

# SSL Alpha Channel

Going to places and hitting markets that you'd never thought you'd see the brand in, SSL now seems an increasingly go-ahead and dynamic company. **GEORGE SHILLING** looks at a box you might have been forgiven for thinking they'd never make.



**T**HE AWS900 MOVED SSL on from being the lumbering giant of stratospherically-priced giant consoles, and since then the firm has been innovating while maximising its heritage and reputation, with the Duality console headlining the range. The Alpha Channel is one of the brightest examples of this new thinking, and, priced at less than half the cost of its E Signature and XLogic channel strips, it is clear that it is targeting the project market.

Despite the relative low-cost, this unit is British made, very sleekly designed and built, and really very well featured — you'd easily be fooled into thinking it was German or Far Eastern. The box even comes in a full-colour sleeve that makes the package look highly desirable. Taking the form of a conventional recording channel, the Alpha features a preamp that includes SSL's VHD (Variable Harmonic Distortion) circuitry, and a simple 3-band EQ, which is broadly similar to that found on G Series desks' stereo channels. Dynamics are handled with a one-knob 'Lite Limiter'. Connectivity includes analogue inserts and SPDIF (up to 96kHz clocked externally).

The knobs are typically SSL — small, usefully colour-coded, and with a good amount of resistance to adjustment, making them sexy to tweak and hard to knock accidentally. The pushbuttons are something of a departure from conventional SSL components, but these illuminating buttons continue the great tradition of SSL visual clarity, showing their status clearly, and two of them even change colour with level to show peaks and limiting. The only slight criticisms are some unnecessarily tiny legending, and a lack of frequency calibration around the EQ knobs. The front panel is elegantly finished with a slight curvature, and includes a power button that glows dimly in standby. The power supply is onboard and, despite the budget nature of the Alpha, it will work at all voltages with no switching required; there is even

a separate earth grounding connection.

Input is via a Neutrik Combo jack on the front panel, and with a Hi-Z switch, phantom power, and a Pad, all sources are catered for. Output on the rear is via a balanced stereo jack; an XLR would have been preferable, but this is one of the very few signs of cost-saving. There is no input metering, but one of the illuminating buttons helps here, with the Pad button turning red on overload peaks.

Next to the Gain pot is the VHD knob. With this turned down, you get all the qualities of a SuperAnalogue mic preamp — it is as clean as a whistle, natural and open sounding, with possibly just a touch of perceived HF enhancement — otherwise it was almost indistinguishable from the clean Prism Maselec preamp I had at the time. And there is plenty of gain, with an indicated 75dB, plus another +/-20dB on the Output Gain. With enough input gain, any overloads can theoretically be given a touch of 2nd, or increasingly 3rd order harmonics as the VHD knob is increased. But having heard the Duality version of this at a demo, I was somewhat disappointed with this implementation. On vocals it seems to sound little different than just overdriving the mic preamp, and this only seems to work just below the level at which nasty overloading occurs. The knob just seems to add a little subtle extra drive, and nothing much happens until the input gain is set precisely at the threshold of overloading with the Pad light turning red. Full-on drive sounds rich on some instruments, but it is hard to set the Gain precisely for this to work, and this doesn't have the warmth and crunch that I think I remember hearing on the Duality, which seemed more variable and sounded great on a drum loop.

Next comes the Insert switching section. On the rear are useful separate jacks for insert send and return, and this can be set pre- or post-EQ, and by pressing Sum you can even combine the insert send and return signals, perhaps for mixing compressed and

uncompressed signal, or adding an effect. The High-Pass Filter can be switched to three different (all useful) corner frequencies; these cover most situations apart from special effects, when you can use the Low band on the EQ instead. Although not properly explained in the manual, SSL has made intelligent use of the extra channel of SPDIF and making different processing arrangements on each channel possible by different setting of the Insert buttons. For example, you can set one of the outputs pre-insert, EQ and limiter, and the other one to post. You can therefore record both, and if, say, the EQ was great for monitoring while recording but turns out to be excessive, you already have a backup plan.

The 3-band EQ is simple, classic SSL and gives you just about all you need for recording tasks. The High and Low bands cover a wide range of frequencies, and the Low has a Bell button for zoning in fairly tightly on certain frequencies, like black-knob E-Series. The mid-band is fully parametric but only goes down to 0.3kHz, often not really low enough for taking out the boom while using the Low band to give some oomph. The High band is powerful without being harsh, perfect for general brightening.

The Output Gain knob is accompanied by the Lite Limit button that enables a peak-catching limiter to avoid overloading the digital output. This is effective, sounding fairly invisible when used sensibly, but still lets through the odd slight overload. Attack is fast, release not quite so, and this easily sounds more funky on a drum loop than VHD on the Alpha Channel! The green-lit button turns red at the threshold. At the far right of the panel a LED output meter and A-DC Lock indicator give further visual clues.

Previous SSL outboard came at a premium price and it seemed you were paying extra for the name badge. Despite a few limitations, the Alpha Channel represents very good value even if the attention-grabbing VHD section seems a bit of a let-down. For overdubbing individual instruments or vocals into a DAW, this is without doubt an excellent choice for the money. If you need more than one channel, multiple units make sense as the limiters can be linked, and for simpler mic channels on a budget, there is the newer VHD four-channel mic preamp. ■

## PROS

Good value; great sound; SPDIF; excellent build quality.

## CONS

Jack-only output; VHD disappointing; limited EQ flexibility; poor EQ frequency legending.

## Contact

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