

Field Test: Audient Black Series Vertical Rack

Processor

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SILKY-SOUNDING MODULAR UNIT WITH EQS, PREAMPS, COMPS OR ADCS

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Audient name, it originated with the founding partners of the DDA console line — David Dearden and Gareth Davies. Carrying this legacy of analog mixers, Audient was formed in 1997, and currently produces the ASP8024 and ACS8024 recording consoles, and additional outboard gear, as well as the new Black Series modular processors.

The Black Series units offer the recording and mix engineer some interesting new possibilities for tone shaping at the point of capture and during mixdown using discrete, Class-A, transformer-coupled circuitry.



CONFIGURE TO YOUR LIKING

Much like the vertical rack systems from API, Tonelux and A-Designs, Audient's Black Series components can be configured for specific applications. My test unit comprised the Black Rack BR-10, which can house up to 10 modules; two Black Pre mic preamplifiers; two Black Comp compressors; two Black EQ 4-band equalizers; one Black ADC A/D converter; and the PSU, a very hefty, 2U rackmount external power supply. A master word clock generator is also available. The 4U system is physically larger than the API form factor; the modules are wider and taller. This extra real estate gives Audient more room to drop in a few more features.

The BR-10's mechanical design element is quite clever. Each "bay" has two XLR inputs and an XLR output on the back for whichever module is inserted in that bay, regardless of the given module's I/O configuration. A diagram at the bottom of the rack illustrates how these connectors relate to a given module. The rack also allows the internal distribution of word clock, if you happen to use more than one ADC module. (A total of 10 ADC modules can be installed.) If you use more than one compressor, simply mount them side-by-side, and the internal wiring takes care of running them as a linked stereo pair, LCRS, 5.1, 6.1 or even as a 7.1 multichannel configuration. Slots 1 through 8 provide this linking, while slots 9 and 10 use a separate bus. You also get two 25-pin D-sub connectors for wiring inputs and outputs to the first eight modules.

FADE TO BLACK

I ran all four modules through their paces on several different tracking sessions. Starting with the Black Pre, you'll find all the usual features, plus some interesting additions: 48-volt phantom power, phase, mic gain (in 10dB steps), line gain (in 5dB steps), gain trim (which can be fine-tuned by 10 dB via a variable pot), variable highpass filter (30 to 225 Hz), DI input and a really nice 12-segment LED that measures analog output level relative to 0 dBFS (+18 dBu).

The HMX control is something you don't see every day. It's described by Audient as "another solid-state triode gain stage configured to enhance low-order harmonics." I used the HMX control on male voice, saxophone, percussion and guitar, and found that its performance depends on the source material. It sounded great on the sax, producing a rich, thick quality that separated it from the other instruments. On the other hand, this particular male vocal sounded a bit muddy with the HMX in the circuit.

Using the Black Pre was a joy. It has precise controls and an accurate meter, and offers plenty of gain, even with a ribbon mic. This preamp sounded exceptional when paired with a Shure SM7, AKG C 451B and a beyerdynamic M160N — clean, with no apparent added noise floor. I also used it with two Blue Microphones Bottle mics employed as drum overheads. Its realism, punch and transparency were remarkable.

IT'S CRUNCH TIME

The Black Comp works a little differently from most conventional compressors. There is an input attenuation and output gain control that, when used together, provide your threshold settings; there is no conventional threshold control. Audient states that the Comp has a fixed threshold of -20 dBu; with a higher input attenuation, you effectively have a higher effective threshold. This seems to work just fine, but I had to get used to it. A VU meter shows output level or gain reduction, and it worked just as it should. The Black Comp's controls perform as you'd expect and were easy to use with attack, release and ratio, each offering six variations.

The Black Comp sounded exceptional on the Blue Bottle overheads. I squished the signal *way* down and then brought it up against the rest of the kit, and it produced cannons in the room — huge. Then I pulled all of the drum kit mics out of the mix and just listened to the overheads, using a much more conservative setting on the Comp, and it sounded as if that's all that was necessary.

The Overcomp button applies a preset compressor to the signal before the main compressor. This sounded best when crunching down high-gain guitars and on the Blue Bottles, but it wasn't so subtle on the sax or acoustic guitars. The Smooth button uses average and peak detection simultaneously. This worked well on acoustic guitars, taking the edge off the pick attacks (you know how those coated strings can get) while keeping the body forward in the mix.

TONE SCULPTING

I found the Black EQ to be very musical and its preset buttons — Air, Overtone and Glo — to be quite usable. To start off, the high shelf has a selectable shelving point of 8 kHz or Air, ± 15 dB. The Air setting gave a high-frequency sheen to vocals, cymbals, saxophones and acoustic guitars. I found that I was using it quite sparingly and usually switched over to the 8kHz setting, with just a touch of boost to add a little sparkle or cut to alleviate string noise. The low-frequency shelf has ± 15 dB of gain at selectable shelf points of 100 Hz and 50 Hz. The Overtone preset adds "harmonic enhancement" to the low-frequency band, and it's proportional to the amount of LF cut/boost. This added just enough body to a baritone sax, but it was too much for acoustic guitar. Glo boosts and then compresses just the low end. This added percussion to an otherwise snappy kick drum. When I applied Glo, the drum sounded as if it were moving more air. Glo was not the right choice for the male vocalist, however. That's the beauty of this EQ: It's flexible and offers lots of choices for many different sources.

The Presence control is a fixed-bell curve, with center points at 1.5 or 3 kHz. Gain range is ± 15 dB. The Presence Shape allows you to have either a broadband boost and narrow cut (the out position) or cut/boost over the same bandwidth (the in position). I found the Presence controls to be effective in popping out vocals and acoustic guitars, and dipping out some annoying high-gain guitars.

CONVERT ME

The ADC module is a great idea that is well executed. This is the piece of the puzzle that makes this rack system a great front end for your DAW, whether you have a portable or studio rig. Using an AKM 24-bit/192kHz chipset, you get the option of internal clocking, clocking off the optional master clock module or external clocking via the BNC input on the back. A 12-segment LED ladder on the front panel shows metering, along with an LED indicator for your selected sample rate. A Lock indicator rounds out your light show.

The ADC's back panel has L/R XLR inputs, along with an AES XLR output. There are additional optical, co-ax and AES/EBU outputs on the front. These converters sounded very natural during several recordings of female and male vocals, and acoustic guitar (mostly at 88.2 kHz) using a Neumann KMS 105 and an Apex 460 through the Black Series' signal chain into Pro Tools. There were no spikes or resonances at any given frequency, and no apparent "edge" in the spectrum's upper range. If anything, the ADC projects a feeling of warmth and power, particularly in the acoustic guitar's bass frequencies.

IN MY DREAMS

I'm dreaming of having three Black Series racks: one loaded with eight mic pre's, another with eight EQs and two ADCs, and another with eight compressors and two ADCs. This would provide six channels of 5.1 surround sound tracking with two extra preamps for spot mics and eight digital outputs. Each Black Series rack unit measures six rackspaces (including the two-rackspace PSU), which would make for a bit of a load-in on a remote project, but the effort would be well worth it. For an easy load-in, I would probably put this "dream rig" into three separate 6U racks.

I would recommend any individual Black Series component by itself, but as a system it's fantastic as the front end of a DAW. The mic pre's are natural, the EQ is quite musical, the compressor is variable from transparent to "squish" settings, and the ADC sounds smooth. This is a quality kit with lots of flexibility and a great sound. Prices: BR-10, \$950; Black Pre/EQ/Comp/ADC, \$700 each.

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