



ART VOICE CHANNEL

Voice Channel marries a Class-A tube pre with flexible signal processing and digital interfacing. Mark Cousins speaks out.

KEY FEATURES

- Fully featured tube mic preamp
- Variable input impedance
- Dynamics section
- Parametric EQ
- Flexible digital connectivity
- USB port

VOICE CHANNEL

Manufacturer **ART**

Price **£465**

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One pleasing consequence of the rise of digital recording has been the increased emphasis placed on the front end of your signal path – in other words, the preamp and other signal processors placed ahead of your DAW. While many producers are happy to mix in-the-box, they'll still go to great lengths to ensure that a performance is captured as perfectly as an analogue signal path can. This usually means a lot of expensive 'boutique' equipment, especially if you decide to include a preamp, compressor and equalizer as part of your signal path. At a little over £450, though, ART's new Voice Channel represents one of the most affordable valve-based front ends to a DAW, but can it really compete with solutions costing thousands of pounds?

Making connections

On first impressions, the ART Voice Channel certainly looks impressive, its sturdy black 2U metal casing accommodates plenty of hands-on controls, VU and LED metering plus a wealth of input and output options. On the front you'll find the usual combo XLR/jack connector covering mic- and instrument-level input, while at the rear is a balanced line input (and a parallel mic input) in the form of a combo connector. Outputs cover everything

from balanced analogue (via XLR and a TRS jack), ADAT optical, S/PDIF and even USB, making it a breeze to integrate into a range of setups.

Interestingly, the Voice Channel offers a number of different insert options. The first is patched post-preamp, but before any of the Voice Channel's signal processing. The second is just ahead of the A/D conversion and after the signal has been split into left- and right-hand components (although, of course, the image is resolutely mono). In theory, this enables you to achieve a number of different effects, including the ability to have one channel recorded clean while the other is compressed (via an external compressor) or, indeed, to patch in external stereo effects (although the wisdom of this is dubious) as part of the USB audio path.

Modern art

As the number of controls on the Voice Channel's front panel might suggest, there's an impressive amount of signal processing at your disposal. To start with, the preamp includes a fully variable impedance setting, enabling you to impart subtly different performance characteristics on the mic, as well as a pad, phase inversion and a low cut control.

After the preamp section, the signal passes through some tube colouration, which has a control for moving between high- and low-voltage operation. Technically speaking, the high-voltage setting provides the greatest amount of headroom, while the lower voltage setting provides greater opportunity for tube colouration.

Next up is the dynamics section, which includes an expander/gate, compressor and de-esser. The compressor sounds much like a typical VCA compressor, providing efficient gain control, although nothing too exciting in respect to its character. Certainly, the clear metering makes the compressor easy to configure and if used subtly it can provide a useful level of gain control ahead of your DAW. The de-esser, though, is slightly harder to work out, as it seems to 'bolt on' its settings to those already established in the compressor. What's more, its sidechain cannot be solo'ed, making it impossible to tune the de-esser's frequency by ear.

Finding your Voice

Having just a single Threshold control, the expander/gate is easy to use. Although it might be useful to adjust Attack and Release settings, it does a good job of controlling background noise. A slight disappointment, though, is the lack of dedicated bypass controls for the compressor, de-esser and gate, with the only option to deactivate their functionality coming from either lowering the Ratio or reducing the Threshold setting to its off position. This makes an A/B comparison difficult to achieve unless you're willing to reset the Threshold/Ratio accordingly.

Usefully, the equalizer can be applied either before or after the compressor, enabling you to optimise the timbre ahead of compression or restore a little 'air' after the input has been compressed. The equalizer features four bands of semi-parametric operation, with two switchable-frequency shelving controls and two sweepable mids. Unlike the dynamics section, the EQ has a dedicated bypass control, enabling efficient A/B comparison.

Artistic vision

Technical criticisms aside, we have to admit to being won over by the sonic charm, efficiency and flexibility of the ART Voice Channel. The preamp delivers excellent results for its price, while the

The Cryo Tetrad DAW...

MEASURING UP

If your main interest is the preamp, then it's well worth taking a look Focusrite's ISA One (£499), which retails at a similar price point. Of course, the ISA One lacks the signal-processing features of the Voice Channel, but you do get an extra 20dB of gain on the preamp as well as a well-designed system for monitoring directly from the ISA One. Digital connectivity, through, is an optional extra. A similar feature set to the Voice Channel can be found on TL Audio's 5051 Mono Tube Voice Processor (£688). This includes both a compressor and equalizer as well as similar valve colouration to the Voice Channel, although digital connectivity (like the ISA One) is an optional extra.

additional signal processing enables you to tailor the sound in an effective and efficient way. Testing the unit both as a USB front end to a DAW as well as being connected via S/PDIF revealed that the A/D conversion is certainly up to scratch, retaining all the important detail captured by the preamp.

Of course, the only caveat with the USB connectivity is in respect to monitoring, as the unit effectively works only in one direction (and, of course, latencies are usually much higher over USB than FireWire). By comparison, Focusrite's ISA One includes a rudimentary monitoring system, enabling you to directly monitor from the preamp, with the 'cue mix' delivered via an additional input. However, by aggregating your existing audio interface with the Voice Channel as well as using the preamp direct out, it's easy enough to create some form of workaround.

Overall, the Voice Channel is well worth closer investigation if you're looking for a cost-efficient way of improving the front end to your DAW. The results provided by the Voice Channel's preamp alone compare favourably with many higher-priced units and the added signal processing provides detailed control over what eventually reaches your DAW. **MTM**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Flexible output options
- Full range of signal processing
- Efficient preamp
- Clear metering

WALK ON BY

- No bypass controls for the dynamics
- Shelving frequencies slightly unconventional
- De-esser difficult to use

VERDICT

An impressive package for a little over £400. ART's Voice Channel delivers a refined performance with plenty of signal processing options and a wealth of digital connectivity as standard.



METHOD SPOT

The USB port enables the main outputs of the Voice Channel to appear as an input option in your DAW, using class-compliant drivers. The sample frequency and bit rate will be defined by the host, with the Voice Channel supporting resolutions up to 48kHz/24-bit. Use the other digital connections if you want to run at up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution.



Sounds so good it's hard to ignore.

"This is the sort of performance we would expect from a £10,000 Dream PC rather than a sub £2000 air cooled system",
Cryo Tetrad, Custom PC Magazine, May 2009.

