

# TL Audio M1 Tubetracker | from £2,584

Are you looking for multiple channels of valve front end? Maybe TL's Tubetracker is the answer. *Jon Musgrave* rolls up some paper and takes a look



ON THE DVD

## WHAT IS IT?

Valve mixing desk

## CONTACT

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Great sound
- 2 Affordable for a valve mixer
- 3 Sturdy construction

**T**hese days, there's never been more choice when it comes to single channel mic pres.

And if you're after a cheap and compact mixer, there's usually something new to look at. However, where there are single mic pres to fit every budget, move up the food chain a little on the compact mixer front and you'll pretty much hit a brick wall, especially if you want it to be analogue.

For a number of years, TL Audio has been trying to redress the balance a little with its 'M' series. Some of you may have spotted the M3 rack mixer or more recently the M4. Both these

products package their hybrid valve/solid-state circuitry into compact and affordable mixers.

No surprise then that their latest and most affordable desk is the M1. It comes in eight-channel and 12-channel form (we've got the eight-channel on review), with prices coming in at £2,584 and £3,524 respectively.

## Compact

Although mic manufacturers are quite nifty at levering valves into mic casings, when it comes to outboard, the inclusion of valves tends to result in weighty and bulky gear. The M1

Tubetracker is no exception. Its super-solid construction, combined with the oiled oak side panels and armrest make this one heavy desk.

And with it coming in at almost 76cm deep and over 17cm high at the back, you may not consider it compact at all. But remember, this is very much a traditional desk design.

## The old switch-a-roo

So what else does it have to offer? First up each channel is switchable between mic and line with individual phantom power, phase reverse, 90Hz filter and 30dB pad. EQ is 3-band with a swept mid-range and high and low shelving, and there are two auxiliaries (the first one can be switched to pre).

Each channel also has a PFL (though no solo), mute, drive and peak indicators, pan pot and a 100mm fader. At the master section you get two monitor options, one stereo effects return, two stereo 2-track inputs, a pair of TLA VUs (with peak LEDs) and of course the 100mm master fader.

All analogue connections (mostly balanced TRS jacks) are found on the top of the desk surface, which is great for re-plugging but does mean you'll

## Bussing

The widespread use of DAWs to mix and process audio has left many traditional desk designers with a dilemma: Which functions should a hardware desk actually perform? In some respects the M1 excels at being a recording front end, particularly sonically. It is also an excellent

summing mixer for your computer outputs, adding some analogue cohesion to the summing process.

However, the one thing it doesn't offer (if you discount the auxiliaries) is any kind of bussing at the recording stage. Why is this a problem? On a traditional mixer, the option to blend mics into

one signal, which you then buss to the recorder, is vital. Sure, with a modern computer recorder you can simply track all your mic sources separately. But if you do this, being sure multiple mics blend into the sound you want can be fiddly and just avoids making the decision at the time.



need to leave plenty of space above the back of the desk. Each channel gets an insert send/return plus a balanced direct out. The main mix outputs are on XLRs, and the phones output is down by the main fader.

The M1 can also be fitted with two digital interface options. The DO2 adds a 24-bit S/PDIF output to the master output at 44.1kHz to 96kHz sampling frequencies. The DO8, on the other hand, is an 8-channel ADAT interface. The outputs are hard-wired to the channel direct outs, and the inputs hard-wired to the line ins. Both cards have word clock inputs.

### Warm up

With the M1 powered up, it only takes a few minutes for the valves to warm up (put your hand over the top grille and you'll feel the reassuring warmth).

Overall, the look and feel of the desk is very impressive, with all knobs, faders and switches having a solid feel. Okay, it certainly is a bit retro, but in a reliable way, giving the impression that this is one desk that would need very little maintenance.

On the sound front, the EQ has that TLA sound (musical rather than clinical) and you'd struggle to seriously damage anything with it. Tweak the gain up and the yellow drive LEDs start to fire. Initially it's hard to spot any difference in the sound, but keep going and you'll get the harmonic 'fatness' that valve freaks love.



after this – so before the insert and EQ! I can understand this in some respects (nice short signal path to recorder input), but also think it's a shame I

But from a user perspective, it does lack some of the features you would expect to see on a desk. If you simply want eight valve mic channels

connected to your recorder (possibly via the optional ADAT interface) then it's great. Similarly, as an outboard valve summing mixer it does a great job.

But for more complex tracking or mixing duties you might want to look at the original VTC desk. **FM**

**It feels like an incredibly professional piece of equipment – I'd struggle to fault its sonics or build quality**

However, even when you start to push the red peak lights (both the channel and master), it's tough to really trash the sound. I'm left feeling there's no shortage of headroom, which is great if you're used to working in the digital domain.

### Specs

Referencing the specs, the initial amp stage is solid-state followed by a triode valve amplifier. So the more you up the input gain, the more you're driving the subsequent valve stage. It's a really pleasant and mostly additive effect, which I like a lot.

I also learn from the specs that the direct output splits off immediately

can't use the EQ or insert prior to sending the signal to the recorder. Plus because there's no other post-fader bussing options, I can't opt to compromise signal quality for the convenience of EQ'ing my signals at source. I suppose I could use the pre-fade auxiliary as feed, but that only gives me one channel, which brings us neatly to the bussing discussion (for more on this, see the *Bussing* box opposite).

### Professional

The M1 feels like an incredibly professional piece of equipment, and to be honest, I would struggle to fault its sonics or build quality.

### SPECS

**Inputs:** Mic gain +16dB to 60dB, line +/-20dB  
**Distortion:** 0.4% typical 20Hz to 20kHz (line to direct output @ 0dB gain)  
**Noise:** -89dBu, 22Hz to 22kHz (line to direct output @ 0dB gain)  
**EQ:** HF +/-15dB @ 12kHz, Mid +/-15dB @ 150Hz to 7kHz, LF +/-15dB @ 80Hz  
**Insert:** balanced send / return on TRS jacks  
**Direct output:** balanced TRS jack, pre EQ, insert and fader  
**Master outputs:** balanced XLR, noise -76dBu (all channels @ 0dB), maximum level +26dBu  
**Power:** External PSU with 2 metre multicore  
**Digital I/O:** DO-2 S/PDIF master output, DO-8 ADAT direct/line interface  
**Weight:** 35kg  
**Dimensions:** 475 x 675 x 190mm

### ALTERNATIVES



**AMS Neve 8816 Summing Mixer**  
**£2,174**

If it's just a summing mixer you're after and valves aren't an issue, this Neve has plenty of features and a fab sound.  
[ams-neve.com](http://ams-neve.com)



**Tube-Tech SSA 2B**  
**£2,441**

If sub-mixing with a tube circuit is all you want, the Tube Tech is a super hi-fi solution, but lacks features even for a summing mixer.  
[tube-tech.com](http://tube-tech.com)



**Manley Mixer**  
**from £5,700**

A number of mixer configurations are available from US company Manley. They are very expensive but excellently engineered.  
[manleylabs.com](http://manleylabs.com)

**FutureMusic VERDICT**

<b>BUILD</b>	★★★★★
<b>VALUE</b>	★★★★☆
<b>EASE OF USE</b>	★★★★★
<b>VERSATILITY</b>	★★★★☆
<b>RESULTS</b>	★★★★★

**The M1 is very well made and sounds great but may not have enough features for some users**