

VERTIGO SOUND VSC-2

If compressors are like cars, the Vertigo is the Lamborghini of gain reduction: fast, fabulous and pricey.

Text: Andy Stewart



► A lot of gear comes across my desk these days and occasionally it can all get a little samey. As a certain type of product becomes popular with end-users, manufacturers jump in to take economic advantage of the situation by producing their own 'version'. One recent example of this has been the resurgence in popularity of the ribbon mic. But once in a while something exceptional hits the market that stands out from the crowd like a beacon, a product that doesn't particularly conform to any trends or movements. The Vertigo VSC-2 stereo compressor is one such product.

The VSC-2 is basically one of the best stereo mix bus compressors I've ever heard... end of story. From here on in consider these words as filler, pulp... waffle even. I'm really tempted just to sign off now and leave the rest of the page blank, but I s'pose I must persist.

I've used lots of compressors over the years but this thing is right up there in the Cirrus clouds... where the air is thin and... uncompressed. Everything about this beast, from its sound to its striking blue regalia and black & white VUs, is viscerally impressive. I am already cursing that we ever met.

FROM PLACE CALLED VERTIGO

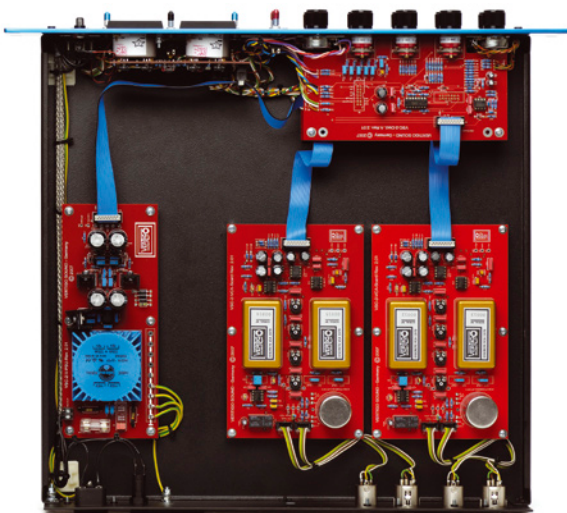
The VSC-2 is a VCA stereo compressor of the highest calibre. It's one of those rare devices that you really could use on just about anything. Across the mix bus in particular, where the Vertigo seems destined to reside, it's simply awesome. Songs just seem to 'come to life' through this thing, and in all the right ways. Signals can be tickled, made bigger, hammered or drilled without ever feeling like you're doing something 'wrong'. Of course, the compressor won't make decisions for you about what settings to adopt to perform a particular task, but neither is it fiddly, confusing or unforgiving.

You can achieve all kinds of results through the Vertigo, from artefact-laden pumping and pounding to super clean stereo mixes. It can sound beautifully transparent strapped across a vocal with a relatively slow attack and fast release one minute, and be screwing a bass part to the floor the next, all without any apparent loss of fidelity. Nothing ever seems to get dull or lifeless through this compressor. The harmonic distortion it generates at certain higher and harder settings is tasteful and often highly desirable. On drum groups it can be everything from clear and controlled to truly manic, generating apparently pounding rooms from lacklustre takes. The Vertigo, I can confidently report, is no one-trick pony.

SIMPLE CONTROLS

The VSC-2 is setup very simply, and in classic fashion. There are no overly complicated options or endless variables. Each set of controls (one above the other) runs clearly from left to right. Starting with Threshold on the left, this rotary control employs a non-linear law, allowing what's described by the designers as 'zoom' or 'focused' fine-tuning between -6 and +6dB. This allows the control a broader range of movement in the area deemed most likely to be used by an engineer in a properly calibrated studio environment. Like all the pots and rotary switches on the Vertigo, the Threshold knob is sturdy and definitive to the touch. Following across the unit are stepped Ratio, Attack and Release controls and variable Make-up gain. The Make-up gain knob is also 'focused' in similar fashion to the Threshold control, allowing finer tuning of the area between zero and +6dB.

Other controls on the unit involve individual channel in/out toggle switches, which feel so good you can fantasise about being on a moon mission as you flick them in and out. There are also two three-way sidechain filter switches that kick in gently and reduce the compressor's sensitivity at either 60 or 90Hz, for whenever you find the compressor over-reacting to bass frequencies in kick drums or bass guitars, for instance (the middle position switches the filter off). These work really well.



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There are only two other switches: the first links the two compressors in 'Stereo' mode (at which time the upper controls take command of the ship and row 'B' is switched off) while the other solitary black switch simply turns the unit on and off. The only remaining components in plain view of gawkers and passers by are two fabulous and unusually backlit gain reduction VU meters. All the scaling, logo and needle are white on a black background, and the illumination is also a fairly stark white. The effect of this is striking; the meters themselves are accurate, nimble and super sensitive. Curiously, these VUs are also controlled by a non-linear circuit, which allows the meters to express greater detail of the gain reduction performance between zero and -6dB, where most compression takes place.

