

Tube-Tech MMC 1A

Bringing the multiband compression of the SMC 2B to a single channel unit with a preamp front end is what this new box is about. ZENON SCHOEPE reckons it could end up being the most used item in your recording chain.



NO MATTER HOW HARD I try I still find it very hard to remain totally impartial to a new piece of Tube-Tech gear. I can be as cynical and calm as I want about it but by the time I get the damn blue thing out of the box I start to go a bit soft. Part of this has to do with the look of it. While it's the front panel that sticks out at you from the rack, the Pavlov's dog in me is triggered by the smoothness of the expanse of blue casing and the precise machining of the side vents. Once I glimpse the front panel in a little more detail I recognise bits that I know and have experience of and I immediately make a connection. So we're at this point already and I haven't even given it power yet.

The MMC 1A (UK£2388 + VAT) is linked by lineage to the SMC 2B stereo multiband compressor, a unit that I particularly like (not getting any better is it?), but distills this down to a single channel with a mic pre on the front. Around the back you have individual mic and line inputs plus an output all on XLRs and all with fully floating transformers, of course. There are six valves inside.

The multiband compressor offers three identical compressors that operate on the low, mid and high portions of your signal and the point at which these three sections 'crossover' or divide the frequency spectrum between them is governed by two crossover controls. The low mid split can span 60Hz to 1.2kHz, by way of a continuous pot working in conjunction with a x4 multiplier switch, while the mid to high split spans 1.2kHz to 6kHz on a continuous pot.

The operation of these crossovers is central to the operation of the MMC 1A, as how you split the signal will dictate how creative you're going to be able to be with your selective compression. Imagine a hard hammered bottom end, relaxed mid and nicely squeezed and boosted top end or, alternatively, a narrowed down, squashed and boosted midrange with the bass and treble left entirely in tact as just two of the many possible permutations.

Each of the three compressors has its own gain

reduction metering plus fully variable Threshold (Off to -20dB), Attack (3ms to 200ms), Release (60ms to 2s) and Gain (off to +10dB) operated by those super Tube-Tech pots that feel light but not too light. The MMC 1A is different from the SMC 2B in that it doesn't have the latter's continuously variable Ratio control but opts instead for a 3-position switch offering 2:1, 5:1 and 10:1. I kind of hoped I would be able to identify this as something of a limitation but in fact these settings equate to Gentle, More and A Lot and it is adequate. You have the Threshold to play with as well, of course. End of the chain sits a bypass and an Output Gain (Off to +10dB).

The Mic/Line front end also has a front-panel DI input. Gain is available in 10dB steps from 20 to 60dB plus +/-10dB in 2dB steps on two switched pots. There are switches for Phantom power, a 20dB pad, phase reverse and 20/40Hz low cut filter. In line with a lot of other modern boxes the MMC 1A sports the distinctly retro inclusion of variable mic impedance sensibly spaced as 600, 1200 and 2400ohms.

Performance from the preamp is pretty damn good. It's leisurely and comfortable sounding and also adds a bit of character depending on how hard you are driving it and how broad the incoming signal. The DI sounded solid but didn't particularly do it for me — I find DIs subjectively far more dissimilar than most people would have us believe — but it's a welcome addition on a box like this.

You may have tried multiband compression on some of your digital outboard or plug-ins but I think you ought to reserve judgement on what you really think about it as a means of gain reduction until you have tried Tube-Tech's analogue take on the subject. Presented with such a high pot count it is also child's play to operate compared to digital attempts.

How you implement this box depends on how you approach it. By definition most users will be piping something down it on the way to recording. As such you've got your input options covered and you might be expecting some form of EQ. The beauty of

multiband compression is that you are effectively mucking around with the spectral balance anyway because you're offsetting the incoming relative values and dynamics of the bands.

For my money, going into a DAW through a unit like this is far smarter and purer than going through a box with EQ that you might be tempted to use. Used sensitively you can track up some monster signals that retain an element of class and character all the way through to the master, even after all the subsequent treatment you will give it. Learn the knack, get your source sounding right and you can track clean and strong and add real quality.

It's good discipline too because it encourages you to put the work in at the front as opposed to slapping something down in the hope that you can sort it out adequately later on. It doesn't have to take long and you're not obliged to use all the bands all the time when only the slightest bit of help in one tight region will improve matters. Vocals through this box are amazing because you can tune in or tune out the bit that you're after and get it smooth without, what is by comparison, the relatively vulgar use of mere full band compression. You can make a rather unexciting mic sound really rather expensive with this unit. The advantage of this type of multiband over broadband compression is that you can preserve more of the apparent dynamic of a performance by controlling only the required part rather than compromising the whole lot simply because there's a bit too much energy in certain frequencies.

A keyboard pad or even a snare can be evened out selectively and they will sit better in the mix as a result. Same goes for a processed guitar or bass signal, they can be tamed. You'll start to listen in a different way as a result and it's at this point that the MMC 1A will become the most used piece of tracking equipment you have. The crossover arrangements are perfect, there is so much variability, so much scope for subtle and not so subtle control. The results are superb.

I could convince myself that a stereo MMC 1A would've have been a better option. But, if I'm honest, in your typical DAW recording application you are more likely to want 2-channels of the multiband compressor than two channels of mic pre — in which case you ought to be looking at an SMC 2B.

Of course, it's a lot of money for a single channel unit and you would be hard pressed to find even a selection of single channels at this price. However, you could console yourself with the fact that resale values of Tube-Techs are right up there with the best and you should certainly file this purchase under 'investment'.

Original friendly bias or not, I love this box. Buy one, get the hang of it and I guarantee that you will get your money's worth. ■

PROS Superb performance and control; simple to use; quite unlike anything else; good package.

CONS Not cheap; single channel; so what?

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