



MCAudioLab EQ1ch

Pultec homages come from a variety of geographical locations and now we have one made in Italia. **GEORGE SHILLING** explores the extra bits and bobs that make this one so different.

There seems to be no end to the stream of Pultec-inspired valve EQ designs, but I don't know of any others that can boast they are 'Hand Built in Italy'. Behind the MCAudioLab name is Manuel Curcuruto who formed the company in 2007, since when he has been fine-tuning his designs although he has been developing ideas since 2004. Curcuruto is a bass player and says he has a genuine musical interest in the sound of his designs. He states his goal is to use the musical sound of tubes to achieve as high performance as digital and to that end the company produces a range of outboard. The philosophy is to keep the topology as simple as possible and to use Class A amplification. All components are tested individually before assembly, and the tubes are hand-picked.

The EQ1ch is a handsome and stylish looking unit, as befits an Italian design. The 2U case features a front panel with controls that broadly mirror those found on a Pultec EQP-1A and its many clones. However, there are some notable differences not least of which are in the sound.

After a couple of espressos I fired up power on the EQ1ch using the large toggle on the right, and a classy transparent blue badge illuminated, featuring the model designation — a common feature to MCAudioLab units. Legending is white-on-black and perfectly clear and readable, despite the fancy 'handwriting' font employed. All knobs are cleanly machined and finished in black, similar in shape to those found on Focusrite's Red range, and all with very clear pointer lines, with different colours helpfully used here to denote each

EQ band. In addition to the usual Pultec controls there is also a useful Output gain knob, with 0dB indicated at the fully clockwise position. There are three LEDs to indicate Signal present, 0dB and Overload, and all are set at sensible and useful levels — there's plenty of headroom here and the noise floor is commendably low. A small Bypass toggle activates the EQ, sometimes with a little click on the audio.

Not all the controls are similar to the Pultec, as there are additional frequency settings provided on each band, and some different behaviour.

The Low band features the familiar Boost and Cut knobs — these are very smooth and lightly damped — and the scale is marked 0 to 10 with a line for each unit. The accompanying frequency selector provides settings for 20, 30, 60, 90, 120 and 150Hz. The lowest three are familiar, but the Pultec would normally additionally provide 100Hz instead of the three higher options. What is not obvious is that the Cut knob provides a broad dip centred on a frequency 10 x (ten times) that selected.

The Mid/High Boost knob has a remarkable 12 settings: 0.6, 1, 1.5, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16kHz. The accompanying Q control is helpfully ►

accompanied by graphic indications to show which way is narrow and which is broad. The High Cut also features additional frequencies with 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 16 and 20kHz indicated.

Audibly, the unit's behaviour is different from a typical Pultec. I discerned a change in the tone of the signal when EQ was in circuit even without any EQ applied. The Output knob has no 'unity' setting (it's at about 4 o'clock) so you can easily fool yourself, but there seemed to be a slight reduction of top and a very small LF boost. It's pretty subtle stuff, probably partly due to the effect of the transformers, but certainly noticeable and something to be aware of. There is a unique colour and quality to the shaping. In particular, the character of the low band is different, with the Cut knob audibly acting on higher frequencies than those indicated by the selector (where the boost frequency is set). Dipping higher mid frequencies produces something of a link with the upper band and works well on most signals, giving you a little more useful control across the frequency range.

In terms of low boosts, the lower frequency boosts seem fractionally rounder and more audible than those on a typical Pultec — 60Hz seems more like 100Hz on an original. And the Boost seems rather more powerful, especially without the tempering normally expected of the Cut knob, with lower Boost settings providing large bass boosts. Any thoughts of replicating EQP-1A settings evaporate when you introduce the Cut knob. This seems all the better for clearing away some of the mid-range crud out of a signal, whether it be voice, acoustic guitar or bass. In fact it's especially good with bass guitar (which just happens to be the designer's instrument of choice!)

The Mid/High boost band is also incredibly powerful and satisfying. When Q is set to narrowest there is



something like a 20dB boost at the centre frequency. Yet somehow, this doesn't seem as shrill or piercing at higher frequencies as you experience even with Pultecs and other clones, with perhaps (I'm guessing) a slightly wider curve. Whatever the theories, you can clearly hear it centre on each frequency, yet it sounds even more pleasant — musical and rich. And those extra frequencies open up rather more possibilities than you'll be accustomed to and with, say, an acoustic guitar it is easy to hear the difference between frequency choices, even on wider Q settings.

The HF Cut is not a band I use very often, but subtle amounts of reduction are often a better choice than boosting the lower half of the spectrum for a bit of rounding or warmth. The extra settings are welcome, and the EQ1ch performs beautifully at all frequencies. This band also works well for a little noise reduction on such things as instruments.

The MCAudioLab shaves a few pounds off the price by employing cheaper XLR sockets, Lorin switches and 'orange drop' capacitors, but I also spotted a Lundahl output transformer on the board, and a Sowter inductor. One of the main selling points of the Cartec model (*Resolution* V8.8) was its employment of a tube rectifier in its power supply stage. The EQ1ch on review here has a solid state circuit; however, the PSU board is separate from the audio board and there is a tube rectifier option model available for MCAudioLab's TP1ch microphone preamp as the TP1tp. So naturally, when quizzed, Manuel proposed to offer a similar EQ1tp with the valve rectifier PSU.

The EQ1ch sounds fabulous, and arguably the equal of any other Pultec clone, but in truth it is not strictly a member of that club, despite the controls' apparent similarity. Approximating Pultec settings requires the knobs of the MCAudioLab

to be in rather different positions, and even then you never quite match the sound. That's not to say this is inferior — this unit has a lovely musicality to its sonic character. With its unique sound, additional frequencies, gain knob and stylish build at a price below that of much of the competition [€1,049], it is surely the Alfa Romeo of EQ. ■

PROS

A uniquely characterful take on the Pultec concept; rich and musical EQ; excellent value.

CONS

No 'unity' détente on Gain knob; some colouration without EQ applied.

EXTRAS



The TP1ch is a single channel microphone preamp with a DI. It has a mic and instrument input with switched phantom power, phase invert and a pad. The TP2ch is a dual mono version.

Contact

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