



TL Audio A2 stereo processor

Black and chrome and combining the virtues of Class A and a driveable valve, the Ebony Series is attractive and sounds promising. **JON THORNTON** enjoys the drive on the A2.

TL Audio's Ebony Series is a range of processors that features discrete Class A electronics in the audio path together with a variable drive tube stage to harmonically enhance the signal if desired. The range currently comprises a two channel mic pre-amp/DI, a 16:2 summing mixer, a mono channel strip, and finally the A2 (UK£899 + VAT) stereo processor being looked at here. What's on offer is essentially a stereo compressor and EQ together with that variable tube drive. Packed in a 2u the overall look is black and chrome, which could have ended up looking slightly tacky but it actually comes across as quite stylish.

The rear panel is simplicity itself with two balanced inputs and two balanced outputs on XLR. There is a slot here as well to install an optional DO2 card, which gives digital output in SPDIF at 44.1 or 48kHz sampling rates.

Centre stage on the front panel is a single illuminated VU meter, which seems a little strange for a stereo unit. Granted, there are individual peak LED indicators either side of the meter for the left and right channels, but only one meter. This can show you either input level or output level for the left or right channel, or gain reduction. What you're looking at is determined by different permutations of pushbuttons located below the meter itself.

The remainder of the front panel is nicely laid out and feels very uncluttered and this is largely due to the fact that the A2 has been designed from the outset to process stereo signals. So there's only one set of EQ controls, one set of compressor controls, and absolutely no sign of any form of stereo link function. Of course, there's nothing to stop you using it for a single mono source but you can't process two signals independently.

At first this annoyed me slightly, as it seemed so potentially inefficient, but as I used the A2 more and more it made much more sense. Working on a stereo source without having to constantly check settings across channels for EQ, or ensuring that the dynamics stages are linked was strangely liberating and helps to ensure that you're concentrating on the sound rather than the operation of the device.

Starting from the left hand side you get an input Gain control offering +/-20dB of range. Directly above this are a pair of buttons allowing either of the two input channels to have their polarity reversed. Next in the signal path is the Tube Stage, which is controlled by a single pot and turning this drives the tube stage harder and introduces more (largely 2nd order) harmonic distortion. A pair of LEDs marked Drive illuminate progressively more brightly as the total THD added varies between 1% and 5%, and a pair of



peak LEDs illuminate if things start to get out of hand — typically when THD levels reach 10%. In use, this tube stage is really very useful, acting gradually on a signal and warming it up gently for the first three-quarters of its travel, and then much more overtly in the last quarter. But even when cranked up quite high it manages to avoid sounding overly 'gritty' as some other units can tend to.

The EQ and compressor sections can be switched in and out of circuit independently, and the EQ can usefully be switched to be either pre or post the compressor, or taken out of the audio path and switched into the sidechain of the compressor. The EQ itself is a three-band affair with fixed shelving filters for HF and LF and a swept mid band. The turnover frequencies for the LF and HF bands are chosen sensibly at 80Hz and 12kHz respectively, while the mid band can roam between 150Hz and 7kHz with a fixed, fairly wide Q of 0.7. All three bands offer +/-15dB of boost. In use it's a sweet sounding EQ section, which despite the fixed parameters in terms of frequency and Q is very effective at applying gentle EQ over an entire mix. Perhaps there are times when too much choice is simply a bad thing.

The compressor section is likewise an exercise in limiting your available options to some degree. You get fully variable Threshold, Ratio and Gain Make-up settings, and even a choice of a hard or soft knee function but the time constants are both fixed, with either a fast or slow setting available for both attack and release. For attack, the fast setting equates to 1ms and the long to 8ms, and for release the options are either 200ms or 2 seconds. Now, I can generally live with a choice of two attack times, but I do like to have a little more control of the release parameter than this so I was pleasantly surprised when this didn't prove to be quite as problematic as I had anticipated. For gentle levelling it works well and imperceptibly on the

slower settings, while there is still potential to use it to really pump a pair of room microphones on a drum kit quite aggressively. OK, it's not flexible enough to really stamp on a single snare hit quickly enough and release in time to thicken up the sound, and it struggled to tame an errant electric bass line but for broadband mixes it's not as limiting as it sounds.

All of which adds up to a unit that I had anticipated was going to be significantly lacking in flexibility but in practice turned out to be remarkably seductive. When you take those component parts and add them together, the whole is a lot more than the sum of them. The A2 has clearly been designed with stereo mix processing in mind, and in this application it works extremely well. The discrete Class A circuitry is clean, quiet and very open sounding, the EQ nicely musical and the tube stage capable of warming up a mix without every sounding harsh or contrived. And even the compressor is more flexible than it might appear at first glance.

For somebody mixing in-the-box this would prove a useful tool to wrap a little analogue signal processing around the output or for anybody looking for an alternative mix bus compressor with some added features, and the flexibility, if pushed, to tackle other duties too. ■

PROS Tube drive works well and smoothly; nice, musical EQ; flexibility to switch EQ into sidechain.

CONS Metering a little quirky; compressor time constants a little limiting for some applications.

EXTRAS There are four units in the Ebony Series, all of which are assembled in England. The A1 is a dual preamp/DI, the A3 a mono channel strip and the A4 is a 16:2 summing mixer in a 2u that has 16 balanced inputs on XLR and D-Sub with individual pan controls. The unit uses Discrete Class A circuitry throughout and also boasts the ability to activate an optional tube stage on the master bus. The addition of balanced insert points on the master bus section means you can patch in a stereo compressor or EQ.



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