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The Vintech X73 is a single-channel microphone preamp/equalizer based on the venerable Neve 1073 channel strip module. Vintech Audio has been in the business of manufacturing audio gear based on vintage designs since 1997, and the X73 is the company's flagship unit. Featuring the original circuit design, the same polystyrene capacitors and the same transformers ensures that the X73 sounds exactly like the old 1073...back in the day, when the Neve unit was brand spanking new. (Vintech also offers a 2-channel, all-discrete microphone preamp based on the Neve 1272 amplifier.)

A large part of the sound of the original Neve 1073 and the X73 is the Class-A output amplifier that uses a 2N3055 NPN power transistor. The DC operating voltage flows through the audio output transformer's primary winding, a design twist that is more like an RF (radio frequency) final amplifier design than an audio amplifier circuit. This causes a certain amount of desirable low-frequency coloration, aka distortion. The input impedance can be switched between 1,200 ohms and 300 ohms on both the X73 and the 1073, but not easily...the 1073 module has an inaccessible toggle switch under the rear edge connector, while the X73 has to be re-wired internally.

Removing the top cover from the X73's single-rackspace, 16-gauge, all-steel cabinet reveals a single, large motherboard with all components neatly laid out, and three audio transformers mounted to the chassis sides. As in the original, there are both line and mic input transformers

and a large output transformer, all made by St. Ives. The X73 is well-constructed and hand-assembled in the U.S. and at considerable expense, judging from the individually soldered front panel switches. Dallas Upton from Vintech explained that the original 22-position, Elma rotary input gain switch used in the 1073 must be hand-wired for each X73 unit. The other EQ switches are by Electroswitch and, like the Elma, have gold contacts. I like the new custom-machined aluminum knobs that match the original plastic knobs in shape and color, but without the vintage feature of cracking, discoloring or breaking. (I find that when old Neve modules are mounted horizontally on rack panels, facing you instead of vertically mounted in a console, it is all too easy to apply too much torque to the controls and switches. This can cause those old and possibly brittle plastic knobs to crack or get loose.)

Significant Modern Touches

If you are going to emulate a recording studio icon like the Neve 1073, then you should improve on it without trying to make it sound better. The Mr. Rupert Neve design, "warts" and all, occupies a special place in engineers' and producers' sonic palettes and imaginations. The X73 has several additions that, without changing the Neve 1073's personality or character, turn the old 1073 into a true piece of professional, stand-alone outboard gear.

First of all, there is an Output Level control (made by Clarostat) for precisely trimming down final levels if needed. This control is normally operated fully CW, allowing for a full output level as set by the input gain selector. To the right of this control are three toggle switches for +48-volt Phantom, Phase Flip and EQ In/Out. But there aren't any silk-screened labels to indicate which way these switches work! (The switches activate to the right.) It's still an improvement over the 1073, which uses two push buttons for EQ In/Out and Phase that, in my experience, are the first switches to fail, get noisy, and require cleaning or replacement.

Other new items are an LED Output meter ranging from -6 dB to +18 dB and a power indicator. I only wish there were also clip LEDs that indicate when the preamp section and/or output amp clips. Another new addition is the 1/4-inch front panel instrument input jack. You can plug a bass guitar directly into this 100k input impedance jack, but be aware that it is active along with any microphone already plugged in...the unit needs Mic/DI switching and this should be added soon to future units. On the rear panel, there are both Neutrik XLR mic input and line output jacks, but, strangely, a 1/4-inch TRS line input jack.

Enhanced Frequency Selection

The Neve 1073 equalizer is a 3-band type with 16dB boost or cut and a separate, selectable highpass filter. Frequencies for the highpass filter are 50, 80, 160 and 300 Hz. The low-frequency equalizer section is a shelving type with 35, 60, 110 and 220Hz positions. The Vintech X73 copies this same lineup. The fixed, bell-shape midrange section in the 1073 has: 360Hz, 700Hz, 1.6k, 3.2k, 4.8k and 7kHz frequencies, and the X73 adds a 10kHz position here. The high-frequency section in the original 1073 is a fixed-shelving type set to 12 kHz, but the X73 adds a great new feature: switchable 10, 12, 14 and 16kHz high-frequency positions. Except for the high-frequency shelf EQ, the 1073 has Off switch positions for each section of the equalizer and the highpass. They are in first position on each of the knobs

across the panel. Unfortunately, the X73 does not copy the 1073's consistency here...the Off position is at the opposite end of the midrange knob.

Now For The A/B!

I was fortunate enough to have a newly refurbished Neve 1073 module supplied to me by Brent Averill Enterprises for this casual and very nonscientific A/B. I also had a second Averill module that was recapped about seven years ago. The Neve module (and the X73) has up to 80 dB of gain selectable in 5dB steps with the rotary Input Gain control. The same switch also changes the module from the line input to the microphone input after passing through an Off position. The X73 I received had 24 positions, one extra at each end of the switch's travel that muted the output. Apparently, the switch stop pins were forgotten. The wider spacing of the controls on the X73 front panel and the larger metal knobs make rotating through gain steps and operating the equalizer much easier than the original 1073. I also liked the center detented equalizer Boost/Cut controls on the X73. With a Neve 1073, you are never quite sure if you are exactly at 0dB boost/cut, hence the Off position.

I used a Neumann M49 microphone with a narrator for my first quick test. Along with three other engineers and producers (all of whom know the sound of this particular M49), we strictly evaluated the quality of the amplifier without getting distracted by music or good singing.

Using the microphone preamp only with no EQ switched in, the two Averill modules were very close together in sound. There were some very slight differences in gain and tonality, but they were well within typical module-to-module differences you would find in a well-maintained Neve console. The Vintech X73 acted like a third Neve module with similar gain and tone. All three modules sounded great, and I think we were hearing differences in component tolerances and age.

Using the equalizers on line-level sources, I was not able to hear any difference between any of the three modules. Without using precise test gear, setting boost or cut with the 1073 equalizer is, at best, a "guesstimate." The 1073 and X73 do not have calibrated Boost or Cut knobs, so you just turn the controls until it sounds right. All three units sounded smooth in the high frequencies and warm in the bass...just like a Neve console. I tried the X73 with different microphones on all the sources I would normally use a 1073, and it sounded the same in all cases.

New Neve Sound On The Road

With the exception of a few manufacturing oversights, the X73 excels, providing more frequency choices than the old Neves, plus direct input, metering and output level control. The new switch components offer glitch-free operation, while the more rugged construction is valuable for taking the Neve sound on the road.

A great way to get into the classic sound of Neve with a good-sounding, rugged and worthwhile unit, the Vintech Audio X73 sells for \$1,995. A power supply that will run up to four X73s sells for \$225.

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