

NIGEL PALMER

Manley clearly has a soft spot for the mastering environment, not least through its custom analogue consoles which are used around the globe, and I was intrigued when I heard about the introduction of a mastering version sibling for their SLAM! (Stereo Limiter And Micpre). The original unit is fast becoming a favourite amongst those who can afford it in track-and-mix, so I was interested to see what refinements might be made to the design to justify the 'mastering' tag.

Overview

As soon as the unit and accompanying power supply are out of the packaging it's apparent that the term 'built like a tank' well describes the solid construction of the mastering SLAM!, and that must be the chunkiest separate mains box I've yet seen for a 2U item. Once the two are connected via the supplied umbilical (you're warned not to hot-plug), we're in business. I won't give an individual account of the many knobs and switches on the front and back panels, but the headlines are firstly that the unit has two limiters based on different principles, ELOP (optical) and



MANLEY MASTERING SLAM! LIMITER

FET. ELOP has, unlike the standard version, a number of ratios from 2:1 to 10:1, which can make it act more like a compressor if required, something which broadens the SLAM!'s usefulness considerably, and generally has a more relaxed feel to it than the faster FET. Other differences compared to the original include removal of the mic pre-amps as there's little relevance to them in a mastering context, and the provision of stepped rotary switches throughout instead of standard pots to aid resetability. Metering is comprehensive, with both large VUs and peak meters, the latter offering a wide range of modes showing various aspects of the unit's operation, and there's also a new true hard-wire bypass mode.

Looking round the back, together with a very full complement of analogue balanced and unbalanced I/O including, unusually, TT connectors for use with patchbays, is a slot for an optional digital board which was present in the review sample. This has a well-featured upsampling DAC and ADC which appear to be the result of much careful listening and evaluation – certainly I found no fault with the sound of them during the review period, the only logistical downside being that the digital parameters can only be accessed via the back of the SLAM!, so if you regularly wanted to change sample rate, for example, you'd need to ensure good access. Something I found interesting here was that the manual states that the Swiss developers of the ADC are better known in the hi-fi audio world than the professional one, and talking of the manual I should also mention that it's exemplarily thorough and friendly – it even gets into the philosophy of loudness with memorable phrases such as: 'We are building guns, not pulling triggers... be careful with this cannon'. I'd recommend a download of the PDF from the company's website from a general audio information point of view alone.

THE REVIEWER

Nigel Palmer has been a freelance sound engineer and producer for over 20 years. He runs his CD mastering business, Lowland Masters (www.lowlandmasters.com), from rural Essex where he lives with his family and two dogs.

In Use

Loudness and level conformity, subtle or otherwise, are mostly what this box is about. I've long held to a tenet of mastering engineer Glenn Meadows who says that good mastering is not usually achieved with any magic bullet or process, rather it's about chipping away at the sound a small amount at a time: just as I might track vocals using one kind of compressor and then mix with another in place to 'get in the cracks' of the previous process, the ELOP and FET limiters in the Mastering SLAM! similarly complement each other with their different attitudes, and I found that 1dB of limiting from each together generally sounded better than 2dB with either singly, though I usually found the ELOP's sound easier on the ear. If I wanted, impressive amounts of additional loudness could be imparted to programme material with less penalty than I'm used to, or I could take the opposite approach and go for something much more savage, often involving the FET limiter. A '50 percent' mode allowing a mix of straight-through and limited audio also offers interesting parallel compression effects from this Rolls Royce of an analogue limiter, and I was taken with the digital I/O board as its qualities seemed very well matched to the mastering SLAM! and could be a must-have for those requiring a stereo analogue

insert for a workstation, when the whole box can act as a sophisticated analogue and digital hub in a mastering or other audio context.

Conclusion

Although it's clear that a short review can really only give a flavour of such a piece, my feeling after living with it for a while is that although you don't get too many of these to the pound or dollar, as far as I'm concerned in the right hands and working situation the mastering SLAM! is worth every penny or cent. Once bought, a high-end tool like this should give many years' faithful service, and the price of entry can therefore be effectively spread over a considerable period. It doesn't take a crystal ball to realise that good analogue is going to be in demand well into the future and will hold its value – in the unlikely event of buying a Mastering SLAM! and eventually deciding it wasn't your cup of tea I don't think you'd have any difficulty in reselling it for a good price, which speaks volumes for the pleasingly old-fashioned quality and perceived value of products like this. **MAN**

INFORMATION

- ④ Manley Mastering SLAM! Analogue I/O £4695.00, plus digital I/O £5895. Manley (USA).
- ① +1 909 627 4256.
- ② www.manleylabs.com

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