



CharterOak SCL-1

CharterOak claim this to be one of the most transparent buss compressors available. Mark Cousins takes a closer look.

KEY FEATURES

- Discrete Compressor Limiter
- Intelligent release characteristics
- Static and dynamic thresholds
- Auto gain makeup
- Dual and stereo operation

SCL-1 DISCRETE COMPRESSOR LIMITER

Manufacturer **CharterOak**

Price **£2,274**

Contact **ASAP Europe 0207 231 9661**

Web **www.charteroakacoustics.com**

You only need to look at the variety of different designs of compressor to realise that there's more than one way of controlling the dynamic

range of a recording. While some engineers chase after 'character' compression, others realise the significant benefits of a transparent compressor – a sonic tool able to massage the dynamics of a recording without imposing a noticeable sonic fingerprint. However, achieving true transparency – without unwanted pumping artefacts, HF reduction, etc – isn't an easy task, and in many cases demands a pricey compressor.

CharterOak's SCL-1 Discrete Compressor Limiter is primarily designed as a buss compressor, making it highly suitable for both mixing and mastering applications. Throughout the SCL-1's design CharterOak have placed a real emphasis on the unit's transparency, using a range of innovative techniques to ensure the programme material retains as much of its pre-compressed sound as possible, yet still delivers plenty of efficient gain control.

On the busses

The SCL-1 works as both a two-channel

stereo compressor and, using the dual switch, as two mono compressors should you want to use it on individual tracks in the mix. On first impression the controls seem to be largely familiar, with input and output levels, dynamic threshold, slope (or ratio, in other words), and attack and release time. However, one unique feature of the SCL-1 is the static threshold, which in essence, seems to enable you to 'calibrate' the SCL-1 to various different knee settings so as to change the response of the compressor.

As you'd expect, the immediate quality of the SCL-1 is one of absolute transparency. As hard as you push it (even using as much as 20dB of gain reduction!), it's difficult to make the output sound in any way 'distressed'. All the characteristics of over-compression are conspicuous by their absence – the high-end remains clean and bright, transient details preserved, and any unwanted pumping artefacts kept to an absolute minimum. Indeed, to the untrained ear you could almost be forgiven for thinking that the SCL-1 had been left in its bypass mode, despite the needle hovering around 5-7dB of gain reduction, or more.

An invisible touch

Looked at more closely, you start to see how the SCL-1 achieves such impressive results. Firstly, the release seems to intelligently respond to the averaged signal levels, reducing any unwanted returns to unity gain (0dB, in

other words) in-between notes, and hence keeping any breathing artefacts to a minimum. This subtle response works wonders at controlling an overarching dynamic – gently reducing levels in louder passages of music while slowly 'opening up' during quieter segments of the track. Secondly, the SCL-1 features an auto gain-makeup, so that the output level stays consistent even as you apply greater amounts of gain reduction. As a result, you get to hear how the sound changes in response to altering the threshold and ratio rather than having to juggle with the output levels to assess the compression in context.

Despite its transparency, the SCL-1 is still a highly effective gain control device. On delicate acoustic instruments it can perform a marvellous job at holding an instrument's place in the mix, making it sound much more like a controlled performance rather than a deliberately squashed recording. Across the mix, the SCL-1 adds body without being unduly dictated by elements such as a kick drum, and when pushed harder it can still deliver just enough 'mojo' to make a trip through the SCL-1 a worthwhile excursion.

Subtle squash

The SCL-1 is undoubtedly one of the most transparent buss compressors we've encountered. Of course, this sound won't suit every application, and if you actively enjoy a little pumping or a more heavy-handed response you'll want to look at an alternative design. However, for those looking to preserve signal integrity, the SCL-1 is a triumph of forward-thinking design – a versatile and sonic-effective compressor that only makes its presence felt in its ability to control gain, rather than destroy a good mix. **MTF**

SUMMARY

- ### WHY BUY
- A highly transparent sound and performance
 - Automatic gain-makeup
 - Intelligent release characteristics
 - No HF pumping

- ### WALK ON BY
- Too subtle for some people's tastes
 - Two thresholds can be confusing at first

VERDICT

A great choice for sensitive and refined gain control over the mix. But for some the results might be too subtle.

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

MEASURING UP

Good buss compressors aren't cheap, so it would be fair to say that the SCL-1 represents good value for money. Other good transparent buss compressors include the GML 8900 (£4,700), and the Crane Song STC-8 (£3,290). Alternatively, for more character, try the Manley Variable Mu (£3,695) which provides a vintage-style result.