

ART

ProVLA II | £249

The ART ProVLA compressor gets a new shiny facelift and an expanded control set. **Robbie Stamp** puts it up against the original to see who's best



WHAT IS IT?

2-channel Vactrol (opto-isolator) valve limiting amplifier (compressor)

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Pleasantly transparent dynamic control
- 2 Well built for the price
- 3 Well implemented metering and leveling

The ART ProVLA has been tucked away in the sub-£300 price bracket for many years without ever being shouted

about, but a quick scan of the many user reviews show they are very much loved. In recognition of this overlooked status, ART have given it a new shiny, gently-curved black front and have expanded the metering and controls.

I have used the original model for years and often take advantage of its reliably transparent qualities for anything from drum overheads to bass DI processing to vocal tracking. So now it's A/B time for the mark II.

Rugged and handsome

This is a well built unit and the cosmetic changes make it feel even sturdier than its predecessor. If the reliability is in any way similar, then this is one dependable compressor (my old faithful has given faultless service for over 10 years). At the front, the two large VU meters remain and have been enhanced with individual trimmers for calibration. These switchable meters

(between input and output levels) are separated by the addition of two rows of eight LEDs for output level, thus providing peak level feedback as well as the RMS scale of the VUs.

The two horizontal rows of LEDs (10) beneath the VUs continue to provide gain reduction metering down to

-30dB, which is the unit's electronic limit. Each channel now has rotary controls for attack and release settings, whereas the old version only had a switch between 'Fast' and 'Auto' for each parameter. The attack ranges from a nippy 0.25 milliseconds to a nice easy going 50 milliseconds. Release ranges from 0.15 seconds to 3 seconds. Though the original two settings worked well over many sources I always hankered for more hands-on control of the time constants, so this is a tick in the 'improvement' box.

Apart from the use of lit buttons for VU meter source and bypass switching, the only other change is that of the stereo linked output gain control. Instead of both channels having independent level controls in stereo linked operation, the channel 1 knob is assigned to overall gain while channel 2 looks after stereo balance. Though this unit is not prone to tilted stereo images, this is nonetheless a better approach to

Optical vs VCA Compression

Compressor/limiter detection circuits come in many flavours: Optical, VCA, FET, Vari-Mu valve and diode bridge. The latter three are less widespread than the two under consideration here, and in the case of Vari-Mu valve, prohibitively more expensive for mass production.

So what's the difference? Broadly speaking VCA designs are known for their precision and excellent electronic

linearity/predictability. They excel at creating a fast, punchy and hard edged response to incoming signals, particularly favoured for drum mixes and clamping down a mix-buss. This is not to say a VCA design cannot display smooth characteristics, but this is where the optical detector topology has earned its reputation. The opto-isolator consists of a light emitting diode (LED) and a photocell in a

sealed unit, with the latter tracking the former as it increases/decreases brightness with the incoming signal. Due to the nature of light emission and the time response curves of a photocell, attack and release are generally slower and tend towards a curved response plot. For this reason optical compressors are often favoured for acoustic instruments, bass guitars and vocals.





output gain control. All the pots for the controls are now lightly stepped which I find improves threshold setting at high compression ratios as well as fine output gain trimming.

The rear connectivity remains the same as before with XLR and 1/4" TRS

critical to prevent over-pumping of the audio. This is not an 'effect' compressor and doesn't impress a characteristic tonal stamp on the source material and so, it is best suited to more workhorse duties. One improvement that could be made to this unit is the inclusion of a

doesn't exhibit the 'valve' sound in any appreciable way, and its overdriven behaviour is more solid-state or 'clean' in tonality. The upside of this is that the noise floor is very low and there is no audible harmonic distortion of the source signal. The unit is now

true-bypass so that, even when it is off, the input is passed straight to the output in bypass mode, meaning it can be left in a processing chain when not in

It's capable of some heavy compression too and doesn't break-up or jitter, like some VCA designs

jacks for the two inputs and outputs. Though only one of the input sockets can be used at once on either channel, both outputs can be used simultaneously, which is a neat feature for monitoring and for parallel processing uses.

Well behaved

As an opto-isolator controlled compressor (see the *Optical vs VCA Compression* box for a brief explanation) the ProVLA II compresses/limits most sources in a relatively transparent way. It is capable of some very heavy compression too and doesn't break-up or jitter as with cheap VCA designs, but the attack and release controls become

sidechain filter to trim out low frequencies from the control circuit as it is very sensitive to bass content, which makes it less suited to mix-buss usage.

The ProVLA works best with single sound sources (instruments, vocals, drum overheads, synthesizers) and can control a dynamic pleasingly when tracking, without colouring the source.

Though there is plenty of headroom (as well as having a switchable +4dBu/-10dBv sensitivity for the I/O) and make-up gain available, the mkII is at least 6dB quieter than my old model. This may be some quirk or it may be intentional, but I prefer the higher gain operation of the predecessor. Unlike more expensive designs the ProVLA II

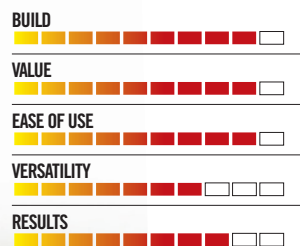
use without having any appreciable effect on the signal. This is a simple yet rare addition, and a welcome one.

Good breeding

Overall the ProVLA II is better looking and even more robust than its ancestor with a lot of worthy additions to the metering and controls. There is no noticeable change in the sound or operational character, both of which are easily beyond the price bracket, and it remains a highly dependable audio tool. Though I'm not a fan of this compressor in the mix-buss, I would recommend it for tracking/sub-mixing usage over many more expensive possibilities.

That said, a sidechain/detector filter would really improve its range of uses. I have also found ART customer service to be excellent, so in the unlikely event of a failure you won't be left stranded. A transparent and reliable compressor. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



Dynamic control is rarely this good for the price. Effortless, smooth and clear sound.

SPECS

Inputs: 2x XLR and 1/4" TRS jack
Outputs: 2x XLR and 1/4" TRS jack
Attack Time: 0.25ms to 50ms (variable)
Release Time: 150ms to 3s (variable)
Ratios: 2:1 to 20:1 (variable)
Max Attenuation: 30dB
Output Gain: +20dB max
Frequency Response: 10Hz to 100kHz (+/-0.5dB)
Dynamic Range: >100dB (20Hz-20kHz)
THD @ 1dBm: <0.1% (typical)
Equivalent Input Noise: -99dBu, A weighted (+4dBu mode), -107dBu, A weighted (-10dBV)
Input Impedance: 10K Ohms
Valve type: 12AT7
Dimensions: 483 x 233 x 89mm
Weight: 4.76kg

ALTERNATIVES



TL Audio Ivory 5021 MkII

£586

Twice the retail price (though the Mk I can be picked up second-hand for closer to £300), but a lot more 'valve' in sound. The 5021 also has a sidechain facility and switchable hard/soft-knee operation.

tlaudio.co.uk



Behringer T-1952 Tube Composer

£133

Considerably cheaper as well as having sidechain, an expander/gate and a 'tube warmth' control. Not necessarily as smooth/transparent and well behind on build quality/reliability/reputation.

behringer.com



FMR RNC 1773

£199

Though not possessing any valves, this solid-state design has an even better reputation for smooth compression and, again, it has a sidechain facility. It may be small and with only unbalanced operation, it is a contender, for sheer value.

fmradio.com

