

Rupert Neve Designs: Portico from £1,385

Rupert Neve has designed some of the most desirable audio gear ever. *Jon Musgrave* sizes up his latest Portico range

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

Range of transformer-based high-end outboard units.

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Quality transformer design
- 2 The sound
- 3 Innovative 'true tape' module

PRICING

- 5043 compressor £1,468
- 5042 tape channel £1,385
- 5032 mic pre/EQ £1,468

Over the years various designers have put their name to classic pro audio. From the component-led design of a Pultec EQ to the creative beauty of a Moog synthesizer, you instantly know and trust the people behind the gear. In pro audio circles, no name is more renowned than Rupert

Neve's. Over the years he's not only been responsible for some of the best audio designs ever created, he's also built up his fair share of companies, including Neve Audio, Focusrite and now Rupert Neve Designs (RND).

At 80 years of age you'd have thought a happy retirement would be uppermost in his mind, but as the latest

Portico modules indicate, it's clearly not. This modular range of units (along with his new analogue mixing desk) are the fruits of his latest factory in Texas.

Modular

As you can see, the Portico units are small half-rack modules. There are seven units in the range including mic pres, EQs, compressors, a tape emulation line driver and a stereo field editor. The range covers a lot of ground in various different ways, with the 'true tape' line driver probably the most innovative product. Thanks to Sonic, the UK distributor, we have three of them to try out – the 5032 single channel mic pre/EQ, the 5042 twin channel 'true tape' line driver and the 5043 twin channel compressor.

Before looking at the individual units, it's worth considering the overall design concept Neve has applied here. First up, like the great designs from the '70s, these are discrete transistor-based circuits (so no valves), using single-sided (or Class A) amplifier designs.

All units use new custom-designed input and output transformers and have balanced ins and outs on XLRs. This combined with the independent power supplies, and magnetically shielding



steel enclosures means your Portico is about as isolated from ground loops, noise and interference as possible.

The 5032

A Rupert Neve mic amp is always a wise choice. With vintage 10xx series modules still changing hands for silly money, and AMS Neve re-issues costing over a couple of grand, a new mic pre/EQ design from the man himself has to be considered.

The 5032 is a single channel mic/line level design with three-band EQ. It employs the typical Neve TLA (transformer-like-amplifier) with stepped mic gain. This is followed by an input transformer and a post transformer level trim (+/-6dB). The EQ section occupies the other half of the panel space.

You'll notice that there's no additional output or fader level. There's also the mysterious 'silk' button but more on that later.

Modular system

So just what is driving the half-rack module size of the Portico? First up there's the space-saving aspect. If you buy a pair of units, you get a joiner plate, so you can easily slot them into one rack space. However, probably more important is the nod towards a compact

modular desk. All Porticos are designed so they can be mounted vertically, a bit like an old rack of Neve mic pres! To help you on your way they've produced a 19" 6U vertical frame kit. This accommodates eight Porticos, with a label blanking plate at the end, leaving space for power

supplies. If you're wondering about the fascias, they can be swapped out for vertical ones, and knob positions easily re-aligned. The 'buss' option found on most units, is designed to hook up with their forthcoming 'monitor/mixer' module.

For some reason (maybe given the transformer design), I was expecting the 5032 to sound coloured. It doesn't, and actually sounds as open as any mic amp I've heard in recent times.

It certainly lacks the sense of low mids 'congestion' you sometimes get with mic amps. As you'd expect, the EQ and filter are also fabulous, offering the

simple, the record and replay amplifiers are coupled so that driving the input reduces the replay level. And the tape speed options reflect the different emphasis/de-emphasis circuitry you'd get on a tape deck.

So how does it sound? Quite frankly – brilliant! With tape emulation engaged, the input trim at zero and the

saturation set to minimum you effectively have a unity gain situation. But because the signal isn't actually bypassed you're still getting the

initial effect of the circuitry. It's at this stage that the differences between the tape speeds first become apparent.

With the 7.5IPS setting, there's a filling out of the low mids slightly, with a taming effect on the high frequencies. At 15 IPS the effect on the low mids is less marked, but the real difference is there's a noticeable high frequency lift.

The effect is like a subtle enhancer. As you further push the saturation control, the sonic differences become more marked, but it's only when the level meters hit the red that you might re-consider. And with amplifier coupling taking care of overall levels, you can concentrate on the sound.

Overall the 15IPS option seems better for using on mixes. The slower tape speed is far more suited to taming and thickening things such as drum overheads. Either way both options are far more varied than you may at first think, and seriously addictive.

The 5043

Choosing a stereo mix compressor can be tough. Finding one that will gel things, but with the right kind of colouration and that isn't a nightmare to set up, means pro users tend to choose from a few established units.

Sure, you can find fancier-looking outboards but Portico is for those who value sound over image

musical boost you expect from a traditional Neve design.

So what about the 'silk' control? According to the manual, this circuit reduces negative feedback. To my ears it sounds like a very subtle enhancer, especially for the low mids. I have to say it's a tough call, because the 5032 sounds great in either mode. I guess my only slight beef is there's no dedicated instrument DI input (something which you do get on their 5016 unit).

The 5042

The 5042 feels a little like the odd one out in the Portico range. Designed to emulate the sound that recording to tape imparts (7.5IPS and 15IPS no less), it's a simple-looking two-channel unit with input level and 'saturation' controls. So how exactly does it go about this?

Well, first up the sound associated with tape recording is a combination of many factors including the input/output amplification, the emphasis/de-emphasis EQ circuits, the record and replay heads, and the tape itself. The 5042 incorporates all these elements minus the tape, allowing you to drive the input heads in the way you would when driving tape. To keep things

SPECS

Portico 5032
Frequency response main output: -0.2dB @ 10Hz, -3dB @ 160kHz
Noise: with unity gain (measured at output) better than -100dBu
Max output: +25dBu (20Hz to 40kHz)
High pass filter: continuously variable 20Hz to 250Hz, 12dB / octave
EQ: low shelf +/-15dB @ 160Hz, high shelf +/-15dB @ 8kHz / 16kHz, mid peak +/-15dB, continuously variable 80 to 800Hz or 800Hz to 8000Hz.
Power requirements: 9 to 18 Volts DC

Portico 5042
Frequency response: -0.5dB @ 10Hz, -3dB @ 200kHz
Noise: with unity gain (measured at output) better than -100dBu
Max output: +25dBu
Max output 'true tape' mode: +25dBu min saturation, +6dBu max saturation
Frequency response 'true tape' mode: -3dB @ 16kHz for 7.5 IPS, -3dB @ 20kHz for 15 IPS.
THD and noise 'true tape' mode: approx 1 to 2% 2nd and 3rd harmonic below 1kHz

Portico 5043
Frequency response main output: -3dB @ 18Hz, -3dB @ 150kHz
Noise: with unity gain compressor in, -92dBu
Max output: +25dBu
Compressor ratio: 1.1:1 to 40:1 (limit)
Attack range: 20ms to 75ms (continuously variable)
Release range: 100ms to 2.5 seconds
Power requirements: 9 to 18 Volts DC



