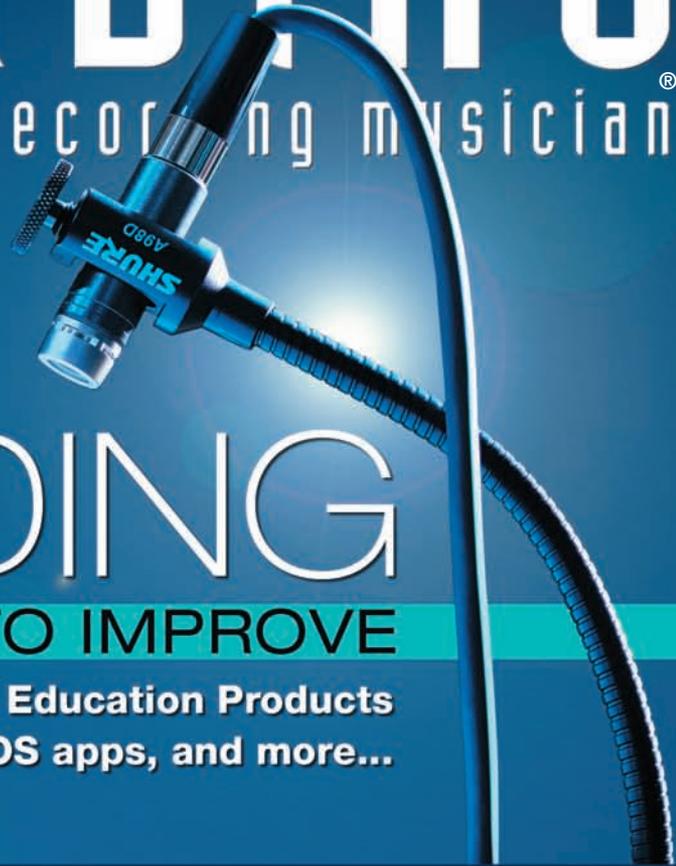


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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Slate Pro Audio Dragon Dynamic Processor



Interesting control options highlight this new dynamics processor from a new maker

Steven Slate wears many hats. First known for the Steven Slate Drums libraries, he has branched into audio software with Slate Digital (we reviewed his excellent Trigger Platinum drum replacement program in our April 2011 issue) and also into hardware with the new Slate Pro Audio line. Its first product is the Dragon dynamic processor, under review today.

The Dragon is a two-space single-channel unit built around a classic FET compression circuit. Internally it makes use of pro-audio-grade components with a transformer-balanced input and a transformer-balanced class A output path. While visually it's slightly reminiscent of the elder statesman of FET compressors, the UREI 1176, the Dragon is so jam-packed with controls and features that the close similarities begin and end with the large VU meter!

Dragonology

This 12 lb. beast is clothed in all black armor with a gloss-coated oriental dragon graphic sprawled out across its faceplate. While product photographs make this graphic appear grayish and garish, in person it is more of an illusion visible only in direct light... very classy.

Each pot and switch is of very high quality, with nice resistance and glide. Unlike the sometimes flimsy FET compressors of old, this unit is built for battle. Input and output are on balanced XLR and 1/4" TRS connections on the back, plus a pair of 1/4" jacks for stereo linking two units.

Dragon control

In front, the unit has an input knob, a 5-position ratio switch (2:1, 4:1, 8:1, 12:1, 20:1), Attack and Release controls with 20 to 800 microseconds of attack time and

50 milliseconds to 1.1 seconds of release time, plus an output/make-up gain knob.

Then there is a by-pass switch and a switch to engage the requisite "all buttons in" mode found on an 1176, and a Link switch. Besides linking together the threshold reaction of a pair of Dragons, the Link switch has the hidden feature of halving the ratio values when used on a single mono unit.

If this was all, you'd have a very clean, smooth, modern sounding FET compressor that handles gentle 2:1 (1:1 in mono link mode) compression all the way to a slamming 20:1. But this is just the start. The real key to the Dragon lies in the flexibility found in the rest of its feature set.

Dragon tricks

The Dragon offers two controls that were a rarity until maybe five years ago, and are now more common in new designs. The first is a highpass filter that lets you control how much low-frequency information reaches the unit's detector. This adds transparency in stereo-linked operation and can help to avoid "pumping". On the Dragon you get settings of 80, 100, 120, 160 and 200 Hz. The second is a Mix knob. Just like the ones found in most effects processors, this simple control allows the user to dial the compression in and out of the dry signal and essentially perform parallel or "New York style" compression all in one box.

Again, if the Dragon stopped here it would be a useful, handy great-sounding tool, but the next section offers some unique features, many of which I have never encountered in a stand-alone analog compressor before—a set of unique tone-control options.

