Generic Audio Preceptor

Here's a thing you don't see every day — a high-end boutique dynamics box from Poland. GEORGE SHILLING gets stuck into an individual and extremely capable processor.

Perhaps the first thing to clarify about the Polish-designed and built 'Preceptor' is that it obviously sets out to be something rather more than a generic audio processor. The company name merely reflects the encouraging fact that designer Bartosz Radziszewski (a DJ and recording engineer) has a sense of humour, and would like the products to be judged on merit, rather than through gimmicks.

This Stereo/Dual Mono hand-built 3U compressor/limiter has been in development for two years, and is designed to a high specification with gain reduction provided by a transistor in the differential amplifier circuit using 16 carefully matched Zener diodes for stabilisation. This is not a new idea; old Neve, EMI and Pye units worked in a similar fashion, but the Generic includes features not present on those, and is built with close tolerances and modern components, aiming to perform in a more stable manner, particularly when it comes to stereo imaging.

Build quality is very impressive, with smartly painted front and rear panels, and a robust powder coated casing. To be slightly picky, the legending on the front is very tiny and in some places gold paint makes settings hard to read. And the mini toggle labelled Bypass has On and Off positions, which is slightly ambiguous. But the control layout is clear, with channels arranged side-by-side, sharing only a Link switch, Power rocker and orange vintage-style jewel-lensed power lamp in the centre. This arrangement reflects the internal circuitry which is effectively two mono blocks. The front is dominated by kidney shaped VU meters displaying gain reduction in the conventional manner. A very satisfying feature is that all rotary knobs are switched, in the style of a mastering unit. This makes matching stereo settings easy and also makes recalling straightforward. The switches have gold contacts, and along with low-noise metalised resistors this results in an excellent claimed tolerance of 0.1dB between the channels when they are linked.

On the rear are smart XLR sockets from Amphenol, plus balanced jack connectors for sidechain inputs, selected with small front panel toggles. Along with the IEC mains socket is a dual fuse holder and voltage selection switch. Generic takes the power supply section very seriously, using a special order torroidal transformer and an anti-vibration mount, a special EMI filter and solid metal partitions. Each channel of the circuitry has its own rectifiers and secondary voltage stabilisation and voltage tolerance is tightly controlled to +/-0.01V. A heat sink for the stabilisers doubles as an extra shield. Carnhill transformers are employed in the audio circuitry.

The Preceptor combines some excellent features and principles from other great compressors. The threshold is fixed, so juggling the Input and Output level knobs arranged either side of each VU is the method of increasing or decreasing compression while also setting the level for the signal's onward journey. Each knob starts from an Off position and has 21 positions. The Output knob claims a range of -40dB/+10dB. A toggle on each channel selects a basic mode for the ratio: Compress is equivalent to about 2:1 while Limit mode is stated as being similar to a Fairchild. Another influence on the amount of compression is the unusual Z toggle, switching between input impedances of 300 and 1200ohms. The latter setting is more conventional but flipping to the former provides an extra 12dB input gain for more extreme settings.

Parallel compression is usefully provided onboard, with knobs to set the mix between Wet and Dry with click settings in 10% steps. Another favourite feature is the High Pass Filter provided for the compressor sidechain. This is variable with settings at 40, 80, 120, 200 and 320Hz — a perfect selection — enabling you to quickly settle on the best sound across the mix bus. There are Speed toggle switches on each channel for Medium, Fast and Slow, governing the ranges of the Attack and Release knobs, which each have 11 settings. Position 1 is fast and for Attack 10 is slowest — 9 is the slowest Release setting. Attack Position 11 seems to do something slightly different, with a non-linear characteristic. This 'auto' mode seems to result in more compression, sounding beefy on drums. In Slow mode this sometimes sounded good with vocals too, although I generally preferred a slower setting. But it was especially good containing an uneven bass guitarist *(Better than the unbalanced sort. Ed)*. Release settings 10 and 11 use RC circuitry; 11 seems pretty fast and also seemed to take a little of the smack off transients. Setting 10 is slower but also imparts a pleasant 'auto-release' characteristic. These extra settings change the character of the compression and are certainly useful. It's difficult to compare directly these extra modes as they affect level, but it

did seem that these settings should maybe have been placed at the fast end of the knob, as they relate more closely to those settings. Using the F, S, M ranges provides a huge total array of Attack settings from 5 to 600ms, and Release from 10ms to 10s.

I'm a big fan of fast release times and for drum and drum ambience enhancement the Preceptor truly excelled. It has a big, stable, exciting sound. Even with just a few dBs of compression showing on the meters, there is an enormous, grainy, full sound, making my humble drum room sound massively rich. The 300Ohm input setting is like a 'bonus' mode for extreme crunching but by notching up the HPF a great amount of weight can be achieved or retained. With extreme settings, the Preceptor sounded amazing — in a slightly over-the-top way. But oddly, despite the luscious mush of sound, there was only a maximum of about 5dB gain reduction showing on the meters, when you'd expect them to be pinning. Blending in some Dry signal works great with this kind of over-the-top drum limiting and is a useful feature. The comparison of the Limit mode's ratio to that of a Fairchild is a pretty good analogy, and although no valves are present in the circuitry, the Preceptor is similarly engaging and huge sounding.

For vocals, Slow mode provides plenty of smoothness and control, and the huge range of attack and release times available will satisfy all tastes. Release position 11 in Comp mode provided a smooth levelling, but a fast setting such as 2 often worked best, combined with medium or position 11 Attack.

Of course, the External Sidechain input is a bonus, and can be used with an EQed version of the main signal, or for interesting keying possibilities. But my favourite use was the anomaly of plugging nothing into the sidechain sockets, but selecting sidechain on the front panel toggle, whereupon the Preceptor becomes an overdrive unit! It's not ridiculous, but adds some nice warm harmonic distortion to enrich the signal.

The Preceptor is a great enhancing processor, extremely well designed and constructed, hugely useful and terrific sounding for all sorts of material. At Euros 3125 it represents excellent value, and takes pole position in my list of recommendations.

PROS Big, rich sound; variable HPF in sidechain; Wet/Dry blend; mastering-style switched knobs.

CONS Poor/tiny legending especially in low-light situations.

Contact

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