

Summit Audio TLA-50

The second in the new half-rack series from Summit Audio (already affectionately tagged the 'little guys' by the people at Carmel), the TLA-50 tube leveler looks set for a brilliant career.

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ONE OF MY FAVOURITE 'plug and play' units that requires no religious fervour beforehand is the Summit Audio TLA-100A compressor and the TLA-50 looks exactly like a miniature version of its bigger brother. The main difference is that the VU/gain reduction meter has a semi-circular scale with a horizontally moving needle and this should bring back some fond memories of equipment from yesteryear.

The unit features a trademark Summit brushed-aluminium front panel with a vented chassis painted a reddish-brown and it complements the TD-100 instrument preamplifier nicely (*Resolution*, V1.1). The left-hand side of the front panel features three toggle switches aligned vertically for Attack (fast, medium, slow), Release (fast, medium, slow) and Meter, the last of these toggling between Output and Gain Reduction.

This is followed by a suitably large black Gain control, the aforementioned meter, another large black knob for gain reduction, and finally a power indicator with toggle switches for Link/Bypass and Power.

Turning to the rear panel, there is a Neutrik Combi input connector for +4dB signals on male XLR and -10dB signals on unbalanced jack. This is followed by a link jack socket for stereo-linking two units together, a side chain insert jack (tip/ring configuration) and a -10dB unbalanced output jack and +4dB balanced XLR output connector.



First use of the TLA-50 was literally on the fly: I came off the plane and straight into a mobile recording session and as the unit was in my case, it was plugged up and inserted into the saxophone channel on the console and away we went.

Interfacing was no problem at all and when the saxophonist finally decided to play (sound checks?

You must be joking!), the Summit caught it beautifully. A slight tweak down on the gain control after the first few notes and we were set for the evening.

I went on to try the unit in a more controlled environment with a wide variety of signal sources. The first thing I noticed is that it needs a good half-hour for the circuitry to settle down and for the meter to zero. Good practice generally dictates that you let equipment warm up for at least 15 minutes before use so this is not too much of a hardship and besides the unit will work satisfactorily anyway.

I tried it on spoken and sung voice, various musical instruments and percussion, and mixed material. It was quickly noted that if the general-purpose compressor really does exist, then this unit certainly qualifies for membership in the club.

The compressor has a soft-knee characteristic and the fast-medium-slow settings for the attack and release characteristics really do work. With slow release time, the effect becomes more programme-material dependent but this is probably what you want anyway.

One thing that I have always liked about Summit Audio compressors is their smoothness – you can hit the signal really hard or be gentle with it and there are no hiccups whatsoever.

There is one vocal track that I use that will make most compressors duck nastily on some of the transients but the TLA-50 just smoothed them out before beefing up some of the softer passages.

For making larger-than-life guitar sounds, the combination of slow attack and fast release worked really well – both on electric and acoustic instruments – while medium/medium provided a good all-round setting.

Setting up the TLA-50 is simplicity itself. You just set the gain control to around 3 and then increase the gain reduction control as required. A quick in/out of the bypass switch to check levels and you are in business. Some quick experimentation with the attack/release settings to suit the signal in question and you should be ready in a matter of minutes.

The way the compression curve is set up can be considered as 'auto ranging'. By this I mean that once you have set the unit up, the compression ratio will adjust itself automatically to take care of sudden peaks without upsetting the general scheme of things.

The final check was to use the TLA-50 with no compression at all but as a signal 'warmer'. The effect

is subtle but it does add a little extra that can make all the difference. I also looked at the stereo link operation combined with a TLA-100A and the image remained very stable from Mahler to rap.

This begs the question of just how this little box stacks up against the TLA-100A. The

answer is extremely well but I would qualify this by saying that whereas the two units have definite similarities, they are not the same. Being an older design, the TLA-100A shares more Pultec characteristics whereas the TLA-50 has a more modern 'punchy' sound. The way it can emphasise high frequencies, for example, is extremely useful.

Using a TLA-50 in combination with its sibling TD-100 preamp makes for a great tracking package, particularly for electric guitar straight into a console.

For those that previously felt that Summit Audio gear was out of their budget range, you now have absolutely no excuse. For those more well-heeled, just stack up a bunch, this unit is a steal. ■



PROS Simplicity of operation; sounds great; very affordable

CONS Standard VU meter might have been preferable; I have to buy one (or two)

EXTRAS Comparisons to the TLA-100A are perhaps encouraged by the look of the TLA-50 but they're unfair given the backgrounds of the two units. The TLA-50 is certainly a derivative of the TLA-100A but the bigger unit remains the original.



In continuous production for over 15 years, the TLA-100A tube leveling amplifier is a hybrid of vacuum tube and solid state devices and boasts soft-knee characteristics, switch selectable attack and release times, and a unity gain bypass switch for A/B comparison. The device has a transformerless signal path, is stereo linkable and has a side chain insert

The output is electronically balanced or unbalanced using 990 discrete op amps.

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