

TL Audio M4

The M4 is the third valve console in TL Audio's current range, bridging the gap between the well-established 'pro' VTC and the little M-3 Tubetracker. With frame sizes of 16, 24 or 32 channels available, the M4 is aimed squarely at the DAW user market — according to TLA. **GEORGE SHILLING** is impressed.

THE M4 IS PRICED very competitively starting with the 16-channel model at UK£3995 (+ VAT) up to the 32 at £5995, with a 24-channel version in between, which was the configuration of the prototype looked at by *Resolution*. Despite the low pricing, it's a very professional looking beast, with lovely carved oak end and front panels, chunky buttons reminiscent of MCI desks from the 1970s, and big knobs with a smooth, oily feel to their damping. Legending is clear throughout. With all the wood, large well-spaced controls and valve innards, it is fairly big and heavy, and seems very old-school in a world of fiddly plug-in graphics and is perfect for engineers with big hands!

The power supply is a separate 2U rackmount that connect via a snake cable. Neither the PSU nor the console get overly hot or emit any physical noise.

The angle of the control panel serves several functions.

It creates the necessary internal room for the valve circuitry, allows plenty of space on the rear panel for all the necessary connections, and makes it easy to see settings when you sit behind it. It also makes the M4 look like a proper professional desk. Every channel includes a valve microphone preamp, 4-band EQ, four sends, and a 100mm fader in a clear and conventional layout.

Something not included and which is found on most studio recording and mixing consoles is any routing, there is only a stereo mix bus. However, the M4 is designed for multitrack recording and each channel has a Track Out jack on the rear. Many desks feature direct channel outputs, but the difference here is not only the individual +4dB/-10dB pushbutton accompanying each of the sockets, but the Track level knob on each channel. This is a large control positioned within easy reach just above the panpot, with a range of +/-15dB and a centre detente. Accompanying each of these knobs is a button for sending the signal to the recorder as pre- instead of post-EQ. You can easily track at optimum level while monitoring a sensible and useful balance in the control room, adding EQ in the monitoring or to 'tape'.

You can simultaneously generate two mono or one stereo prefade headphone mix using the Auxes. Of course, playing the recording back through the desk at the same balance isn't possible without resetting, but you could set a quick internal balance in the DAW and bring it up the 2-track input for checking back the takes. You might miss the facility to submix, say, the 5 tom-tom mics into stereo, but when you are tracking into a DAW with capacity for virtually unlimited tracks, it is not a serious handicap to have to record each signal separately. After recording the band, flip the channels to Line and bring up your separate DAW outputs for a valve overdubbing and mixing experience.

Rear panel layout is clear, with almost all connections on jacks. At the rear of each channel, the connections are directly in line with the controls. At the top, the

mic input XLR has a proper latch, along with a phantom power switch — this might have been better on the front channel strip with an LED, but it's not difficult to reach over to find it, and it's easy to tell if it is pushed in. Line input is a jack, then there are separate Send and Return jacks for the Insert. Not only is this switchable from the front panel, but there is also a Post button on each channel, referring to the EQ. Usefully, the Send and Return jacks on each channel have their own -10dB/+4dB button, as does the final Track Out jack socket. In the centre section, each Aux output jack has its own -10dB/+4dB button, as do the stereo Returns. Connecting just to the Left jack of these causes them to become Mono and their Balance knobs become Pans. The main Stereo Output is on XLR, while the Monitor Output and 2-Track input (again with level selection) are jacks. Finally stereo bus inserts similar to those on the channels appear here too. Connectivity is certainly comprehensive, with a sea of jack sockets and red level buttons, but the layout is clear.

Each channel features a TL Audio valve mic preamp. Possibly not the most exquisite valve mic preamps, they do sound remarkably open and honest; warm, rich and woody, and you can certainly drive the gain



for some pleasant harmonic crunch. This is aided by Drive and Peak LEDs at the top of each fader, the red Peak light reacting very quickly to transient peaks, with the yellow Drive LED glowing when subtle additional harmonic distortions are introduced. There are Pad and Phase buttons beside the Gain knob, which has a centre detente for use with the Line inputs.

The -30dB pad seems a bit strong, but allows a very wide range of input signals. The EQ (with Bypass button) features fixed top and bottom frequency shelving bands with midrange peaks sweepable over wide ranges (500Hz to 18kHz and 50Hz to 2kHz), these with fixed bandwidth. Again, there are more sophisticated onboard valve EQs, but this is pleasant to use, powerful without being nasty. With 15dB of cut and boost (centre detented) available on each of the four bands, there is plenty of scope for manipulation — I mostly found myself making fairly small gains and cuts for desired sonic shaping. The Mid sweeps both have quite a narrow Q, with a very evident wah-wah effect when sweeping at high boost.

