

Focusrite ISA 828 | £1,699

Can Focusrite's new 2U, eight-pre, four-DI monster live up to the sound of the Forte desk and 110 pre? **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** gets focused to find out



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

An 8-channel preamp/24-bit 192kHz capable digital converter with transformer-based inputs featuring eight preamps taken from Focusrite's legendary mixing desks and packaged in a 2U rack

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Eight high-end transformer-based preamps
- 2 Four instrument DI inputs
- 3 Optional ADC card

PRICING

Optional digital output card
£499

The original Rupert Neve designed ISA 110 pre/EQ (commissioned by Sir George Martin) is something of a

legend in the high-end pro audio world. Many swear that it's still one of the best sounding pres/EQ circuits ever made. Originally it was designed as an outboard unit but then due to popular demand, found its way into Focusrite's legendary mixing desks; the huge and rare Forte Console and later on the Focusrite Studio Console.

With the ISA 110's gold-standard reputation firmly cemented among engineers and producers alike, Focusrite have sought to keep its flame burning, most recently with their successful ISA 220 channel strip, 430 and 430 mk2 producer packs and 428 four-channel preamp. The ISA 828 is the next logical step in that series.

The ISA 828 is a hefty 2U slab of metal that's for sure. Weighing in at 8.84 kg you'll need a sturdy rack unit to hold it – it's built like a tank! All the front panel dials have a solid and

reassuring feel to them (as you'd expect at this price) and everything is nicely laid out.

Around the back there are eight XLR mic inputs, eight balanced-jack line inputs, and 25-pin D-sub connections for the analogue outs and ADC inputs, (although it's a shame there's no room for XLR or jack outs

due to space taken up by the large heatsink). You'll have to buy a custom 25-pin D-sub to XLR/jack to plug into a desk or soundcard, unless you're going all-out digital using the ADC, adding at least £50-100 to your initial outlay.

With knobs on

On the front there are four DI/instrument jack inputs that are very welcome indeed. Up to +40dB gain is available here, perfect for driving low output passive instruments without the need for separate DI boxes. It's great that these are front-mounted for easy accessibility. Each individual channel also has a toggle switch for mic/line/inst and a useful six-segment led meter for monitoring input levels. These can be calibrated using the peak level control on the rear and can be also switched pre ADC.

Next up is the standard line input accessed via XLRs on the back panel and has a gain range of -20 to +10dB with an extra 20dB trim available for fine level adjustment. The transformer-

The optional Analogue/Digital Conversion card

The optional ADC card allows the ISA 828 to seamlessly integrate with other digital gear. The card has AES/SPDIF, word clock in/out, and ADAT optical allowing 24-bit 192kHz operation and will integrate well with any DAW. At the lowest sample rate of 44.1kHz the card can output 32 digital channels while allowing use of the eight

analogue outs as well! I hooked the ADAT optical output to my soundcard's optical input and all sounds were transferred



digitally to Logic on my Mac. The quality of the conversion is top-notch with no noticeable loss of quality. As a standalone converter the ISA 828 works like a dream, holding its own in terms of sound quality with just about any other high-end converter you could think of. It's more impressive when you consider the card is only £499...





based mic pre is a direct modern recreation of the preamp from the Forte desk (the ISA 110) and uses the same Lundahl transformers on the inputs (great for added glue, warmth

even at high gain settings and it's difficult to get any audible distortion. It's one of the quietest pres I've used in this respect and there's no way you'd ever be short of headroom.

switch and of course a phantom power switch for mics that require it. The 828's overall character is heavy with a well-defined high end, soft midrange (although it sounds almost too soft for

It excels on punchy sounds where the pre retains and emphasises the attack transients beautifully

and heaviness) and what's known as a 'Zobel Network', which is essentially a resistor-capacitor that ensures smooth delivery of frequencies across the preamps range. The mic/line gain dial is click-stepped in 10dB increments allowing easy recall of settings and the gain range has two modes.

A la mode

The first mode has a range of 0 to +30dB the second runs from +30 to +60 and has its own switch. There's also the +/-20dB trim available allowing the total gain available to hit +80dBs. As a testament to the quality of the pres design, noise is super-low

There are also four different impedance selectors (which also work on the Inst inputs as well). These affect the frequency response of the mic connected. High impedance settings generally enable a higher output, flatter midrange and emphasised high end from low output mics, while lower impedance will reduce output from high output mics and emphasise the lower mid range. In practice these settings make a subtle but important difference to the sound of any connected mic or instrument.

Finally, each channel has a high-pass filter (which rolls off at 75Hz to eliminate bass rumble) a phase flip

my liking!) and tight low end with no bagginess. Where it excels is on bass/acoustic guitar and on punchy sounds where the pre really retains and emphasises the attack transients. It's a very useful all-round, fairly transparent preamp but it does have some character especially when you push the gain levels and experiment with the various impedance settings, particularly the ISA110 mode.

I can see the ISA 828 getting used in many different applications including as a standalone converter, (using the ADC card – see box on the opposite page) as a front end for your DAW (although FireWire integration would be nice, hint hint!) and generally if you want eight excellent workhorse pres in a compact unit you need to consider this box seriously. The one key missing feature for me is a stereo mix buss/stereo output for use as a summing mixer and perhaps an optional fader pack, but you can't always have everything! **FM**

SPECS

Preamps: Eight Focusrite preamps with Lundahl transformers on input and Zobel Network based on the Forte desk/ISA110 preamp design. Mic/line/inst selector switch, 48 volt phantom power and phase flip switch.

Mic pre gain stepped in +10 click steps up to +60dB

Trim control +/-20dB

Line input -20 up to +10dB

Instrument inputs - +10 up to +40dB

Impedance selector: low, ISA110, med and high

Filters high-pass filter on every channel with 75Hz roll

Analogue inputs Four DI jack inputs (on channels 1-4), eight balanced-jack line inputs and eight XLR inputs

Analogue outputs Via 25-pin D-sub connector

Digital inputs 25-pin ADC input allowing eight analogue channels

Digital outputs (via optional ADC card) Includes AES/SPDIF and ADAT outs. Capable of 32 outs at 48kHz or 20 outs at full 192kHz resolution. ADC card includes wordclock sync in/out. Runs alongside the eight analogue outputs.

Metering Six segment meter showing DBFS, switchable pre ADC with ADC card installed.

Dimensions:

482 x 305 x 88mm

(350mm depth with heat sink)

Weight:

8.84kg

ALTERNATIVES



Presonus Digimax FS

£349

Pretty similar feature-wise to the ISA 828 but significantly cheaper and with digi card built in. A steal at this price.

presonus.com



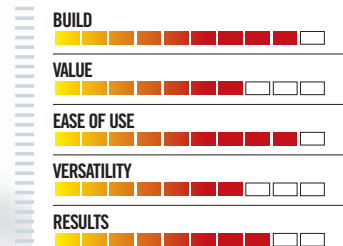
Mackie Onyx 800R

£749

Mackie eight-preamp channel strip in a compact 1U rack space. Features the well-respected Onyx pres, digital conversion and variable mic impedance.

mackie.com

FutureMusic VERDICT



If you need eight pres with ADC option, metering and four DIs, then seriously consider this.