

Toft Audio Designs ATC-2

Malcolm Toft returns after a short absence with a new line of outboard with his name on.

ZENON SCHOEPE attempts to resist a dual-channel mic preamp, compressor, and EQ that has real character.



MALCOLM TOFT'S NAME is so strongly and immediately associated with the Trident brand that it has largely overshadowed much of his other work. While many would want to keep him firmly back in the days of that limited short run of first A series desks, allowing him perhaps to venture as far forward as the Series 80 and TSM, I like to look at his work over a much broader period. For me, his days at MTA did epitomise much of what was good about what Malcolm does. Well thought out desks that were stacked full of features, that were well laid out, and that sounded great on pretty much all fronts. They looked a tad sudden with their light back colour and bright red switches but they've probably aged more gracefully than some of the cosmetic atrocities that were hitting us at around the same time. Most importantly they were always extremely good value and still represent a great second hand buy today for those who want a proper desk.

The MTA days also saw the release of the desk EQ as a Signature series rack unit and it remains one of my favourite EQs simply because it is so usable and so effective. An all too brief association with the Trident-MTA brand and Fletcher Electroacoustics did, however, produce the rather superb and very underrated A Series EQ mic preamp that I regard as among the finest ever built. After another quiet period, it's great to see Malcolm back again with a range of boxes with his name on.

The ATC-2 breaks no immediate ground with what has become a fairly standard list of features but because it has the Toft name on it we can expect something a little special. We have a dual channel mic preamp, with line and instrument inputs, FET compressor and EQ housed in a stylish case with nicely sculpted recesses for the switchgear. It's built in the Far East but you really wouldn't think it as it's chunky, tight and well screwed together with smooth pots, which are centre detented where appropriate, positive switches and good hardware. Most significantly it's UK£699 (inc. VAT).

The rear panel has XLR connectors for mic and line balanced inputs and outputs plus unbalanced jack I-Os. The front panel adds instrument level inputs to both channels.

I'll say straight away that the compressor has a Stereo Link switch that merely links the control voltages and leaves each channel's individual controls fully independent. So there is no master channel allocation just like in those old desirable FET designs.

To quote the rather poor manual, which really should have a front panel layout with pot by pot and switch by switch descriptions, the box's mic pres are derived from his earlier desks and the EQ and compressor sections 'borrow heavily from vintage Trident designs'. The EQ, in particular, will stir Series 80 fans.

Starting with the equaliser then, you get a switchable 12dB/octave 50Hz rolloff and +/-15dB on all for four bands. LF and HF are shelving with switchable 60/120Hz and 8/12kHz frequencies. The mids are peaking and seem to sweep (there are no figures in the manual) 100Hz-1.5kHz and 1-15kHz. This is a great design and I love it. It might not read like much but believe me that it has a subtlety that is now increasingly lacking in modern designs. It's pure sweetener, whether in boost or cut, generous and full bodied. You can pile it in with enthusiasm but I found I ended up using little bits of each band and used it lots.

To my mind when you get a tracking EQ you want to be using it, the special occasion EQs are all well and good but they do tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time On and unplugged. This circuit is a high usage design that I love to death. Admittedly you're not going to be pulling out mains hum with this thing but you will very quickly find it can improve and correct with ease.

Now the compressor is a different sort of proposition mostly because its action is quite different from the more common VCA-type designs. It's

certainly fast but its squash factor has much more in common with 'classic' designs than its modern presentation would suggest. There are fully variable Attack and Release pots (marked only as fast and slow at their extremes), Ratio (apparently unity to 12:1) and the essential Gain Make Up (-50 to +20). VU-style meters can follow output level or gain reduction. The former could really do with a Peak

LED, to my mind, and the latter could do with a means of desensitising the meters when hammering hard as mine spent most of their time twitching on the hard left end stop.

But it's really very good, I can't knock it. There's a creamy quality to what it does that is

immediately flattering and very refined. It's very similar in quality to boxes costing very much more that have those funny plastic controls on the front.

This is a good mix compressor, excellent on drum subgroups if you want to get that sucky room mic sound, and very handy on snares. It's also fabulous on a quality vocal mic because it can be remarkably transparent and doesn't have to overpower and stamp its mark on the singer. I'm fumbling for a word here and 'smooth' probably gets closest and will mean most to you.

It goes without saying that the mic preamp is damn fine — very quiet and responsive — and surprisingly unfussy about what mic it is being fed.

EQs and compressors can be bypassed individually. EQ is fixed before the compressor which is OK for most things but there are times when I like to run things the other way around.

The ATC-2 is very hard to fault in any major way and amounts to a quality unit of remarkable character — again that's something that is starting to be lacking in a lot of 'affordable' outboard. I love the EQ, the compressor and the mic pre. I've think I've just added another box to my list of favourites. ■

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PROS

Quality, characterful processing; ultimately usable EQ; real retro compression; a great box.

CONS

Could do with a Peak LED and the ability to desensitise the VU for gain reduction extremes; no switchable EQ-compressor order; poor manual.

EXTRAS



Other products in the Toft range include the AFC dual channel equaliser and mic preamp, the EC-1 mono channel compressor, EQ and mic preamp and the DC-2 dual channel mono/stereo compressor.