

Masalec MLA-2

Brad Watts gets a lesson in precise stereo compression

Another compressor rears its head. But before you switch off... this time it's from Prism Sound. Prism Sound began life as consulting engineers for Neve Electronics where they worked as R&D consultants. Since they left Neve in 1987 the company specialised in consultancy for many varied audio-based commissions before releasing their own product range, Maselec, in 1992. Their expertise has been employed in projects as varied as floating-point DSP platforms for audio restoration, digital audio multi-channel metering systems, and an automatic guitar tuner. The guitar tuner caught my eye. Here's a quote from their web page, describing the tuner as "a cost-critical device for embedding into electric and

controls for ratio, attack and release. Here's where you'll realise the precision nature of this unit and the task it was designed for.

The ratio choices begin at 1.4:1. Then ratios of 1.7, 2, 3, 5 and 6 follow. Attack starts at an impressive 0.005 of a second, then 0.02, 0.1, 0.3 and 0.5. The Release control is just as finely stepped. From 0.01 through to 0.35 of a second. Very fine settings for microscopic dynamic control and indeed precision limiting. Beside the control pots sits a large VU-style pin meter, which is large, white, and easy to read, although not backlit. The metering will reflect input gain or, by flicking a switch directly beneath it, gain reduction. Next to that switch is another for bypass and a light that glows green when signal is present and red when the reduction control takes effect.

Between the two channel sections sit a power switch and a toggle that selects Prism's 'ImageLink' mode. Prism refer to this as an 'intelligent dynamic stereo linking' system - and believe me, it works! I've not heard dynamics processing keep a stereo image as intact as this compressor! This unit certainly offers a degree of control that exceeds DSP-based dynamics control. Other devices can have the drawback of letting a centre image wander away from the middle as one side of the program material forces the other to reduce the gain at a ratio not required by the orphaned channel. Imagelink is worth investigating, such is the accuracy that you can be fooled into thinking the unit is doing nothing at all!

The Maselec specs are well within an acceptable range for professional mastering. The frequency response falls between a staggering 1Hz and 50kHz - which makes it equally suitable for two-inch and one-inch tape or 96k digital sources. The dynamic range (with gain reduction in) is greater than 107dB and >125dB when gain reduction is bypassed. Again, well-suited to analogue and 24-bit signals.

Overall the MLA-2 is a solid, effective and incredibly precise dynamics control device. In terms of its responsiveness, the only processors I can begin to compare it with is software that functions with the ability to 'look-ahead' at a signal. The MLA-2 does it in real-time with transparency and class. A tough act to follow and well worth auditioning as a world class professional stereo compressor/limiter.



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• Control Devices:

Phone: (02) 9356 1943

Maselec on WWW: 'www.prismsound.com'

For further information: info@alchemedia.com.au

Price

• RRP: \$5670 ex tax



acoustic guitars ... the unit allows the completely automatic tuning of the instrument by measuring the vibration frequencies of the open strings and progressively tuning them using special high-torque miniature motors patented by the client company." So, as you can see, we're not dealing with any ordinary manufacturer.

The MLA-2 stereo opto-compressor has been developed in association with engineer/producer Leif Mases. Leif has worked with a wide range of artists including Abba, Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Leif has co-operated with Prism in the design of other Maselec units such as the MEA-2 EQ. The Maselec range also includes some very well respected 24-bit/96k A/D and D/A systems, the Dream AD-2 and Dream DA-2.

The MLA-2 is a 2U rackmounting compressor/limiter designed for mastering applications. Prism's experience in the corporate world of logging recorders is reflected in the build quality of the Maselec range. This is a solidly built unit with a grey fascia, large knobs, steel rocker switches and plain, easy to read meters. The MLA-2 definitely subscribes to a 'let's get down to business' ethic, with aesthetics not so much taking a back seat, but being stored under the spare tyre in the boot.

The chassis is totally sealed, confirming the cool-running solid-state nature of the circuitry. The rear panel houses balanced XLR I/O for the two channels, IEC mains input and power switch. Each side of the compressor's face plate sees controls and metering for the two respective channels of the MLA-2. Two large knobs control input gain and output. These are stepped in single dB increments with the makeup gain finishing at +28dB. Above these knobs are smaller, stepped