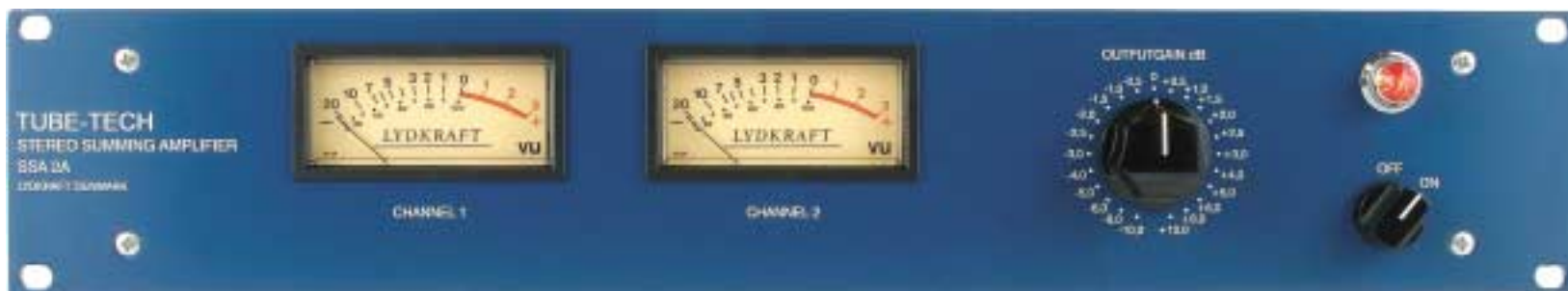


Lydkraft Tube-Tech SSA 2A

The latest blue box from Denmark fulfils a role that until relatively recently wouldn't have been considered necessary. In the world of high end analogue consoles, who would have thought there a need for a box that effectively sums eight stereo analogue inputs to a stereo analogue output? But with more and more production environments effectively mixing out of DAWs, Tube-Tech appears to have identified a gap in the market.

JON THORNTON



THE ARGUMENT IS A FAMILIAR ONE — regardless of the sophistication of the DAW being used, and regardless of the DSP precision or the relative merits of fixed or floating point operations, a high quality analogue summing stage is hard to beat for some applications, from a technical and subjective standpoint. Hence the increasingly common sight of set-ups that involve the separate analogue outputs of a DAW feeding an analogue mixer in the quest to cure 'digititus'. For those with the space and budget for a respectable analogue console, this is a perfectly acceptable, if rather inefficient solution.

Tube-Tech's SSA 2A (UK£2200 + VAT) is one of the first of what is sure to be a number of devices to offer a more efficient remedy in space and financial terms. The preproduction unit that was sent for review will have a number of cosmetic tweaks, but is functionally the final production version (*The final production version will have the output gain on the left. Ed*). First impressions are of a typical Tube-Tech box — blue and chunky with the trademark oversized knobs and the familiar red power lamp.

The front panel simply consists of the power switch and indicator lamp, a pair of large mechanical VU meters, and an output gain control. This switches in increments that vary between 0.5dB and 2dB depending on the proximity to unity gain, and offers a maximum range of +/-10dB. It's a gorgeously tactile control, and operates pre the VU meters, which show the stereo output level. The VUs appear to be just that, with 0VU corresponding to -14dBFS, which might prove problematic if you really wanted to push the output level of the summing amplifier to feed a digital input. There's no problem with headroom here — just an issue with metering the last 8dB or so of signal.

The rear panel is equally simple, and consists of 16 inputs arranged as 8 stereo pairs, and a pair of outputs — all on XLR connections. Inputs are electronically balanced, and outputs are individually transformer

balanced. As the audio stages employ no solid-state devices at all, but are completely valve based, this gives a nominal input impedance of around 50kohms and an output impedance of less than 60ohms. It would have been nice to see a pair of balanced inserts across the main outputs — but perhaps this would have ruined the simplicity of the design.

Lifting the lid and poking about the internals reveals typical Tube-Tech build quality, and confirms the audio path as being totally symmetrical for both channels from input to output. Each of the two channels employs two ECC88 type valves, an ECC83 and an ECC82.

A conversation with the folks in Denmark revealed future plans for expanding the input capability of the unit. Possibilities here include an external break out box that connects to the main unit via some sort of multipin connector, or the provision of some additional mono inputs that would feed both buses for carrying signals that would be panned centre anyway, rather than pulling these in as identical signals on a stereo pair. Also on the cards is a future digital output option.

The unit was set up with individual outputs from a Logic Audio session running via some Digidesign 888/24 interfaces. As a comparison, a stereo mix was also generated by Logic and fed digitally to a Yamaha DM2000. The SSA 2A's output was then monitored via the DM2000's analogue inputs. Admittedly, this arrangement meant that there were successive A-D and D-A conversions going on, but that would probably be typical of normal use unless mastering to an analogue format. It's also worth remembering that in such a set-up, you are always going to be at the mercy of the quality of your D-A and A-D conversion.

First impressions of the SSA 2A's output compared with the Logic mix was that it was noticeably smoother — much of the 'sizzle' of the original had been tamed, but without making the mix sound dull. Low frequency elements, particularly the kick drum and bass guitar,

seemed noticeably rounder, and if anything slightly fuller sounding. Perhaps the most surprising result, though, was the effect the unit seemed to have on the clarity of the stereo image — everything seemed much more defined and localised, particularly the centre imaging and the extremes of left and right.

All of which is very pleasing, and on a number of different mixes from Pro Tools and Logic the unit performed similarly. Should you buy one? Well, if you don't have the services of a good analogue console, definitely. If you do, then it becomes a trickier decision. Comparing the SSA 2A with a set-up that mixes out of Pro Tools into an Amek Galileo shows that the Tube-Tech box certainly has its own character — smoothing the high end sharpness to a greater degree, but the other sonic differences are nowhere near as pronounced.

What is clear, though, is that we'll see more of these types of units. We've already had the analogue channel strips, now the summing amplifiers, and I daresay we'll see more of the things like cue systems, monitoring and talkback units that have started to appear. Tube-Tech and others may well be the future of the analogue console, albeit in small pieces. ■

PROS Great sound; simplicity of operation; does exactly what is says on the tin.

CONS A bit pricey if you already have summing capability; a pair of insert points would be useful; a peak indicator on the output metering would be useful.

EXTRAS Tube-Tech recently announced the MMC 1A microphone multiband compressor which offers a single channel valve mic preamp and sophisticated 3-band gain reduction.



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