



## TL Audio Ebony A4

Completing the portfolio of the UK manufacturer's dark and shiny product range is the A4. Rain and wind don't dampen **GEORGE SHILLING's** resolve as he insists it's a summer.

The fourth in the Ebony Series is unsurprisingly dubbed the A4, although where As one to three are legended with their designation, the A4 is labelled 16:2, which, err, 'sums' up this box pretty well. It is a fairly straightforward 16 input summing mixer with stereo output. All TL Audio products traditionally have a valve or two lurking inside (Tony Lurking?) and the A4 is no exception. However, the introduction of valve processing into the circuitry is optional here and the important job of summing is delegated to Class A transistor electronics. The unit is smartly styled much like the other Ebonyes, with a shiny black finish, white lettering, chrome buttons and vintage knobs.

The front panel presents a set of pan pots, one for each input, logically arranged into a row for 1-8 along the top with 9-16 below. These knobs are centre-détented and although they work smoothly enough, the tops do seem a bit cheapo-retro rather than classic-retro; more like something from your dad's old portable radio. And the pointers only feature on the caps and not down the barrels, so accurate recall is not easily possible. However, almost without exception I imagine that these will be hard panned or centred, so it's unlikely to be an issue. Left of the knobs are a series of chrome pushbuttons to select +4dBu or -10dBv operation, with four separate buttons for channels 1-8, 9-16, outputs and inserts.

A Master knob controls output level, this has a possible extra 6dB of boost but is labelled simply 0 to 10 — unfortunately with no calibration or détente for 0dB, so some lining up and calibrating with a tone is required. Zero is around 7 on the scale. Unfortunately I discovered a left-right imbalance and I subsequently learned that there is an internal trim for this. There were also some tiny discrepancies of level among some of the channels (the variance was up to half a dB), and there are no individual trims, so the only thing for it was to delve behind the rack and (with some assistance from a meter watcher) recalibrate the output level trims on my interface using a tone. It was slightly inconvenient having to compensate this way, but once set everything was stable.

Below the Master gain knob is a Tube Warmth knob but this is only active if the Tube Stage button is On with its corresponding green LED illuminated. A further button is provided for Insert On (with LED), and another button adds 10dB to the VU meter calibration. The round VUs show output level and

are typical of many TL Audio products — gently illuminated and clear enough to see that things are in the right ballpark. Accompanying them are red Peak overload LEDs. There's a rocker switch for Power with an accompanying bright blue LED.

Internally, to accommodate the extensive Class A and valve circuitry, the main circuit board (mounted just above the base of the case) is accompanied by about 12 further smaller boards, many of which are mounted perpendicular to the main board. A toroidal transformer for the mains is sectioned off by shielding, which also doubles as a heatsink for some of the transistors.

Cramming the necessary connections onto the back panel has been cleverly achieved and even offers a choice of inputs. Two 25-pin D-Sub connectors provide input to channels 1-8 and 9-16 and alongside these are rows of balanced jack inputs that override the D-Subs if both are connected. D-Sub wiring sensibly uses the near-universal Tascam standard, and balanced TRS jacks provide an excellent compromise where XLRs would take up too much space. The stereo insert point also uses fully balanced inputs and outputs so a further four jack sockets cover this. This is an excellent addition for the connection of analogue mix processing, such as the TL Audio A2 perhaps... The final main stereo output does use XLRs rather than jacks and the only other connection is the IEC mains.

So having spent the morning Larking about with a trim tool, I was able to set up a previously completed in-the-box mix with separate outputs, routing back into my mix bus processing chain. A/Bing without the tube stage engaged resulted in only a remarkably small discernable difference. In fact, the A4 sounded a little less glued-together than the in-the-box mix. Subtle changes to the vocal presence and clarity were evident, but there was no clear winner. However, this initial material was fairly unsubtle pop-rock, and testing with more spacious analogue elements, such as live jazz ensemble recordings, the A4 held a slight advantage in perceived space and 'air', a removal of clogged lower-mids and an enhanced and seemingly deeper bass. Apart from impeccably accurate alignment these were relatively unscientific comparisons, with audible differences certainly due partly to the qualities of the converters used for the multiple outputs, stereo inputs and monitor outputs.

Boshing in the tube stage there was an instantly

noticeable change, even with the knob at minimum. The Drive LEDs were already flashing with my healthy mix level, which averaged just over 0VU on the meters but was well below Peaking so a range of Tube Warmth extending lower down might have been useful. The subtle but noticeable crunch constricted the low mids, adding richness to the upper mids, and added a slightly 'compressed' character overall. The pop-rock track sounded even more exciting as the knob was increased up to 7, beyond 8 it turned nasty (like a fluffy record player stylus, if you remember those), and the red Peak lights soon illuminated. You'd have to be fairly cloth-eared to let things go that far under most circumstances (*Pardon? Ed.*)

Unexpectedly, turning up the Warmth doesn't increase output gain, in fact the level gradually decreases slightly as this is turned up, which perhaps means that the effect doesn't sell itself as well as it might. It was surprisingly successful at adding extra glue to the aforementioned jazz ensemble, bringing back some warmth in a more desirable way than the closed-in digital-ness of in-the-box, and certainly sounding slightly less fatiguing. I would, however, qualify that by emphasising that differences were mostly fairly subtle, and generally less than one might notice between, say, WAV and MP3, or source and analogue tape, unless cranking the valve circuitry. But you certainly get a wholesome feeling, hearing impeccably designed Class A circuitry handling the summing.

I still prefer a console, but as a rather cheaper option, and certainly one of the lowest-priced summing boxes (UK£999 + VAT), the Ebony A4 is exceptionally well featured. The choice of connectors is sensible, and the insert option adds useful flexibility. It sounds as clean and classy as more expensive rivals and, apart from some level line-up niggles, performs impeccably. The valve warmth adds useful character to taste, and the comprehensive +4/-10dB settings enable it to slot into any setup with minimum hassle. ■

**PROS** Pristine summing; optional variable crunchy valve warmth; balanced inserts.

**CONS** Factory calibration not quite accurate and no obvious user adjustments; no individual signal present indicators.

**EXTRAS** There are three other units in TL Audio's Ebony Series, all of which use discrete Class A circuitry and have a tube stage with variable drive putting you in control of how 'creamy' or how 'cool' your unit sounds.



Hand assembled in England the units have chrome knobs and a high gloss black finish and balanced I-O, multi-input options, analogue VU metering and simple operation.

### Contact

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