

Alternate Soundings Dynax²

It's big, brash and beautifully built but it's also a bit bonkers if it's gain reduction control that you're after. **GEORGE SHILLING** plugs in and watches the blue window turn red.



Alternate Soundings (Al.So) is the brainchild of Olivier Bolling whose credentials include involvement with the design of the Neve 88R and a lengthy stint at Paris's Plus XXX Studios, where he designed and built two new control rooms and recording studios. The Dynax² (pronounced Dynax Square) is essentially a re-tweaked stereo version of the now discontinued mono Dynax opto limiter.

Bolling's maverick approach is reflected in the physical appearance, and the exceptionally high build quality apparently reflects his experience in the maintenance room. Hence, the Dynax² is remarkably solid and sturdy, with exceptionally clear legending and labelling. Full marks for the 10mm thick aluminium front panel, where all the labels are deeply etched using a stylish font that suggests 1930s sophistication and living up to the French reputation for style. And the rear connectors couldn't be more clearly labelled, which is what you want in the dark recesses of a rack.

The beautiful VU meter is housed behind a perspex cover that is the same thickness again as the front panel. The power transformer is housed in an external metal case, with a thick flying lead terminating in an XLR connector to join the rear panel of the main unit. Inside the main unit are Sowter transformers and other high quality discrete components. Both boxes are weighty. Large, deep bakelite-style knobs dominate the front. Power is enabled from the external transformer box, while the front panel features a push switch (similar to old-style guitar pedal stomp switches) labelled Standby and this is a hard wire bypass. When the unit is enabled a blue LED illuminates the meter, however this dramatically turns red to indicate overloading (similar to the implementation in the Drawmer 1968 Mercenary). A long warm-up period is recommended, and indeed it takes quite a while for the VU to settle centrally.

The Limiting function is selected from three possible settings: Limiter, Brick Wall and AntiDyna. The mono unit additionally provided a Compressor setting, but this has been abandoned and the ratios re-jigged so that the Limiter on the Dynax² is somewhere between those two settings on the original. Bolling is currently also planning a gentler compressor model. The Limiter is a 10:1 ratio, Brick Wall is infinity:1 and AntiDyna is a unique setting where a negative ratio is achieved: the further the level over threshold the signal goes, the less level is generated.

The large Threshold knob is stepped with 24 positions; turning the knob clockwise lowers the Threshold and increases the limiting. However, there is an additional toggle switch on the rear panel, no

doubt something of an afterthought, that increases Threshold sensitivity by about 10dB. None of the level knobs are calibrated, and I had assumed this to be a policy decision, but Bolling says the next batch will be calibrated. Attack is a continuous pot, while Release is a 23-position stiffly switched knob — Bolling prefers continuous knobs but this pot value wasn't achievable as the Release setting covers an enormous range, from extremely fast to very slow indeed.

Bass Drive selects a sidechain filter with three settings to allow low frequencies to be circumvented in the detector circuitry. Make up gains are separate for each channel and operate continuously, then there are a couple of small toggles to switch VU function and also to select detector source — L, L+R or External (accessed from a rear panel jack socket). The last of these might be useful for other filtering options or surround linking, while the Left only option usefully enables sidechain compression of the right channel signal.

This is self-evidently a unit for fans of heavy limiting, but some interesting effects can be achieved, and the sonics remain remarkably clean and undistorted at all times. This makes it useful as a mastering limiter. Just a few dBs of gain reduction can glue a mix nicely, but if more dramatic limiting is required this can be difficult to achieve without undesirable pumping. Even with the fastest attack setting, the initial transients are generally retained briefly, with the signal then 'sucking' away. However, the Bass Drive circuitry mitigates this. With a slow release and a low threshold, huge gain reductions (10dB or more) can be achieved without distortion or any adverse effect on the tonal balance. With a medium attack, this can actually sound much gentler than expected (depending on the mix) adding a bit of pleasantly gluey containment.

I had particular success using slow attack and fast release for a really exciting rock sound. And this was excitement without distortion, a really huge analogue sound with warmth and depth. But overdo things and it can quickly get a bit rubbery sounding; the danger certainly exists of squeezing the life out of the mix. Pumping can often be effectively reduced by notching the Bass Drive control up to 100, 200 or 300Hz, although oddly this doesn't seem quite as dramatic as similar circuitry found on other mastering compressors.

The somewhat crazy AntiDyna over-limiting mode produces some unusual effects that Bolling claims can be used creatively. However, even with fastest settings it tends to reduce anything percussive to a small tapping sound and this wasn't particularly to my taste. And putting it on solo instruments generally had a similar effect — making the start of a note

go 'pop'. Limiter mode was more than enough in many instances, with Brick Wall way too strong in many cases. The only use I found for AntiDyna was slap bass, where the popping sound was sometimes desirable, but I struggled to think of other uses. However, Limiter mode was surprisingly useful on solo vocals, working especially well with some dynamic female vocals, balancing them perfectly in the mix with minimal fiddling.

With judicious setting the Dynax² controls and tames in a highly enjoyable manner, with no loss of fidelity, no unpleasant distortion and no tonal colouration. It can be brutal, and indeed it does tend towards the overly-powerful for many music applications. I liked the sound best when it was only showing one or two dBs of reduction on the meter, where things gelled and glued nicely. And as a mastering limiter it works very well. For general studio use, the Dynax² can be overly powerful, and I'd have liked a lower ratio setting. But it is obviously very well put together and combines excellent sonics with a wide range of adjustment and some unique features. And it looks great. ■

PROS

Clean as a whistle top-notch sonic integrity; powerful limiting with wide-ranging controls; bass side-chain; bonkers 'AntiDyna' mode; sturdy build; looks fab!

CONS

No gentle compression ratios; tends to pump if not set carefully; AntiDyna mode a matter of taste!

EXTRAS

Al.So has released the Modular modular rack system. This includes a dual mic pre module with 60dB of gain and input



transformers (Sowter), a dual DI module, and stereo input module. A monitoring section module has Cue and Talkback capabilities and a headphone section. Rear panel connectivity permits patching between the modules.

Contact

ALTERNATE SOUNDINGS, FRANCE:
Website: www.alternatesoundings.com