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Tascam portastudio 414 review

Though Tascam have embraced the digital generation of Portastudios with their MiniDisc-based 564, they're not about to abandon the low-cost analogue cassette format yet, as proved by their latest analogue machine, the 414. Derek Johnson gets it taped. The recording world may be inexorably turning digital, but there's one market sector that has yet to be addressed digitally: the entry level. It's going to be quite some time before stand-alone digital multitracks of any flavour will hit the sub-£350 price band — although the recent trend in MiniDisc-based multitracks is tantalisingly close! But for now, analogue cassette-based machines offer the most cost-effective start in the world of multitrack, and not only is the hardware affordable and easy to understand, but the recording media is cheap and widely available too. This brings us to Tascam's recently-launched 414 Portastudio. A replacement for the Porta 07 (apparently one of Tascam's best-selling Portastudios), the 414 falls nicely in the middle of Tascam's current 4-track cassette range: the truly entry level Porta 03 MkII retails for £199, the 424 MkII costs £499, and the 414 is a comfortable £349. Note the convenient £150 price banding! Facilities In common with the Porta 07 (reviewed in June 1993's SOS), the 414 offers a combination of a simple 4-input mixer section and double-speed (9.5cm/second) tape transport (using dbx noise reduction), housed in a light, compact casing. In fact, as I write, the Portastudio is perched on top of my Atari ST, with just a few inches hanging off the back. This limited size doesn't necessarily mean a restriction of facilities, though, as we'll see. Physically, the 414 has taken on some of the look of the more up-market 424 MkII (reviewed in September 1996), replacing the Porta 07's colourful 'teddy bear eye' knobs with a collection of more traditional-looking controls. There are operational improvements as well: the 414 can record on all four tracks at once (unlike the 07, which was restricted to two), and it features two sets of stereo inputs with level controls, in addition to the four main inputs, and two dedicated effects sends. The 414's cassette transport is fairly basic, and uses mechanical controls rather than the soft-touch buttons found on the likes of the 424 MkII; the tape counter is also mechanical, rather than digital. Though there are no sophisticated transport or locate functions, there is at least a 'return to zero' switch, and a pitch control varies the play speed by +/-12%. On the noise reduction front, dbx can be switched in or out, and a special sync position switches it off just for tape track 4, so that a sync code (for locking MIDI sequencers to tape) can be reliably recorded. The mixer section is simply and logically laid out. There are four input channels, each of which features, from the bottom: A quarter-inch input jack, which can accommodate mic or line sources; A trim pot, for setting the overall input gain, between -10dB and -50dB (mic and line level); A main level fader; An input source select switch; your choices are off, tape and mic/line; A Pan pot, for placing your signal in the stereo field; A record routing switch — options are safe (ie, no recording), a tape track numbered 1-4 for the equivalent input channel, and a left or right input (left for channels 1 and 3, right for channels 2 and 4) for stereo recording; Effect send 2/Tape Cue; depending on the setting of the Effect 2/Tape Cue switch (found above the master fader), this forms part of a basic 4:1 monitor mixer (independent of the main mixer), or can be used as a second post-fade effects (auxiliary) send; Effect send 1, for connection to an effects processor; EQ Low, shelving at 100Hz, with 10dB cut or boost; EQ High, shelving at 10kHz, with 10dB cut or boost; An LED bargraph meter, which provides a readout of the playback or record level of each track; A record-ready LED: this flashes in record standby mode, and lights fully when recording is actually taking place. As mentioned above, the 414's mixer section also features two stereo inputs, labelled 5-6 and 7-8. These are strangely equipped with stereo jack sockets, rather than a pair of mono jacks each, so you'll need to use a stereo splitter cable or insert lead in reverse in order to connect stereo devices to these inputs. And that's still not it for inputs: a pair of phono sockets provides a stereo submix input; just like the Porta 07, this has no level control and is routed directly to the master fader. Stereo inputs 5-6 and 7-8 could be used as effects returns, or to patch in the output of an external mixer. Add up the mixer inputs, plus the stereo and submix inputs, and you get 10 inputs altogether — not too bad for a budget Portastudio! On the output front, there are two auxiliary send jacks, and a collection of phono sockets offering a main stereo line output (which would patched into your mastering recorder), a monitor output (for connection, independently of the main stereo output, to a stereo monitoring system) and a synchronisation output; there is no dedicated sync input, since the right-hand socket of the submix input doubles up for this function. The headphone socket can be found at the front of the 414, next to the Punch In/Out footswitch socket. The remaining switches and knobs offer control over the monitor mix, which is independent of the main stereo mix; you can monitor the main mix, effect send 1 or Effect 2/Tape Cue (once again, this latter function is selected with a dedicated switch). 414 In Use Making a recording with the 414 is as straightforward as it gets. To record, plug an instrument or a mic into one mixer channel. Switch the record function switch to the channel's track number (say, 1) and put the input selector switch to the mic/line position. Play your part a few times, while checking the level going to tape: 0dB is ideal, but peaks of up to +6dB are fine. Ideally, you want the signal to be as 'hot' as possible without distorting. You may have to alter the trim control to get the cleanest signal, especially if you're using a mic. The EQ can, of course, also be tweaked while recording. Now, press the pause button, then the record button. When you're ready, release the pause button to start recording. To play back, set the input switch to the Tape position — this will now route the signal coming off tape through the mixer channel — and the record function switch to Safe. To hear the recording through headphones, press the L-R monitor switch. It's also possible to make recordings via the stereo buss. Mixer channels 1 and 3 are routed to the left side of the stereo mix, while 2 and 4 are routed to the right side. This technique allows you to record entire stereo mixes within the 414, and to bounce previously-recorded tracks (see 'Bouncing & Syncing' box for more on bouncing). In the first case, setting either tracks 1-2 or 3-4 to the left and right mix buss lets you record a stereo mix of all the signals coming in via the main mixer, plus the two stereo inputs 5-6 