



Solid State Logic

## ALPHA CHANNEL



SSL is renowned for its pro-end hardware, but the company has recently turned its attention to the project studio market and is bringing that legendary sound quality within the scope of more modest budgets. **Mark Cousins** checks out the Alpha Channel...

### KEY FEATURES

- Professional, ultra-clean mic preamp with line-level and Hi-Z instrument inputs
- Analogue or digital outputs direct to your DAW
- Variable Harmonic Drive
- 3-band SSL parametric EQ
- Built-in limiter

### ALPHA CHANNEL

Manufacturer **SSL**

Price **£999**

Contact **Sound Technology 01462 480000**

Web **www.solid-state-logic.com**

Following hot on the heels of the impressive Duende, SSL's Alpha Channel reinforces the company's apparent desire to bring its trademark audiophile quality to a wider user base. Of course, dedicated preamps and 1U channel strips such as the excellent XLogic Channel have been members of SSL's product lineup for some time, enabling the project-studio owner to integrate some of that SSL magic into their setup. The catch, however, is that the XLogic Channel and the E-Signature units don't come cheap (around £2,350 and £2,500 respectively) and desirable features such as the inclusion of integral A/D conversion add even further expense to the investment. At only £999, therefore, the Alpha Channel is a considerably more affordable way of adding a splash of SSL to your recording path.

The Alpha Channel has been put together with the average project studio user in mind, offering an ideal replacement or addition to your existing DAW front end. Most importantly, this DAW-inspired front end means that digital audio connectivity (via an S/PDIF connection) comes as standard, so if you find that the preamp and A/D converter aren't up to the task – a typical drawback of mid-range interfaces – you have the potential to upgrade. And in addition to the digital interfacing, the Alpha Channel includes features such as integral EQ, insert points and an output limiter. Could the Alpha Channel be the ultimate front end to almost any DAW?

### Alpha test

Interfacing with the Alpha Channel's preamp is via a combined balanced XLR/jack connector, enabling you to connect anything from a vintage condenser microphone to a Hi-Z or instrument-level input. The front panel also houses switches for phantom power and Hi-Z status, alongside Pad and Phase Inversion controls. More intriguingly, the preamp also features a Variable Harmonic Drive pot that adds

variable amounts of second- and third-harmonic colouration in much the same way as a valve preamp does when pushed slightly into its 'warm' territory. Although no dedicated input metering is provided as such, the Pad doubles as an input level indicator by illuminating when an overloaded input is detected.

The Alpha Channel's preamp delivers a pleasingly open sound, with a nicely extended top end and plenty of clarity in the mids. What's more, it has plenty of gain, making it ideal for less sensitive microphones or situations when you need to record particularly delicate sound sources. Interestingly, the Variable Harmonic Drive seems to work in conjunction with the gain pot, effectively changing the nature of the distortion. We got some great results experimenting with a DI'ed bass and even fed some mono drums loops into the line input, with the Variable Harmonic Drive appearing to add extra weight and body to the sound.

### Into the Channel

Usefully, the Alpha Channel features an Insert section, which offers an ideal way of inserting a compressor into your signal path. As well as an Insert



The Alpha Channel's Insert section could be used as a means of creating a parallel compression effect.

In/Out switch, the Alpha Channel also provides a Post EQ switch (enabling you to place your insert before or after the EQ), as well as an intriguing SUM feature to combine both the send and return signals – possibly a useful way of creating a parallel compression effect. A high-pass filter follows the Insert section, and although it's not fully variable like the XLogic Channel, the two switches can be used to create cutoff points at 40, 80 and 120Hz.

## THE MOST AFFORDABLE WAY OF INCORPORATING AN SSL FRONT END INTO YOUR SETUP.

The EQ section – which is apparently borrowed from the G Series design – is one of our favourite features. The design is 3-band parametric, with the LF section ranging from 40–600Hz and switchable from shelving to bell modes, a fully variable mid (300Hz–5kHz), and high shelving positioned anywhere between 1.5 and 22kHz. With up to 16dB of cut or boost, the EQ section has an impressive power to it, but – as with the Duende plug-in we tested a few months ago – plenty of musicality, too. One minor annoyance, however, is the lack of any indication of the specific frequency you're working at (beyond the extremities, of course). Although we should all be using our ears, it would be good to have a little more guidance here.

