



## Shadow Hills Industries Mastering Compressor

Victory is, apparently, boutique audio equipment manufacturer Shadow Hills Industries' business. The heavyweight Mastering Compressor looks like it's been airlifted straight out of WWII, but does it have what it takes to win the loudness war? **GEORGE SHILLING** signs up to find out.

The Shadow Hills Mastering Compressor is an extraordinary-looking, 5U-encased stereo compressor. (In fact, it's even bigger, for there is a separate 2U power supply!) It looks astonishing, with the most exaggeratedly 'retro' styling I've ever seen. Peter Reardon is the ideas man behind Shadow Hills, who also does the engraving on the units, and personally listens to each one. His philosophy is that the user should be given the control to achieve exactly the desired results — on purpose.

The front panel is dominated by two huge Hoyt meters. On the review unit one had become faulty in transit, but a replacement was speedily dispatched and easily fitted. With the lid off the almost cuboid box, there was a surprising amount of empty space within. There is plenty going on directly behind the front panel, but most circuitry is mounted on the base on two separate boards — apparently one for each channel, plus two transformers mounted high up — one on each side. Further transformers are mounted on the boards, along with a huge array of other components. On the rear are two pairs of XLRs for input and output, along with a 7-pin XLR to connect the power supply unit using the supplied 2.5m cable. The power unit includes two big green lights on the front, labelled Positive and Negative, a big toggle switch, and two fuses alongside the IEC connector socket.

There is a definite 1940s military theme apparent, reinforced by the manual. Eyebrows were certainly raised by the last chapter, which has detailed instructions on the destruction of the unit (including the use of boot heels and grenades) for 'evading enemy capture!' The front panel is awash with (clicked) Bakelite knobs, toggles, and levers, all accompanied by green-lensed lamps. The metal backplates around the knobs indicate specific clicked settings. Undoubtedly many custom components are employed here. Legending is beautifully etched into the panel, but — despite the clarity of the white lettering (and 5U of space) — overall operation does sometimes seem a little complex. This is partly due to the mirroring of controls between the two channels, and also because the SHIMC is, in fact, two distinct compressors wired in series.

Independent meter switching provides separate

display of gain reduction for either the optical circuit, which comes first in the chain, or the discrete compressor, which comes next, or the output level. Right underneath the meters is a rotary switch to select stereo or dual mono operation. Switching to stereo links the audio detector circuitry and disables all the right-channel controls, including even the makeup gains and bypass toggles. Only the meter switching remains available — particularly useful when using both compressor circuits, as you can then display the optical reduction on one meter and the discrete reduction on the other. The enormous meters are supremely easy to read. Also in the centre is a hardwire bypass, which always operates simultaneously on both channels; below this is a 'magic eye' tube, which displays mono level with a Pacman-shaped indication, the 'mouth' closing at about +4dB, lending some authentic 1940s military styling.

The first part of the circuitry (after the input transformer) is the optical compressor; this uses a similar photocell to that found in LA-2A and LA-3A units and has a similar sonic glow. It has only two controls — Optical Threshold and Optical Gain, each with switched steps from 1 to 24. With Threshold turned anticlockwise, and no compression occurring, unity gain seems to be at about 11 on the gain knob, allowing a good range of operation. This section has its own Bypass toggle, as does the following discrete compressor circuit, which provides VCA-type compression. That section also includes Threshold and Gain knobs — both scaled from 1 to 24, although these Gain knobs are rather larger, perhaps to denote their 'final output' status. However, the discrete compressor has rather more control flexibility. The Ratio knob has settings of 1.5, 2, 3, 4, and 6:1, plus Flood, which represents 20:1. The Attack control has settings for 0.1, 0.5, 1, 5, 10 and 30ms — interestingly, the same settings as found on SSL bus compressors. The 'Recover' knob switches between 0.1, 0.25, 0.5, 0.8, 1.2s, and Dual settings, the last of these being an auto setting for smoother and less audible release. There is also a useful Sidechain Filter switch set for a 90Hz rolloff — great for preventing pumping from prominent bass drums and suchlike.

Following the compressor circuits is a switchable

transformer stage. Here you can toggle between Nickel, Iron, and Steel transformers. The first adds a hint of treble boost and is clean sounding. The Iron setting adds a touch of warmth; Steel adds a touch of very low frequency boost and has a subtly gritty character.

Despite some similarity of function, the discrete section sounds rather different than an SSL bus compressor. On the mix bus it sounds thick, warm, and analogue, yet with a beautiful openness and fluidity. There is a big, magical glow. For extreme parallel drum compression or drum ambience, the fastest settings provide perhaps even more 'air' and character than, say, an EMI TG on fast limit, and flipping in the 90Hz sidechain filter helps to slightly reinforce the weight of the bass drums and create deeper snare drums and tom-toms with wonderful Led Zeppelin hugeness — even from my modest-sized drum room. The Steel transformer setting seemed the juiciest setting here. It sounds fantastic, but I'd wish for perhaps an even faster release setting. Adding a little optical compression doesn't do any harm, a couple of dBs of reduction seemingly adding even more character and smack to the sound. For vocals, the optical circuit works smoothly and really glows, but I also enjoyed additionally using the extra flexibility of the discrete circuit. It was usually best to let the auto-recovery setting take care of making a natural contour. Meanwhile, the Nickel transformer setting provided the best vocal clarity.

Although it has taken the fancy of some notable mix engineers, the SHIMC excels in many other applications. With careful tweaking users can keep things subtle, but it also has plenty of power and oomph for extreme compression, pumping, and high output level. Across the mix bus it can glue and enhance programme beautifully, and is flexible enough for a variety of tastes in compression. I also enjoyed recording through it. I found the optical section ideal for strummed acoustic guitar, and great for taming bass guitar, but adding a touch of discrete and selecting the Steel transformer also juices it up. The final choice of transformer setting can usefully sweeten or subtly enhance a signal.

The SHIMC is beautifully constructed; although the styling harks back to the 1940s, it is a thoroughly modern tool for the sound engineer. It is expensive (US\$8,295 retail), but it is effectively two truly excellent compressors. Also the switchable transformers are more than just a gimmick, with a useful final tonal tweak that can often lend some extra magic to the signal. I'd love to evade enemy capture and hang onto it for a while! ■

### PROS

Magical, glowing, fluid sound quality; looks amazing — clients will be impressed!

### CONS

Sheer bulk of the unit and PSU.

### EXTRAS

The Equinox is described as a complete recording console. The control room



section features a discrete monitor volume control, a three-position speaker selector and four-position input selector. The summing bus is a 30-channel mixer using copper bus bars and esoteric resistors combined through switchable custom output transformers — Nickel, Iron, and Steel. The mic pres are the same as on the Shadow Hills Gama.

### Contact

VINTAGE KING AUDIO, US:  
Website: [www.vintageking.com](http://www.vintageking.com)