

Universal Audio LA-610

Anyone who believes there's no action in high-end outboard should be escorted and introduced to the UA range of processors, which has scored consistently and astoundingly high in the desirability and performance stakes. **GEORGE SHILLING** reports on yet another brilliant reincarnation.



Alongside the two control knobs for the compressor are a rotary switch for meter modes to show Preamp, Comp (gain reduction) and Output level, plus a rotary for the two different modes — Limit or Compress — and Bypass. It seems that this just switches off the Peak Reduction circuit — the Gain knob remains active. This does of course mean that some fun can be had by cranking up the preamp, and turning this down for a driven tone without excessive output level.

Although the physical size of the LA-610 is considerably reduced compared to an LA-2A, the all-

important knobs are actually bigger than those on its ancestor, making setup very pleasurable and straightforward.

However, a major loss for me is the large VU meter. Like

the 6176, this new unit necessarily uses a relatively tiny VU, albeit clear to read and backlit. It does the job — just.

This 610B preamp sounds better than ever, because it has a slight but noticeable high frequency boost to compensate for the darkness of the compressor — some criticize the LA-2A for its wooliness, although I don't entirely hold with that. The impedance settings, instrument input and tone controls combine beautifully with the T4 compressor in a unit with ample flexibility for most recording situations, and sound quality to make you grin. The build and construction is up there with the other excellent UA models, and the layout is well-planned and easy to use. And OK, I can live with the small VU meter! ■

IT SEEMS THAT Universal Audio has issued more new models in the last five years than Urei, UA and Teletronix (all put together) issued in the last 40 years. Having successfully squeezed an 1176 to half its traditional size for the 6176 and 2-1176 models, it's done the seemingly impossible here. The LA-610 combines the 610B mic/line/instrument preamp with a new compressor that recreates the sound of the LA-2A. Knowledgeable readers will have noted that a 3u compressor shouldn't fit into half a 2u box. Even more remarkably, this entire unit is considerably cheaper than the LA-2A reissue, and furthermore, cheaper even than the 6176 — by some margin (UK£1199 + VAT).

Of course to achieve this, compromises have been made. The LA-610 uses the T4 cell that comprises the electroluminescent panel and photo-resistors that characterise the signature sound of the LA-2A. But this is not a component clone of the LA-2A; instead, original Urei design engineer Dennis Fink has collaborated to deliver the essence of the sound, without the size and cost of that model. Also, the back panel is noticeably sparser than the 6176; there are no separate connections for preamp and compressor here, merely three XLRs for mic input, and line input and output.

The left-hand side of the front panel houses the 610 preamp section. This is the latest version of the 610 preamp featuring a 15dB pad — the 2-610 and M610 still lack this feature. The panel is further enhanced by moving the phantom power toggle to a more logical position. I am a big fan of these preamps — it is hard to define the sound of a mic preamp, but the valve 610 consistently impresses. The detail, warmth and presence are always exceptional. The different impedance settings for mic and instrument inputs often make for a noticeable difference, and having the choice is useful.

The onboard EQ controls have high and low frequency bands and follow the API 550A school of thought — well chosen frequencies and a boost/cut curve that will never compromise the signal. When tracking, you rarely want to get fiddly, so this simple tone shaping circuit is ideal in most situations for just a bit of old fashioned treble and bass. The T4 optical compressor circuit is similarly straightforward and also has qualities that make it hard to do any irreparable damage to the signal. Distortion is very low, and this is the sort of compressor I'd be happy to have in circuit at all times — which is good, because with no relay or hard-wire bypass, it is in circuit at all times!

I always liked the LA-2A's no-nonsense two-knob approach. You plug it in and set the levels, carefully adjusting the Peak Reduction for the desired effect, setting the Gain for the output level, and nine times out of ten, it sounds great. If it doesn't, then you've wasted little time fiddling around, and you simply plug something else in. Early original LA-2As didn't even have the Compress/Limit mode switch, and when it was introduced they put it on the back. It's all so refreshing after a long day staring at intricate plug-in parameters.

The attack is fast and clean, and release follows the expected two-stage recovery time constants — short transients are released quickly, while long periods above threshold release much more slowly. It is a warm, gentle, natural sound. Bending the gain reduction needle hard over to the left sounds fine, but you must be aware of the eventual slow recovery bringing your noise floor right up.

For a little more signal control, the Limit mode increases the ratio but the effect is not hugely dramatic — the same warmth and character of Compress mode remains. The enormous bottom end warmth of the LA-2A — and the LA-610 — is unparalleled.

PROS

Excellent 610 preamp, LA-2A compression in a small box; great value for money.

CONS

Small meter; no hard bypass for compressor; no separate compressor connections; no stereo linking possible.

EXTRAS

The UAD-1 Project Pak includes the proprietary UAD-1 universal PCI (PCI-X compatible) DSP card and v3.5 software which includes a collection of 15 Universal Audio plug-ins including: the 1176SE vintage compressor, the Pultec EQP-1A classic EQ, RealVerb Pro, Nigel guitar processor, EX-1 EQ & Compressor, the DIM-1 Delay Modulator and the CS-1 Channel Strip.



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