

Excel 301A Nearfield Active Monitors



FEATURES

- 35Hz to 20kHz frequency response.
- 112dB Maximum output level (@ 1 metre).
- Complementary sub unit available.

INFORMATION

- £ **£1869 +VAT.**
- M **Excel Audio Systems.**
- T **+44 (0)20 8354 0820.**
- W **www.excelaudio.co.uk**

I have to admit to not hearing too much about these monitors before. They've been quietly infiltrating the upper reaches of the audio community, and some of the most respected facilities in the land have taken up with Excel, including quite a few BBC installations. Unlike monitor manufacturers who list every conceivable application for a single product, Excel concentrates on the upper echelons of critical listening: music balancing, mastering, film dubbing, and so on. All of these require uncompromising reproduction, with balance, detail, and time domain uppermost in the priority list. The Excel range is as follows.

The smallest monitor in the range is the 101A (320x180x280mm) with a 60Hz to 20kHz frequency response is recommended for desktop monitoring and travelling audio professionals. From there you move up through the 202A, with a slightly larger cabinet and bass/mid driver. The 202A's frequency response is quoted as 35Hz to 20kHz. The largest reference monitor of the range (and the one I tested) is the 301A. It has the same quoted frequency response as the 202, but is designed for higher listening levels (112dB compared to 109dB).

Finally, Excel also manufacture the complementary 802FEU (Frequency Extension Unit). It's a fairly tall box that's supplied in pairs and recommended as the 'perfect speaker stand' for the reference monitors.

The 301As, in common with the rest of the series, use 28mm, ferro-fluid cooled, soft dome tweeters; polypropylene cone bass drivers; plus two 80Wrms amplifiers coupled with Excel's own active, 'minimum phase' crossover filters. The monitors are also supplied with metal grilles for those situations where the drivers could be at risk — a crowded OB unit is a perfect example. For the purists it is preferable to remove the grilles, but there's isn't too much lost when they're in place.

I tested the 301As, as usual, on a good variety of familiar material, some full mixes, some single instrument and vocal tracks collected over time, and some test tones (I've only ever blown up one pair of monitors with these). Initial impressions were highly impressive, the detail and balance in the 301A reproduction is stunning. Much of the detail comes with a transient response that doesn't just deal with the big bangs, but the subtlest of pops — vocal plosives and lip smacking, the complex attack of an acoustic guitar, and so on.

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Stereo imaging is steady as a rock all the way through the spectrum — nothing really wavers, even with a turn of head. As should be the case with this level of monitoring, the image was pretty much independent of the physical speaker positions so you end up listening to a point in space, rather than the combination of two sources. The tonal reproduction through the spectrum is just as impressive. With some monitors you can hear the crossover point, or a movement where the drivers run through a 'soft spot'. No such problems occurred with these.

It can be upsetting to review a product and not come up with some problem or other. The best I could come up with a lack of digital input and basic gain/tone controls. The rear panel sports just an XLR input and a mains IEC connector. However, I then discovered that those controls are inside the unit, designed for set-up on installation and kept away from meddling fingers thereafter. As I mentioned before, these monitors aren't cheap, but neither is this kind of quality. Highly recommended. □ Paul Mac.

Sony R3 EQ TDM Plug-in



FEATURES

- Four basic EQ types plus GML option.
- Variable slope HP and LP filters.
- GML Extended HF simulation.

INFORMATION

- £ **£550 +VAT (plus £220 for GML option)**
- M **Sony Professional.**
- T **feedback@sonyplugins.com**
- W **www.sonyplugins.com**

It was the idea of the engineers at Sony to incorporate an EQ into the OXF-R3 Oxford console that took advantage of the flexibility of the platform, but that didn't end up without a personality. The solution lay in multiple personalities — recreating the interactions between control changes and parameters that characterise some of the most sought-after EQs around. That has led to four generic EQ types, plus the GML 8200 type — an alternative version that Mr Massenburg himself had more than just a hand in. The result is a bunch of knobs that can be most of the EQs you've ever wished for. The next step was to take that EQ and port it to the Pro Tools platform as a TDM plug-in.

When you buy the Oxford R3 EQ plug-in, you get three different versions of the plug-in, each in mono and stereo versions: Filters only (three per MixPlus chip), EQ only (four per chip), and EQ + filters (two per chip). You can opt for either just the four basic EQ types, or those four plus the GML option. You buy on-line (although no demos are available) and receive instructions on how to navigate the anti-piracy procedure. At the end of it you get a custom plug-in locked to the hard drive it was installed on.

The filters are HP and LP shelves that have variable slope (6dB to 36dB/Oct) and frequency. The main EQ has five fully parametric bands, each with In/Out buttons, and shelving selections on the HF and LF bands (where Q controls overshoot). In the centre section of the EQ there are master AB selectors (two simultaneous settings), EQ Type selection (click 'In', and the plug-in imposes those characteristics), and a master gain control.

The EQ types encompass various 'control reactions' and the

amount of interaction between gain and Q. Type 1 has very little Gain/Q interaction, described as 'most like the original 4000 Series SSLs. Type 2 is the same in boost as Type 1 but has constant Q responses in cut (fine cut for tempering snares and wide boost for 'fill', for example). Type 3 is described as resembling Neve and the later SSL G consoles, with a moderate amount of Gain/Q interaction (Q reduces with gain). Type 4 increases that interaction for control of 'overall impressions' — recommended for mastering. The GML 8200 option is a comprehensive simulation of the outboard unit,

Everything about this plug-in spells quality. With lesser EQs you never really feel 'safe' making a change.

though with ± 20 dB of boost/cut.

You have to spend a little time with this EQ to fully realise what it is capable of. Variety between types comes down to the way the EQ reacts to your actions, which is the way it should be. I've spent some time with GML EQs (fixed plenty) and I can say that the feeling returned with this — that accurate but musical sense that it brings. Everything about this plug-in spells quality. With lesser EQs you never really feel 'safe' making a change — with this you can twiddle with confidence. No other EQ currently available for the Pro Tools platform comes close. Sony has proved that you can take the EQ out of an Oxford, without taking the Oxford out of the EQ. □ Paul Mac.