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Remote Production Group

Remote Production Group employs Focusrite Pro technology to address the challenges of a new audio production landscape
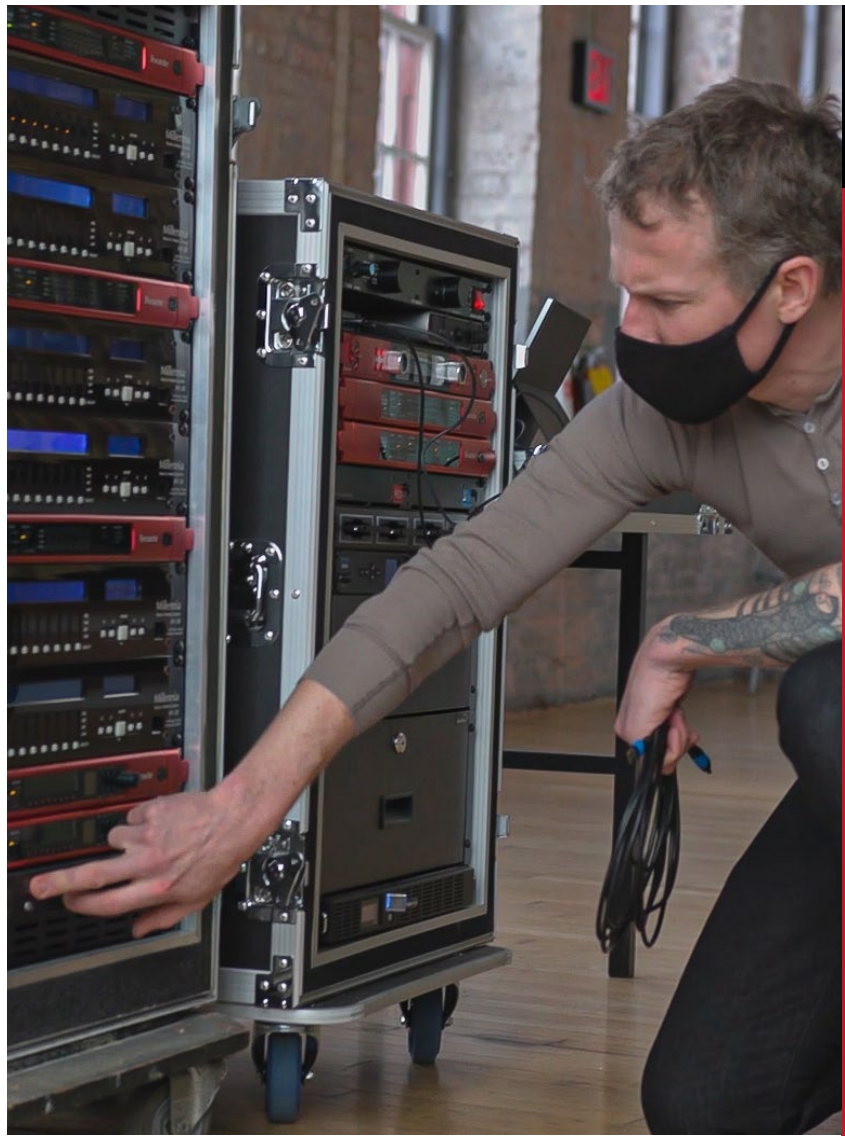
Focusrite PRO

With stellar mixing and production credits between them, leading audio professionals Brett Blanden, Jody Elff, Anthony Falcone, Greg Green, John Harris and Scott Pederson join forces to create a new strategic alliance that enables live events to have world-class audio from any location, and Focusrite Pro technology and products are central to their workflow

COVID changed everything, and in particular it changed live broadcast production, as streaming replaced live shows and events throughout most of 2020 and 2021. But even after the pandemic has been tamed, some of how the production industry adapted will remain as a new efficient and effective approach to connecting events with audiences. That includes Remote Production Group LLC, a cadre of leading production professionals who are offering an alternative to how the audio for events and performances can be mixed across any distance. Brett Blanden (FOH and broadcast mixer for Lady A and Billy Currington, among others), Jody Elff (GRAMMY® Award-winning audio engineer, sound designer and artist),

Anthony Falcone (engineer for artists including Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Prince, and Snoop Dogg), Gregory Green (technology architect with over 25 years' experience in technology-systems design, engineering, and implementation), John Harris (12-time Primetime Emmy and three-time GRAMMY winner), and Scott Pederson (GRAMMY-nominated mixer and John Lennon Songwriting Award winner) have joined forces to create this new service. Technology and products from Focusrite Pro – including the Red 4Pre, Red 8Pre, and Red 16Line Thunderbolt and Pro Tools | HD compatible audio interfaces – are central to how they do it.

Planting the Seed

Remote Production Group's journey actually began many years ago. "The seeds of this idea began about 25 years ago between John Harris and myself, because of something that came up with regard to another gig that John was recording and mixing at the time," stated Jody Elff. "And so it'd been floating around in our minds for a long time. About 10 years ago, I was on a tour that really needed a remote music truck for broadcast, but the project wasn't willing to pay for it. That's what really kicked my brain into high gear about how there's got to be a better solution for a tour or project that really needs these resources and the services on a smaller budget."

Elff had some preliminary success trying to do control over a VPN about eight years ago, but the hardware and network reliability wasn't really there yet. He also admits that at the time, he didn't know enough about network architecture to really make it work. "So now jump ahead to the end of 2019 and John reaches out to me and says, 'that thing that we keep talking about – let's really dig in and try to make it work.' That's when we started working on it in earnest," stated Elff. He continues, "We started along the same

path that a lot of people have been exploring, which is that you've got a show in New York that's got 64 channels, and you've got an engineer in L.A. that's got a studio, and how are we going to move 64 channels of audio across the country, over the internet?"

