

# Universal Audio Solo 110 and 610

While you seemingly can't move these days for multichannel mic preamps, there also seems to be space for the other extreme of channel endowment, namely a single channel device in a 'luggable' form factor. Universal Audio's Solo range is a case in point, coming in two flavours — the solid state 110 and the valve-based 610.

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**INTERNAL ARCHITECTURES AREN'T** the only things that differentiate these two boxes, which although identical in size and shape (shoebox sized with integrated carrying handle and a sloping front panel), differ slightly in appearance. The 110 favours minimalist pushbutton switchgear with a plethora of blue LEDs and smooth contours to its controls, while the 610 gives a nod to a vaguely retro styling with sub-miniature toggle switches and chunky, bakelite-esque knobs (*You can mount three solos in a rackmount side by side. Ed*).

Having said that, both units offer identical features and connection options. The rear panel features a microphone input on XLR, and an output, which rather curiously can be switched to either line level or mic level output level, also on XLR. I guess that the thinking here is about the possibility of chaining preamps, or perhaps in case an end user's recording input possibilities are limited. A signal ground lift switch for the output completes the picture here.

Cosmetic differences aside, the front panels are dominated by the two stage level controls that are a feature of Universal Audio's more recent offerings. A Gain control drives the input stage of the preamplifier — FET-based in the case of the 110 and valve (12AX7) in the case of the 610 — while the Level control adjusts the overall output level for the unit. In this way, it is possible to drive the input stage very hard to colour the sound, while still delivering an acceptable output level to the next device in the chain.

Metering is via a tri-colour LED, and is post-gain but pre-output level. Signal present lights up green, near clipping turns amber and clipped is red. It's not the most accurate form of metering there is, admittedly, but sensible level points for the three stages means that it's perfectly useable. And in practice, your ears tend to tell you far more than the LED does anyway.

Switches for a high pass filter, phantom power and

phase reverse are all available on the front panel, as is a switch to select two possible input impedances (500ohms or 2kohms). Also on the front panel are a DI input and associated Thru socket — both on 1/4-inch jacks, making it possible to DI a guitar or bass, and then pass the signal through to a cab for recording. A neat trick here is that the variable input impedance also applies when the DI input is selected, albeit with correspondingly higher ranges (47kohms or 2.2Mohms).

Build quality is everything you might expect from Universal Audio — the chassis is sturdy, and a poke under the hood reveals that everything is nicely spannered together inside too (*All built in the US even at this price. Ed*). Fully discrete circuitry is employed throughout both of the Solo flavours, with the same fundamental design and component choices as the more exotic (and pricey) 4110 and 8110 models.

This is immediately apparent in the first audition of the 110. Fans of Universal Audio's newer range won't be disappointed, as I was hard put (by memory at least) to distinguish its performance from the 4110. An open, honest sound, perhaps a little bit 'hyped' in the upper mids, but delivering a very clean and useable tone from a variety of microphones. Experimenting with the balance between gain and output revealed that when you hit this unit hard with a signal, the effects are those of a kind of gentle limiting — again most noticeable in the upper mids and highs. This isn't an unpleasant characteristic at all and in fact was useful in softening a female vocal recorded with a Brauner VMA — a combination that can sound a little hard with some voices.

Switching to the 610 and the differences, particularly when driving the preamp hard, become clear very quickly. While the 110 tends to soften the sound slightly here, the 610 adds a level of harmonic distortion that warms up the bottom end nicely, but to

my ears actually lent a touch of brittleness to the high mids. It's a matter of taste, of course, but I always came away feeling that perhaps it was trying just a little too hard to attain that 'valveness' to the sound.

Both units, though, make terrific DI boxes. Bass guitar D1ed through the 110 gave a really thick but clear sound with just the right amount of cut to the low mids. The same bass fed through the 610 gives more of the same, with just a little more buzziness in the low registers, particularly when cranked hard. And while the variable impedance switch on the mic input revealed very little in the way of sonic difference with the particular microphones I was using, it proved very versatile with the DI input, with the lower setting able to extract a little more clarity to a slightly boomy sounding bass.

On balance, I was drawn more to the sound of the 110 than to its valve-based stable mate the 610, although there's no doubt that they are both quality bits if kit that sound impressive. If portability is key to you, or if a single channel is all you're likely to need, they should be on your audition list. And if you also fancy a really tasty sounding DI box, well that gets thrown in for free. ■

## PROS

Well built; 110 sounds just as good as the 4110 and 8110; portability; DI capability very impressive; form factor makes it very luggable.

## CONS

Only a single channel; form factor could be a little clumsy in some applications; metering effective but crude.

## EXTRAS

Universal Audio's UAD-1e Express PAK and UAD-1e Expert PAK, PCI Express DSP cards and powered plug-ins will ship



with UA's core 15 free Mix/Gtr FX plug-in suite plus a UAD US\$100 (Express) and UAD \$750 (Expert) voucher that customers can use to pick and purchase UA plug-in authorisations on-line. The PAKs offer DAW users with new PCIe-based Mac/PC computers access to UA's DSP-powered mixing and mastering plug-ins.

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