



SSL XLogic Alpha Channel | £999

SSL extends its XLogic range with something more affordable. *Jon Musgrave* powers up...



WHAT IS IT?

Mic pre/EQ with digital output

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Relatively good value
- 2 SSL sound
- 3 Stylish and sturdy

nce upon a time, getting top console-grade channels in outboard form (and hence mobile and

compact) often involved literally racking up one-time console modules with dedicated power supplies. But in recent times most top companies have wised up to the advantages of selling purpose-built rack units.

A while ago I was lucky enough to size up both the E-Signature and Super Analogue Channels from SSL. With those units retailing for well over a couple of grand each, it's no surprise that plenty of people would have been put off.

At just under a grand their latest box, the Alpha Channel, is a considerably different proposition. It's still a lot of money, but unquestionably makes the SSL sound available to a much wider audience.

Self contained

It's astonishing to think that in these days of digital recording, many micpres don't come fitted with an A/D converter card as standard.

This is certainly the case for the aforementioned (and more expensive) XLogic channels (and plenty of other manufacturers as well).

Whatever the arguments are for each approach, it's great to see that with the Alpha Channel they've opted for the all-inclusive one. Not only that,

but they've also made use of both sides of the converter at the output stage (see the box below for details). So what else is new here?

First off, the mic stage incorporates the VHD (variable harmonic distortion)

idea we saw on the E-Signature Channel. This offers a drive control that shifts from second harmonic distortion to third. Used in combination with the mic gain (more gain drives the VHD circuit harder), it gives you tone shaping right at the input stage.

Next up we've got an EQ design effectively lifted from the stereo channel on a G Series desk. Slightly simpler than the four-band standard G EQ, this Alpha Channel version has low and high shelving with a fully parametric mid band.

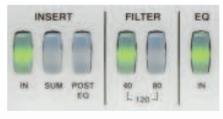
Frequency ranges are typically broad (up to 22kHz on the high shelf), and in keeping with the 'black knob' LF EQ there's also a bell shape option. The high-pass filter is a simple design, but with three frequency settings (40, 80 and 120Hz) it's pretty flexible. SSL EQ is renowned for being pretty

S/PDIF routing

The Alpha Channel has an extra variable in the form of two converter channels (left and right) at the output.

In use, this results in four signal patterns controlled by the 'post EQ' button. With the insert and post EQ both switched out, the left channel gets all the processing (filter and EQ). The right channel gets filter only.

Switch in the 'post EQ' button and both left and right get the same full



processing. Now switch
the insert in and you
get two further options by
plugging into the insert
return. With 'post EQ'
switched out the insert
return feeds the EQ then
the left channel, with the
main input going via the
filter to the right channel.

Switch to post EQ and the insert return feeds straight to the left channel with the main input getting all processing (and feeding the right channel).

Got that?!









powerful, so it's nice to see an output level control (20dB cut and boost), and the final stage in the analogue signal path is a switchable limiter.

Called 'lite limit', this design has been borrowed from the Super Analogue channel and is essentially there to offer non-intrusive protection prior to the converter.

You can link Multiple Alpha Channels for limiting purposes using dedicated rear-panel phonos.

at the input stage you'll have noticed the dual-purpose Neutrik connector (for mic and instrument). With no iack input on the back, you may be wondering where you'd stick a line level signal. You use the XLR input combined with the Hi Z switch and the pad, giving you a 10k0hm impedance with the appropriate gain range.

Next up you'll see an insert 'sum' button. This sums the insert return signal into the original send. In use it's coloured LEDs (for example the pad button turns red to indicate overload).

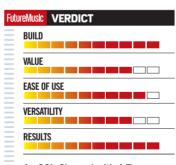
The sound is clean and precise and as a good mic pre/EQ it has a lot going for it. But the extra harmonic flavour provided by VHD means that as an instrument DI or line level insert it's a useful bit of outboard too.

Magic

Clearly the Alpha is a great box. Both familiar and reliable but with a few

> tricks up its sleeve, it offers precisely what many serious project studios need. There isn't an abundance of bells and whistles, but the layout and

particularly the visual feedback from the backlit buttons is excellent. If I did have a gripe (apart from the lack of compressor) it would be the slimmed down (and non-XLR) analogue connectors. Aside from that though, a big thumbs up. FM



An SSL Channel with A/D converter for just under a grand? You can't argue with that!

SPECS

Mic input: 20dB to 75dB gain, 20dB pad, 48V phantom, phase reverse

Input impedance: 1k0hm (mic), 10k0hm (mic HiZ), 1M0hm (instrument)

High pass filter: 40Hz, 80Hz, 120Hz

Three-band EQ: LF 40Hz to 600Hz, MF 300HZ to 5kHz, HF 1.5kHz to 22kHz

Output Gain: +/-20dB

Maximum Output Level:

Converter: A/D 32kHz to 108kHz

Dimensions 482x230x45mm

Weight 3.5kg

The Alpha Channel is an extremely ergonomic rack with plenty of finger space for tweaking

The built-in 24-bit converter is set to self-clock at 44.1kHz (there's no manual rate settings). It will, however, clock anywhere between 32kHz and 108kHz, and to achieve alternative rates you simply need to provide an external S/PDIF signal carrying an appropriate clock.

As you can no doubt see from the picture below, digital connections are S/PDIF only (on phonos), and all rear analogue connectors are balanced (on TRS jacks).

Logical

First impressions of the Alpha are that things have been slimmed down a little from the more expensive channel strips (there's no compressor, for example). This is inevitable to some degree, but in typical SSL style it has some different tricks up its sleeve. Starting

great for blending a compressed sound into the main signal, although getting the balance between elements requires a bit of skill. It's at this stage that I first try the 'lite limit' button. discovering that it reduces the insert send level (12dB according to the manual). This is useful for retaining headroom, but worth knowing while you're carefully setting your insert levels up.

On a more practical note, the Alpha is an extremely ergonomic rack with plenty of finger space for tweaking. The newly designed fascia, including backlit switches, is by far the best looking of the XLogic units and begins to move away from a visual blueprint set over 20 years ago.

Missing from that blueprint is the familiar LED metering, but many of those backlit buttons have multi-

ALTERNATIVES

Rupert Neve Designs Portico 5032

£1.468

A very different beast to the Alpha Channel but highly desirable all the same - no digital option though.

runertneve.com

Buzz Audio MA2.2 £1,550

It's simply a twin mic amp with a clean, clear sound

huzzaudio com

TL Audio Fat Funker £850 (including A/D board)

If it's harmonic flavour you're after then this guitarist-angled box makes a fine channel strip.

tlaudio.co.uk



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