Grace Design m103 Channel Strip

With a sweet EQ and smooth compression, the m103 is as clean and pristine as you would expect from Grace Design.

Review Copy

I have a lot of quality preamps in my studio, none of which are channel strips, maybe because I'm a purist, or maybe just because I haven't found one that I feel can deliver the goods on a high level. So when agreeing to review the Grace Design m103 channel strip ($1,750 retail), I did so with reservation.

As the proud owner of a Grace Design 906 monitor controller, I respect what the company does, but I realized this is its first foray into channel strips; I was open-minded, yet skeptical.

Features

When I first opened the m103 box, my initial reaction was, in a word, "Wow." There's a lot here. The m103 is a solidly built, single-channel preamp with a single-stage, parallel-tuning, three-band EQ and Optical Compression, all based around the heart of the m101 circuitry.

The m103 packs a lot onto its black anodized front panel. First, you will find a quarter-inch TRS Hi-Z input; peak LED; a large, rotary Gain Control (10 dB to 65 dB in 5 dB steps); and several small switches, each with corresponding LEDs, for 48V phantom power, Ribbon mic selection (more on that shortly), and a 12 dB/octave 75 Hz high-pass filter. Above that sits the mic/line switch followed by smaller EQ knobs for Low Gain (all are -12 dB to +12 dB), Low Frequency (20 Hz to 750 Hz), Mid Gain, Mid Frequency (.5 kHz to 4 kHz), Mid Q (fully parametric), High Gain and High Frequency (3 kHz to 20 kHz). Next are Low and High Frequency-type switches for either shelving or peak and an LED-illuminated EQ In switch.

A switch chooses the order of the EQ and compressor circuits, followed by knobs for compression Threshold, Attack, Release and Ratio (1:1 to 12:1), as well as the Compression In switch and Link (SC) switch for activation of external side chain control or linking two m103's compression for stereo applications. Above this sits a 10-segment Gain Reduction meter (-10 to -1) for the compressor and a 10-segment VU meter for the m103's output (-20 to +3). Lastly, a large Trim control knob for -10 or +10 dB of gain and a power switch with LED are provided.

The rear of the m103 features XLR Mic in, XLR Mic Pre Out (balanced output before the EQ/Comp section), unbalanced quarter-inch Mic Pre Out, XLR Line Input (input to EQ/Comp after mic preamp), XLR Main Out, TRS quarter-inch Main Out, unbalanced quarter-inch Main Out, a Stereo Link/Sidechain switch, quarter-inch Link in and the power supply.

Obviously, that is a lot of options on a 1RU, single-channel preamp. After reading through the manual, I really liked what I saw: The specs were impressive across the board. I noted on the block diagram that when the EQ and compressor are switched out of circuit, they're completely bypassed — something I feel

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is important for a super-clean signal path when needed.

In Use

Connected with my standard Zaolla silver cable, I placed an Earthworks QTC-1 mic in front of a friend playing a vintage Martin. Again, my (and his) initial reaction after listening was "Wow." It offered the clarity I was hoping to hear. Against my nature, I also dialed in a little peak EQ around 12 kHz, boosting about 5 dB. It was subtle, but certainly there. Since it's a small guitar, I also kicked in some low EQ — about 3 dB around 120 Hz. My impression was the same: subtle but noticeable and quite nice. Then we recorded a Guild D-66 with a Rosewood body, which naturally had more bass response, so I cut some bass. I've recorded a lot of acoustics, and this m103 combined with that single mic was really killer on both instruments. That was when I looked over to my rack to decide what to sell to buy this thing.

Next, I used it to record a short TV cue with a single Royer R-121 ribbon on a Martin 000-18NB. Flipping up the ribbon switch, the m103 automatically locks out the phantom power and raises the impedance from 8.1k ohms to 20k ohms. It also bypasses the phantom decoupling caps, something I was curious about, so I asked Grace Design's VP of sales/marketing, Doug Wood. "Since capacitors tend to adversely affect sonic purity in the signal path, the only ones that we use are for phantom-power decoupling," he noted. "Also, it's important to know that we use metalized film caps — no electrolytic caps. The rest of the preamp audio circuit is direct-coupled with DC servo control."

The m103 and Royer ribbon gave me a warm, classic sound that beautifully captured the guitar. Next, I plugged in my '70 Fender Precision, dialed in a slight 4:1 compression, left the 75 Hz Filter in, bumped up 120 Hz a dB and got a killer smooth sound with massive sustain. I again said to myself, "This unit is not leaving my rack." Finally, I used it with a Tele and a Sennheiser MD 421 on my old '62 Gibson Falcon, and it delivered the goods as expected.

Summary

Without a doubt, the m103 channel strip is a winner. It is as clean and pristine as you would expect from Grace Design with a sweet EQ and smooth compression. Although its front panel is tightly packed (my only gripe), its build quality is solid and the knobs are smooth and sure. Its flexible design, clarity and super-accurate sound have made it a permanent part of my acoustic mic pre arsenal. Yep, I bought it!

Price: $1,750 retail

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PAR FILES: Grace m103

http://www.proaudioreview.com/article/31258

This .WAV file features Rich Tozzoli's use of the Grace m103 channel strip. It includes a 2010 Martin 000-18 on the left, recorded with a Royer R-121 and the m103 EQ in the chain "to add some top," offers Tozzoli. The bass is a 1970 Fender Precision with the EQ subtracting some 60-80Hz and a 4:1 compression "just hitting the peaks." The guitar on the right is a '91 Fender Telecaster through a 1962 Gibson Falcon with a Sennheiser MD 421 with EQ cutting 80Hz and cutting 10kHz and compression at 3:1.

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