

TL Audio Ivory 5052

Responding to predictable user demand for a stereo version of its popular 5051 unit, TL Audio's latest box offers high levels of versatility. ZENON SCHOEPE says it adds up to much more than the sum of its parts.



IT'S BEEN A GOOD FEW years since I used a TL Audio unit for any length of time. Younger days were spent looking at the original grey boxes, even when they were briefly called TLAs, and the experiences were very favourable. However, there was always something of a 'self-build' feeling about those early devices, which some people like to refer to as 'classic' looks. The 5052 is a league away from that and looks and feels splendid. It's the sort of presentation that American purveyors of esoteric modern outboard are so good at – combining blandness with just a hint of brashness that makes the box say: 'Buy me, you know I'm good'. So it is with the 5052 and at UK£999 (+VAT) you have to look at this 2-channel incarnation of the 5051 recording channel. It's a dual channel and stereo linkable preamp, compressor, EQ and limiter.

Connectivity is brilliant. However, I'd say sort your requirements out pretty firmly before you screw it into a rack as the density of sockets makes 'hand up the back' connection pretty difficult.

TL Audio is not scrimping on anything here. There are balanced mic and line inputs and line outputs on XLRs plus unbalanced inputs and outputs on jack (the former -10/+4 switchable). There are balanced inserts on each channel and unbalanced TRS access to each compressor's side-chain. The front panel also gets an instrument input with selection of this plus phantom powered mic, dynamic mic and line input on a switch.

The review unit came with the optional digital output board offering switchable 44.1/48kHz at 24-bit SPDIF on a phono with a Word clock input.

Central to front panel affairs are the two VU meters, which can be switched as a pair to read input, output, compressor gain reduction or limiter gain reduction. There's also a 10dB 'pad' switch for the meter, which serves to unstick the needle from full right and give a bit more movement for instances when your

hammering it down hard. You'll need this switch, believe me.

Three Stereo Mode switches hand control of both channels to channel 1 for compression, EQ and limiting respectively. Significantly, input and output gains remain independent for both channels.

From here on in the 5052 presents itself much like the two 5051s that it is but I'll dust over the facilities quickly.

The EQ is 4-band with two fully parametric mids and peaking or shelving options on the sweepable HF and LF. You have +/-15dB to play with over 30Hz-1kHz, 50Hz-1.5kHz, 1kHz-12kHz, and 3kHz-20kHz. I hadn't actually thought what the precise frequency ranges were until just now when I copied them out of the manual for you. I'm a bit surprised to be honest because I wasn't aware that there was quite so much overlap in the bottom two bands. Either way I'm still delighted with this circuit as it is very useful stuff. Good for putting a curve on a mix, great for pulling down notes on a bass, and wonderful at making a cheap mic sound more expensive. I always liked the switched frequencies on those old TL Audio EQs but this is undoubtedly progress in the control stakes.

Similarly I was always partial to the compression on those battleship grey units and the 5052 acquits itself well. You get variable threshold (which turns in the opposite direction to most other units), ratio (1:1.5 to 1:30), attack, release, and the essential 20dB of gain makeup. There's switchable soft and hard knee characteristic and you can even switch the EQ into the compressor's sidechain for added flexibility and power. You can also flip the EQ to be before the compressor.

The word useful comes to mind again. Clean enough to sit and tend general levels unobtrusively, it also has a darker and dirtier side to it that does passable impersonations of hard-driven valve classics. It's a great tracking compressor for instruments.

The EQ and compressor can be bypassed individually and there's also a global bypass for each channel.

What's great about the 5052 is that the character of the EQ and compression is altered according to how hard the input section is being driven and this really is the heart of this unit. The input gain pot drives a valve circuit – just how hard is indicted by the glowing intensity of its associated Drive LED. TL Audio is not scared to offer you 11 on the input gain, you can really pile in the level.

No where is this better illustrated than what it can do to the otherwise unassuming and well-behaved limiter. The Limiter is switched on with a pull of its Threshold pot and if you load up the front of the channel with the input gain, tune into a kick drum with the EQ or side chain the compressor to do the same, and then let it hit the limiter at some speed...well, it's obscene. It sounds like the box is exploding internally. Fantastic.

It's worth reminding that you are also getting a pair of rather refined sounding mic preamps into the bargain complete with phase reverse and a 90Hz filter.

If I was feeling really greedy then I might have wanted some sweepable high and low pass filters, although I don't know where they would put them. As I'm not, I have to admit that this is an incredibly well rounded and complete package. Mono recording channels have never made a lot of sense to me. The 5052 is so flexible. Recommended. ■

PROS

It's stereo; great connectivity; fab performance, sound and flexibility; a really useful box.

CONS

'Reversed' Threshold pot may throw some; filters would be nice.

EXTRAS

TL Audio's Ivory 5000 valve condenser mic comes with its own matched power supply and preamp unit and boasts a 1-inch dual gold diaphragm for 9 variable patterns including omni, cardioid and fig-8. It has switches for



low cut and 10dB pad and it comes with an elastic suspension and windshield as standard.

The power supply's output includes the heater and 200V DC supply for the mic's internal 12AT7 triode valve, while the preamp offers output level metering, control of input and output gain and phase reverse. A balanced line level output presents a microphone level signal that can be fed to an external mic preamp.

An optional DO-2 digital output card provides a 24-bit SPDIF output switchable between 44.1 and 48kHz, along with an external Word clock input.

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