The first part of the Dragon's tonal shaping journey starts with a toggle switch

labeled Vintage. When flipped, it engages an additional output circuit designed to add back harmonics, the grit, feel and what Slate calls the "attitude" found in vintage compressors. Aside from a thicker harmonic tone, this feature also causes the attack and release to be more sensitive and very subject to minute adjustments.

Next up are three Character switches. When engaged, each of these boosts a particular part of the frequency spectrum, essentially high, mid and low, and thrusts them forward in the mix. The high frequency is called Sheen and according to Slate is meant to emulate the forward, airy highs found in the old photo-optical cell compressors like a UREI LA3A. Next is Bite, and while that sounds like it should be a "take your face off" high-frequency setting, it is more of a solid hi-mid tone that adds punch and crack to snare drum, guitars and even adds in a nice string presence on bass guitar.

Then there is Boom. Its name alone should be all you need to know, and it lives up to it in spades, with a low oomph all the way down to 40 Hz. Dull kick drum or bass? Not any more. One warning from the Dragon's manual is that you really need a sub to appreciate what this control does to the low end, and I concur. While it definitely adds an almost magical fullness to the low end, you may not hear it on typical full range monitors and it could easily be adding way more bass than many computer/car speakers can comfortably handle.

The last feature of the Dragon is a saturation knob. With three available choices, this control adds harmonic distortion from slight thickening all the way to pleasant subtle fuzz. While this feature is similar to the distortion settings found on an Empirical Labs Distressor, they are to my ear a tad less aggressive with a broader range. As with

the Distressor, this is not an Ibanez Tube Screamer or BOSS DS-1 style distortion, it's more of a warm fuzzy that is reminiscent of machine-head distortion and tape saturation, and I quickly became addicted to it!

How To Train Your Dragon

If you are familiar with using 1176-style compressors, driving the Dragon can be fairly straightforward. However, getting comfortable with its wider range of possibilities will take some time and experimentation, and it's these nuances that make this unit sing.

All over the gear message boards the Dragon is often labeled as an "1176 on steroids". I would strongly disagree! I think this adds an unrealistic expectation and actually sells the unit short. I did not start to fully enjoy this unit until I *stopped* trying to make it be a drop-in replacement for my 1176LN. The Dragon covers a much wider range of extremes and can be as subtle or aggressive as you want it to be. While it manages to sidle up to the sound of many well-known compressors, it stops short of simple emulation and nicely does its own thing.

So what does the Dragon sound like? Interestingly, even with its tone shaping in action, the Dragon retains a classic smooth natural sound. The only time this changes is when the Vintage switch is engaged, and then the Dragon becomes grittier and obscures the source a bit more. At times I found that the Vintage setting tries a bit too hard, but I really liked it on electric guitars and snare drum.

Now you wonder "What does it sound like on drums, or bass or vocals, etc.?" Sometimes great, and sometimes you may reach for something else. This is not meant as a cop-out; the Dragon is very much like the ubiquitous 1176 in that there is no source I would hesitate to use it on, although there are times when a different comp was a better choice. Not a slam on the Dragon, just reality.

That being said, there are standout sources. They include:

- Kick drum with the Boom setting engaged for added rumble, and Bite engaged for beater attack, dial back in about 20% dry signal, and you have a natural but massive-sounding classic rock kick.
- Electric guitars were nice with a heavy dose of 8:1 compression and Bite, and then about 20–30% dry rolled back in.
- It makes a great and aggressive mono drum-mic smasher at 20:1 and full saturation, and on the flip side as a subtle room mic compressor I found my favorite use of the Sheen setting where it added a nice gentle air.
- Bass guitar was my favorite use of the Dragon, and not just one setting; here it excelled in a variety of ways, especially with Bite and/or Boom.
- Likewise it offers a virtual smorgasbord of choices when it comes to vocals.

Anything else?

I would have loved a second unit to try it on the 2-bus, but I will guess that at its low 2:1 setting, just tickling the gain reduction and maybe a hint of saturation, these could be one of those rare FETs you would use on the 2-bus.

My only complaints would be that there were times I wished that Bite and Sheen were adjustable. For me they either worked or they did not, especially Sheen, which I typically found too bright for my tastes.

Other than that, with the exception of the Distressor, this box is all but unrivaled in the sheer scope of its sonic breadth and versatility. As such, the Dragon is a fantastic choice for "my one and only compressor", and that's a rare thing in today's world of choice upon choice. The only big downside is that once you get one of them, you will quickly have to budget for a second. ➤

Price: \$1899.99 street • **More from:** Slate Pro Audio, www.slateproaudio.com.

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