

Focusrite ISA One Microphone Preamp and DI £499

Need an instrument and mic preamp/DI? Well, why not go to a certain Mr Rupert Neve... *by Mike Westergaard*

The Focusrite brand has an outstanding pedigree in the audio world and was formed in 1985 by Rupert Neve when George Martin asked for a microphone preamp that could be retro-fitted into the Neve desk at Air Montserrat. The result was the ISA 110. This design was also used in the Focusrite Forte mixing console, a desk that was so expensive to build that only two were made and the company became bankrupt. However, the company was resurrected in 1989 and this year, Focusrite launched the ISA One, featuring the original preamp designed by Rupert Neve over 20 years ago.

The ISA One comes in a custom-made flightcase. It has a front panel bristling with knobs and switches, dominated by a classic VU meter, giving it the appearance of a piece of lab gear. As well as the expected gain knobs and input selector, there's a +48V phantom switch, high pass filter, phase reverse and a useful insert switch, enabling you to patch in your favourite EQ or compressor. Unusually, there's also an impedance selector so you can match the impedance of the preamp with a microphone, particularly useful with ribbon microphones. There's also an

independent FET DI circuit with its own level control, impedance selector and feed out to an amp. This means you can use the ISA One to record a clean guitar or bass through the DI and simultaneously capture the amp or a vocal through the mic preamp.

There's also a headphone socket with its own level control. The ISA One has a rather convoluted monitoring system. With the 'cue mix' button in, the headphones will only monitor anything arriving at the 'cue mix' inputs on the back. If this is the output from your DAW, you will then suffer latency problems. The alternative is to de-select the 'cue mix' and connect a mono feed from your DAW to the external input. This creates a latency free environment but because the external input feed takes up one of the inputs, you can't then use the two channels to record. It would be great to be able to hear the 'cue mix' inputs in the headphones as well as the other inputs and have a control to balance them.

Sounds

The ISA One is a breeze to use. Input level is adjusted using a stepped gain and trim system with a switch to throw in 30dB of extra gain if needed. The mic

amp, as you would expect from Focusrite, sounds exceptionally good. It's clean, pure and solid; almost three-dimensional in its delivery, in fact. The detail on both picking and strumming acoustics captures all the subtleties and nuances of your playing. The DI was tested against a variety of DI units and equalled or outperformed them all.

As an optional extra, you can buy the SA Stereo ADC digital card. It gives you two channels of very classy sounding A/D conversion in AES/EBU, ADAT ADS or S/PDIF formats. The ISA One can either control the clock from 44.1KHz right up to 192KHz or receive clock via the BNC on the back panel.

Verdict

The ISA One is a seriously classy piece of kit. Both the mic amp and DI sound fantastic and will only help to make your recordings sound more professional. It's great to be able to use one unit to record both the DI and a microphone simultaneously and the variable impedance selector on the mic preamp will be a boon if you have an eclectic collection of microphones. A portable, high quality unit that is priced fairly, not cheaply, and well worth saving up for. **G**

Bottom Line

We like: Sound quality; dual input (DI and Mic Amp) architecture; portability

We dislike: Strange headphone monitoring configurations

Guitarist says: If you can afford it, you'll get a high quality mic pre-amp and DI that oozes class



The Rivals

Avalon has the **U5** (£429) with mic, line and instrument inputs. The **Summit Audio 2BA-221** (£459) has variable impedance and filter controls. **Universal Audio** has the **Solo 610** (£657) and the **Twinfinity 710** (£599). Both have a tube stage and high quality audio.



Focusrite ISA One

PRICE: £499.95 (SA Stereo ADC digital card £249.95)

TYPE: Microphone pre-amplifier and simultaneous FET DI box

OTHER FEATURES: Easily portable and flight-cased. Variable impedance. Various headphone monitoring options

CONNECTIONS: Front Panel: DI input, amp out, headphone jack. Rear Panel: XLR Mic, XLR and jack line inputs, XLR main and DI outs, send and return jacks; cue mix and external inputs on jacks; mains connector

OPTIONS: SA Stereo ADC digital card – 24-bit 44.1 to 192kHz AES/EBU, ADAT ADS or S/PDIF analogue to digital conversion

TEST SYSTEM: Apple Mac Pro 2.66 running Logic 8 through a Motu 2408

Focusrite
01494 462246
www.focusrite.com

Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★