (power rails run at +/-36V and there are no ICs) features a beautifully finished front panel — legending is clear black on a thick, off-white painted panel. Knobs have a lovely tactile matt finish, with a classy damped feel. Small pushbuttons illuminate in several colours. First impressions are excellent, with an obvious attention to detail and an exceptionally high build quality.

The rear panel features separate Mic and Line XLR inputs, an XLR Line out, and four jack sockets. These comprise Side Chain Send and Return for connecting audio signals relating to the Compressor VCA, plus a pair of Link sockets for connecting other Portico compressors' VCA signals. A relay-activating Ground Lift switch is provided, and mains input handles 100-240V at 50 or 60Hz.

The front panel controls are neatly organised into delineated sections. First comes the Input stage, with Mic/DI Gain from 6-66dB in 6dB steps, along with a +/-6dB Trim knob that also operates in Line mode but has no centre detente. As with other rotary controls this lacks a pointer down the side of the barrel, which is frustrating when recalling settings. A Signal Present LED lights green at about 20dB below 'normal' and turns red at +22dBu, which is about 3dB below clipping. Latching buttons are provided for Line, 48V phantom, Phase reverse and Mute (full marks for providing the last of these where so many rivals omit it.) LED colours have been thoughtfully selected (red for 48V and Mute, green for Line, etc.) A front-panel jack socket is provided for DI and there is even a paralleled Thru jack for onward connection to an amplifier (full marks again!) Inserting a plug into either of these makes relays click and the DI indicator light up.

With processing bypassed the mic preamp sounds clean and crisp, with just a hint of that trademark HF extension and apparent extra detail and

enhancement at the top end that I recognise from Neve's Focusrite and Amek designs. It's very subtle, but there is perhaps a tiny fraction less midrange 'glow' than you get from an API.

The next section is a Bessel 12dB/octave HPF that is a continuously variable knob from 20Hz-250Hz with 100Hz marked at half way. This can be switched into the audio circuit or alternatively routed to the compressor sidechain to reduce pumping from signals with lots of low frequency content. This feature is great on certain material, although with only one of these units I didn't get a chance to hear it across a stereo mix.

The next section features the EQ and de-esser controls, with an All EQ In button and the means to set all EQ (except the HPF) post-compressor if required — I sometimes like to do that so found this useful. The four-band EQ includes three bypass buttons for LF, HF and the two mids together. All bands include detented +/-15dB continuous boost/cut knobs. Low and High bands each feature four well-chosen switched frequencies (35, 60, 100 and 220Hz and 4.7, 6.8, 12 and 25kHz) and include Shelf/Peak switching, with Peak set to a Q of about 2.5. The mids both sweep continuous frequency ranges (70-1400Hz and 0.7-14kHz) and are accompanied by continuous Q knobs (marked values are 0.7 to 5 with 2 in the middle). Also hidden among these controls is a De-Esser knob that simply ranges from Off to Max. However, what is not obvious is that this is dependent on the HMF frequency knob setting with its range of 0.7 to 14kHz. You can compensate for the de-essing by simultaneously boosting this band, so with a bit of juggling very natural results are possible.

The next section is the Compressor. The Ratio control covers every eventuality with a range from 1.1:1 up to 20:1. Attack and Release controls are similarly wide-ranging, and not only is there a choice of RMS or Peak sensing, but also a choice between FeedBack and FeedForward modes. In the manual, Peak mode is referred to as Fast mode and this is essentially what happens! Meanwhile, the FB mode is more gentle and classic sounding, while FF tends to get things pumping. I was generally more of a fan of FB mode, which tends to retain better clarity, while FF can get a bit rubbery. As well as Gain make-up, there is also a useful Blend knob for

achieving parallel compression.

To the far right is the Power button (the only non-illuminating switch) and the Silk controls. A button toggles Off, Silk and Silk+ modes and the amount of 'Silk' is controlled by the Texture knob. Silk seems to add 'fatness' and warm but subtle fuzzy distortion in the low frequencies when pushed. Silk+ aims to emulate vintage Class A console circuits and seems to enhance the high frequencies. If adding anything while tracking I'd tend to stick with a tiny bit of Silk+ for vocals while Silk works great for bass instruments, especially when Dling bass guitar. The DI input sounds exceptionally good with bass guitar: my Hofner was solid, clean, clear and round; seemingly more 'grounded' than is sometimes the case.

I recorded voice using a fairly bright valve mic with a touch of Portico HF boost, light FB compression (according to the GR meter) and a moderate amount of Silk (knob half way) and was surprised by just how 'processed' the results turned out, with very slight distortion from the Silk circuit and the compression (foolishly set to Peak with a fast release), and quite some poke from the HF boost! However, this just proves how potentially powerful the Portico can be, and with a lighter touch on the controls a rather more neutral sound is achievable. With most signals, powerful EQ boosts can be achieved with no unpleasantness — this EQ deserves the description of 'musical' as much as any production of Mamma Mia! (*Groan. Ed*)

The Portico is a class act with supreme audio quality, yet with the capability to deliver strongly characterful manipulation and processing. Many buttons activate relay clicks and you feel reassured that the circuitry is of the highest quality. The manual is helpful and unexpectedly light-hearted. Features that I love, such as sidechain filtering for the compressor, compressor blend, DI Thru, and the handy Mute button, all contribute to a highly flexible recording channel. The preamp reveals great detail, the EQ is sweet, and there are nods to the old classics with the variable 'Silk' emulations. It's possibly Rupert's best box yet. ■

PROS Extremely flexible 'Rolls Royce' recording channel; very low distortion (with Silk disengaged!)

CONS No pointers along knob barrels.

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