Audient Black Series

Take one of the most proactive analogue brands and fill a modular rack with its produce. Whereas the silver range represents Audient's sparkly and shiney take on audio, the Black Series is, well, altogether darker and more characterful. **JON THORNTON**

AUDIENT'S NEW RANGE of outboard kit is a new take on an old concept — namely that of taking a modular approach to signal processing that allows a user to build a rack to their own specifications and requirements within a standardised frame. Nothing new here — API and others have done similar things for quite some time — but Audient have clearly seen an opportunity and demand among those looking for front and back ends for their DAWs.

As the name suggests, the overwhelming cosmetic impression of the Black Series is its colour. The main chassis is a 4u rackmount into which up to 10 Black Series modules can be installed. On the rear of the chassis are ten sets of three XLR connectors (two inputs and one output), which provide audio interfacing to the installed modules. The function of these change somewhat depending on what modules are installed. For example, with a compressor module one of the inputs acts as an external side-chain input while the other is the signal input. Usefully, the various permutations for different module types are silk-screened onto the rear panel for reference purposes. The audio outputs and one set of inputs for the first eight slots are also duplicated on 25-pin D-Sub connectors for convenience.

The chassis provides power and, where appropriate, Word clock distribution to each module, with the power supplied to the chassis from a separate 2u PSU. DC power connects to the chassis from a truly impressively sized cable terminating in a Neutrik PowerCon connector. Seriously, it's heftier than the power cable for a 36-channel Audient console, so there should be no worries about the health of the power rails. Five different modules are currently available in the Black Series: a preamp; a compressor; an EQ; an analogue to digital convertor and a master Word clock generator. The review model shipped ready populated with two each of the preamp, EQ and compressor, and a single A-DC. Modules mate to the back-plane of the chassis with DIN 41612 connectors, and installation and removal is straightforward and painless.

The front panels of the modules are distinctively Audient-ish, using the same small tapered knobs as its other outboard offerings (but in black rather than silver), and making sensible use of illuminated pushbuttons where appropriate. Space is obviously at a premium though, and the combination of black knobs on a black background with a fairly dense layout had me constantly double-checking what I was doing initially. That said, let's deal with each of the modules in turn.

The Black Pre is perhaps the most straightforward of the three analogue modules. In common with the EQ and Compressor modules, it features discrete Class A circuitry, and transformer balancing for both microphone and line inputs. The output is electronically balanced, and the front panel also sports an unbalanced, high impedance input for use as a DI. Separate mic and line inputs are available on the rear panel selected by a front panel switch. Each has its own coarse gain control, stepped in 5dB steps from –10dB to +15dB for line level signals, and 10dB steps from +10dB to +60dB for mic level. A separate control gives you 10dB of fine trim for whichever stage is selected, which is nice as in my experience other Audient mic preamps tend to have quite poor control resolution at the upper extremes of the gain range. Plugging an instrument into the DI will override the currently selected input, and either the mic or line input gain stages can be used for this depending on which is selected. Metering is good, with a 12-segment LED bargraph referenced to 0dBFS, and 0dBu marked as corresponding to –18dBFS. A variable high pass filter (30–225Hz, 12dB/octave) and the usual phantom power and polarity reverse switches are also available. All very bread and butter stuff so far until you factor in the inclusion a variable harmonic drive control, which Audient has termed HMX.

Without the HMX function switched in, I expected the Black Pre to sound very similar to other Audient preamps — in other words pretty open, reasonably quiet and not much in the way of colouration to the sound. It doesn't though, there's a slightly softer sound to it, particularly at the low end, almost certainly attributable to the use of transformers on the input stage. It's also a little susceptible to freaking out when signal levels get too hot — 'Over' on the meter means just that, even when working strictly in the analogue domain. Feeding in the HMX control brings out a lot more in the way of colour to the sound, particularly noticeable in the presence bump on a vocalist. It's not overblown, even at maximum setting, and adds an extra degree of versatility.

Turning to the EQ section you start to see a common theme with the design intentions for the range. At one level it's a straightforward 4-band equaliser, but look closer and you see some extra features and implementations that make it stand out from the crowd. The mid bands are the most straightforward; low mids are continuously swept from 125Hz to 2kHz, and the high mids (actually labelled 'Presence') can switch their centre frequency between 1.5 and 3kHz. Both bands have an unusual switchable response. They can be either straightforward constant Q peaking filters, or have a response with a wide bandwidth boost coupled to a narrow bandwidth, almost notch filter-like cut. It sounds a little bizarre, but in practice emulates what you might instinctively do anyway with a fully parametric EQ band.

