

Thermionic Culture Nightingale

It's another in the series of unusual form factor and quirky feature set processors from those ornithological appreciators. **GEORGE SHILLING** is feeling rather sporty and patriotic.



Settle down to write this review the day after the London Olympics and find myself drawing parallels between the Nightingale, Vic Keary's latest creation, and the themes that inspired the stunning opening ceremony: the chaos, humour, eccentricity and invention of the British. This home-grown box shares many of those qualities. Like its

maverick inventor, the Thermionic Culture range has never followed convention, but instead seems always to come from a slightly lateral way of thinking. Following the Freebird (*Resolution* V10.2), which housed three bands of EQ in a half rack 4U case, comes this, the Nightingale, in a similar case but providing instead two valve recording channels plus a mono valve compressor. It manages to achieve dual microphone, line and DI preamplification, dual EQ and filter channels, along with summing and valve compression based on Thermionic's enduring classic Phoenix model, although with a little more 'bite'.

The front panel has all the style of 1940s shed-built military equipment, legended with a plain font all in capitals. There are black Bakelite-style knobs, some acting as switches, and that square meter similar to those on the Phoenix. Some of the controls of each mic channel mirror the corresponding ones, others don't... this is value-added genuine English eccentricity, unlike some 'trying-too-hard' retro-chic designs. The case is bare steel with plenty of vent holes and slots, adding an even more industrial (revolution) feel.

The three sections are arranged as two mic channels (designated A and B) and their associated EQ, with the compressor in-between. The rear panel signal connectors are three inputs and three outputs on good quality XLRs, mirroring the front panel arrangement. Power goes into the detachable PSU's IEC socket; its switch lights a front panel LED.

Each mic channel includes a three-way selector: Lo, Hi and Line. Lo provides the most gain, up to 34dB, Hi provides up to 21dB, and Line claims up to 5dB of boost. The Gain knob goes from 0 to 10 in gently clicking half-steps. This acts like a fader, with the signal muted at the zero setting. A front panel DI socket overrides the selector, with plenty of gain for guitars and instruments. A single 48V locking toggle introduces phantom power on both channels, lighting twin LEDs to confirm it. It is sensibly disabled when the input selector is switched to Line, although the LEDs remain lit. The mic preamps sound huge, juicy,

warm and detailed, without adding unwanted colour. They work well with traditional condensers on vocals and dynamic mics on guitar amplifiers. The only problem that you might encounter is the meagre maximum gain, so recording an acoustic guitar with a ribbon mic seems out of the question. However, this can be overcome, as we shall see.

The other three knobs on each mic channel are a simple 3-band active boost EQ, all bands with continuous pots labelled 0 to 10. Top adds up to 12dB of lift, starting as a gentle curve and reaching its peak at



9.5kHz. It is sweet and powerful, opening out the treble without harshness. Next to this knob is a Top Cut toggle, allowing the introduction of either a low pass filter 6dB down at 8kHz, or a shelf-type cut that flattens out 8dB down at 8kHz. This dulling can be nicely warming with bass sounds. The Pres knob is a broad mid lift of up to 11dB at 2.8kHz, which brings richness and life to the interesting middle area without becoming honky. The Bass knob uses Keary's characteristic 'Varislope' curve, which starts off broad, reaching a small peak at 90Hz at the half-way setting (5), then reaching a final peak at 40Hz at full tilt with 11dB boost.

But even more shaping is possible here by using the Bass Cut toggle, which has three positions. After the Flat setting, Position 2 gives a shelving filter with a 3dB cut at 200Hz, down 7dB at 80Hz. Position 3 is also shelving but with 3dB cut at 800Hz, down 6dB at 200Hz. Furthermore, another three-position toggle inserts a high pass filter that is 6dB down at 30Hz or 80Hz. Juggling all three controls allows for a number of bass enhancing possibilities. Boosting with the knob and tempering with the toggles provides a satisfyingly solid warmth on programme. The only remaining control here is a useful and clearly labelled Phase Invert toggle.

The Compressor section is a simplified design based on the Phoenix. Using a rotary switch its input can be sourced in four different ways. Line selects the dedicated rear XLR input. A and B select the outputs from the respective mic channels. And A+B sums both channels together at the compressor input. The gain reduction meter is deliberately set up with ballistics a little slower than the actual compression effect. The Threshold rotary switch has off and three numbered positions (running the opposite way to the Phoenix.) Here, 3 is the equivalent of 1 on the

Phoenix (maximum compression). Attack is fixed at around 60ms, where 4 would be on the Phoenix's scale of 1-11. This gives a plectrum bass guitar some extra attack, and sounds natural on vocals. Release has three positions, Fast being 60ms, Medium is 150ms and Slow is 500ms.

Whenever I have used a Phoenix it has usually been with the Release set to its fastest position. Thankfully, the Nightingale's Fast setting is equivalent to that and the compressor sounds big, glowing and magical, yet still fairly invisible, even with 6 or 9dB reduction. The slower settings tend to make the compression more apparent, which is not always a bad thing, and Medium was best for smoothing bass guitar. The Compressor Gain knob is an input level, and this provides up to 28dB of gain on the way in, making up for the lack of Mic amp gain(s) if necessary, with combined gain of around 60dB available (more with EQ!) I recorded my Martin 12-string with a Beyerdynamic M160 like this; noise was extremely low, and the sound amazingly sweet and immediate. The five position Output Level provides attenuation in roughly 3.5dB steps.

When working with a DAW and mic preamps rather than a mixing console, external summing can prove impossible when multimiking. Something like the API 3124MB+ can solve this problem, but EQ and compression are not included. The Nightingale's compressor section and simple but effective EQ give the unit a uniquely useful combination. You can, for example, track top and bottom snare mics or a pair of mics on a guitar amp to one track, or in a mix situation these sources can be summed together to make use of the compressor section. Of course, even when routed through the compressor, the 'dry' outputs are also still available, enabling the recording



of both versions for safety or parallel compression, for example.

The Nightingale is a superb triumph of British design. It has a unique combination of features and while there are some compromises you will wonder why nothing quite like this has ever existed before. Marvellous! ■

PROS Fabulous sounding circuitry; two-channel input summing; unusual format and combination of features that work well together.

CONS Relatively low maximum mic amp gain unless routed through Compressor; no mic channel mute button; no EQ bypass.

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