API 6B Lunchbox and modules

Powerful, flexible and portable are just three of the words that apply to this configurable processor rack for engineers on the move. Throw in API heritage and sound and you have the makings of a feast. GEORGE SHILLING is out to lunch.

THE LUNCHBOX IS A NEAT POWER supply and chassis with a carrying handle that enables you to configure a 500 series setup to suit your appetite. API has discontinued the 4-slot version in favour of this 6-slot unit. I'm all for a bigger lunch, but the review model included just one each of the 512c microphone preamp (UK£489 + VAT), the 525 compressor (UK£745 + VAT) and the 550b (UK£745 + VAT) 4-band EQ. The 6B (UK£319 + VAT) will also house the 560 10-band graphic EQ. Conversely, these 500 series modules are also compatible with rackmounting units that will hold 2 or 10 modules, and of course the Legacy console and vintage API consoles.

The rear of the Lunchbox includes very clearly labelled XLR inputs and outputs. All three of the supplied modules are effectively vintage reissues of designs from 30 or more years ago, with a few small enhancements.

The 512c microphone preamp is a very simple affair, with one uncalibrated, undamped Gain knob, a small LED meter, and four buttons for Polarity, 48V, Pad (-20) and Mic. The front also includes a high impedance jack input and an additional XLR mic input. The Pad applies to all inputs.

I have long been a fan of API mic preamps since using the old API desks at London's RAK Studios. Despite their diminutive size and unassuming appearance, and the plethora of new mic preamp designs around, these are still my all-time favourite mic preamps. The 512c has the clearest and sweetest tone, with enormous detail, dynamics and tonal enhancement, yet somehow, the signal remains remarkably uncoloured. The supplied example initially provided almost no signal output, but after a bit of a general 'going over' by Livingston Studios' expert tech guru Pete Martelli, it sprang to life and sounded as wonderful as expected, with all kinds of mic pairings.

The 525 compressor delivers a remarkably warm sound. This is an exact reissue of the early 1970s model and uses a 'feedback' circuit, unlike most VCA compressors, which are 'feed-forward'. This sounds more friendly and warm, and offers 2:1 compression or 20:1 limiting. The three release buttons provide four different release settings covering a wide range, although their exact operation is not obvious from the panel legending. Attack time is fixed and fast, which I like, and the levels are set with simple In and Out level knobs at the top, and an unusual Ceiling knob that is stepped and simultaneously adjusts threshold and make-up gain. This is great for trying different amounts of compression while keeping the level roughly the same.

A DS button provides de-essing, and there are hard wire Bypass and Off buttons, the latter simply removing the gain reduction effect. The little meter is like something from a portable Hitachi cassette machine circa 1972, but is lit and gives a reasonable indication of the pleasant squashing.

The 550b EQ is the latest incarnation of this lovely sounding EQ. The 4-band version has seven frequencies per band and tiny toggles for shelving on the high and low bands. Cut and boost knobs are also stepped, with 2dB the smallest step. I don't have any problem with these 'limitations' though — the frequencies are well-chosen, and this is the kind of EQ where changes almost always sound good, so the choice between, say +2 and +4 of 10kHz seems somehow less critical!

I started off using the unit in a mixing situation. I had the compressor followed by the EQ as my main vocal insert on a slightly thin and hard sounding rock vocal, which included enormous dynamic changes. It would be handy if there was a way of internally chaining the audio signal from the output of one module to the input of the next one, but with some short XLR cables this can easily be achieved — after all, this is a free-standing unit rather than a permanent rack installation.

The compressor soon had the dynamics tamed, and with a few notches of EQ the vocals sprang to life and were immediately more involving and enjoyable as part of the mix. I was truly surprised at how easy it was to get them sounding so good, the API circuits seem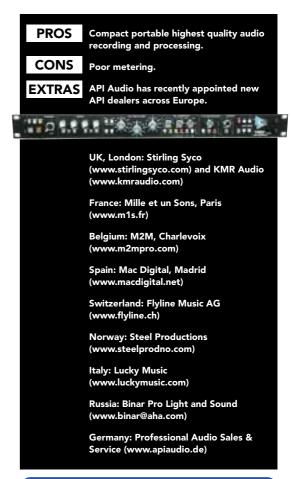ing to enhance the signal beautifully. The mic preamp was put to good service for some electric guitar overdubs. Plugging the output into an A-D convertor, the meter lacks resolution in the higher end of the scale: there is a 12dB gap between the top two LED indicators. The mic pre was also used for vocals and other instrumental recording, always performing effortlessly, and always providing rich and involving recordings. My ribbon mic sounded even better on vocals than when paired with more expensive variable impedance preamps.

Put alongside other vintage and modern units, you might not guess the power of these API modules, but they are truly fabulous. Chaining all three together made a 'dream' recording channel, showcasing the 'secret of the API sound' — the proprietary 2510 and 2520 op-amps.

The 6B is easy to carry, and makes a great portable setup for any recordist wanting the highest quality. The plasticky 1970s look might not be to everyone's taste, but I think the knobs are quite cute, for some reason reminding me of those 1970s Polydor 7-inch singles with molded labels. So, when hankering for portable outboard, don't overlook this handy lunchbox. ∎

PROS	Compact portable highest quality audio recording and processing.
CONS	Poor metering.
EXTRAS	API Audio has recently appointed new API dealers across Europe.

UK, London: Stirling Syco (www.stirlingsyco.com) and **KMR Audio** (www.kmraudio.com)

France: Mille et un Sons, Paris (www.m1s.fr)

Belgium: M2M, Charlevoix (www.m2mpro.com)

Spain: Mac Digital, Madrid (www.macdigital.net)

Switzerland: Flyline Music AG (www.flyline.ch)

Norway: Steel Productions (www.steelprodno.com)

Italy: Lucky Music (www.luckymusic.com)

Russia: Binar Pro Light and Sound (www.binar@aha.com)

Germany: Professional Audio Sales & Service (www.apiaudio.de)

Contact