

Focusrite Forté Suite £249 PC MAC



Pro Tools users can now indulge in an emulation of Focusrite's legendary hardware processors

> Before their more recent branching out into making audio interfaces, plug-ins, DSP devices such as Liquid Mix and more affordable, traditional hardware devices, Focusrite were exclusively an ultra-high-end audio manufacturer. Of particular note were the ISA 110 EQ and the ISA 130 dynamics processor, which have both now been replicated as much more affordable software plug-ins for the Pro Tools LE, M-Powered and HD systems.

The Forté Suite comprises several plug-ins, so as well as a full-on channel strip incorporating all elements of both processors, you can have the ISA 110 and ISA 130 as individual instances, or even just the latter's compressor section (but not a solitary de-esser or gate, sadly).

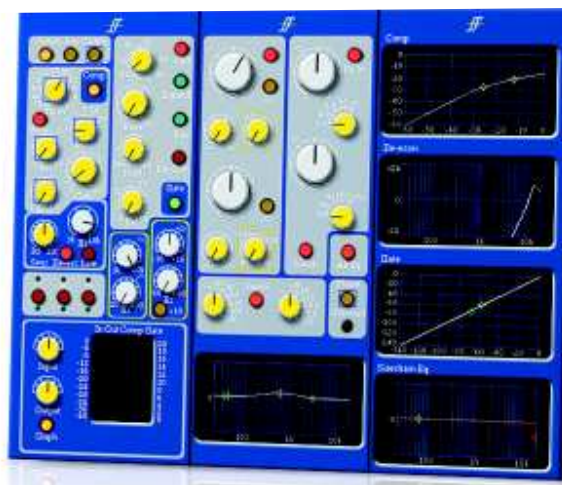
The ISA 110 is a four-band parametric EQ with two adjustable mid bands, top and bottom bands with shelving curves, plus low-pass and high-pass filters. It's a literal recreation of the hardware - which is something of a double-edged sword, as we'll discover.

The sound is pretty close to the original but a little edgier, which is good, because the original EQ is very polite around the mid and presence range. This virtual 110 has real bite, to help cut through the mix. The slope of the shelves is fixed and gentle, bringing a silky air to the top end.

The downside is that the layout and controls mimic the original, so the frequencies of the top and bottom band are notched (five steps) and the frequency controls of the mid bands have fiddly 'x3' switches to alter the range.

Dynamic dynamite

The 130 dynamics controller consists of compressor/limiter, expander/gate and de-esser. There's also a three-band filter that can be routed to the sidechain input of either the compressor, the gate or to the main audio. Like the 110, it's true to the original in sound, looks and operation. The compressor is very smooth, especially in the attack transient stage and is



fantastic for invisible control of vocals and acoustic guitar. It's not great for percussive sounds or 'rude' compression, though. As on the hardware, the threshold and ratio are stepped rather than swept, which means for fine threshold settings, you have to adjust the input level control as well.

On both plug-ins, you have the advantage of graphic displays (compression graph and EQ curve) that can be clicked into shape, but they're by necessity pretty small. The colour scheme is brash and bold - like the hardware - but the font is very low-res compared to other plug-ins.

Focusrite have done the world a favour in recreating their flagship processors for a wider public. Although they could look and feel more expensive, it's the sound that counts, and the Forté Suite isn't lacking in that department. **cm**

Contact Focusrite, 01494 462246
Web www.focusrite.com

System requirements

PC/Mac Digidesign-qualified
Pro ToolsHD, HD Accel or LE system,
Pro Tools v7 or above

Test system

Mac Apple Mac G5 PPC Dual 2.5GHz,
4GB RAM, OS X 10.5.6, Pro ToolsHD3 v8

Alternatively

McDSP Channel G
N/A >> N/A >> \$495
A fully fledged channel strip that models leading consoles

Metric Halo ChannelStrip
N/A >> N/A >> \$345
One of the first TDM channel strips, now available in RTAS format, too

Verdict

For Great-sounding EQ
Compressor very smooth on vocals
Plug-in comes in several configurations
Very flexible sidechaining possibilities
Good replication of the real thing...

Against ... But too faithful in places!
No separate de-esser or gate
Graphics don't look a million bucks

Despite some interface annoyances, this recreation of classic Focusrite gear pushes all the right sonic buttons

8/10

A little piece of history...

After creating the original ISA 110 and ISA 130 processors in the late 80s, Focusrite used them as the basis of a monster mixing console known as the Focusrite Forté (where Focusrite's double-f logo comes from). At the time, it cost literally a million pounds and Focusrite could only afford to build two, one for Electric Ladyland in New York and the other for Master Rock in London. When the latter closed, it was moved to Pete Townshend's Eel Pie studio.

The Forté console was a massive beast that required some agile stretching to reach the mic gain pots and a bus trip to get from one end to the other. But it was a sublime desk, sonically comparable to the Neve VR, though with perhaps a less coloured, open sound. Like the VR, it ran so hot you could cook your breakfast on the meter bridge.

Many great rock records were made on them, yet the gentle EQs and dynamics were also perfect for acoustic instruments.