Around this time a colleague drew our attention to Unity Connect as an ideal platform for moving our audio. And that's when we got to know the guys over there, specifically Chuck Downs, who has been a tremendous asset and supporter of our vision. When we started putting the demands on Unity Connect that were very specifically related to working with music, Chuck said, 'Hang on, I see what you guys are up to. That's really cool. Let me tweak my product so it works better for this application,' and he actually went in and made some fantastic improvements for us. Now we can deliver phase-locked audio across the network, and it does it very well. Unity Connect has become a really viable way to transport our monitor bus, whether it's two channels of stereo or 5.1 or 7.1.4 or back-feeding comms systems or talkbacks through Unity to the onsite people or whatever it is. It's a great utility."

Workflow

Elff remembers the first time they pushed audio over the internet: "The first time you route live audio remotely, it's pretty exciting because historically we really don't do that. And so when we started seeing it work, it opened up all sorts of possibilities. The system works brilliantly now, and we believe that this method and workflow will continue to evolve and improve as it moves through the industry. At the end of the day, this needs to be to be a professionally viable product. We can't tell our colleagues at the top of the industry about what we're doing if we aren't willing to put our names and reputations on the line to support it".

Remote Production Group's workflow involves sending a pre-built technology I/O rack, loaded with key Focusrite Pro products, as well as other systems, and shepherded by a technician, to the event or performance location. That rack is then connected, via a high-bandwidth internet connection, with one of Remote Production Group's mixer members (usually Jody or John) working from their own home studio. The remote mixer monitors only the stereo output – the multitracks are recorded at the site of the performance – so only control data moves over the Internet connection, via Remote Production Group's proprietary codec and managed switches on a VPN, enabling a real-time remote mix. "We're not sending 64 channels of audio because that all stays local – all we're sending to ourselves is the monitor bus," Elff explains. "So what we're listening to in our studio is just two channels of audio, and that's relatively easy to move over the internet. We've created a system that helps producers imagine a new kind of workflow, with fewer people on site than what would have [been] required ten years ago. You basically have full OB van functionality, but with engineers that are in distinctly different geographic locations, working in ideal listening environments equipped for immersive audio, either across the country or across the globe."

Referencing a recent performance that took place at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), over 100 miles from his studio in New Paltz, New York, Elff notes, "When that rack shows up on site, my technician [there] will connect it up to an internet connection, and I'll be able to grab control over that rack from my studio here in New Paltz. We roll these racks in, and with power and decent Internet, we connect my studio, make sure everything talks to each other, and we're off to the races." Other recent Remote Production Group projects include the remote recording of the music for Diana: The Musical, performed with the original Broadway cast in the unoccupied Longacre Theater for showing on Netflix; Audible Originals for Smokey Robinson and Alanis Morissette; the livestream of the iHeartCountry festival, featuring Dierks Bentley, Lady A, Sam Hunt, Kane Brown and Kelsea Ballerini; the Level Up festival headlined by Blake Shelton, Roger Daltry and Dave Matthews; and an ongoing series of recordings by Elff of cellist Yo-Yo Ma. All of these projects featured Focusrite Pro products as part of Remote Production Group's workflow.

"Bulletproof," says Pederson succinctly of the Focusrite Pro systems they have used, individually and collectively. "Bulletproof head amps, well-thought-out drivers and excellent support. I've loved the Red Series ever since the mid '90s when I introduced it to artists and producers, and as a studio owner myself. The Red 4Pre, Red 8Pre and Red 16Line are Swiss army knives that let us get into and out of any kind of sticky situation with grace. They're very central to our infrastructure, especially for work that requires a very high degree of [sonic] transparency."

Harris, who mixes remotely from his home studio in suburban Philadelphia, concurs, calling Focusrite products "the backbone for moving audio around our systems, which then allow us to provide new kinds of monitoring opportunities for others to remotely listen into projects as they're taking place, and be able to hear every sonic nuance. Everything that we've done is about serving our creative collaborators, and Focusrite has been central to the systems that are now allowing us to do this in a really tangible and immediate way," says Elff. "The world of production is always shifting; it's always growing, adapting, and embracing new technologies, and we want to be a part of the future of that change."

Remote Production Group use:

1 x Red 4Pre
58x64 all-in-one interface
32x32 Dante I/O

1 x Red 8Pre
64x64 all-in-one interface
32x32 Dante I/O

1 x Red 16Line
64x64 all-in-one interface
32x32 Dante I/O

1 x RedNet D64R
64x64 MADI Optical/Coax MADI I/O,
dual PSUs

2 x RedNet MP8R
8-channel remote-controlled mic pre
with dual PSUs

3 x RedNet A16R
16x16 analogue I/O with dual PSUs

1 x RedNet HD32R
32x32 Pro Tools | HD I/O with
dual PSUs

About Focusrite Pro
Focusrite Audio Engineering has pioneered professional audio recording technology spanning almost three decades. Focusrite Pro, the company's professional and commercial division, meets the demands of recording, post-production, live sound and broadcast professionals. It consists of RedNet, a fully modular audio-over-IP solution, and the Red range, Focusrite's flagship multi-format interfaces, along with the heritage ISA range of microphone preamplifiers and analogue signal processors. The solutions have been developed to meet the needs of the most demanding applications through a relentless focus on ease of use, quality and reliability. Focusrite is based in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, with offices in Los Angeles and Hong Kong.

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