

XTA D2 stereo dynamic EQ

Better known for its range of high-end live sound products, XTA has arrived with a selection of boxes that undoubtedly have live uses but also sit very comfortably in a studio environment. ZENON SCHOEPE explores its D2 EQ.



THE SERIES 2 OFFERS AN INTERESTING supplement to your outboard racks with processors that are not at all what they seem. Despite appearances, all the boxes are digital internally, running 40-bit with 24-bit convertors at 48kHz at the I-Os, but interface to the user with a decidedly analogue front end. In fact it feels so analogue that I didn't actually believe that the internals were digital – even the pots have end stops – and attempts to really thump some serious level through the box failed to generate a tell-tale digital crunch. I guess I'll just have to take XTA's word for it (opening the lid proves it).

All S2 units can be fitted with an optional AES-EBU interface on XLR and there's also a transformer balancing option.

The D2 being looked at here is a beautiful piece of equipment and typical of the series. It's a pleasure to see that there are still companies out there making quality gear. Powering up instigates a fascinating power test routine that lights most of the many front panel LEDs and should keep the simple minded happy for hours.

The first thing to note is that this is a stereo box and not a dual channel arrangement. The stack, and there really are a lot, of front panel controls work across both channels simultaneously. Of course you can just use half of the rear panel XLRs and some probably will because I did.

What you're presented with is a complement of pots and switches that would put most analogue dynamics units to shame. And I'll say it again, it feels analogue and at no stage was I reminded of the fact that I was in effect working digitally.

The best way to look at the D2 is in blocks as there are three bands of stereo dynamic EQ plus an end of line compressor and gain make up control. Twin bargraph meters follow input or output and will flash on and off when you go beyond the red, as I tried to do, to alert you to the fact that you're being daft.

The three band blocks are extremely similar but offer twists that differentiate them when using them as a chain, 3-band EQ-style. Each can be bypassed individually and each has a gain reduction bargraph. A word of explanation here. The D2 is 'dynamic' in two ways as it can cut (compress) above or below the threshold you set with the Threshold pot and this fundamental mode is set on a switch per band. I was half hoping that the D2 would also be able to perform true upwards expansion (boost), like the excellent BSS DPR901 can, but it doesn't.

Threshold is variable from -30dBu to +22dBu and the tuning of the band that is to be processed is performed by a frequency pot (20Hz to 20kHz) and a Q control

(0.5 to 8). All blocks work as bandpass but the first

and third can also be switched to shelving. Additionally each band can also be switched to full band, which defeats the tuning capability, for instances when you want to supplement more specific dynamic control with a tad of general stuff or just use one band as a straightforward vanilla compressor.

Things are rounded off with a Ratio pot (1:1 to 16:1) and a three-position switch to select response times (attack and release) marked simply as fast, medium and slow. The best part is the inclusion of a Listen switch, which you have to press and hold to latch and can cancelled on a further prod. This pipes the sidechain signal to the outputs so you can hear what you're working with. This is necessary as the effects we're talking about here can be extremely subtle and it'll take a while for you to get your ear tuned in to what you are listening for. We could be talking about zooming in on a frequency and clamping down on its transgressions above the set threshold or bolting it down below threshold. Think super fancy and variable turbo de-esser and you're part of the way there.

The end of chain full range compressor has a Bypass, Threshold pot, three ratio settings, and again three response times. Frankly I can't fault it. Finally there's a global bypass processing switch.

So how does it go? Pretty damn well if you understand what you're dealing with and if you have a plan. Once these two essentials are in place you can start to slice and fine control in a manner beyond the abilities of ordinary compressors.

The above and below threshold modes may not sound like a big deal but they are central to the operation of this device. It's possible to bass lighten a mix or firm the bottom end up simply by working on the lower frequencies and 'tilting' the spectral balance

in favour of the remainder. Similarly you can soft-scoop the mid range to yield a smiley face curve without touching the low and high. It goes without saying that you can home in on a boomy frequency or suppress a nasty peak. The results are completely different from what you could do with any sort of EQ; things are more open and natural sounding.

One of the peculiarities of full band compression is that its apparent spectral content sounds different depending on how high or low in the mix the processed signal is. The great thing about the D2 is that you can adjust the relative weighting of the spectral breakdown to match the effect you are trying to create. Great for background music to voice-overs then.

There's a temptation to regard this as a box only for curing ills, as opposed to something to get creative with. I'd agree to a point, but as you work with it you start to think of ways in which it can contribute. It can produce killer bass control in programme and on individual sounds. It's also a fabulous vocal processor.

What you have to be careful of is to keep an eye on the bigger 'picture' of the sound because if you process heavily in nearby frequencies you can get a little unsympathetic interaction happening, which sounds peculiar.

All in, it's hard not to be impressed and the sound quality is superb. One of the best looking bits of gear to have the lights working on in your rack too. Oh, and it is digital right? ■

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PROS

Superlative dynamic control; very approachable and easy to use; unusual and distinctive; it's digital but you wouldn't know it.

CONS

Stereo as opposed to independent dual channel; probably difficult to appreciate by the unenlightened; upwards (true) expansion (boost) above and below threshold would have been fantastic.

EXTRAS

XTA's Series 2 range also includes the C2 dual/stereo compressor, E2 stereo parametric EQ, and G2 dual/stereo gate. Each unit features DSP technology with traditional front panel controls for ease of operation.



The C2 includes look-ahead attack times and built-in side-chain EQ. A 'De-EQ' mode, an extension of traditional de-essing, where the side-chain filtering affects the compressor's frequency sensitivity and allows compression around those frequencies only, delivers de-essing, de-popping and many other band power reduction features.



The E2 provides four bands of fully parametric EQ, each band sweepable between 20Hz and 20kHz and offering high resolution Q and level adjustment. The outside bands are switchable to shelving filters.



The G2 has a fully adjustable envelope including hold time, and large status LEDs showing attack, hold and release phases. High and low pass key filters are included and there is an additional multifunction band of EQ with listen facility.