

Universal Audio 4110

Unlike some of its other recent offerings, UA's 4110 isn't a reproduction of an old classic, but a brand new design. That said it throws more than a passing nod to some of the design philosophies that underpinned Bill Putnam Senior's companies — namely producing tools that are dependable, flexible and have a distinct character. **JON THORNTON** switches to drool mode.



THE UA 4110 is a 4-channel microphone preamp. Unlike some of the current crop of multichannel preamps that are crammed into a space saving 1U box, it sports a refreshingly old school approach to outboard real estate in occupying a whole 3U. This allows plenty of room on the front panel for each of the input channel's controls, which are arranged in vertical blocks. A bigger box also allows the rear panel to consist simply of 24 XLR sockets, giving 8 channels of mic level input, 8 of line level input and 8 balanced outputs — no fiddly D-subs here.

Despite its size, the 4110 (UK£1999 + VAT) is a fairly lightweight unit, and a quick peek at the innards reveals why. Inside, a compact power supply at the rear, four transformers to handle microphone and line level inputs, and a single PCB for each of the four channels makes for a very sparse internal layout, and probably accounts for the fact that the unit runs slightly warm rather than hot.

The basic preamplifier design uses DC-coupled matched FET, all discrete Class-A circuitry. No capacitors are used in the audio signal path to minimise phase distortion and to ensure that the audio path does not degrade over time. By itself, this isn't exactly an uncommon approach in higher end preamp design, but it does have a twist that is revealed by returning to the front panel. And for those who value form as much as content, what a front panel it is. A high gloss black for the most part, with matt black areas defining each of the channels, silver legending and a surplus of blue illuminated push-buttons — this is truly the Darth Vader of mic preamps.

Each channel has a gain control and an output level control, which enables the input stage to be driven harder if necessary while still delivering the appropriate output level. This can have quite marked effects on the tonality of the signal, particularly when used in conjunction with a three-position toggle switch labelled Shape. In its Off position, the channel works in the most transparent fashion — something Universal Audio refers to as a 'modern' sound. In

position 1, referred to as the Vintage setting, the input transformers are more heavily loaded, which enables them to add a more significant degree of harmonic colouration to the sound. Position 2, termed Saturate, loads the input transformer in the same fashion but also alters the loading on the first section of the input stage to achieve a degree of soft-limiting.

A final rotary control selects the input source — choices here are mic, line or a high impedance input (these are located on the front panel on four 1/4-inch unbalanced jacks). Microphone and high impedance inputs each have a choice of two impedance settings — 57kohms or 2.2Mohms for the high impedance inputs and 500ohms or 2kohms for the microphone level input.

Illuminated latching pushbuttons on each channel allow the selection of phantom power, a 20dB pad, a high pass filter (100Hz, 6dB/octave) and a polarity reverse. While having all these switches illuminate with blue LEDs undoubtedly helps the overall aesthetic, I can't help wondering why the designers didn't opt for something less uniform — a red LED on phantom power for example might have provided a little more visual feedback from a distance.

In use, the 4110 is delightfully straightforward, and the feel of the front panel controls suggests that they aren't going to break any time in the next couple of decades. Because of the dual gain stage employed, there are two points at which levels can be monitored. A single tri-colour LED gives an indication of initial gain, while a 4-segment LED ladder shows final output level post the level control. If this sounds a little clumsy in description, it's not in practice thanks largely to the sensible choices in trigger levels for that tri-colour LED. These are based around effective THD levels generated, with green signifying a nominal signal level, rather than simply signal present, with a THD figure of 0.07%. Orange and red indicate increases above nominal level, with correspondingly higher THD figures.

This is important, particularly when considering the use of the Shape setting described earlier. The effect of the Vintage and Saturate settings becomes

progressively more pronounced at higher levels of gain, and in fact changes subtly across the gain range. Starting with shape in the Off position with initial gain never indicating anything above nominal level and the 4110 turns in a respectable, if slightly underwhelming performance at first. There's a slight 'busy-ness' to the high mids and highs that will be familiar to Focusrite users — a kind of slightly hyped clarity that sometimes gets in the way of a truly open sound. Cranking the gain up higher counters this to some degree as it introduces a grittiness to the lower registers, but still never sounds quite as honest and open as an API, for example.

Flicking the shape switch into the Vintage setting, though, changes things considerably. Yes, you can hear the voicing effect immediately but it's best described as a very gentle mid presence that works well on vocals without ever sounding harsh or brittle. Its effect changes considerably in character as gain is increased — I found it most workable with the gain set at about 2/3 of its range on vocals. The Saturate setting moves things up another notch and on nearly all things percussive delivers a wonderfully fat, rounded sound — admittedly at the expense of HF definition and extension. Again, the effect is altered considerably with different gain settings, but you do keep finding yourself really hitting the extremes of the gain control when you hear the effect.

Coupled with the variable input impedances, what UA has achieved here is almost unique among multichannel pres. If you want to, you can have four identically sounding channels but the scope is there to sculpt the sound so much that you can just as easily have four channels that sound like completely different devices.

Downsides? Well there's no digital output option but frankly, if you're in the market for a box like this you're probably going to have your own converters of choice anyway. And the unadulterated, un-shaped, Modern setting might not be to your particular taste. But as a wonderful sounding, flexible device with a huge sonic palette to aid tracking, it really is a very classy box indeed. ■

PROS

Build quality; good old-fashioned XLRs on the back; very flexible sonic palette; clean and quiet at 'normal' levels.

CONS

No digital option; you can have too much of a Blue LED fetish.

EXTRAS

The 8110 provides eight channels of premium Class A, all discrete amplification. Each channel has custom input stage transformers, dedicated Gain and Level controls, input and output metering, dual input impedance selection, and the same 3-way Shape to select between Modern, Vintage and Saturate modes.

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