The HF band is a shelving filter, and switches between 8kHz and 'Air' — sounds like 15k or thereabouts to me *(Pardon? Ed)*. The low shelf switches between 50Hz and 100Hz, and also has two additional controls that will be familiar to anyone who has used any low frequency enhancement trickery. A switch marked 'Overtone' adds some synthesised harmonics to the band, while another labelled 'Glo' boosts then compresses the low band. Finally, a 'Tilt' switch allows the overall frequency response to be tilted to favour high frequencies and reduce low frequencies or vice versa, centred around 1kHz with a

+/-2dB cut or boost at the extremities.

All of which makes the EQ module feel just that little bit alien when you first dive into it. I found myself having to actively search for the correct control far more than I'm used to *(You could use your bat-like hearing to locate them. Ed)*. Give it time though, and it's actually very liberating. The bands, centre frequencies and slopes all interact with each other very musically, and although it can be tricky to get those LF enhancement features to work smoothly, the whole thing really forces you to think a lot more carefully about what you actually need to achieve.

The final analogue module, at least for the time being, is the compressor. Primarily an optical design, this features a fixed threshold level of –20dB. Adjusting the input level relative to this gives you an effective threshold variation, and an output level control enables gain make-up. Metering is via a mechanical VU meter, which can be switched to show gain reduction or output level. Attack and release each have six stepped values, with an auto release setting as the last step, and ratio is similarly stepped from 1.2:1 to a maximum of 8:1. In keeping with the other modules there are then a couple of additional tweaks. The first is an 'OverComp' button that switches in a fairly radical FET-based compressor to pre-treat the signal before it hits the main compressor. The second is a 'Smooth' button, and this enables a dual slope mode, with a gentle RMS detecting stage coupled to a peak detecting stage to deal with any unruly peaks.

In practice, this 'Smooth' mode is the more useable of the two tweaks, and the Black Comp's strength is in dealing out gentle, unobtrusive compression over complex mixes. In other applications it does a reasonable job, although I found it a little slow in response for some applications where you really need to grab hold of those transients quickly, and even with the OverComp function it seemed much better suited to gentle transparency than heavy handed dynamic manipulation. One useful feature is the link function, which links the side-chains of any compressors in the rack that have it selected regardless of their position in the chassis. While this does mean that you have to exercise some care in setting parameters, as these aren't linked, it enables you to build stereo or multichannel dynamics functionality in a very flexible manner.

In comparison to the slightly quirky nature of the analogue modules, the A-DC is utterly straightforward. Sample rates of 44.1 to 192kHz are available and selected on the front panel. The A-DC can use its own internal clock or an external clock source fed to an input on the rear panel of the chassis. Analogue inputs are on the rear of the card, and digital outputs are available on the front panel (SPDIF, AES-EBU and optical Toslink) with an additional AES-EBU output on the rear panel. A 12-segment LED stereo bargraph shows input level and signal over. The unit ships with 0dBFS equating to +18dBu, although setting internal jumpers on the module can move this to +20, 22 or 24dBu if required. Although not fitted to the review unit, Audient also plans to release a master clock module, the Time Machine. When installed, this distributes its clock to all A-DCs in the rack, and converts the Word clock input on the rear of the chassis into a Word clock output for distribution to other devices.

Taken as a whole, the Black Series is an interesting proposition. I have to admit to being less enamoured of the compressor than I was with the EQ and Pre, but that's down to personal preference and there's no doubt that all of the analogue modules have a unique character of their own. I do find the form-factor slightly confusing though, as it lacks the 'luggability' of something like the API lunchbox, and with the PSU it takes up 6u of space that could conceivably be equally well used by a mix and match of any preamps, compressors and EQs.

This is even more relevant when you remember that, although the chassis performs some useful functions like clock and sidechain distribution, analogue signal connections are still simply XLR inputs and outputs to each module, with no signal busing within the chassis itself. What this really boils down to is the fact that you don't get much in terms of additional convenience or space saving from the architecture — so it stands or falls by the quality of the modules. So it's a good thing that, personal preference over the compressor aside, the modules really are very good and, more importantly, characterful. You'll really need to try them out to make sure that both ergonomically and sonically they are what you are after, because if they are then a fully loaded rack would pack some serious punch. ■

PROS Good quality signal processing fare with some useful additional features; multiple linking feature on compressor modules very useful; musical and useful EQ; very smooth sounding compressor for unobtrusive levelling.

CONS Doesn't save a great deal of rack real estate when compared with separate rack units; pre seems a little lacking in headroom.

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