API The Channel Strip

It's a brand with lots of fans and lots of outstanding modules. GEORGE SHILLING beds down with a medley of some of his favourite bits.

*I*n a departure from the usual form, this is an API unit with a name instead of a model number. However, they couldn't entirely resist, and in fact The Channel Strip is subtitled with four model numbers: 512C – 527 – 550A – 325. Some or all of these might be familiar to API fans, and this unit is an interesting alternative to the 7600 that stuck more closely to the Legacy console strip and included 200 Series components and busing capabilities for connection to the 7800 Master unit. This new Strip (UK£2000 + VAT) seems more intended for standalone recording and processing but in terms of connectivity this is still a very flexible device with no less than 12 audio (and sidechain/control) connection sockets.

The four distinct sections are tidily arranged on the front, working from left to right as per the normal signal flow. At the left is the 512C preamp, followed by a 527 Compressor, a 550A EQ and then the output section, the 325 model number referring to the Line Driver circuitry. Regarding this Output section, API seems remarkably proud to boast about the provision of a Cut button and rightly so. The lack of a Cut button can be one of the most frequent frustrations of recording with racked preamps and channels (as opposed to a conventional console). On powering up with a stiff button, the soft-switching Cut button has already sensibly reset itself to a muted state, shining a bright red.

But before exploring the front, the rear is worth a look, with a selection of connections mirroring the sections. Behind the preamp is the mic input XLR, and working across from this is a long row of TRS jacks before reaching the output XLR. The first jack is Line In — an XLR may have been preferable but it seems space is limited here by the sheer number of connections provided. There is then a Preamp Output which is half-normalled to the First Effect In jack socket, its labelling reflecting the option to reverse the order of EQ and Compressor processing on the front panel. Further insert possibilities are then provided with First Effect Out, Second Effect In and Out, and a final Insert Return input that is switchable from the front panel, just before the output driver section. The Send for this can, of course, be taken from any of the previously mentioned outputs. The next TRS socket is a Compressor Side Chain In, and there is finally a DC Link for connecting multiple Strips together to provide stable stereo or surround imaging when using the compressors on each one. It appears that each section

retains the original modules' output transformers, and the 1U is fairly heavy.

The 512C preamp has three possible input choices, selected with a soft-switch that defaults to Mic (blue) when power is cycled. The colour changes to yellow to indicate the selection of the front panel Instrument jack, and goes off for rear Line input (TRS). The other three (latching) buttons here are for Polarity, 48V phantom and -20dB Pad, arranged similarly to the layout on the 3124 preamp unit. However, all three buttons here illuminate and will light up yellow when depressed (as will all the buttons except Cut). I'd have preferred red for the phantom. The little Gain knob ranges from 34 to 68dB but with the pad, minimum gain is 14dB. There is no meter on this section, but instead the horizontal LED VU meter at the far right that normally shows Output level can be switched to show Preamp level. Line mode bypasses the gain knob, and reduces the Pad option to -6dB.

Sonically, API mic preamps have long been my all-time favourites, and this version is no exception with just the right blend of clarity and subtle, neutral, yet slightly magical enhancement to just about any signal and mic. It's a clear, clean and detailed sound, and the Instrument input has a truly 'direct' quality that works well with guitars and basses.

The Compressor is next, with a relay Bypass, and plenty of flexibility. There are Feed-Forwards (New) and Feedback (Old) modes for different characters, as per the 527 and earlier 2500 models. New is more akin to a dbx 160 while Old leans more towards the 1176 style. There is also the patented Thrust button that applies a high pass filter to the sidechain for that great punchy bottom end effect on programme. Soft or Hard Knee modes are switchable, and the Link button brings the aforementioned rear panel connector into play.

Knobs are provided for Threshold, Ratio, and a dual-concentric Attack and Release. And there is also a Post EQ button that swaps the two sections round in processing order. With all the different possibilities here, the compressor can satisfy most

tastes and styles. The Attack and Release are wide-ranging, and the Ratio goes continuously from 1:1 through 3:1 at half-way round, to infinity:1. With the different modes, these ranges effortlessly cover all eventualities from punchy attacking drum hits and squashy, grainy drum ambience limiting to punchy bass guitar, smooth and luscious vocals and everything in-between. To be picky, I occasionally wished for a little more range than the 30dB provided on the Threshold knob, and rather than providing a make-up gain knob there is an auto make-up circuit that can sometimes make accurate comparisons difficult, although it can be a time-saver. The compressor's meter is unusually reversed in that all LEDs lit represents no gain reduction, with the lights going out to represent compression.

The EQ section is a reincarnation of the classic original three-band 550A. All controls are stepped here, with a super choice of seven frequencies on each band. The proportional Q character provides beautifully smooth shaping (with optional Shelving top and bottom). This is the EQ to use if you don't want to screw things up! It doesn't do surgical, but it does do gorgeous, with a wonderfully open and natural yet engaging sound. Steps of 2 or 3dB boost or cut might seem large on paper, but in practice the choices between different settings are usually easy, and the lack of fine-tune actually speeds up decision-making. The Band Pass filter button slices off signal below 50Hz and above 15kHz, and is surprisingly useful, removing unpleasantness in both areas, and tightening and smoothing things.

At the far right beside the Cut button is the nice large Output fader knob, which is gently notched with a 0dB mark (although the pointer is not especially visible).

This is a beautifully designed and constructed device. Build quality is high, with plenty of chunking audible relay clicks when switching many of the buttons, and a solid, weighty feel to the box. The mic preamp is surely one of the best there is, the compressor covers a lot of possibilities and sounds great, and the EQ is as sweet as a tin of Golden Syrup (but without the side effects). This, along with all the rear panel connectivity and the routing and linking options, all adds up to a dream (The) Channel Strip. ■

PROS The best processors available; classic favourites in a beautifully coordinated and flexible channel strip.

CONS No Instrument 'Thru' connection.

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