

Drawmer Three-Sum

Multiband compression has largely been the preserve of the digital domain but this new box gives it to anyone who already has three stereo compressors. Who said there is nothing new in the world of dynamic processing?

ZENON SCHOEPE



I'VE BEEN RELISHING the prospect of writing this review because I've been excited by the prospect of this product ever since I saw an early version at a trade show last year. What hits a chord with me about the Three-Sum is the fact that it's an intelligent and practical addition to every rack that contains dynamic processing and, like all great ideas, it's simple and brilliant.

While there is no shortage of wonderful outboard dynamics devices on the market, they all do pretty much the same sort of thing. What differentiates them and makes compression and limiting so varied is how they do it, how you control it and what sonic character they impart upon the signal. However, the majority of compressors are broad band in their action. With the notable exception of Tube-Tech's superb SCM 2B, which is a strong personal favourite of mine, if you want to go multiband for compression then you're going to have to do it in digital.

This is where the Three-Sum comes in because it acts as an interface to effectively split a stereo input off into three bands for individual compression and then sum the results back to stereo for output. Like I said, simple idea but brilliant. This means that you can use your existing outboard compressors to create the mother of all multiband compressors.

The rear panel has XLRs throughout — two for the stereo input, two for the output, and two I-Os for each of the three bands. Of course, you can use only one half of the chain for mono sources and you're not obliged to use all the bands. You're also not obliged to use the bands just for compression, the manual suggests applying distortion, delay or reverb selectively. After a lot of scratching around I only had a chance to try reverb on the high band, which was interesting but it might be more effective to use this box as an adaptation of the EQing an aux send principle. You could theoretically sit this on a stereo aux and only peel off the high band to the send, but am starting to sound a bit too 80s?

You get an input Level Trim (+/-10dB) and a +/-10dB output gain pot to balance the front and rear ends of any processing that goes on between. The band split pots sweep over 18Hz-1.6kHz and 530Hz-42kHz (yep, you read that last figure right). The Low, Mid and High bands that are created by these splits each have Mute and Bypass switches — the former kills the band allowing you to listen to the remaining bands for processing effect, the latter bypasses the band's processor. At first I thought I would have liked LEDs for the Mute and Bypass switches but with the long-throw switches you don't really need them.

Then we hit a brick wall limiter with a pot that adjusts the level of the wall, gain reduction LED metering and a Limiter On/Off switch. I found the limiter most useful when working towards a multiband result as a means of protecting the back end from what can at times be a pretty wild and loud tweaking process. When I got to where I wanted to be I then switched it out.

Two VUs complete the picture with Input/Output source selection and a hot +10dB option, which is vital.

At this point it becomes difficult to say very much more about the Three-Sum because satisfactory multiband compression now depends on what you do with the boxes you choose to hang off the bands. What I will say is that when fully connected up there's a lot of circuitry in the signal path and the Drawmer isn't contributing any noise of its own. Mind you, by the time I'd cranked the hell out of three separate stereo compressors I'd stopped worrying about it.

It is a complete delight. You can choose your dynamics according to the band and mix and match powerful combinations. The permutations are endless and I was surprised at just how well some boxes do in certain roles and how even relatively 'bland' processors can do the job. It clearly all is in the band split positioning and this varied for me on a track by track basis, as you would expect. The real boon is being able to effectively solo a band to see what it's doing and to be able to bypass bands to monitor their interaction and contribution. The only downside for me, and it may not be the case for you, is that not all my dynamics boxes are in the same place or area of rack and I quickly found myself adjusting the bottom-end over there, the mid band up there, and the high band here. That says more about my rack ergonomics than it does about the Three-Sum.

Why multiband is such a good idea is that broad-band compressors are generally driven by the dominant frequency component in the incoming signal. How they respond is part of their charm and character and it's great and we love them but there are times when you might want to try something a little more specific and different. Unless you've actually tried analogue multiband compression then you won't know precisely what I'm talking about but imagine it as improvement on the side chain to end all side chains. You can slap a nice retro compressor on the bottom end to flatten out some of the peaks, use something contemporary on the mid range to tie it down hard, and then leave the highs to fend for themselves.

The tunability of the bands means you can isolate just one problem area, say, the lower mids, attack

that one narrow band with restraining compression and hear how the whole track opens up. What's so frighteningly impressive about such a simple solution is that the alternative would have involved broad-band compression and EQ and it still wouldn't have hit the nail on the head quite so well.

I've said this before, but once you get your ear 'in' to hearing multiband you start to listen differently and I'm convinced that in corrective applications it's far less destructive. Creatively it's in a completely different league, especially if you have some special boxes to play with. It adds far more value than the UK£465 (+ VAT) it costs to your rack because it releases extra potential from outboard you already own. That said, I got excellent results from some otherwise rather dull and affordable multiple channel compressor 1Us.

So there you have it. Simple and brilliant. I love it. ■

PROS

Superb idea; excellent implementation; adds value to your existing dynamics; multiband compression for everyone.

CONS

From an operational standpoint it helps if you have all your compressors near the Three-Sum!

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.

Contact

DRAWMER, UK:

Website: www.drawmer.com