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Summit Audio Everest

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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Summit Audio ECS-410 Everest
Recording Channel Strip

Recording a pristine source? It's all here... and it's all good

The Everest is the culmination and distillation of over 25 years of Summit's compression, eq and mic pre technology into a channel strip of mountainous proportions. (Sorry, but when a company named Summit releases a product called Everest, the mountain jokes are part of the package.)

Meet Everest

Everest is a two-space 19" rackmount unit, hand-built in the USA and offering both tube and solid-state signal paths. It has an all-metal chassis and thick contoured faceplate, uses a hefty internal power supply, and weighs in at a respectable 26 pounds.

Everest contains four audio sections: the Mz-2 Microphone & Instrument Preamp, the Fe-1 Passive Equalizer, the Dc-1 Dual Mode Dynamics (two-mode compressor), and the Db-2 Drive Bus/Output (multi-mode overdrive). A fifth section on the fascia, called TouchPatch, offers control over signal flow.

Each section can be internally patched in series, complete with individual section bypass, or they can be used as four independent units, each with its own individual inputs and outputs on the rear panel. Every output is always live, so you can record a dry take direct from the mic pre or the compressor, etc., alongside Everest's main output buss.

Mz-2 Microphone Preamplifier

The Mz-2 controls on the far left of the fascia consist of a single large input knob, a 10-segment LED input/clip meter, and a vertical row of five small switches that control, from top to bottom, 20 dB pad, polarity, +48 V phantom power, 60 Hz high-pass filter, and the bottom switch offers a choice between a discrete transistor or 12AX7A tube output stage. This Mz-2 section is completed by a 1/4" unbalanced Hi-Z instrument input.

The rear of the Mz2 section contains an XLR microphone input, a TRS insert, a +4 dB XLR output, and a –10 dB TRS output. Other than the Hi-Z input in front and the inserts, all of the connections on the Everest are balanced.

Dc-1 Dual Mode Dynamics Control

To the lower right of the mic pre is the compressor section. This discrete transistor attenuator design is available in two flavors: tight and classic. Tight is a fixed hard knee ratio of 10:1, while the classic softer kneed 3:1 setting is reminiscent of past Summit models.

Additionally, the Dc-1 has a 10-segment gain reduction LED and four knobs for gain (–6 dB to +13.5 dB), threshold, attack (4 ms to 100 ms) and release (50 ms to 1 second). A final 3-way switch chooses between in, bypass, or link mode—used to link the threshold response between a pair of units.

Around the back the compressor has a pair of +4 dB XLR I/O as well as 1/4" TRS link and 1/4" TRS sidechain connections.

Fe-1 Passive 3 Band Equalizer

Above the compressor control section is the 3-band passive, solid-state equalizer known as the Fe-1. Built off of Summit's 4-band FeQ-50 passive EQ, the Fe1 features ±12 dB of inductor-based frequency attenuation. Each band offers six stepped frequency choices:

Low: 33 Hz, 60 Hz, 100 Hz, 150 Hz, 270 Hz, and 390 Hz

Mid: 560 Hz, 630 Hz, 1 kHz, 1.6 kHz, 2.5 kHz and 3.3 kHz

High: 5 kHz, 7.2 kHz, 8.2 kHz, 10 kHz, 12 kHz, and 18 kHz

The mid-band's Q is fixed at roughly 2 octaves, while the low and high bands offer a choice of shelf or peak Q. The Fe-1 also has an in/bypass switch.

On the back, the Fe-1 section has its own pair of +4 dB XLR connectors.

Db-2 Drive Bus Master Output and Drive Section

To the right of the compressor and eq controls we come to the output section, which is both a final output buss and a drive section. A 3-way switch offers a choice between bypass, tube, or solid-state gain staging.

Similar in function to a variable input microphone preamp, this section uses a smaller drive knob to force signal into the circuit controlled by the larger master output knob. A 2-stage LED shows both signal saturation and master-buss clipping. This is completed by a master VU meter for the overall output gain.

The solid-state section is, of course, transistor based, while the tube section uses a pair of 12AX7A vacuum tubes. On the rear the output section has +4 dB XLR I/O as well as a –10 dB TRS 1/4" output.

TouchPatch

The last section, on the far right of the unit's fascia, is called TouchPatch. This section contains 10 small backlit buttons used to configure signal flow. The signal can either start with the mic pre for tracking, or with the compressor or eq for mix down. The drive buss is always last. The eq and compressor can be chained in any order or even left out of the mix.

