



Vintage Guitar[®] Gear Reviews

magazine

Recording With Finesse

The Grace Designs m103

Getting better gigs requires marketing, and the first step in most bands' marketing plan involves making recordings. And making good recordings requires using good-sounding gear. Enter the Grace m103 Channel strip.

Calling the m103 a channel strip, as Grace Designs does, is a bit like calling John Elway "a guy who played for the Denver Broncos." But if Grace had included all of the m103's functions in its name it would have formed a run-on sentence – microphone/instrument preamp with three-channel EQ and compressor for recording or sound reinforcement. And even then you'd miss some of the m103's myriad features.

Because it does so much, the controls on the m103 look daunting at first – 11 small knobs flanked by a pair of larger knobs with 10 mini toggle switches interspersed on a 19" x 1³/₄" front panel could cause one's eyes to glaze over.

The microphone preamp in the m103 delivers 10 to 65 dB of gain in five-dB increments via the Gain control. We had no problems getting adequate gain

from any of several condenser microphones requiring 48-volt phantom power, including a Schoeps Collette, AKG SE300B, and Alesis GT-40. The m103 can also accept ribbon microphones and includes a switch to disable phantom power. It also had no issues with noise or hum with the various instrument pickups we connected to the unit's front-panel HI-Z input. Even a Schertler DYN instrument pickup had adequate gain when plugged into the m103's mic input. Single-coil pickups may hum, but in the right spot in one's domicile, away from fluorescents and other noise sources, a single coil can be almost as noise-free as a humbucker.

Three bands of EQ may not seem like much, but it's more than enough to change the presence, harmonic balance, and texture of a track. The m103 EQ circuit offers + or - 12 dB of gain for bass (20 to 750 Hz), midrange (500 to 4 kHz), and treble (3 kHz to 20 kHz). It also has a Q setting for the midrange that lets you vary the range and slope of the effect. Listening through Stax Nova Pro headphones easily reveals the

EQ changes to the timbre of voice and instruments. Run into an Ultrasound AG-50 DS guitar amplifier, the EQ's effects were less pronounced, but still noticeable.

The m103's compressor circuitry is based on an optical attenuator – the purest, high-fidelity gain-control mechanism available. It can provide everything from gentle to heavy compression. Popping P sounds to check the effectiveness of the compressor under extreme circumstances proved the unit capable of correcting minor blasts of expelled air, but when Ps became more explosive, even at a higher setting on the compressor, the circuit couldn't rectify a more-dynamic faux-pas. So if your mic technique is especially bad, the compressor on the m103 won't solve your problem – you'll need to "adjust" your technique.

Sonically, the m103 is as transparent as a reference-mic preamp like the Grace Lunatec V-3. Changing microphones or mic positions, the differences become obvious and easy to hear. The m103 let the sonic characteristics of

the mics shine through. Even when hammered by a strong level, the m103 didn't change during dynamic peaks. After several hours of testing, I could only conclude that if there's a weak link in my recording chain, it won't be the m103.

Right out of the box, the m103 proved excellent for the recording, but required some fiddling to get things right with guitar amps. At first, we got a noticeable 60-cycle ground-loop hum when the m103 was connected to an Ultrasound AG-50 DS guitar amp. Per the company's suggestion, a two-prong AC "cheater" plug solved the problem. With the ground lifted, the m103 was as silent through the Ultrasound as it was through any recording gear.

So, who is the m103 for? It would be nearly ideal for anyone using a pair for two-channel on-location recording where they need a transparent microphone preamp, a bit of room correction, and some compression to avoid clipping in wide-dynamic-range recording situation. Or someone recording in a home studio; vocals, acoustic instruments, and electric instruments can be recorded through the Grace. All you need in addition to the m103 is a super-sounding home studio with a computer, recording software, an Analog to Digital or A/D-to-USB box or PCI-E board, plus a good microphone (or two or three), and you're stylin'!

– **Steven Stone VG**

GRACE M103

Price: \$1,750 (list)

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