

dbx 162SL

Proving that improvements can be made beneath the skin without sacrificing the feel and the look, this box has a number of immediately promising credentials—it's a compressor-limiter with the dbx name on the front and a 160 derivative model number.

GEORGE SHILLING spots that it's kind of purple too.



DBX'S WORKHORSE VCA compressors are such a common sight in studios that they almost fail to register on the radar when I see them in a rack. However, they will usually see action at some point during my sessions. There have been many variations in the history of the dbx 160 range. First there was the half-rack 2U VU-metered 160. Then came the 1U full-rack 160X, and variants the 160XT and 160A. Then came the more substantially engineered stereo 160S, which became the 160SL. There were also 161, 162, 163 and 164 models, not to mention the splendid 165A and probably many others...

Now, looking extremely similar to the 160SL model but substantially more purple, comes the 162SL. In fact, I had some trouble grasping the concept, as, apart from some rear panel differences, it was hard at first to see why such a similar model had been introduced. It seems the main difference is internal, with the 162SL using surface-mount technology as opposed to the 160SL's all-discrete circuitry. This of course makes the new one cheaper (UK£1531 + VAT), but this new box is still labelled 'Made In USA', and certainly isn't bargain-basement; the construction is solid and weighty.

But the mass of the 160SL has been reduced by downgrading the output transformers that allowed dbx to reduce the PSU transformer. The only downside to these changes is that the 162SL is less capable of driving long cable runs. In a studio installation this should not be an issue. On the upside, the Ratio knob has been changed to allow greater resolution at lower settings: while the 160SL has 4:1 at the straight up position, the 162SL is only 2:1 allowing for greater resolution in the area most often used. Particularly in normal hard-knee mode, all 160s have always to me seemed to provide stronger compression at lower ratio settings than rival units set to ostensibly the same ratios, so this expanded resolution in the lower ratios is to be welcomed. But we're getting ahead of ourselves...

On the rear are provided XLR and balanced jack

connectors for line in and out connections. There are additional 1/4-inch connectors for individual sidechain inputs and outputs on each channel, useful for de-essing or ducking situations, that are brought into operation with front panel buttons. There are tiny semi-recessed buttons here on the back to select +4/-10 operation for each channel, plus similar buttons for ground lift associated with each input. The power switch is also on the rear.

On the front panel, the large deep-shaped aluminium finish knobs cry out to be tweaked, oozing quality with their smooth, oily damping. All pushbuttons are accompanied by bright chrome-surrounded LEDs — these wouldn't look out of place mounted in the dashboard of a modern Audi, although you might not order the car in this shade of purple (*Still better than that ghastly banana yellow they do. Ed*). The custom VU meters go up to +6 and display In, Out and Gain Reduction. In GR mode the needle goes all the way to the right for maximum visibility and resolution, and visibility is quite a strong point here: the white backgrounds are lit very brightly indeed — another improvement over the 160SL. With these beaming out at you, the Power LED is somewhat superfluous.

In addition to the aforementioned enormous Ratio knob, each channel features continuous knobs for Threshold, Attack, Release and Output Gain, and a Stop Level for the peak limiter circuit. Above the Threshold knob are LEDs to indicate the crossing of this level. The green 'below' light moves directly to red ('above') in normal hard-knee mode, but when the OverEasy button is pressed the knee becomes soft and the yellow middle LED indicates that the level is in the 'knee' zone where compression initially occurs. In this case, the red LED only lights when the knee is passed and a constant ratio has been reached. Both modes of operation are supremely useable, and with the very flexible Attack and Release knobs, a wide variation of character is possible. There is also an excellent Auto mode — whack

that in and the 162SL tames bass guitar like nothing else. I was also mildly surprised to find that the dbx can make an excellent vocal compressor.

Although the compressor goes up to infinity, there is also a separate limiter circuit with two different modes. PeakStop is similar to that found on the 165A, while the switchable PeakStopPlus mode is a more intelligent two-stage limiter. The latter mode tends to be less susceptible to distortion artefacts when limiting heavily, but it is useful to have both modes for creative limiting.

The Stereo Couple button makes the left channel control master with only the VU meter and bypass button active on the right-hand side. This makes stereo operation easy, although I missed having separate make-up gains where sometimes you need to even-up the channels.

The number legending around the knobs is incredibly small, and the Attack and Release scales are somewhat unconventional with dB/mS and dB/S making you scratch your head when Fast and Slow would have been more helpful to a dumb engineer like me. But the 162SL is a superbly engineered unit, with improved audio performance compared to, say, the 160X. It does what you expect and despite all the cleverly-named features (OverEasy, PeakStopPlus, etc.) there are no surprises. You get the classic dbx character in a modern high-performance package. Every studio should have one. ■

PROS

Dependable dbx compression; familiar controls; cheaper than 160SL.

CONS

Tiny scale legending

EXTRAS

dbx's iEQ line of 'intelligent' digital graphic EQs consists of the iEQ-15 dual



15-band and iEQ-31 dual 31-band. They incorporate dbx Type V noise reduction, PeakStopPlus limiting and Advanced Feedback Suppression.

The AFS 224 Advanced Feedback Suppressor employs up to 24 filters per channel with filter Qs up to 1/80 of an octave. It also offers selectable modes and live filter lift.

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