ACTION PACKED PERFORMANCE

As is nearly always the case with products I review, the VSC-2 was immediately put to work in a real-world mixing situation, in this instance across a mix bus, without so much as a sideways glance at the manual. The results were instantly gratifying, with gain reduction up to three, four and five dB seemingly falling away like water off a duck's back. Needless to say I was more than impressed. Indeed, based on what I was hearing through my Questeds, I was initially concerned that the meters might in fact be lying to me about the levels of reduction the unit was providing. But it wasn't the case. The VSC-2 was simply locking down my mix with the flair of Fred Astaire and the biceps of Hulk Hogan. 'This compressor is the real deal' I thought, not just a pretty face.

TIPTOE INTO COMPRESSION

One of the ratio settings I initially worked with on this blue marvel is simply labelled 'Soft' on the faceplate. It's the furthest left position on the six-way control; the other ratios being 2, 4, 8 and 10:1, with the final position labelled 'Brick' (at 40:1). 'That's cool' I thought, 'I really only want to give this mix a very light touch up so Soft is probably the way to go'. So without knowing what 'soft' was all about, I set about mixing a song, with the attack set slow and the release relatively fast, to allow transients to pass through with little or no acknowledgement from the compressor. It sounded great; the song appeared full and clear and the left/right balance remained stable, with good depth of image and impressive tonal balance. The sidechain filters were disengaged and the gain reduction meters flickered once in a while to a maximum of around 2dB.

But of course, three hours later, the gain reduction was metering more like three (and occasionally four) dB - too much really, given my initial intentions. As I reached across to increase the threshold slightly - mainly to alleviate my concerns for what I was *seeing* rather than *hearing* - I caught myself, hesitated, then gave the mix a second listen. I instinctively wanted to open up the song a bit, based on what I'd seen, but sonically the mix wasn't really calling out for help at all. It certainly wasn't sounding like an SSL quad compressor at those kind of levels of reduction; things sounded much more open and unmolested. The control was certainly visible in the music, but not in the compression itself. I was intrigued.

It was only later that I found out that 'Soft' was in fact not a ratio of 1.5 to 1 (which I had suspected it to be based on my experience with the awesome Smart C2), but a whole other scenario. The German designers call it (somewhat amusingly) a 'tip-toe' ratio, which increases as the input level rises, from 1:1 up to 8:1. This gives the unit a particularly invisible initial compression effect... indeed, it's the knee you never saw coming.

MAKEUP

Inside the VSC-2 are four custom-built VCAs that the Vertigo designers have manufactured themselves in-house in their single-minded pursuit of excellence. No off-the-shelf VCAs for these guys! This custom component has been affectionately dubbed the '1979' presumably to indicate where their sonic headspace resides. And for anyone who hasn't already looked carefully at the photo, the Vertigo has the words 'Quad Discrete VCA Compressor' emblazoned across it. This should not, however, be taken to mean that the VSC-2 is somehow merely a clone of an SSL console quad bus compressor (which works on four inputs and outputs simultaneously, rather than two), but to simply indicate that there are four VCAs employed in the design: two in the audio path and two in the sidechains. There is nothing 'quad' about the inputs or outputs on the Vertigo.

There are also countless other quality parts on show when you flip the Vertigo's lid, including the highly regarded Jensen (input) and Burr Brown (output) transformers. What's also obvious when you open this baby up is how well it's constructed, and perhaps more obviously, that it's broken up into isolated PCBs for power, audio and processing. This design approach has a two-fold benefit over a single PCB. Firstly, it reduces the potential for unwanted interference to creep between the boards - hum, noise and crosstalk are all reduced, if not eliminated, by this approach - and secondly, the unit is eminently more repairable by a tech.

The result of the design is some pretty impressive technical specifications: crosstalk in excess of 100dB, dynamic range of 115dB, frequency response between 10Hz and 70kHz (+/-3dB) and a power consumption of a paltry 8 Watts.

BOUND FOR GLORY

The Vertigo Sound VSC-2 is one hell of a compressor, and for the price it would want to be. It's versatile and classy, but like an expensive car, it makes no apologies for being well made from high-grade components, well designed and manufactured in Germany, beautifully crafted and great to drive. And fair enough too. You can't expect someone who sets out to design the best compressor on earth, who fills the production model full of ingenuity and quality components, to sling it to you for a slap on the back and a bottle of whiskey. To some extent the price is inevitable with a unit like this. So if price isn't the issue - if *compression* is the issue - then the Vertigo is without doubt a compressor worth owning. When I become Prime Minister, I solemnly swear that every AT reader will be given one via a government subsidy. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$7,532

Contact
Mixmasters Productions
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www.mixmasters.com.au

Pros
Sounds great.
Looks great.
Feels great.
Very impressive as a stereo mix bus compressor.

Cons
Not yet covered by a Government subsidy.

Summary
A compressor of this calibre comes along infrequently. If high-end VCA compression is something you appreciate, the Vertigo is worthy of very serious consideration, particularly if your job involves delivering stereo program to paying clients. While it may seem pricey, the VSC-2's abilities to add that professional touch to mixes more than justifies the expense. It's a tool that would likely provide years of quality service and constitute a classy long-term investment.