

APHEX 230 MASTER VOICE CHANNEL

Patented signal processing and extreme sonic outcomes are what Aphex is renowned for, and its latest product release is no exception.

Text: Greg Walker

► As a pathological recordist I'm always interested in new gear aimed at the middle of the market – not so expensive as to alarm the missus and not so cheap as to alarm the local hock shop owners. I don't know if anyone else suffers this, but I have a long-running fantasy that I'm going to stumble onto a preamp one day for just over a grand which is going to be like one of those 'Neve killas' you see advertised on eBay, except that it *is actually* a killa Neve! Well the wait goes on; meanwhile preamps in this price range tend to be competent and sometimes versatile without necessarily setting the world on fire.

What piqued my interest in Aphex's latest offering – the 230 Master Voice Channel – is that apart from being a versatile channel strip replete with compressor, gate and EQ etc, it also includes some more typically arcane Aphex signal processing into the bargain. Aphex is no slouch in the audio design department, having had great success over the years with numerous proprietary processing designs and, as if to make the point, the final page of the 230's manual is a list of no less than 21 patents under which this device may be protected. A quick glance through the manual reveals the 230 Master Voice Processor to be squarely aimed at the broadcast market – in particular at radio DJs and voiceover artists of various kinds, but this by no means precludes the 230 from vocal and instrument recording duties.

BOX OF TRICKS

The Aphex 230 Master Voice Channel is a relatively shallow 1U design finished in anodised silver with a top-mounted grille through which a single 12AT77 valve can be seen. The valve front end and extensive processing sections are augmented by A/D conversion and comprehensive digital outputs with supported sample rates of up to 96k. Build quality is solid with nicely-weighted rotary controls and funky translucent backlit dome buttons. When the 230 is powered up, a green backlit Aphex badge is illuminated and various other LEDs on the unit flutter into life. The input stage features mic gain, -12dB/octave high-pass filter (operating below 70Hz), -20dB pad, +48V power and polarity inversion buttons. There's also a small LED that flashes yellow when the 'cough switch' is engaged (one for the broadcasters), and red for signal clipping.

With the 'Phase Rotator' button, things start to get interesting. This tool enables a process called Spectral Phase Refraction or SPR – the manual goes into some detail regarding this process, but let's just agree that the net effect of all this is to extend the apparent frequency response and improve sonic clarity. Either side of the simple but effective 10-segment LED meter (a button toggles between input gain and gain reduction metering) is the dynamics section. The 'Easyrider' compressor is indeed very straightforward to use, having only variable release time and the mic pre's gain control (acting on the compressor's threshold level) to concern the operator. Even though it is spec'd at a fixed 4:1 ratio, in practice, the compressor behaves more like a transparent brickwall limiter, keeping sonic detail intact while really clamping down on errant peaks – a very slick and successful element of the 230's overall sound in my opinion, though obviously not able to be finessed a great deal.

The 'Logic Assisted' gate has controls for Threshold and Depth while a LED blinks when the gate is closed. I found this feature less attractive than the compressor but then I've never been a big fan of gates, full stop – this one seems to work best at moderate settings and I dare say in a broadcast environment it could be a life saver. The de-esser is a joy to use and is one of the smoothest and most transparent I've come across. A single rotary control dictates threshold and an LED illuminates to show the taming of sibilance – lovely!

BIG BOTTOM INSPECTION

Next up is another one of Aphex's proprietary circuits, the Big Bottom. No prizes for guessing what it does, with a rotary controller setting the frequency below which low-frequency enhancement will take place, and another to mix this enhancement into the main signal chain. A single fully-parametric EQ follows with three controls governing ± 12 dB of gain available between 240Hz and 4.5kHz. Aphex's star performer, the Aural Exciter, comes next in the chain, providing rotary control of the frequency above which 'excitement' begins, and also for the amount of excitement fed into the main signal. For those of you too young to have encountered this effect, it works on the higher frequencies and is capable of adding breathtaking amounts of fizz, sheen





and air to a signal. When pushed to its limits it also gets quite noisy and is best used with a degree of restraint. Another pushbutton allows for switching the entire tone-shaping section of the 230 (Big Bottom, Parametric EQ and Aural Exciter) in and out of the chain, making A/B comparisons a cinch. Finally, on the far right hand side, is a rotary controller for overall output level.

