review

Drawmer DSL424

Dynamics boxes have traditionally combined gain reduction with gating but few boxes offer independent sections and stereo operation for both processing types. ZENON SCHOEPE looks at a box that is made of two halves.

AS THE YEARS HAVE passed I have become, on the whole, largely less tolerant of the whims of equipment types with the single exception of dynamics. While I expect a fairly high minimum from an EQ and am very clear about what I want from an outboard effects, dynamics can delight me in all forms. Part of this down to an appreciation that you can never have enough and that individual character adds to the pool. So providing they're quiet, have decent connectivity and do what they say they can, then I am fairly easy to please. That's not to say I don't have favourites, because I do, but I can reel off a fairly long list of boxes that I also really like and that occupy well deserved space in my racks.

Drawmer has a superb reputation and track record in dynamics and the DSL424 combines the functionality of two pretty fine boxes — the DS404 and the DL441. As a reminder, the DS404 is a quad noise gate that is itself genetically descended from the venerable DS201 dual noise gate but with programme adaptivity. The DL441 is a quad auto compressor/limiter that is derived from the DL241 auto compressor. The DSL424 is therefore a further distillation of respected and good solid Drawmer gear — half a DS404 plus half a DL441.

Best of all you can look at it as two stereo linked compressors plus two stereo linked gates, a stereo linked compressor-limiter and gate, or you can access each processor individually via the back panel and treat it as two gates and two compressor-limiters. Personally that really appeals to me.

Each gate and compressor channel has its own balanced XLR I-O, which means you can patch between them if you wish, with the gates additionally getting a jack key input.

The two gates are arranged as the first two control blocks from the left and are followed by the two compressors. Both pairs can be switched for stereo on a button and this hands control to the left channel in the pair.

Operation is simple, control layout is clear and the results are good. The compressor has a Threshold pot (-40-+20dB) and you can switch between Hard and Soft knee character with LED illumination. Ratio sweeps from 1.2:1 to hard limiting and there's a +/-20dB Gain makeup. Metering is surprisingly good given the size of the control block with eight gain reduction LEDs and five LEDs in three colours for output level. It becomes a very colourful box when in full flight. Finally there's a separate Level for the peak limiter section, which has a LED to show you its working.

The observant would have clocked this description as that of a flexible and easy to set compressor with the super protection of one of Drawmer's exemplary limiters sitting on the end for broadcast applications, for example. Even the most explosive sudden excesses are pulled up beautifully by the limiter and you just can't fool it because it sees you coming. However, the devil's in the misuse and the limiter can be driven hard in isolation with very pleasing results. The compressor's good too and I'll answer any complaints now about its relative lack of individual parameter control by pointing out that most 'classic' compressors probably offer less. It's all in the choice of constants and it is hard to reconcile the big sound you get out of such a small little section. The bases are covered with the two knee characteristics, which really amount to giving you two completely different processing approaches that cover mix or individual sources. I think I've said this before about other Drawmer 'compact' dynamics, but if you were to spread out this circuit as a mono channel in a big 2U rackmount box with some retro knobs and switches and a couple of bricks inside to add weight, I'm sure quite a few people would be none the wiser.

The gate gets Drawmer's usual sweepable low and high frequency filters for tuning the side chain plus a Threshold (-70-+20dB) and Release (10mS-5S). Flexibility is aided by the inclusion of a button that switches between Hard and Soft gating — the former for a more traditional fast gate response, the latter transforming it into a programme adaptive downwards expander. I found that if the Hard setting wasn't ideal then Soft was better, presumably as intended.

Three LEDs tell you that the gate is closed, or open, with a middle LED giving an indication of the 'hold' value. This will be instantly familiar to Drawmer users. Unlike the compressor's Bypass button the gate's bypass is on the three position toggle that also selects key listen and the gated output.

I was sure I was going to object to the two-position (-90 and -20dB) Range switch but in practice it didn't bother me although it's the fully variable Range and Hold pots that contribute enormously to making the DS201 the wonderful gate that it is.

I would have liked to have seen the inclusion of the 'Peak Punch' feature found on the MX40 to spice up what is a perfectly capable but not extraordinary gate. But then the majority of gating applications are fairly simple and this processor does what it should.

It's undoubtedly a very strong package and the ability to patch or break out the box's individual sections does add value and a level of flexibility that you don't often encounter now. The compressor is the exceptional part of the combo. It sounds much fatter and smoother than it looks and I believe would add its character to any dynamics armamentarium. Two halves do add up to a very wholesome whole. ■

Contact

DRAWMER, UK:
Website: www.drawmer.com

PROS Excellent flexibility through rear panel connections; superb performance; the compressor's really great.

CONS The gate's not a power gate in the true sense, just a good allrounder.

EXTRAS Drawmer's S3 3-band stereo valve opto-compressor forms the basis of a new 'Signature Series' and offers 'previously unattainable control and tonality' over each of the three frequency bands. The signal path has I-O transformers, passive components and ten valves in a fully balanced Class A design. The Light Dependent Resistors in the opto-compressors are temperature sensitive and the S3 houses an 'electronic oven' that sustains the optimum LDR operating temperature.

Large scale VU meters can be switched to Peak mode and two further VU meter rescale modes are available to display the unit's ability to output levels up to +30dBm.