

XTA C2 and E2

Completing the Series 2 range of beautiful blue digital boxes is a frequency conscious compressor with a twist and a stereo EQ.
ZENON SCHOEPE fiddles with dynamics and curves.



AS WITH ALL OF XTA'S Series 2 processors, the two units here are available with an optional AES-EBU I-O and are digital units with analogue-style control panels. You will have heard of digitally controlled analogue, well the Series 2s are justification to invent the inelegant term of analogously controlled digital. Such is the persuasiveness of the front panels that they would fool many into believing that they are in fact completely analogue, especially as they interface to the outside world as standard through nothing more radical than balanced XLR I-Os.

As we are constantly reminded, analogue-style control does not come cheap in the digital domain and at UK£995 (+ VAT) they are not. However, for that you get a build-quality that is akin to the golden age of outboard, when things were built to last and were expected to last. Something you can't honestly say is the case with a superbly well-featured budget box loaded with a couple of buttons, an LED display and a continuous dial as an excuse of an interface.

Series 2 units go through a self-test routine on power up and I can confirm that repeated simultaneous powering up of all four units in the range will keep small children occupied for ages. The multitude of LEDs rival any display I have seen in the West End of London at Christmas.

The C2 is a digital dual-channel, stereo-linkable

compressor-limiter with an extraordinarily analogue interface. It's a front panel of two identical halves – Channel 1 becomes master at the press of a button and because it's digital channel parameter tracking is total.

There's a wide ranging Threshold pot working in conjunction with a below, at threshold, and gain reduction meter, a Ratio control (to 16:1) and switchable hard, medium and soft knee characteristics. An Auto switch, with a fabulous blue LED, bypasses the manual Attack (-60µs lookahead to 250ms) and Release (25ms to 4s).

A sidechain frequency pot sweeps 20Hz to 20kHz in switchable high shelf, low shelf, broad or narrow peaking with switchable gain of +/-6, 9 and 15dB. The side chain gain setting requires consecutive presses of a switch – a pot might have sufficed here but it would have reduced the LED count by four – and your tuning can be auditioned on a Listen switch.

Key to this section of the C2 is the ability to switch between trad frequency-conscious broadband compression and frequency tunable compression, which is termed De-EQ by XTA. The effect is not dissimilar to a dynamic EQ and it's subtle enough to be missed by the unsuspecting but powerful enough to fix an uncomfortable peak when required.

A variable threshold limiter works with two LEDs to indicate below threshold and limiting statuses. The Makeup gain pot was positioned a little curiously for

me as my muscle memory inexplicably had me grabbing the Limiter pot continually. Maybe it tells you something about me but I tend to use the gain makeup a lot and I expect to see it at the end of the physical pot and switch chain.

That said this is a fabulous sounding box and much better sounding than many might expect of a digital unit. You really can throw anything at it and it soaks it all up. Admittedly at the fastest attack setting it is 'cheating' with a little lookahead but it is very hard to trip up as there seems to be a lot of internal headroom.

There's bags of control, the Auto setting is perfectly sensible on programme, and the limiter does exactly what you'd expect. The De-EQ is not a major selling point for me (XTA's D2 and other units deal with these sorts of issues far more elaborately) but it is nice to have on the box. All in, pretty damn impressive and a very useful unit to have in the rack. For me, it is probably the most outstanding unit in the Series 2 range. ■

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| PROS | Great sound; stacks of control; rock solid stereo lock; remember it's digital. |
| CONS | Gain Makeup pot position; a very busy although great looking front panel. |



I'LL ADMIT THAT MY attitude to the E2 EQ was a little more reserved. I believe that users are more open to accepting individuality in dynamics processors while EQs don't tend to grow on you, you are either taken by them or you're left cold. EQ is expected to do a fairly high basic essential minimum and then it has to astonish you to be worthy of real praise.

The E2 reduces its application possibilities immediately by being stereo and not dual-channel stereo linkable. What you're presented with is a 4-band fully parametric with fully variable high and low pass filters. The filters are exceptional, covering 10Hz to 5kHz and 250Hz to 22kHz with switchable 12dB and 24dB/octave slopes. One for the dance-meisters then.

Each of the four bands can be bypassed individually and there's also a master bypass. Boost is variable between -25dB to +15dB in all bands with Qs variable from 0.4 to 25. Bands 1 and 4 can additionally be switched for shelving operation.

Each parametric band also gets a frequency multiplier that changes its pot's range from 10-200Hz to 100Hz-2kHz to 1-20kHz. The strip is topped and tailed with input and output meters and input and output gains. Nothing to get too excited or worried about.

The Frequency range switches allow you to layout the bands as you like. I tended to go for the old 1:2:1 formation although I found the 100Hz-2kHz range occasionally a little short at the top, while 1-20kHz lacks the pot movement resolution required at its lower end when pressed in to mid band duties. I could probably have done with at least 500Hz more in the mid position although I am aware that this would have upset the convenient multiplier nature of the setup.

These things notwithstanding it is a remarkably smooth EQ by any measure. Notch cut and broad boost is very good although I'd have it down as more of a general sweetener EQ than a cure for all ills

because of the frequency range splits.

However, the fixed stereo configuration works against the E2 as a natural for studio applications. Sadly it may be overlooked for this one reason and that would be a shame as it's very able. Those looking for a solid stereo EQ will have to check it out. ■

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| PROS | Smooth EQ; exceptional filters; smart layout. |
| CONS | Stereo not dual channel; multiplier frequency ranges might not suit everyone. |

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