

Mix Magazine, January 1998 BlueMAX



Does the world really need another compressor? In my studio, I've got seven or eight compressors already, ranging from workhorse models from dbx and Symetrix to some absolutely glorious UREI and Focusrite Red units. So when a \$249 half-rack box like the PreSonus BlueMAX comes along, am I supposed to be excited? Yeah, sure, absolutely, and here's why.

If, for a moment, you can look past the BlueMAX's small price and diminutive package, you will see a box that does what no analog compressor has ever done before, and sounds great as well. If the same circuitry were repackaged in a two rackspace box with a milled aluminum front panel, people would wait in line to pay \$1,000 for it.

Essentially, the BlueMAX is a stereo compressor/limiter with five continuously variable front panel controls for input gain, compression ratio (1:1 to 20:1), attack time (.01 to 100ms), release time (10 to 500ms) and output level. Also standard are two LED ladder displays for input/output (switchable) and gain reduction, as well as a hardwire bypass. But what sets the BlueMAX apart from the rest of the pack is the fact that it provides 15 presets for various tasks (three presets each for vocals, keyboards and frets), two percussion settings, eight instrument settings, two stereo program settings, two special effects presets and a manual mode.

The rear panel holds a few more surprises: Not only are connections provided for unbalanced 1/4" inputs/outputs (with a -10/+4dB operating level selector), but there is also a 1/4" sidechain access jack for de-essing compression or other effects (tremolo, anyone?). A detachable AC cable connects to an internal power supply-no wall wart! - switchable from 110V to 220 via an internal jumper.

Having only a single set of controls, BlueMAX is obviously designed with stereo compression in mind, though the unit can be used as a single-channel mono unit by plugging into the left input/output only.

With numerous program-dependent dynamics processors on the market, the "Smart Compressor" part of the BlueMAX name is not entirely true. In audio, the name "smart" usually refers to circuitry that actively changes parameters based on the content of the input signal. So I would regard the BlueMAX as more of a "clever" compressor, rather than a smart one.

Once you get into session with the BlueMAX, you realize the amount of forethought that went into choosing the presets, which have been selected for musicality. Except in extreme settings, the dynamics action is quite smooth, and the audio quality is clean enough to challenge the performance of units that cost three times as much.

Operations are pretty much spin and go: You merely pick a setting that matches the application, set the input threshold and it's done. The output pot acts as a gain make-up control for restoring level to heavily compressed signals. If one setting doesn't fit exactly, just spin the knob to another setting and try again. Of course, the unit also provides a manual mode with access to a full range of controls.

And the brief -yet complete- manual includes the parameter settings for all of the presets, so if you like the snare preset (3.5:1 ratio/78ms attack/300ms release) and you want a longer - or shorter- release time, you can always start from the settings in the documentation and then create your own. My main criticism of the BlueMAX is that the compression ratio/attack/release controls could use some intermediate markings. But the strength of the BlueMAX is its speed of operation which is essential in applications such as broadcasting, sound reinforcement or in the studio. Overall, this one's a winner, and whether you have one or ten compressors in your rack, you may soon find that a PreSonus BlueMAX is the one you reach for first on your next gig.