

TEST

FOCUSRITE TWINTRAK PRO

FOCUSRITE TwinTrak Pro

It's a Class A preamp, a mid-scoop EQ, a compressor, a DAC, and it's got the name Focusrite on the front... But is that enough to impress **Dan Duffell**?



TWINTRAK PRO

Manufacturer **Focusrite**

Price **£399**

Optional ADC
module - **£129**

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Focusrite gear has become synonymous with high quality and prices to match. The Platinum range brings that reputation to a lower price point, but attaching the word 'budget' to it hardly feels appropriate. Clearly, Focusrite's thinking is that it can add a little of its high-class sparkle to the equipment racks of those of more modest means. But, of course, this implies compromise. Has there been any? Let's take a closer look...

What's the big idea?

The TwinTrak Pro is designed for two main functions: to get high-quality audio from your studio into a DAW, and to provide comprehensive, zero-latency monitoring. The format is deceptively simple: inside a glistening 2U rack box, a pair of recording strips carry mic/instrument preamps, line inputs, scoop EQ, and optical compression.

Also included is a monitoring section, which combines the signals from the channel strips with signals from your DAW and feeds both a monitor output and headphone

output for zero-latency monitoring. Oh, and there's an effect send/return loop in the monitoring section, too.

All the controls feel great, the layout is spacious, there are plenty of LEDs and those lovely mauve VU meters make it look very impressive sitting in a rack. That said, the small front-panel lettering can be difficult to read without direct strong light.

TwinTrak approach

One of the main aims of the TwinTrak is to obviate the need for a mixing console when using a DAW. A major part of fulfilling this brief is the inclusion of the kind of connection options you'd normally expect to find on a console. The main XLR mic and 1/4-inch jack instrument inputs are on the front. Round the back, each channel has a balanced TRS jack line input, a TRS insert socket, +4dBu balanced XLR line out, -10dBV unbalanced jack line out, and TRS jack sidechain inputs for the compressor.

The monitoring section offers a pair of unbalanced jack line inputs (for connecting your DAW), balanced XLR outputs (to feed a studio monitor system) and an effects send

and return system using balanced TRS jacks. There's even an additional set of unbalanced 1/4-inch jack Headphone Mix outputs which, as the name suggests, take the same mix as the headphones and so are ideal for a recording booth headphone feed.

The whole package is finished off with a digital I/O section comprising a S/PDIF input (going directly to the monitor section) with Word Clock in. An optional ADC module provides a S/PDIF master output with Word Clock feed.

On the strip

The mic inputs have 48V phantom power switches, 'Air' buttons, and variable impedance knobs. The Air feature boosts certain higher frequencies in a mystical (and sadly unexplained) manner, designed to make the signal sound more 'spacious'. All you really need to know is that it adds a subtle, but quite definite, 'lightness' to the sound which is rather pleasing.

Another key feature of the TwinTrak Pro's design is the variable impedance control (read more about it in the Different Strokes box). It's accompanied within the input section by a (+20dB) High Gain switch and several buttons whose



The TwinTrak Pro's comprehensive rear-panel connections.

purpose is to select between line, mic and instrument. There's also a Trim (gain) control, whose action varies according to input type: Phase Reverse button; 75Hz 18dB/octave HPF (high-pass filter) button; and six-point LED input level meter. The input stage provides plenty of headroom for each input type and for outputting signals to different recording media.

Stuck in the middle

Many sound sources suffer from at least one mid-frequency element which is a little too dominant, so a little judicious mid range cutting is often required for recording. The TwinTrak's Mid Scoop EQ section consists of an On/Off button, Steep button (switching between -6dB and -12dB cut) and a Range control (120Hz-2kHz). The cut is relatively gentle in comparison to most console (or software) equalisers, but subtlety is really what you need when recording and this EQ sounds particularly smooth.

The compression section consists of rotary controls for Threshold, Release and Gain Make Up, and buttons marked In (meaning on/off), Slow Attack, Hard Knee and Hard Ratio. These are accompanied by a level meter indicating compression amount and also a Stereo Link switch that combines both channels to form a true stereo compressor. In stereo

only one monitor channel!); the second to switch between the analogue and digital line inputs (from your DAW to the monitor section).