The 10kHz shelf adds a natural open clarity and sheen when boosted, without sounding forced. Similarly, the low frequency band

is a fixed 100Hz shelf — for really sumptuous bottom end the trick is sometimes to back this off slightly, then boost with the Low Mid peak at a slightly lower frequency. This EQ does the job really well in most situations, whether tracking or mixing. Think of the powerful 1980's Amek M2500 with extra warmth, or even possibly vintage Harrison or Neve, especially at the top-end, rather than gentler and broader API or washy SSL (brown-knob) E-Series. You also get a useful 90Hz high-pass filter. This EQ handles most requirements with ease. Of course if you want to get more fiddly, you've always got your DAW plug-ins. The channels each include four useful Aux Sends, there are no Off buttons for these, but the first two are switchable to Prefade, and talkback can route to each of these. Pans are centre-detented, the Mute and Solo buttons click satisfyingly, with clear LED indicators. The faders are smooth and accurate, if a little lightweight in feel.

The main section includes four Aux Master pots, each with PFL, two stereo Returns with Level and Pan/Balance knobs plus PFL, and a talkback section with a mic socket, level knob and latching buttons to Auxes 1 and 2. There is no built-in talkback mic, nor any 'mix to cues' or 'talkback to mix' functions,

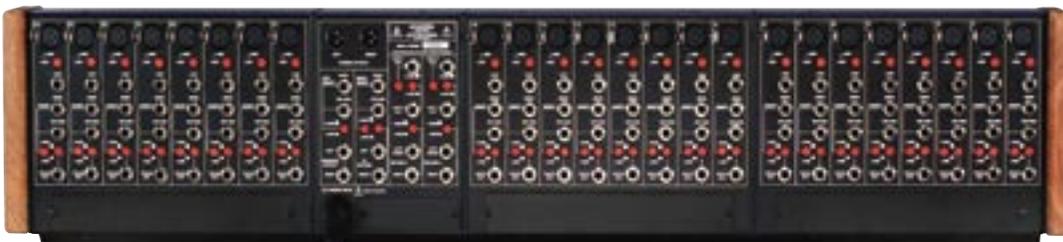
which could be a nuisance. There is a knob for overall PFL trim, with an LED when in use. The centre section is clearly laid-out, with pretty VU meters, a nice big control room Monitor volume knob, and a headphone output beside the pair of main faders. The last of these usefully has a separate volume knob, (although located a long way from the socket) with the headphone source following the monitors. The separate Left and Right Master faders seem unnecessary, making it tricky to do balanced fades.

There will be optional digital boards available for interfacing directly with your DAW for the stereo output, and ADAT boards available for each bank of eight channels, with outputs normalised to the Line Inputs and inputs sourced from the track outputs.

It is difficult to find fault with this console at the price. It is quite different from any similarly-priced competition — no-one else is making valve consoles, most 'budget' desks from major manufacturers are considerably more expensive, (you would pay more for just one pair of reissue Neve 1081 channels), and other alternatives are mostly digital. Obviously it is built to a price, but I would sacrifice the individual +4/-10 buttons on the Track Outs for a global selector (or banks of 8) and instead perhaps add some

refinements to the talkback section, with a built-in mic, TB to mix, and optionally non-latching buttons.

The overall sound of the M4 is big and warm, and operationally it is a pleasure to use. The build quality is excellent, the knobs and buttons seem reliable, and there are no nasty clicks or pops when you press any of them. The real question here is whether you could work without any groups or buses. With all the flexibility afforded by modern DAWs, this is easier than ever. In the case of the M4, it is a matter of your style of working and, of course, your budget. In many ways, this is a big grown-up desk of the old school, and it is well suited to tracking and mixing. In the age of the DAW, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better companion for your rig, and the M4 will make an excellent centrepiece for any small studio. Hats off to Mr Larking. ■



PROS

Price is low for what you get; sound quality is great; build quality is superb; good ergonomics; separate Insert Send and Return jacks; I-Os all switchable +4/-10; easily adjustable separate Track Output levels.

CONS

No groups or buses; dual master faders make fades tricky; phantom power buttons on the rear; no 'mix to cues' function; no 'talkback slate to mix' function.

Contact

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