

# TL Audio M1

**GEORGE SHILLING** knocks another few inches off the polar ice caps by plugging in TL Audio's entry level valve board, and discovers a thoroughly benevolent kind of global warming.

**T**L AUDIO'S VTC (Valve Technology Console) has been around for some years and is now established as a successful mid-range/project studio console, but the company has toyed with a few different lower-order models over time. The M1 Tubetracker delivers a conventional 8 or 12 into 2 mixer, but unlike earlier budget TL Audio desks this one is semi-modular, with separate channel strips, although some circuitry is still bolted to the case. EQ is a simple 3-band design, and master section features are limited, but the trademark valve-featured circuitry remains. The 8-channel version sells at a price (UK£2199 +VAT) that you might expect to pay for four channels of boutique mic preamp — and those included here are really very good. Furthermore, digital interfacing options are available as modules to plumb into the rear — at a price.

The 12-channel unit received for review was quite a weighty affair, with some degree of strength required to move it. This is probably mostly due to the attractive oak panels on three sides. These add an air of quality rarely seen with mid-budget gear, and upon checking the label I was pleasantly surprised to find that the M1 is put together in the UK.

All analogue connections are on the top of the rear part of the unit, which can lead to messy cabling, but re-configuring is easier, and connectivity is good. All the multitudinous jack connections are balanced, and microphone inputs and main outputs are on XLRs. Each channel also includes a separate switchable Line input and a direct output (post-EQ but pre-fader), which usefully allows you to create a monitor mix separate from recording levels. There is also a proper separate balanced Insert Send and Insert Return, a welcome feature when you often have to put up with unbalanced TRS combined insert jacks at this level.

The input section includes separate phantom power for each channel, and a 30dB pad. This seems a bit drastic, but the preamps certainly have plenty of gain, even though their maximum range is labelled 60dB. A useful Polarity switch sits next to a handy 90Hz high-pass filter button. The 3-band EQ is very simple, but includes an On button, and is adequate in most situations for a bit of shaping. HF and LF are fixed, while the Mid sweeps from about 150Hz to about 7kHz. It sounds sweet enough with small boosts, especially when just adding a bit of top or bottom.

There are two Aux Sends: one is switchable to Pre but the other is always Post, which is a nuisance if you wanted to provide a stereo foldback. Above the faders are centre-detented panpots, PFL and Mute buttons with associated LEDs, and Peak and Drive LEDs for controlled colouration. While all the knobs feel oily to turn, the long faders are rather light to the touch.

The master section is laid out spaciously, and this section includes useful Alt Speaker connections and selection button, a stereo return and two external



selectable 2-track monitor inputs, a PFL Balance knob, separate headphone level control, and a wonderfully huge Volume knob. A couple of illuminated circular VUs stylishly indicate mix level.

The M1 is made a more attractive prospect to DAW users with the optional digital boards. The DO-8 provides access to the Direct Outs and Line Ins of the first eight channels with ADAT optical connections, with Word clock I-O on BNCs. A small switch selects 48kHz or 96kHz but it seems 44.1 and 88.2 are only available when clocked externally. I got better results from the mic pres using the analogue outputs going into a high-quality external convertor, using the digital interface I noticed some slight hum from the channels, but this may have been an earthing issue, as several interfaces and Word clock cables were involved. Additionally, the master section was fitted with a DO-2, this with a simple Word clock input and SPDIF phono output, and a similar sample rate switch. This is a handy solution for plumbing the mix back into the digital world.

The M1 is undoubtedly aimed towards DAW users, and as such makes a fantastic recording setup for bands. The mic preamps and EQ sound solid for the price, and true to the clichéd expectations, the valve circuitry indeed seems to add some warmth, depth and hugeness compared to budget solid state rivals. When tracking, you can use the mix bus or even the Auxes to create submixes, say to combine multi-mic setups to mono or stereo tracks on the recorder. In a non-TDM setup you could alternatively (or additionally) use the Auxes and/or the main bus for zero-latency monitoring.

With a mainly in-DAW mix, I ran some subgroups through the M1 in order to use it as a summing mixer, and again, a size and depth was achieved that was certainly a marked improvement over the results of an entirely in-the-box approach. This was achieved without driving the M1 hard, but even with the needles just touching zero, the noise floor is commendably low. Lighting up the Drive LEDs with gain adds some pleasant colouration in some circumstances.

Of course, when trying to use the M1 as centrepiece in a recording situation, you start to notice the missing features: no talkback whatsoever, mono-only foldback, but no Mono monitor button. And a fair amount of heat is generated, despite the separate PSU box.

The M1 is solidly built and has a very professional feel to it. It sounds as chunky as it looks, with a big warm sound, and facilities that are generally adequate. For the DAW-based studio, a desk like this makes an awful lot of sense, especially with the digital interfacing options. In short, the M1 remains true to TL Audio's established reputation for competitively priced, good-sounding valve gear. ■

**PROS** Warm valve-tinged mic preamps and output stages; great for tracking or summing; digital I-O; modular.

**CONS** No digital I-O for channels 9 to 12; mono pre aux; no talkback; hefty; DO-8 is expensive; no 44.1/88.2kHz internal clocking.

#### Contact

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