



Vertigo Sound VSM-2

The maker of the highly-rated VSC-2 compressor has come up with an elegant and flexible solution for integrating analogue gear in a chain. **NIGEL JOPSON** takes a mastering standpoint and finds something that is truly innovative.



The mastering suite has become a final redoubt for analogue audio, with many top engineers putting 90% of their work through traditional hardware (like Bob Ludwig, *Resolution* V9.2). Mastering engineers with a more modest client-base have also found analogue has delivered 'the sound', as well as providing a marketable differentiator between them and their customers. But lurk on any mastering forum and you'll see one of the most discussed analogue items are not processors, but rather the apparatus to link them. Vertigo Sound, makers of the highly-rated VSC-2 compressor (*Resolution* V6.7) has come up with an elegant and flexible solution. The VSM-2 is available at two option points: Basic, which

includes input and output sections plus two insert points, and full-spec, which adds '2nd Harmonic FET Crusher' and '3rd Harmonic Zener Blender' sections. The Basic model has all the metalwork and wiring ready for upgrading with the Crusher and Blender.

Input and output sections offer up to +30dBu of level matching, with ganged rotary input (-10 to +10) and individual output (-20 to +10) controls. Given some mastering engineers' propensity for driving A-D converters 'close to the edge' the range is useful, and there's little noise penalty even when adding 6dB. As is essential for mastering, all controls are stepped with accurate legends. Killing power with audio passing through delivers a graceful switch to

the input audio, with an accompanying ticking of internal relays. There's a 4-segment input LED meter and 16-segment output meter. I did wish for the larger meter to be switchable — before/after the various inserts and processors — but as the distortion sections provide such a wealth of options it is handy to have a consistent measure that ears are not being fooled!

Insert 1 on the VSM is intended for a compressor: there's a three-way In/Out switch that also engages MS (Mid/Side) circuitry. When used in MS mode, the Side level (on the right compressor channel) is fairly well compensated, meaning no gain cranking or ultra-low threshold setting on the compressor. This is programme-dependent, but the usual quirks of matrix encoder/decoders are avoided. Above the Off/LR/MS switch, a Dry-Wet In switch engages a rotary blend control for parallel compression. I've always been a fan of over-cooking the compression and mixing the result with the original signal, but this process is usually a hideous chore without a proper console. I found the law of the blend control to be well chosen for setting the correct mix of original and compressed audio.

Insert 2 also has an Off/LR/MS switch and circuitry, this time there's also a width control, which doubles as a balance control when in LR mode. A lot of indie material I master needs some MS rebalancing, often in respect of EQing the sides to tame boomy reverbs and add a little 'air'. Vertigo clearly knows how fiddly such a process can be, as it's added a handy Solo switch for Mid or Side, with associated warning LEDs. Just as with Insert 1's Parallel Comp control, the MS or LR balance control was easy to use to find the correct blend. The only thing wrong with the Inserts is

that, for me, they are in the wrong order! I like to EQ first, then compress, and the Vertigo box is clearly set up for the opposite. Andy Eschenwecker indicated that, if a customer requested, it would be a simple matter to rejig the wiring loom so the Insert-order was reversed.

Both distortion sections have an identical control layout — when I looked inside the PCBs are the same — but the sound is very different owing to FET or Zener Diode components. Despite the colour of the VSM-2, the overdriven sound can be far more sophisticated than the vintage pedals of a similar hue. Because of the price-point of the VSM-2 (£4,300 for VSM-2, £2,600 for VSM-2 Basic) a lot hinges on whether the owner is going to find this section useful. From my own experience, many indie musicians and labels have received the message 'don't use a lot of 2-mix plug-ins and don't push the levels', but concomitant with this restraint is an over-optimism for the mastering process. Making it 'louder than love' or 'more funky than James Brown' can require the deployment of an awful lot of expensive/vintage analogue outboard (*Especially when they expect to pay 'cheaper than not very much': Ed*). This is where the VSM-2 is going to shine: a top quality EQ and compressor can be used for your main work, while the VSM-2's distortion can be subtly deployed to add a bit of extra fairy dust.

The controls in the distortion sections require a little understanding, but Vertigo has produced a fairly readable paper manual, with tips and illustrated settings. A key control is the input filter, which defines the frequency range to be processed. The six bands are similar to the EQ control ranges on a console but with the final two bands being wider (Full: 120Hz-20kHz and Track: 10Hz-20kHz). The Track mode is intended for processing individual instruments, in this mode the Shape high-cut filter operates differently: in normal use, as the harsh distortion band is high-cut, non-distorted frequencies are gradually blended back in, making the overdrive more usable for a stereo mix.

But the VSM-2 could also be used in a recording/mixing context as a drum or subgroup processor, and the Track mode enables full over-the-top processing. The Drive and THD Mix controls operate as expected, but the Level control is another clever innovation from Vertigo. Mixing frequency-conscious parallel processing into a finished song is always going to drastically alter the original instrument balance: the Level pot allows the frequency range to be 'dialed back' (like on a multiband compressor). Two LEDs indicate above, below or (when both are illuminated) original balance. Both distortion sections contain MS matrices, so the effects can be applied to M or S only if desired.

There are so many interactions on these sections, every operator is going to come to their own conclusions regarding the best approach. After extensive twiddling, I gravitated to mainly using the FET Crusher to add heft to songs, with the Low or Mid filters engaged, and often only applied to the M signal. The 3rd Harmonic Zener Blender I found myself using a bit like an Aphex, adding sizzle to the high end, sometimes only on the S signal. In particular, I found the Zener effect to be the best device I've ever used for subtly lifting the level of saxophone and brass, without drastically altering the balance of other instruments.

If you have racks bursting with vintage analogue gear, maybe the VSM-2 is not for you. But if each outlay on a piece of top-quality hardware requires careful justification, then the VSM-2 is a brilliant solution. The four MS matrices, level-matching, switching and blending make the device a unique product. The two distortion sections make a pretty good fist of simulating a variety of funky audio effects normally only achievable with a mixing console linking a bagful of vintage transformers, overdriven Dolbys in record mode, FET compressors and suchlike. Cost-benefit and sound-for-pound wise, it's a very good solution. ■

PROS

Funky distortion; ingenious substitute for a rack full of analogue audio gear; flexible use -- recording, mixing and mastering; high build and component quality; no fan.

CONS

Expensive if you are not going to make full use of the distortion sections; peak hold option and switchable metering points would have been quite useful.

EXTRAS

The Mix Satellite basic version without harmonic generators can be updated to the full version at anytime with all connectors, supply voltages, drillings and scales lying beneath the cover plate.

Contact

VERTIGO SOUND, GERMANY:
Website: www.vertigosound.com