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One of the four half-rackspace modules offered in Rupert Neve's expanding Portico Series is the 5032 Mic Pre/EQ. Like all of the Portico gear, the 5032 comes either as a horizontally oriented desktop unit with rubber feet or as a vertically positioned module for mounting in the 5285-RM rack frame. The rack is capable of powering and housing up to eight Portico modules. Converting from a desktop unit to a vertical module is easy: Just swap out the panel and knobs. The other Portico units are (At this time): the 5012, a two-channel microphone pre-amp; the 5042, a two-channel tape emulation/line driver; and the 5043 is a dual-channel compressor/limiter.

A BEAUTY INSIDE AND OUT

Manufactured in Wimberley Texas, the mechanical construction and electronic layout is top notch--better than it has to be. The case is steel with a 0.2-inch aluminum plate front panel. The 5032 uses two DC-to-DC converters to generate +/- 17.5VDC power rails and +48V phantom power from the external +12VDC switching power supply (included); this will operate up to two Portico units using a "Y" cord. The 5032 will operate from any external DC voltage from 9 to 18 volts. This fact and the unit's rugged small size make it ideal for film/TV location recording.

Rupert Neve calls the mic pre circuitry a "transformer-like amplifier", and it is identical to the Portico 5012 dual mic pre module. It includes a toroidal low pass filter to reject common mode signals above 150 kHz; i.e., no interference worries around wireless mics, radio transmitters or cell phones. An exclusive Rupert Neve-designed input transformer (Available nowhere else) follows this stage. The unit's large output transformer (also a Rupert Neve design for the Portico line) has a frequency response out to 160 kHz (-3 dB).

A positive-feeling, 12-position rotary control sets mic gain from 6 to 66 dB in 6dB steps, while a fine gain pot add/subtracts up to 6 dB for a total of 72dB maximum mic gain. The front panel also includes +48V phantom on/off, polarity invert, a handy output mute button, a balanced line input switch with separate rear panel XLR and an LED level meter that measures from -30 to +22 dBu. But there is no mic attenuation switch because the mic input will handle up to +24 dBu--an engineer can use the mic input for a second line input.

The 5032's front end finishes with a 12dB/octave highpass filter variable from 20 to 250 Hz; a bus switch for sending a pre-mute output signal to future modules in the Portico Series; and the ear-friendly Silk switch. The Silk switch, via an internal relay, reduces negative feedback in the mic amplifier and adjusts the frequency response by adding second- and third-order harmonic content. The overall effect is both subtle and sublime; I found it most noticeable and desirable on sources rich in harmonic content, such as pianos, acoustic guitars and vocal tracks.

The 3-band equalizer is sweet-sounding and a good choice for recording any source. There is a 6dB/octave low shelf with a fixed 160Hz corner frequency and up to +/- 15 dB of adjustment. The 6dB/octave high shelf is switchable between 8 and 16 kHz, with +/- 15 dB of range. The midrange is fully parametric with +/- 15dB boost/cut, 80Hz to 8kHz sweepable frequency range and adjustable Q from 0.7 to 5 that can exceed 6 dB/octave for surgically precise tone-carving.

ON THE JOB

I recorded a Yamaha FG-312 II acoustic guitar using an AKG C 451 EB, 42 dB of gain on the 5032 and, at the same time, about 40dB gain on a vintage (and no longer available) Neve 1073 mic pre/EQ module, also designed by Rupert Neve. I used a Jensen JT-MB-E mic-splitting transformer to split the mic's output to feed the 5032 and 1073 simultaneously. I used no other signal processing and recorded the audio outputs on two tracks in Pro Tools HD at 96 kHz.

I found the 5032 more natural sounding with more openness and air than the 1073. Proving the old adage that "the apple does not fall far from the tree," the 1073 sounded similar--good and loud with the same gain setting just not quite as transparent. I liked the sound of both Neve pre-amps.

When switching in the EQ on the 5032, there is a small change in the sound, even with all controls at 0 dB--it sounded even better. The 5032's equalizer is smoother than the more aggressive-sounding 1073 EQ. The 5032 was better at carving an acoustic guitar's sound to fit within a big pop music production than the 1073; this is because of the variable Q in the midrange section.

Transients are sharper through the 5032, making a snare drum miked with an AKG D 190E slightly brighter. Again, the 1073 contributed a darker thickness and softer attack that might help a thin snare drum. Recording a high-tenor male vocalist with a vintage Neumann U67 required 44 dB of gain and sounded great. Using the Silk switch gave the effect of smoothing out the top end; "s" sounds became less biting and the preamp became more sensitive to the lower midrange. Boosting +2 dB at 160Hz shelf and +6 dB at 16kHz shelf helped to lessen the typical midrange "honky" quality of the U67.

On baritone male vocals, I found the 5032 very clear and precise-sounding. The 1073 had a thicker sound that I would have to thin out later during mix. In other words, the 5032 sounds closer to the source than the 1073.

POSITIVELY PORTI-LICIOUS

The Neve Portico 5032 represents Rupert Neve's current thinking on superb mic preamplification and EQ. At \$1,895 MSRP, it is the best-sounding and most flexibly useful mic pre/EQ combo I've seen, and I can't wait to hear the 8-channel rack with mixer that's coming soon.

Rupert Neve Designs, 516/847-3013, www.rupertneve.com.

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