

TL Audio 5000

Diversity — that's the name of the game these days. If you are an established manufacturer of valve-based processing that has conquered preamps, EQ, dynamics processing and even full scale mixing consoles then you can go further up the audio chain. **JON THORNTON**



TL AUDIO'S 5000, part of its Ivory series, is the company's first excursion into microphone manufacture. Being TL Audio, it comes as no surprise that the microphone in question features a valve lurking inside its considerable girth. What is slightly unusual is that the external power supply that accompanies most valve microphones has been expanded somewhat, and also includes a mic preamplifier. Add to this the increasingly common digital output option, and you have a 'one-stop shop' approach to signal path (UK£734.37 inc VAT), from microphone to DAW.

Let's start with the microphone itself, which is described as a 'Gold Diaphragm Valve Condenser Microphone' — self-explanatory really. Featuring a 1-inch dual diaphragm capsule, the microphone body also sports a -10dB pad switch, and a switchable 120Hz high pass filter, with a 6dB/octave slope. The mic body is fairly chunky in dimensions and proportions, and build quality and finish would seem to be of a high standard. Internally, a single 12AT7 valve is employed in the microphone's electronics. A shockmount and foam windshield are supplied as standard.

Connection to the PSU/preamp is via a 7-pin XLR type connector, which plugs into the rear of the 2U rackmount. Also on the rear panel is a balanced line level output at a nominal +4dBu level on XLR. This output is also duplicated on an unbalanced TRS jack at a slightly lower (-2dBu) nominal level, which TL Audio suggests could be used as a separate buffered monitor output to overcome latency problems if the unit is feeding a DAW directly.

This is clearly an application that TL Audio expects to be very common for the 5000, evidenced by the slot for an optional (although not fitted to the review unit) digital output card. A link output and link input jack are also featured,

which allow a second unit to feed its output into the 'spare' second channel of the digital output. The final provision on the rear panel is a switch that allows the microphone's output to bypass the preamp and appear at microphone level on the XLR output — thus allowing the mic to be paired with a different preamp if desired.

The front panel is split into two sections. The first of these contains the polar pattern select switch that offers nine steps between omni, through cardioid and finally to fig-8. A phase reverse switch is followed by the first of two gain stages of the preamp. This stage offers up to 60dB of gain, and is followed by an Output Gain control on the right. This control acts as a master output fader, as it can fully attenuate the output of the unit, but also allows an additional 15dB of gain to be added.

Metering is via a backlit mechanical VU meter and a peak LED. The peak indicator handily monitors both gain stages simultaneously, ensuring that the onset of clipping is accurately indicated even if the output gain control is attenuating the signal. The VU meter also has an associated +10dB pushbutton, which drops the indicated level on the VU meter by 10dB. This allows the output gain to be accurately metered even when driving the output close to the +26dBu maximum output level, meaning that you can use all available digits when recording directly to a digital system. In practice, I found this arrangement

to be a very good and intuitive method when bridging the gap between analogue sources and digital recorders.

Hauled up in front of a male vocalist, first impressions of the microphone are quite favourable. Much brighter sounding in general than some recent low cost valve microphones, the 5000 did a commendable job in capturing a breathy, intimate sound. Low frequency extension is also smooth, with a noticeable but useful proximity lift on the directional patterns. There's a slightly grainy quality around the high-mids, which on male vocals isn't unpleasant and warms up the overall tonality. Where some valve designs fall over in my experience is when dealing with the higher registers of female vocals, where there is an edginess to the sound that borders on the unpleasant. However, the 5000 doesn't suffer in this respect and manages to stay very open sounding.

I'd hazard a guess that some of this is due to careful matching of the preamplifier to the microphone's electronics, as using the straight microphone output option and bringing an Amek 9098 into play as a preamplifier did result in a slightly 'harder' sound. Unfortunately, it's impossible to use the 5000's preamplifier with a different microphone source. While this would have meant some additional costs with the provision of a separate phantom power supply, it would have given prospective purchasers a little more flexibility.

Employed as a single drum overhead, the 5000 also provided good results, managing to capture the detail in cymbals as well as plenty of stick tone from the kit. Moving it further back as a room mic for the same drum kit was less successful though, as its resolution seemed to fall away quite quickly when compared to a Sony C-800 in the same position.

In most other respects, though the 5000 'combo' held its own against a C-800/Amek 9098 'mix-and-match' in blind tests — some voices suited one microphone more than the other, but there was never a clear cut winner. A good package, with very few compromises. ■

Contact

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PROS

A 'one-stop shop', particularly with the digital output option; intelligent gain structure and metering for digital recording applications; bright, detailed sound that doesn't suffer from harshness or premature HF roll-off.

CONS

No provision for external microphone input to preamp; direct mic output switch hard to access when rackmounted; not as detailed for distant miking as it might be.

EXTRAS

TL Audio's 5060 Preset valve compressor couples a dual-channel compressor with a discrete mic preamp, plus stereo line and instrument inputs. The compressor stage features a selection of 15 vocal, instrument and mix presets plus a 'manual' mode that allows access to fully variable control of threshold, ratio, attack/release, gain make-up and soft/hard knee modes.

It can be operated in mono or linked stereo modes and the preamp stage offers a gain range of 100dB, with phantom power and a 90Hz low cut filter.