A setting marked "No Route" turns off all internal routing and allows all sections

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Summit Audio ECS-410 Everest Recording Channel Strip

to function as separate individual audio processors that are accessed solely from their back-panel connections. Each section contains a small orange LED to let you know when and if it is active in a TouchPatch scheme.

In use

The Everest reminds me a little of Millennia Media's SST-1 Origin channel strip, especially due to its dual tube/transistor topography. However, unlike the SST-1 or any other channel strip in its class, the Everest is the first channel strip I have seen that offers flexible internal routing as well as individual outputs for each section.

Minding my pres and Qs

To get a sense of the Everest's mic pre, I compared it side by side with a pair of tube preamps: a Universal Audio SOLO/610 and a BLUE Robbie, as well as a pair of solid-state models: a Millennia HV-3 and a Chandler TG-2.

Fidelity-wise it holds its own with the lot, but the Everest has a low-mid fullness that stands out compared to the other units, and did take a bit of getting used to.

The solid-state side, as you would expect, is the cleaner and a touch more open of the two, not as sparkly as my HV-3, but still clear in the highs. While not quite as punchy as my TG-2, it was just as solid with the above-mentioned low-mid vibe.

The tube stage builds on that by adding a beefiness to the sound, that is rich without being as imposing or thick as the 610, and it actually made my Robbie, which I have always thought of as a clean open pre, seem a touch soft in the highs. Wow.

Although the eq has only three bands it is very successful as a tone shaper and broad sculpting tool. Even significant boosts yield musical results that add character without being overbearing. I do wish this section had a highpass filter, or lowpass for that matter; I know there is a fixed filter in the preamp section, but a second one for use in mixdown situations would have been handy.

Squish, squash, and slam

Everest's compressor is one of the real strengths of the unit, in keeping with Summit's previous compressor lineage. Classic mode is great for vocals, bass and keyboards, while the heavier-handed tight mode was useful for smacking snare drums and popping guitar solos out of a mix. It even tamed a runaway hi-hat with ease.

Overall, this compressor is happiest and sounds the best when you run it hard with around 8–12 dB of gain reduction.

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Drive-by shouting

The real sonic magic of the Everest lies in its output section. Coupling it with any of the other three sections really takes them to a whole new sonic level.

Like most variable mic pres, when you think "drive", it's best to think of harmonic richness and grit vs. guitar-pedal overdrive, although it can do a touch of that. In conjunction with the preamp it thickens and adds presence, giving vocals a pleasant edge and even adding girth to an acoustic guitar.

Similarly it takes the Hi-Z instrument input from being just another DI to something much more sonically versatile. The tube stage excels on DI'd bass and it is now my new favorite recording chain for my vintage Rhodes 73. As such Everest also makes for a great and flexible instrument preamp in live situations.

On its own the drive section can be used effectively to add harmonic richness and vibe to otherwise sterile plug-ins and soft synths, as well as other dull in-the-box tracks. Also, pushing the Everest into "all lights clipping" yields a great "Trent Reznor meets Black Dog" distortion that is a cool effect on direct-injected guitars, synths, and even vocals, especially when using the transistor stage.

Finally, TouchPatch works easily and clearly; as the heart of the Everest it allows you to audition various routing schemes to help make sonic decisions quickly.

Are you ready to ascend to the Summit?

Bottom line: Everest is a malleable, monster tone shaper. Unlike similar devices that have one sonic tone (not that that's bad), the Everest offers a wide sonic palette, all with detailed control and top-notch fidelity.

It's hard to make it sound bad, and rescuing anemic sources in a mix is one of its specialties. Very few units on the market offer this broad of a sonic range with this level of patching versatility and of this build quality, period! I love that I can dial in sounds quickly; sure I could patch in and choose three or four pieces of outboard gear, but with the Everest you can plug in, choose your patch routing, and dial in the perfect sound in no time. And I love that it offers a sound that is different from all my other high-end gear, a unique flavor vs. my Millennia and Chandler and UA and Blue boxes.

At just under $3500 street, it is a major purchase. However, buying individual units of similar quality may actually cost more. So if you have been thinking about a new full-fledged recording chain for your setup, give Everest a look and a listen, as separate audio processors and as a very impressive whole. If this review's emphasis on the tech end of things didn't communicate one final fact well, then take note... I freakin' *love* this thing, and I'm figuring out how to buy it so I can keep it in my studio.

Price: $3895
More from: Summit Audio, www.summitaudio.com.

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