

# Weiss A1

Better known for its digital processors that are standards in mastering rooms around the world, a mic pre from the Swiss company has got to warrant a listen.

**JON THORNTON** fiddles around.



The A1 from Weiss is a single channel microphone preamp in a 500 series form factor — something that might raise eyebrows in some quarters for a couple of reasons. First, because to date the Swiss company's products are more often found in high-end mastering applications than 500 series racks, and second because their pedigree and product line has thus far been rooted very firmly in the digital domain for EQ and dynamics processing. So a budget (well, relatively speaking for Weiss UK£1200 + VAT) predominantly analogue unit is something of a departure. I think I'm right in saying that it's the first Weiss product that doesn't have digital I-O of any description.

It's a beautifully constructed module that feels exceptionally solid in use, and looks every bit a part of the Weiss product family with its sensibly laid out controls and clear, understated labelling on a white background. The unit's signal path can be broken down into three main areas: the preamplifier; a built-in de-esser; and an output line driver.

The centrepiece of the preamplifier section is a switched gain control, which gives coarse gain settings of between +15 and +60dB in 3dB steps. Three miniature toggle switches allow a -24dB pad (for line level operation), phantom power and high pass filter to be selected. The HPF can be selected to operate with a -3dB down point at 40Hz or 80Hz. The preamp itself is a discrete Class-A design with a (Lundahl) transformer on the input.

Jumping to the bottom of the module, a continuously variable pot sets the module's output level. It's slightly unusual as although it allows a further 12dB of gain, turned all the way to the left it fully attenuates the output, while the non-detented 12 o'clock position is unity gain. This caught me out at first, as without careful inspection you assume that it simply acts as a fine gain/trim and wonder why there's no output at its minimum setting. Another toggle switch in this section allows the polarity of the (transformer balanced) output to be reversed. Weiss quotes a maximum output level of +27dBu with a high current output, so driving long lines shouldn't prove problematic.

Metering is provided by three LEDs in the preamp section and a further LED in the output section. Signal present (-19dBu) and nominal (+1dBu) RMS levels post the HPF light up a green and amber LED respectively in the preamp section, while a peak sensing red LED indicates an overload condition (+18dBu) at any point in the preamp section. A further peak-sensing indicator in the output stage indicates the onset of clipping here at +24dBu. It's a reasonably useful set-up, although personally I'd like to see the signal present threshold set just a little bit lower.

Sonically, the overwhelming impression of the preamp is that it's wonderfully quiet — even at high gain levels on quite sources. There's also plenty of headroom here, and it never ever sounds strained or working on the limit. Tonally it falls into the camp of neutral and solid. A swift comparison between the A1, a Focusrite ISA220 and a Neve 1073 shows it to sound a little chunkier and more solid sounding than the Focusrite, but without the slightly murky sound of the 1073 when driven harder.

Sandwiched by the preamp and output stage is the rather unusual narrow-band de-esser — unusual not because of what it does but because of how it does it. That Weiss heritage makes an appearance here as it's a hybrid design, with the audio path being analogue, and the sidechain being digital. This allows the gain control element of the de-esser to be performed by a high resolution 'multiplying D-AC' or MD-AC. The controls for the de-esser are conventional enough — you get centre frequency and bandwidth controls that pinpoint the area and extent of the offending sibilance

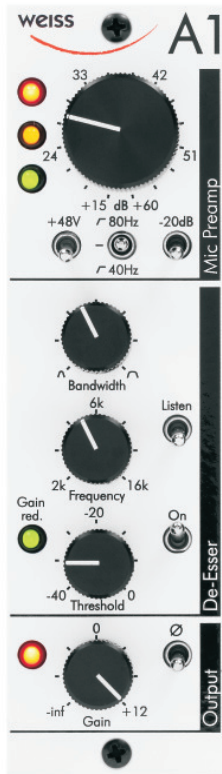
or other resonance, and a threshold control that effectively determines the amount of gain reduction applied to it. A solitary green LED indicates de-essing activity, while a Listen toggle switch monitors the sidechain audio in the main output. A final toggle switch puts the process in or out of circuit.

It's a deceptively powerful bit of processing, and more akin to something like a BSS DPR901 dynamic EQ (*One of my personal favourites. Ed*) than a simple de-esser in the way it behaves. For taming slightly sibilant female vocals it works extremely naturally, and as long as you don't go overboard with the threshold level it does the job transparently without dulling the sound. But I found it equally adept at dealing with honks and rings in acoustic guitar —

helped by the fact that the centre frequency range extends between 2kHz and 16kHz. For those who want to tweak things a little more, a DIP switch on the underside of the module allow the de-esser's ratio, attack and release time to be altered. Default factory settings give a ratio of 3:1, attack time of 400 microseconds and release time of 30 milliseconds but there is a choice of four attack and release times and eight ratios to be had here with varying DIP switch permutations. It's just slightly fiddly to compare different settings as the unit has to be removed from the chassis to access the switches.

For stereo operation, some degree of stereo linking is afforded by linking two modules together with a multipin header. With a little patience this can be inserted through a slot into a socket on the right hand side of one unit, and then mated through a slot to a socket on the left hand side of another unit. For mechanical stability, the two units are then strapped together with metal couplers. This arrangement ensures that equal gain reduction is applied to both channels, but doesn't automatically link other controls or settings.

In summary, the A1 is a very accomplished performer. Simply as a mic preamplifier it more than holds its own against pretty much anything else in the 500 series sector, albeit at a price that's firmly at the top end of the spectrum and that might make it seem uncompetitive. But its secret weapon is that de-esser, which even in this plug-in-tastic era is sure to gain many friends.



**PROS** Terrifically quiet; masses of headroom; solid, detailed sound; powerful, flexible and easy to use de-esser.

**CONS** Pricey for the 500 series sector; adjusting de-esser time constants and ratios is a little fiddly.

**EXTRAS** The DAC2 is a high performance stereo Firewire-based digital to analogue and digital to digital converter for use as a standalone or in conjunction with a computer. The DAC2

supports the following conversions: Firewire to analogue; AES-EBU to analogue; Firewire to AES-EBU; and AES-EBU to Firewire.

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