

# SSL XLogic Alpha VHD Pre

SSL's Alpha range debuted with the release of the Alpha Channel, and brought the brand firmly within reach of a whole new range of customers. The VHD Pre is the second offering in the range and packages four channels of mic pre into a very straightforward looking 1U box.

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Appearances can be deceptive. Although the Alpha VHD Pre (UK£895+VAT) looks like an incredibly straightforward piece of kit, the internals are based around the VHD (Variable Harmonic Drive) designs used to great effect in the Duality console — giving what SSL refers to as 'a time machine of overdrive characteristics'. Very HG Wells, and I'll be reporting back from the Jurassic period a little later on (*Bring back some outboard so we can Ebay it. Ed*). In the meantime, a quick peek at the rear panel underlines the basic simplicity of the unit — four lots of XLR inputs and outputs together with a 5-pin DIN connector for the external PSU.

The front panel maintains the same styling cues as the Alpha Channel itself, which is to say that it is still obviously an SSL, but not quite as austere as the XLogic Super Analogue units, which look as if they've been lifted straight off a console surface. Illuminated lozenge shaped pushbuttons dominate the front panel, together with well-spaced, clearly labelled pots. Being only a four-channel device, there isn't the sense of overcrowding you get on some eight-channel boxes, so even fairly chunky fingers won't have a problem engaging the flux-capacitor (sorry, VHD control).

Each of the four channels has a gain control giving between +20 and +75dB of gain. A -20dB pad reduces this to unity at its lowest setting, enabling line level signals to take advantage of the VHD circuitry if required. This is helped by the inclusion of a high impedance select switch, which raises the input impedance of the balanced rear connectors to around 10kOhm rather than the default 1kOhm. A front panel unbalanced jack on each channel also allows DI inputs — plugging into these high (1MOhm) inputs overrides the rear XLR inputs.

Phantom power is individually selectable for each of the four channels, and an output trim control (+/-20dB) enables you to hit your DAW of choice at a level that suits. There are some curious omissions though, especially given the space available on the front panel, and a phase reverse and HPF of some description would probably be on most peoples' wish list.

The USP of this box, though, lies in the final parameter on each channel — the VHD control. This allows the characteristic of any distortion caused by overdriving a signal to be varied between

predominantly 2nd harmonic distortion to almost entirely 3rd harmonic distortion or any mix between the two. It should be noted that the VHD control in itself doesn't set the amount of added distortion as this is entirely a function of how hard the unit is driven. Gain structure is the key thing here, something that's a little tricky as there's only a rudimentary level metering system in place. This works by changing the colour of the illuminated pad button from its default green, through to orange and then red. These colours indicate the onset of and presence of some degree of clipping, but also the points at which the VHD circuitry begins to make its presence felt.

With the gain set below this point, the VHD Pre sounds competent, if a little undistinguished. It's quiet and relatively transparent sounding, giving clean uncluttered results on most sources. In comparison to a Millennia HV3 it couldn't quite match the clarity in the high frequency transients, and sounded a little cloudier in the low mid range but having said that, getting close to the Millennia isn't too shabby a performance.

Crank the gain up a little and the VHD circuit becomes noticeable even before the pad light flicks to orange particularly when the VHD control is ranged towards the 3rd harmonic end. Unsurprisingly, more gain gives rise to more of the effect, although the shift from 'useful' to 'unpleasant' can come a little abruptly. I have to admit to being less than impressed by the whole VHD concept at first, as I was initially trialling it on vocals, and here it really was a case of the 'unpleasant' kicking in pretty much straight

away to my ears. Move towards other applications, though, and the picture is somewhat different. Close mics on both guitar and bass cabs benefited from slight overdrive, which nicely thickened up the mid range of a sound, and with the bass mic particularly (Neumann TLM 49) added just the right amount of grunge to an otherwise very clean sound.

Tracking drums with the VHD Pre was also something of a revelatory experience. Close mics on snares and toms and room mics in particular benefit from slight (and in some cases not so slight) amounts of overdrive. Toms sound just a little more 'gelled' together, almost slightly compressed, and seem to fit into a mix straight away. Driving a bottom snare mic a little hard and moving the 2nd to 3rd harmonic balance around is akin to using an exciter for the same job, but with a little bit more grit and energy. In general, I found myself tending towards mostly 3rd harmonic distortion for small amounts of overdrive, and mostly 2nd harmonic when really hitting the VHD pre hard but I guess this comes down to taste.

In summary, as a tool to really colour your recordings, the VHD Pre works well — if a little heavy-handedly until you get used to it. At lower operating levels it's a nice, open clean preamp but if this is where you see most of its application, the lack of some minor but useful features might make other contenders a little more attractive. ■

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| <b>PROS</b>   | SSL name at (reasonably) affordable price; solid, clean and open mic pres; VHD circuitry allows a great degree of variation to tone colour if desired; clutter-free, easy to use layout.  |
| <b>CONS</b>   | Lack of HPF and phase-reverse per channel; metering a little primitive; VHD effect takes some getting used to in terms of setting appropriate operating levels.   |
| <b>EXTRAS</b> | The XLogic Alpha Channel combines a mic preamp, filter, EQ and dynamics. The mic preamp has line level and Hi Z instrument inputs, VHD, High Pass Filter with selectable cut-off frequency, built in A-DC and auto sample rate sensing. |