and 7-8, and the submix input. So if you were playing live with a friend or two, or had a band playing through an external mixer, patched into the submix input, a stereo backing track could easily be recorded in this manner — complete with effects, if you patched them into the stereo inputs. One thing to watch out for is that when using the L/R buss to record, anything that is playing through the mixer will be recorded onto the new track or tracks, so if you don't want previously-recorded material to be bounced with your new recording, it'll have to be monitored via the tape cue system, with the main fader turned down. This way, you'll hear the original track on your headphones (or monitoring system), but it won't actually be going through the mixer. One commonly-required recording function is 'punching in' — re-recording over just a section of a take that is otherwise OK. Plugging a footswitch into the Punch In/Out socket lets you do this hands-free. With the 414, the technique is to set the track on which you'd like to punch in to 'record ready', start playing before the area to be re-recorded, and press the footswitch just before the correct point. The selected track goes into record, and pressing the footswitch again takes the 414 out of record. As usual, it'll take practice to find the ideal place to punch in — choose your punch-in point carefully or you'll get a click (most people will tell you to punch in on a drum hit to disguise punch-in artifacts — which is all very well, unless you're not using drums!). Metering may be a little confusing for some. Although there are only four meters — one for each input strip — they do behave differently in different circumstances. First of all, they register the level of an input signal being recorded, depending on the position of the input fader (and the master fader when recording in stereo or bouncing). On playback, with the Record Function buttons set to Safe, the meters show the level coming back off tape, and while wiggling controls might make an audible difference, it doesn't affect the level shown by the meters. Switch a pair of channels' record function buttons to left and right, and the chosen pair of meters registers the level of the overall stereo mix; with this switch set to the direct channel input, the meters show the level coming back off tape, which will respond to fader movements. In these latter two cases, make sure you don't have a punch-in switch connected, since accidentally hitting the switch will start recording on any enabled tracks. Verdict In short, the 414 can be used in exactly the same way as many a cassette multitracker before it. Sonically, it is capable of excellent results, within the limits of the cassette format. Noise, courtesy of the dbx, is kept at a minimum, and one or two bounces are possible before distortion and unwanted side-effects become obtrusive. The other high point of this (and virtually any other) cassette multitracker is immediacy: being limited to four tracks and a small mixer means you start working within the format, and that almost always leads to faster sessions; it also inspires compromises, which occasionally result in a finished mix that wouldn't have occurred when using a more comprehensive mixer/multitrack system. The 414's shortcomings are few, given its price and target market. Most notable is a lack of separate track outputs, which would have allowed an external mixer to be used to treat your multitrack audio. The high-speed-only transport could also be seen as a bit of a limitation. Many cassette multitrackers give you the option of working at normal cassette speed (4.8cm/second); this has the dual advantage of allowing normal cassettes to be played back on the multitracker, and of enabling the terminally insolvent to squeeze even more out of their cassettes, since they run for twice as long (though you'll never get the best quality results working in this way). It would be inappropriate (churlish, even) to comment on the 414's lack of XLR mic inputs and three-band EQ, although one or two insert points would have been nice (on the main stereo outputs, for example). For ease of use, immediacy and sheer fun, it's hard to beat cassette-based multitrackers, and Tascam — who were, after all, the inventors of the format — are particularly good at building these machines. On a value for money basis, the 414 is the same price as the Porta 07 when it came out nearly three years ago, yet it shows a significant advance in features. If you're looking for a painless and affordable introduction to basic recording and would like a bit more than the rather limited Porta 03, or you simply want a well-specified multitrack notepad, the 414 should be near the top of your list. Features Double-speed tape mechanism, optimised for Chrome tape; dbx noise reduction; Records up to four tracks at once; +/-12% pitch control; Tape sync capability on track 4; 4:1 Tape Cue mixer; 4-input mixer, plus two stereo inputs and stereo submix input, equals 10 inputs on mixdown; Two effects sends; 2-band EQ; Separate main mix and monitor outputs, for independent monitoring of stereo mix at mixdown. When bouncing down, a technique used to stretch the limits of the 4-track format, the 414's stereo buss, in common with other cassette-based multitrackers, is used in a particular way. Say you've recorded three tracks — one of drum machine, one of bass synth, one of guitar, for example — and you still want to add some synth and vocals. The classic way is to make a mono bounce of the drums, bass and guitar tracks. To do this, set track 4's record function switch to record on the Right buss, and pan the three backing tracks hard right. Play it back, balance the tracks until you're happy with the mix, and then go into record. If all is well, you now have your basic backing on one track, and have freed up three tracks for new material. Of course, you could also play another part while recording the bounce, which makes the technique even more flexible. You lose some control later (ie, the basic track cannot be re-balanced, and it's not in stereo), but the overall result is a more sophisticated arrangement. Users with a MIDI-based system can stretch the 414 even further, since recording a sync code onto track 4 (any kind of synchroniser can be used — Smart FSK or SMPTE) will allow a MIDI sequencer (or drum machine) to play along in time with any audio recorded onto the other three tracks. Arrangements as complicated as your sequencer and MIDI gear will allow can be created, with the audio tracks left for non-MIDI audio sources such as guitars or vocals. One side-effect of this is that MIDI-generated tracks will always be first-generation recordings when preparing your final stereo mix, since they won't have been recorded or bounced onto the Portastudio first. Pros Records on all four tracks at once; Two effects sends; Three sets of stereo inputs — two with level controls; Tape sync facility. Cons No individual tape outs; Single-speed transport; No insert points; No dedicated metering for stereo output.

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