

PreSonus Blue Max stereo compressor

There is nothing new under the sun in the world of compressors. PreSonus and Martin Eckel beg to differ.

There are no shortage of compressors to choose from in today's marketplace. You can practically spend as little or as much as you like, but primarily they all do the same job (controlling the dynamic range in an audio path), in much the same way. PreSonus with their Blue Max have now given the budget end of the market an interesting alternative – a preset-based compressor. Yes, preset-based. Now that I've got your attention, read on.

The first thing you'll notice about the Blue Max's vividly coloured front panel is the 16-position preset knob. There are three settings each for keyboards, fretted instruments and vocal material; and two settings each for percussion, stereo and effects material. For all those counting, the 16th position frees up the unit for manual use.

The variable Input gain knob ranges from -20dB to +40dB to accommodate DI'd instruments such as bass – but with a 100k input impedance it may be a little on the low side for DI'ing guitars. The Ratio control ranges from 1:1 to a hard limiting 20:1, Attack is variable from 0.01-100ms and Release from 10-500ms. Last in line is the Output gain knob with a range of -20dB to +20dB and two button switches – one for bypassing the compression circuit and the other which switches the lefthand eight-segment LED meter between input and output metering. The second LED meter monitors gain reduction, up to a maximum of 28dB. Front panel labelling is sparse and at times difficult to read. It would have been nice to see more than the three markings around the compression controls.

The rear panel provides unbalanced 6.5mm inputs/outputs which may be switched between -10dB and +4dB operating levels via a selector. There's also 6.5mm sidechain access, for de-essing and other compression effects. Power is provided via a standard IEC cable: no wall wart!

Conspicuous by its absence is the threshold control. This omission means that the only way to adjust the threshold is via the Input knob, and doesn't exactly allow for an optimum gain structure to be set. When any of the presets are selected, only input and output gain controls are active, while all other parameter settings are determined by the preset. Each of the preset's parameter settings are listed in the brief yet thorough manual and



would make for instructive reading for less experienced operators.

Not to be toyed with

After using the unit for a while you realise that a lot of thought has gone into configuring the presets, and they are very musical in nature. I could imagine them being particularly useful in live situations where compressors often need to be set up quickly and on the fly. The audio quality is extremely good, especially at this price point, while the dynamics action is quite smooth, except in the most extreme of settings. The sound of the Blue Max sits nicely between transparency and compression as an effect.

I think many professional users may be tempted to dismiss the Blue Max as a toy: the stripped down user interface, the presets, the half-rack sizing, all contribute to the illusion. But the Blue Max is a seriously useful bit of kit. It would have been nice to see the ability to alter parameters in Preset mode (pick a close preset as a starting point and fine tune it), and perhaps a few user presets wouldn't have gone astray either – a valuable (albeit digital) asset on any compressor come to think of it. But at this price it's difficult to be picky.

I think PreSonus have a winner on their hands with the Blue Max. If you're in the market for a good quality affordable compressor (which accounts for most of us), the Blue Max will certainly do the job. Furthermore, if you're adding the Blue Max to an existing rack of good compressors, in time you may find yourself reaching for the convenience (and sound) of the Blue Max on more occasions than you first thought.



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