

Focusrite ISA430 MkII Producer Pack

Its predecessor proved to be one of the most powerful and useful box of tricks that you could ever have in your rack.

GEORGE SHILLING goes up to the Mark II and says it's got even better.



SINCE ITS INTRODUCTION more than four years ago, the Producer Pack has found favour not only in project studios, but also with top-flight producers who need a reliable and familiar high-quality front end, carrying it with them even when working in well-equipped studios. I particularly liked the Session Pack, its little brother, which was of similar high quality but with slightly simpler features. Now the 430 (UK£1595 + VAT) has undergone a total revamp, with numerous additional features that I will, err, 'focus' on here, some borrowed from other more recent Focusrite siblings.

The optional digital board is now capable of sample rates up to 192kHz, and has all flavours of interconnection, including Digidesign Superclock. However, except when using the optical SPDIF and ADAT outputs, you will need a special breakout cable for AES/SPDIF use, as this is on a 9-pin D-sub connector. Both 1-wire and 2-wire modes are supported for high sample rates, enabling broad compatibility.

The rear panel is typical Focusrite, with plenty of connectors, including two insert points, one movable using front panel selectors, and one fixed. By using split modes you can use each separate signal processor for different tasks — even the stereo A-DC can be used separately, as there are now two dedicated XLR inputs on the rear. Key Inputs are provided for dynamics, and a dynamic Link socket enables connection of another 430. Female XLRs are non-latching, which is a bit cheapskate.

The front panel layout has been rearranged to

include new features. The VU meter now includes a choice of ranges, with +4 or +18dBu registering at 0VU, the latter useful when sending hot signals to the A-DC. The meter can show the signal level at input or either insert return, or can be switched to show compressor gain reduction. It also flips to metering the 'Listen' signal when monitoring the sidechain on Compressor, Expander/Gate or DeEsser.

The mic preamp, while still firmly based on the original ISA110 design, has been provided with some interesting new features. There are now four differing impedance settings, as first presented on the ISA428. These are well chosen and worth experimenting with, although the calibration of Low to High is somewhat vague when matching mics.

The other notable feature here is the Mic Air button, as featured on the Platinum range. Here, however, this is a real transformer circuit, rather than an emulation. I always find Focusrite mic preamps to be very 'airy' anyway, but for more sparkle, this button subtly enhances those very high frequencies even more. There is apparently up to 85dB of gain available when including the Compressor Make-up Gain and the Output knob, but the dual/split range on the mic pre's stepped coarse gain can be slightly irritating, and could have spared the cluttered front panel another button.

Interestingly, the line input now features a transformer. The second insert can be bypassed and rerouted from the front panel, and furthermore, the dynamics section can be moved to Pre EQ or Post

Sum. The EQ sections and filters are littered with buttons to key the Compressor and Gate — in terms of routing, every option imaginable is catered for.

The EQ sounds as good as ever and now boasts extra frequencies in the shelving department. There are eight high and eight low frequency shelves, but the dual ranges are almost unreadable, with tiny low-contrast lettering. The alternative x3 peak ranges and the mic and instrument gain ranges are similarly labelled.

The Compressor section has now been enhanced with an alternative to the Class A VCA design in the form of two optical 'Vintage' modes; Compressor and Limiter. These modes disable the Auto Release and External Key buttons, and the Attack and Release knobs, for authentic optical operation. I really like the sound of these new settings, they can be lovely and warm and fuzzy, and the release times are surprisingly fast.

For vocals, I generally preferred the Vintage settings to the comparatively bland VCA mode, but the latter allows more control over attack and release. The Blend feature, which was a particularly welcome innovation on the ISA220, has been taken a step further. As well as the Blend enable button, there is a variable crossfade knob to blend between compressed and uncompressed signal.

It all sounds as fabulous as expected, the button pushes click nicely and often produce a satisfying relay click, and all statuses are clearly displayed with LEDs. I was pleased to discover that, unlike the ISA220, the button statuses are remembered between power-ups. However, with this degree of control and flexibility, the front panel is inevitably somewhat cluttered. Most of the knobs in the dynamics sections are labelled underneath, so you will want to mount this at eye-level or above to see them.

The new Producer Pack is the ultimate blue-range Focusrite, with nothing missing. The new compressor modes sound great, and the Blend control is a very useful feature. The mic preamp enhancements present subtle but useful choices. I wouldn't often use all the routing and insert options, and they make the Mark II look rather more complicated than it needs to. But if you like the Focusrite sound and really want all the possibilities presented here, this box has everything, and now, it's even cheaper than the original. ■

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PROS 192kHz; compressor Blend feature; classic Focusrite enhanced mic pre and EQ; great new 'Vintage' compressor and limiter modes.

CONS Cluttered front panel; legending hard to see.

EXTRAS Described as 'every mic pre and compressor combination in history, inside a 192kHz 2U device', Focusrite's Liquid Channel has a preamp with variable impedance and the ability to vary signal path to transformer or electronic combined with Sintefex's patented Dynamic Convolution technology, which replicates level-dependant impulse responses to re-synthesise a compressor's sonic behaviour.



All digital front panel controls and all parameters can be saved in user memories and the unit also includes a digital EQ. A USB connection permits archival of presets and the Liquid Channel comes with 40 mic preamp and 40 compressor models that can be expanded.