



Neve 8801

How do you fit a channel of Neve 88R console in a 1U rack? Well you can't but

GEORGE SHILLING leaves it to Neve and eventually it comes up with a solution of its own.

THIS IS A product that now seems obvious, and although there have been boardroom and financial shenanigans, you might wonder why it has taken Neve so long to produce it. The 8801 (UK£1695 + VAT) takes Neve's wonderful heritage and highly regarded 88R console technology and stuffs it neatly into a jam-packed 1U. The exceptionally busy front panel includes 22 vintage style rotary knobs, many of which also hide a push-click function, plus 11 illuminating soft-buttons and a combo input socket. There is an awful lot going on here; it initially looks rather daunting. And if you want discrete circuitry, best look elsewhere or at Neve's vintage reissues. Neve feels confident enough to produce high-quality audio using surface-mount components and ICs, making this cheaper to build, even though it's not particularly cheap to buy.

The front panel is divided left-to-right into logical sections: Input, Filters, Dynamics, Audio Router, EQ, and Output. On the rear are separate Line (combo jack), Mic (XLR) and DI (jack) connections; the last two are doubled with a combo jack on the front. Input gain is served by one knob; pushing it selects between these three and a fourth option, the Digital (Genie) which requires an additional card to be installed (and wasn't present on the review unit, sadly). There is therefore also a redundant Digital Output select button with associated indicator LEDs. Power comes in via the DIN plug-equipped lead coming from the lump-in-the-line transformer. Surely by now flimsy DIN plugs have been banned from mains duties. Buttons are provided for Pad, Phase and 48V. Mic gain goes up to an indicated +70dB so there is plenty of level boost available — furthermore, the output knob is a fader that goes from off to +10dB (although there is no clue as to where zero might be!) Even more boost is available at the Dynamics section's Gain Make-Up. Knobs are closely spaced, but thankfully the important

Input and Output gain pots are in clear space, making it easier to ride the recording levels on the fly.

The mic preamp quality is excellent and based on those in the 88R console. It manages to sound clean and crystal clear without being weak and characterless, although there is little apparent colouration, just a maturity of tone. The Filters comprise two 12dB per octave continuously variable knobs with ample range, separately activated (again by knob push) and accompanied by a Filters to Sidechain button that acts on both simultaneously. The Dynamics section comprises four knobs for the Compressor/Limiter across the top for Gain Makeup, Threshold, Ratio and Release, with four knobs along the bottom dedicated to the operation of the Gate/Expander — Hysteresis, Threshold, Range and Release.

All eight knobs include push functions for additional control: the Compressor's knobs also control Hard/Soft Knee selection, Compressor Sidechain Link, Normal/Fast Attack and Auto-Release mode — a triple time-constant programme-dependent release time for extra smooth release with definitely no pumping. On the Expander Gate you can switch between Gate and a 2:1 Expander, Key Input, Normal/Fast Attack and, usefully, you can also set it to 'Invert' (Ducking mode). An overall Dynamics bypass button is provided; each of the two sections can be separately bypassed by setting their Threshold and Ratio or Range appropriately.

The Dynamics section is extremely well featured and flexible. Internal jumpers change the two Attack settings to faster times, but you do wish they had put these on the front panel. There is an Auto Release setting for the Compressor/Limiter, but for vocals it seems best with a fixed setting somewhere towards the faster side of the knob's range. It sounds good on vocals in Soft Knee mode, especially on female singers, although you need to set it bravely with a high ratio and lots of gain-reduction LEDs showing to really

control singers who have a wide dynamic range.

The EQ section is four-band, with two fully parametric overlapping mid-bands, and sweeping high and low bands with switchable peak/shelf modes and a pushbutton Hi-Q setting available in peak mode. As well as a bypass button, there is an EQ to Sidechain function that does what it says and removes the EQ from the main signal path. The EQ is very useable and controls most situations effortlessly and musically, with a sweet top-end and powerful lows, with less mid-range aggression than, say, an SSL E.

The Audio Router is a clever little logic-controlled switching circuit to change the order of processing of the Dynamics, EQ and Insert (balanced, accommodated by a pair of dedicated XLRs on the rear). Changing the order is as simple as holding the button to enter programming mode, then pressing the main buttons in the order desired. A brief press of the AR button interrogates, and the order is displayed by flashing the buttons.

The Output section has the aforementioned Gain knob: pushing this changes the LED metering between Input and Output. Along with the XLR Line Output, a headphone output is provided on the rear, and using an internal jumper the level of this can be bumped up if so desired. Also on the rear panel is a 9-pin D-Type connector allowing for linking of the Key Input and Dynamics Links (two are provided) to enable daisy-chaining of units.

Last on the rear, there's a Type B USB socket for recall. The software is included on the Manual CD (there is no printed manual) and operation is straightforward and slick, with smart graphics for matching settings with a seemingly high degree of accuracy — buttons are set automatically, although infuriatingly their status is lost on power-down.

The main criticism of this unit is that it really should have been a 2U affair, just so you could get fingers around knobs and see the legending properly. It would also have allowed jumper settings to be available on knobs instead of having to take the top off and fiddle around — you can't do that while the talent is waiting. And it might have allowed for a decent meter. I'd have also liked a separate limiter section, and perhaps a separate de-esser. But that said, a 2U box would have been undoubtedly rather more expensive, so a prudent Brown-ite philosophy has been employed here. It's still a terrific bit of kit: the mic amp and EQ are particularly sweet. It all sounds bigger than it looks, and this is a great way for, well, anyone to employ some genuine Neve hardware when recording and mixing. ■

PROS Jam-packed feature-rich recording channel; authentic Neve sound; recall.

CONS Fiddly, crammed front panel; buttons lose status on power-down; no printed manual.

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