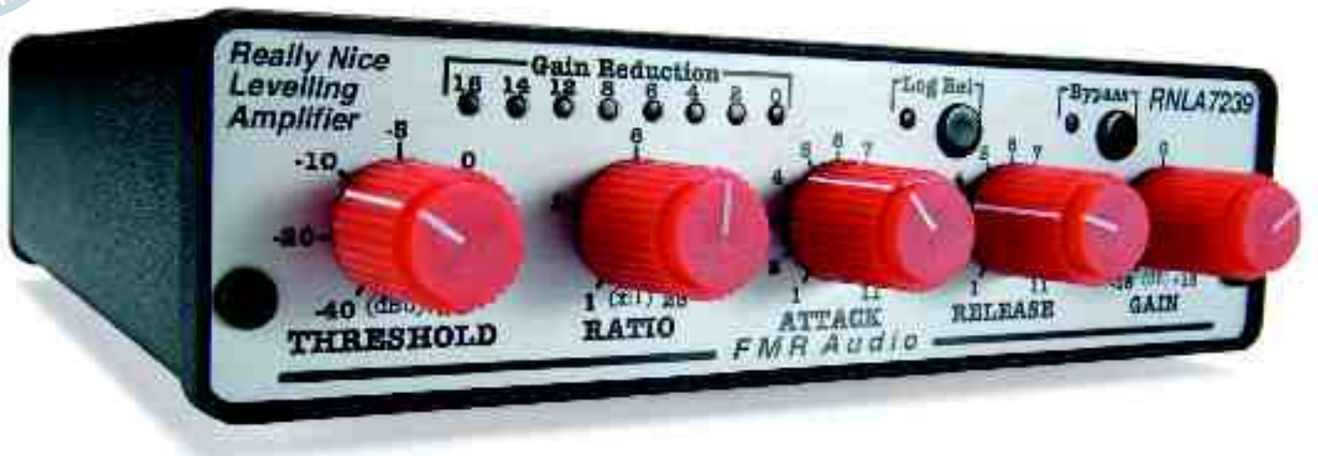

FMR Audio RNLA

A new take on a classic – **Jonathan Wilson** is drawn into the ways of the old skool...

DETAILS

PRICE £199

CONTACT
Supplier: Audio Agency
Tel: 01908 510123
Web: www.fmraudio.com

TECH SPEC
Inputs: Left/Right 1/4" unbalanced inputs
Outputs: Left/Right 1/4" balanced outputs
Controls: Threshold, Ratio, Attack, Release, Output rotary dials Bypass and mode select switches. Eight-segment 0-16dB LED gain reduction meter
Operating modes: Normal (fast attack/release) and Log Rel (release envelope acceleration)
Noise: Less than –90dBu over 20Hz-20KHz; typically –95dBu over 20Hz-20KHz
Frequency response: 10Hz-100KHz +/-0.5dB @ 0dBu
Distortion: Less than 1%, no gain reduction @ 1KHz, 0dBu. Less than 0.5%, 6dB gain reduction @ 1KHz, 6:1, 6.0m/s attack, 0.5s release, 0dBu gain, 0dBu
Threshold range: -40dBu to +20dBu
Ratio range: 1:1 to 25:1
Output trim range: +/-15dB
AC power: wall transformer, 9V AC @ 500mA, 2.1mm jack (included)
Size: 140 x 140 x 41mm
Weight: 0.91Kg

WHENEVER THE PHRASE 'levelling amplifier' crops up, most people instantly think of products like the legendary Teletronix LA-2A or Urei 1176LN, late-60s/early-70s compression classics with such distinctive, musical characters that they're still outboard staples in thousands of studios all over the world.

However, Texas-based FMR Audio would now like to draw our attention to another, substantially cheaper, levelling amplifier – its very own RNLA7329. FMR first brought us the RNC1773 Compressor, then the RNP8380 Preamp – both great. How does the RNLA compare?

Numbers game...

Cosmetically, the RNLA is made of the same aluminium and steel body as its siblings, but there is one striking difference – it's got freakishly large red knobs! The rationale behind this decision is beyond me and it seems to be beyond FMR, too, judging from comments in the manual. Whatever the reason, it does make a bold design statement.

Oddly enough, in the half-light of a darkened studio, those red knobs start to make sense. They take on a subtler hue and they match the blinking red lights on other equipment around it.

The other salient points about the RNLA are as follows: it has a wide dynamic range; excellent audio fidelity; a sidechain insert; accurate gain reduction metering; full parametric continuous controls; a hardwired bypass switch; a Log Rel alternative release contour and two unbalanced inputs that double as TRS inserts.

In use

Hooking up the device is relatively straightforward, either via a standard 1/4" plug from a device's Send or Output jack or by using a 1/4" Send/Receive jack with a TRS-TRS cable. The outputs are unbalanced, but companies like Studiospares supply every kind of cable imaginable.

Once you've connected your source, you then connect the output, power up and, as FMR puts it, make groovy music. The RNLA is simply a compressor, albeit one with a little sauce, so start twisting the knobs until you hear something you like.

When you use a signal processor like this, you expect it to colour the audio. According to FMR, the sound of the RNLA harks back to an early (1984) incarnation of the RNC based on an optical gain element, rejected as not being 'pure' enough.

I started by setting all the controls to the 12 o'clock position, as I could then dial in a greater or lesser amount of the RNLA's sound as required using the inter-related controls. For instance, the effect gets more extreme as you turn the Ratio up, while reducing the Attack time gives you a smoother sound as the transients get swallowed up. If you want less compression overall, slowing the Release would do it, but for greater colouration, speed it up.

That 'Log Rel' button is useful when there's a lot of gain reduction showing on the meters, as engaging the process can help restore a little of the punch to transients by accelerating the release envelope. It's a useful option to have, if not something you'll use all the time.

I tried the RNLA on a variety of sources, including vocals, bass, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, drum machines and analogue synths. I also did a lot of A/B comparisons with my RNC1773. I liked the RNLA on bass and acoustic sources where it gives the sound greater thickness. It's often only a subtle difference, but nicer for it. It also gives a signal a little extra presence, making it sound more three-dimensional. This isn't always what you want – sometimes the RNC's unaffected compression is preferable.

Conclusion

If it's neutral compression you're after, the RNLA is probably not for you. But if you're looking for something with character – call it classic, vintage, whatever – the RNLA does a fine job of enhancing your sound. It's hard to make compression sexy, but the RNLA comes close. Maybe that's the reason behind those red knobs. FM

ON THE DVD

Three common analogue sources (bass, acoustic guitar, DI electric guitar) recorded first dry, then through the RNLA using appropriate settings for each source.

VERDICT RNLA7239

BUILD QUALITY
VALUE FOR MONEY
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
QUALITY OF RESULTS
2 4 6 8 10

The RNLA is a great option to have in your rack, and at this price, it's hard to say no.