Next we have three knobs: the first - Input Balance - is a mix control for the two channel strips (channel 1 is to the left, channel 2 is to the right, so the knob must be positioned at 12 o'clock to get a mix of both). The second is a Wet/Dry mix control for the external effect send/return system (this is not a send level control; the rear-panel FX send connections take a +4dBu insert-type feed, immediately after the Input Balance control). The third knob - labelled Headphones Mix - sets the balance between the signals from the channel strips and playback from your DAW and routes it to the headphones circuit.

Controlling the sound leaving the monitor section are the Monitor level and Headphones level knobs - the latter affecting signals at both the front-panel Headphone and rear-panel Headphone Mix sockets). The headphone circuit actually takes its feed from the Headphones Mix control, while the monitor circuit is fed from the line input from your DAW (unless the button marked Headphone Mix To Monitor is pressed, in which case the result should be self-explanatory). Finally, there is a Monitor Mute button.

If you've been following closely, you'll have realised that Focusrite

The TwinTrak Pro cleverly steers the user towards making the right recording decisions.

mode the top set of controls are used to adjust both sides.

In action, the compressor is very smooth. Obviously, it doesn't offer quite as much editability as you'd get with dedicated rotary controls for attack and ratio, but in some ways that doesn't matter. This unit is designed primarily for recording and it provides the kind of transparent, understated compression you want for the job.

Listening in

The monitor section is rather more complex and versatile than you might expect. First comes a pair of buttons: one to switch the entire monitor section between mono and stereo (which is essential when it comes to only using one channel strip, otherwise the sound appears in

has thought of just about every monitoring eventuality. Once you get to grips with the routing system you can easily set up any headphone or monitor mix you require or listen to the signal you are recording as it comes back from your DAW.

A real Pro?

What many users are likely to want from the TwinTrak Pro is a processor they can simply plug in and use to produce high-quality results with minimal fuss - and perhaps even minimal prior skill. And, by and large, that's what they'll get. The TwinTrak Pro cleverly steers the user towards making the right recording decisions. There's a good degree of editability, but also a subtle preset mentality apparent in its design. The Air button, the subtle cutting of the

RELATED TECHNOLOGY

Different strokes

Variable mic preamp impedance is not something you find on many products. It's designed to address the fact that not all mics or preamps are the same. Different models will have slightly different output impedances. Most mic preamps have fixed input impedance which is optimised for use with most mics (usually somewhere between 1k Ω and 2k Ω). Different combinations of microphones and mic preamps will produce slightly different responses.

Having a variable input impedance control not only enables you to match the mic to the preamp, but also enables you to elicit different responses from the same mic to suit different source material. Low input impedance tends to deliver boosted low-end frequencies and emphasise any response peaks in your mic. High input impedance produces a flatter low-end response and boosts high frequencies. A high impedance preamp also improves signal strength (and, therefore, the signal-to-noise ratio).

mid range, the high-pass filtering, the gentle compression at low ratio... it all adds up to the tried-and-trusted approach a professional might take.

So, what distinguishes the TwinTrak Pro from other top-flight processors in the Focusrite range? The answer is partly such features as full EQ and compression controls and partly the quality of its components. Clearly, economies have to be made somewhere.

Even so, the TwinTrak Pro is a superb product that competes very strongly in its price bracket. Most users simply wouldn't have the kind of recording equipment necessary to reveal any qualitative differences between the TwinTrak and more costly processors. **mm**

SUMMARY

KEY FEATURES

- Class A mic preamp with variable input impedance
- Line/instrument channel inputs
- Digital monitoring input
- Scoop EQ
- Comprehensive monitoring system
- FX send/return

WHY BUY

- Very easy to use
- Excellent sonic results
- Versatile monitoring system
- Great build quality
- Outstanding SNR and THD

WALK ON BY

- Poor legibility in low light
- Some reduced editability
- Two-channel limitation may not suit all needs

VERDICT

A relatively affordable voice/instrument recording channel that sounds marvellous straight out of the box - and bears the Focusrite name.



METHOD SPOT Cut it out

The TwinTrak Pro's 'scoop EQ' highlights an important lesson of equalisation: generally, it is far better to cut than boost. Rather than boosting the frequencies you want, try approaching a mix using the EQ only to cut, so that you define a frequency range for each sound by removing unwanted frequencies.