### Clocking on

The final section of the Alpha Channel governs the output, with a pot providing a further +/-20dB of gain, which is then followed by a Lite Limit

function. The Lite Limiter is placed ahead of the DAC so that any extraneous peaks don't clip the converters. As with the Pad switch, this button also acts as a basic form of metering, indicating when the limiting is taking place (changing from green, through orange to red). The Limiter certainly succeeds in its task, being transparent and unobtrusive, although it might have been interesting to see what would have happened if the threshold could be lowered for more creative applications. Raising the output will indeed push the limiter harder, but when we used the

digital output, this seemed to result in a few too many consecutive peaks in Pro Tools.

By default, the digital output of the Alpha Channel is clocked at 44.1kHz, and we had no problems hooking up the unit to our Mbox 2. However, things become a little trickier if you intend to work at an alternative sample rate – 48kHz or 96kHz for example. In these situations, you'll need to clock the unit externally, running a suitable word clock signal (which could come from your DAW) to the S/PDIF input. When the Alpha Channel sees a suitable S/PDIF input running at anything between 32 and 108kHz, it will clock to it and change its output accordingly.

### Sounds like...

While it would be foolish to expect the same kind of performance and flexibility of something like the XLogic Channel, the Alpha Channel more than delivers in its particular application. For anyone wanting a quality preamp and EQ together with DAC included as standard, you'll find the Alpha Channel

## Measuring Up

If you're primarily interested in the microphone preamp side of the Alpha Channel, we'd recommend looking at Universal Audio's Solo 110 and Solo 610 (£704). Intriguingly, the units come in both solid-state and tube versions (denoted by the 110 or 610 tag), enabling you to pick a preamp that best suits your particular requirements. If your budget can stretch a little further, you could get a similarly featured unit but with better compression and limiting options – arguably an essential, if not vital, part of tracking a 'professional' sound. Ted Fletcher Pro's P10 (£1,499), for example, includes 4-band EQ and compression, complete with the facility to move between different styles of compression. Having two channels also makes the P10 more suitable for anyone recording with stereo pairs.

hard to beat. Of course, other preamps might offer more in the way of valve 'character' (although the Variable Harmonic Drive certainly helps) or, if you're willing to spend a little more money, a greater set of limiting and compression options. However, couple the Alpha Channel with a good mic digitally connected to your DAW and you could easily be won over by its sound and performance.

Most importantly, though, for those asking whether the Alpha Channel 'sounds like an SSL', the answer is a resounding yes! Although some features have been slimmed down in comparison to the XLogic Channel, all of the remaining core elements – namely, the EQ and preamp – are SSL through and through, and coupled with Duende's Bus compressor, you could fool people into thinking you've squeezed a J Series into your control room! **MTM**

### METHOD SPOT

The Variable Harmonic Drive is one of the Alpha Channel's most intriguing features and it's well worth experimenting with it to fully understand its range of sounds. To hear the VHD circuitry in action you'll need to push the input gain slightly towards a red glow, and correspondingly back off the output level to avoid overloading the output. The pot changes the nature of the added harmonics, moving between second harmonics towards the left-hand side (similar to valves being pushed into the red), and third-generation harmonics reminiscent of 70s transistors on the other. Although it's a great effect, try not to overcook all your inputs, reserving VHD for those special moments when extra body and warmth is desirable.

## SUMMARY

### WHY BUY

- Great-sounding preamp with plenty of gain
- Powerful and musical EQ
- DAC included as standard
- Flexible Insert path

### WALK ON BY

- Clocking options limited
- Some of the legends could be clearer
- Limited compressor
- No dedicated metering

## VERDICT

The most affordable way of incorporating an SSL front end into your setup. Its power, musical EQ and a host of other functions make this a desirable addition for any project studio.



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