

Universal Audio 2-610

With the essential checklist of features, properties and heritage all neatly accounted for, this dual mic preamp attains instant kudos.

GEORGE SHILLING warns that you'll probably want one if you get to use one.



HAVING MADE A SPLENDID job of recreating the 1176 and LA-2A compressors, UA Classics has issued its first original analogue hardware product in the shape of the 2-610. However, this dual mic preamp is not without consideration of past designs. The late Bill Putnam Senior's Universal Audio 610 console is the inspiration for this unit. This desk was revolutionary in being the first modular design for a recording console. However, this practical design was not the only remarkable quality of the desk. Its clean and warm sound benefited sessions at United and Western Studios for Frank Sinatra, The Beach Boys (Pet Sounds), The Doors (LA Woman) and Van Halen on their first album. The studio is now known as Ocean Way, and there is still a 610 in Studio B. The mission for Putnam's surviving sons was to capture the essence of this console's unique sound and package it in a box, along with a few improvements and enhancements. The design team spent two years on the project.

The 2U front panel really looks the business, with two smartly etched black panels mounted on the metal front including legending for each channel's controls. The legending is excellent, the white lettering very clear in any light. The retro-style knobs are well-crafted and pleasurable to grip. In the centre is a large toggle power switch with a superb purple indicator light.

The input selectors, preamp gains and EQ cut/boost knobs are all stepped rotary controls. These are fairly stiff to operate, but their positive action leaves the user in no doubt as to the chosen setting. There are small toggle switches for phase switching (not a feature of the original 610), phantom power (separately for each channel), and EQ frequency selection. None of the switched controls produce any untoward clicks or pops on the audio output, a sign of the quality of the engineering involved in this design.

There is a jack socket on the front panel for instrument input. An enormous Level knob, the only continuous control here, dominates each channel and is relatively undamped and very easy to set accurately owing to its sheer size. This acts as output fader, simply legended from 0, where the signal is off, to 10.

The rear panel is logically laid out and also very clearly legended. All signal connectors are XLRs for mic and line inputs and line outputs on each channel. The power connector is an IEC socket, centrally located, and a selector allows for 115V or 230V operation, so country-hopping is no problem.

Internal construction reminds me of a 1950s American car, with big components under the bonnet. Here you'll find large transformers and all discrete transistors, resistors and capacitors, and glowing UA branded valves.

The immediate impression is of warmth and richness, and a very special glow is added to the signal. The detail is truly astonishing, and this is undoubtedly one of the finest mic preamps I have used for vocal recording. The top-end is soft and creamy, the low end deep and naturally warm.

Two different microphone impedance settings are provided, 500 Ohm or 2kOhm, the most appropriate setting depending on the microphone employed. One setting often provides more clarity and depth, so it is a matter of experimentation to find the best one for a given microphone. My regular condenser had more body at the 500 setting, whereas I preferred the clarity of an SM57 at 2k. A ribbon mic sounded sweeter and less clogged at 500.

Similarly, the front panel instrument jack socket provides 2.2MOhm or 47kOhm settings, the latter suitable for such things as synthesiser outputs, the former more appropriate for passive guitar pickups. This input added a genuinely surprising magic to my

normally unexceptional Stratocaster, the valves really bringing the sound to life, especially with the preamp at full tilt where it positively glowed.

The two EQ bands are broad and smooth-sounding shelves, each with three well-chosen selectable frequencies. They reminded me of the API 550 and VacRac units, in that it is virtually impossible to make them do anything nasty. Wherever you turn the knobs you get natural sound sculpting, warmth and magic, and I love this minimalist approach because it discourages unnecessary fussing. The steps go up or down in 1.5dB clicks with the final step of 3dB for a maximum boost or cut of 9dB.

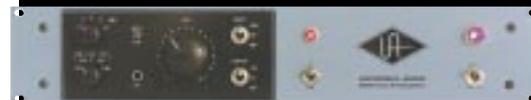
The mic preamps each use two valves, one for each gain stage. The initial stage is controlled by the Gain control, which has just five positions labelled from -10 to +10dB. Using this in tandem with the big output Level knob it is possible to change the character of the sound subtly, driving the valves harder by reducing the negative feedback at higher settings. Harmonic distortion increases at higher settings, making the sound sizzle and glow slightly more. By using the line inputs you can make use of this character in a mixing situation.

Although there are units available with better specified performance figures, this is undoubtedly one of the best sounding microphone preamps currently available, up there with my other current favourite, the big-sounding Phoenix Audio DRS-2. But not only do you get a pair of fantastic sounding mic preamps, but also a lovely EQ section.

The 2-610 is also excellent value; I was expecting a higher price, considering the precedents set by the 1176 and LA-2A reissues. ■

PROS Enhances any signal; warm, big, magical sound; reasonable price; lovely big knobs; beautiful build

CONS A wider range of gain settings might have been useful; you will want to take it with you wherever you go, and it's heavy!



EXTRAS The Universal Audio M610 is a mono version of the 2-610, with a simplified EQ section. Equaliser settings: boost - off, mid (4kHz) fixed at +2dB, high (8kHz), fixed at +4dB; cut-off, 140Hz, 70Hz, 6dB/octave high pass filter.

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