The rear panel layout offers XLR mic input, a 1/4-inch jack effects loop with send and return sockets, +4dBu balanced XLR and -10dBV unbalanced 1/4-inch jack outputs, and a tip+shield jack socket for a simple mute switch (for coughing etc, when broadcasting live to air). Digital audio outputs are offered via AES/EBU, S/PDIF and optical connectors; a two-switch matrix offers samples rates from 44.1 to 96k; and, finally, wordclock in and out terminals are accompanied by the option of internal or external clock source.

GOLDEN TONSILS

Quite a bagful of features and options then, but what does it all add up to? Firstly, I'll offer some general observations based on my tests. Many of the Aphex 230 Master Voice Channel's parameters, being geared towards broadcast tasks, lend themselves immediately to a big, upfront and present vocal sound. The mic pre is quite nice sounding – not too hyped but present enough and good on vocal sources in particular, while packing plenty of power and headroom. The SPR is a rather subtle effect, which may aid certain voices much more than others; at times I found it hard to hear any effect at all. The digital aspect of this unit all checks out okay, although I'm a tad suspicious of any device that adds on A/D conversion at the end of an already large feature list. The parametric EQ is a very useful tool for either high 'Q' problem-fixing or broadband tonal shaping, and because of the availability of other high- and low-frequency tone-shaping tools it naturally lends itself to midrange control. By gently introducing compression, bottom-end and high-range excitement you can find yourself in 'golden tonsil' land in no time at all. I did some mock voiceovers while pushing the setup reasonably hard and was amazed/appalled to hear

The Ghoul: the internationally-recognised symbol for phantom power... apparently.



myself sounding like one of our nation's inordinately self-important shock jocks (yikes!) – there is something about this box that lets you get those slick sounds with surprisingly little effort. The de-esser, in tandem with the gate, really allows you to work the Aural Exciter a bit harder without being blitzed by sibilance or noise, and the Big Bottom magnifies whatever low frequencies your voice generates, transforming you into more and more of a man (apparently this doesn't work so well for female voices!).

SOMETHING ELSE?

Having scoped all this out, my immediate question was: 'Okay what else can I do with this thing?' As it turns out, quite a lot. I tracked some percussion instruments with the 230 and quickly found, especially when I wound in a little EQ and aural excitement, that it helped tambourines and shakers ride really sweetly in the mix. The extra sheen adds something to the sounds that the rest of my outboard gear couldn't do. Ditto with BVs, where a breathy effect was achieved with ease. During the time I've had the Aphex 230 I've found it falls naturally into a role of creating customised sounds when overdubbing that work really well because of their sheer difference. You can get really interesting bass-heavy sounds with the combination of the Big Bottom and the parametric EQ that, again, nothing else in my rack can get close to. The 230 has this ability to magnify things in interesting ways, and while you wouldn't necessarily use some of these processes all the time, the possibilities are intriguing.

This brings me to my biggest gripe with the 230, which is the lack of a line input – I did feed some stuff back through the mic input at low level (with associated low level distortion and noise), and you can sneak in line level input through the effects return, but then you miss out on all the dynamics processing. A dedicated line input would open up the possibilities of the 230 immensely, allowing for more versatile mixing and parallel treatments etc, but perhaps I'm missing the main (broadcast) point here...

In the comprehensive and helpful manual, Aphex suggests that as a budding voiceover artist you might like to carry this box around with you as your secret weapon for auditions etc, and personally I think you'd be wise to take its advice. For the price, it's a very competent and well-targeted piece of kit that takes a lot of the guesswork out of getting that big, full-range radio presenter voice happening. For the more music-based fraternity, the 230 is a good quality pre with a bunch of unusual tricks up its sleeve – well worth considering if you're looking for something different. And now, the news headlines... ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$1695

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Pros
Slick and easy to operate.
Heaps of features.
Powerful and distinctive tone shaping.
Simple but effective dynamics control.

Cons
No line input.
Some controls a bit basic for detailed audio work.

Summary
The Aphex 230 Master Voice Channel is a very effective and reasonably affordable tool for the voice-over artist or radio DJ with a variety of sonic processes that deliver big, slick vocal sounds. Handy also as a channel strip for music work which goes places other outboard gear can't.