



Thermionic Culture

Phoenix Mastering Plus



This new variant of the legendary Phoenix is designed for versatility. Can it be both master and servant? **John Pickford** finds out.

Phoenix Mastering Plus

Manufacturer **Thermionic Culture**

Price **£3,702**

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Key Features

- Handy stepped controls
- Mullard and Siemens valves
- High-pass filter
- Standby switch

The original version of the Phoenix (now discontinued) has long been one of our favourite stereo compressors. It's regularly used in conjunction with Thermionic Culture's Earlybird/Pullet mic pre/EQ combination – an input signal chain that's hard to beat. This updated version of The Phoenix Mastering Plus is primarily designed to be used at the other end of the recording and mixing processes to control mix-buss dynamics.

That's not to say that it can't be used for general compression duties, though. Designer Vic Keary has made several changes to the original design – a faster release time, for example – to make this unit much more versatile when used for track laying or compressing individual sounds within a mix.

As you may have deduced from the company's name, the Phoenix (like all Thermionic Culture products) is an all-valve unit. The specially selected Mullard and Siemens tubes are of very high quality, as are the custom Sowter transformers. Nicely laid-out and

classically styled, the build quality is excellent, making it a pleasure to look at as well as use. The controls are either switches or stepped rotary pots, enabling precise recall of settings, while the large VU meters can be zero-adjusted should they drift out-of-true.

Elma switch (11 positions) that works in conjunction with the Gain control to adjust the amount of compression. Both the Attack and Release controls are Alpha switches (six- and seven-position respectively), with attack times ranging from 4–120ms and release times of 40ms–2.2s.

Besides the aforementioned sidechain filter controls, other front-panel controls are provided for Output Trim (gain make-up), stereo Link and individual Bypass for each channel. The power switch is sensibly situated on the front of the unit and there is a standby switch – not included on earlier incarnations of the Phoenix – that helps to extend valve and capacitor life when the unit is not in use. The rear panel features XLR input/output sockets for each channel, a voltage selector switch and an IEC socket for mains connection.

The Mastering Plus retains that gorgeous and distinctive Thermionic family sound

Measuring Up

Thermionic Culture makes a new version of the original Phoenix compressor (£3,284), which has continuous rotary-pot controls rather than the stepped switches found on the Mastering Plus. The current SC version adds the sidechain HPF lacking in earlier models. Vertigo Sound's VSC-2 (£3,642) is a discrete VCA solid-state compressor that also features a high-pass filter and is a very capable mastering device.

The Phoenix is a soft-knee or variable-mu compressor, meaning that the compression ratio increases as more compression is applied. The lowest ratio is a very gentle 1.2:1, rising to 5:1 at 15dB of compression. A very welcome feature of this new model is the sidechain high-pass filter, which alters the unit's response to low frequencies. The bass cut can be selected at 150Hz or 300Hz on each channel; in addition, when linked in stereo mode, one channel set at 150Hz with the other set at 300Hz creates an average, so the filter operates at 225Hz.

Looking at the front panel, the Input Gain control makes use of a 24-position Elma rotary switch providing up to +31dB of gain for each channel. The Threshold control employs another

Once we'd powered up the Phoenix we left it on standby for 30 minutes. Like all valve gear, a warming-up period ensures optimum performance (if time is of the essence it can be used almost immediately after switching on). Thermionic Culture recommends that the standby switch is active before switching the unit on, and it should then remain in standby for at least 20 seconds. Once powered up, it's best left on all day, making use of the standby when not in use. We also fired up our original Phoenix – which has provided sterling service for nearly ten years – to see how the new model compares with our much-loved example.

Setting up both units so that we were able to make instantaneous A/B comparisons between the two, it soon

became clear that the Mastering Plus retains that gorgeous, distinctive Thermionic Culture family sound: rich and smooth, with no sense that the frequency extremes are being curtailed. In fact, we felt that the new model has an extra ounce of transparency, especially in the broad midrange, making our old compressor sound slightly coloured. Obviously, our well-used original contains aged

of gain reduction was taking place, with both attack and release set at position 3. We also made use of the high-pass filter at its lowest setting and found that this really helped to preserve the bottom end. This setting glued the track together nicely, producing no unwanted pumping artefacts or shifts in tonal balance. Many instruments and voices were processed through the Phoenix during the review period and at no time

punchy edge when given a good squeeze. On delicate source material the Phoenix is superb, providing a lovely cohesiveness in an open, transparent manner. On complex, bass-heavy mixes its versatile features enable you to add the final touch that makes the difference between an OK-sounding mix and a radio-ready recording.

Once again we take our hats off to Vic Keary: his no-compromise attitude to audio design has produced another full-fat favourite here at MTM. If you only ever purchase one professional hardware compressor to handle gain-reduction duties, this should be at the top of your audition list. **MTM**

MTM Verdict

WHY BUY

- + Open, transparent sound
- + Easy recall of settings
- + High-quality components
- + Versatile

WALK ON BY

- May be too refined for some

A gorgeous-sounding compressor that is equally at home processing individual sounds or final mixes.



Method Spot

Mastering is something of a black art and great care should be taken when compressing final mixes, as it's easy to get carried away and go over the top. Begin by selecting medium attack and release response times and then adjust the gain and threshold controls so that just a couple of dB of compression is taking place. Employing the high-pass filter is often a good idea with busy or bass-heavy material, and you may find that this allows you to compress a little harder without inducing pumping effects. As always, use your ears!

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components and we're not comparing identical models here – the Mastering Plus is a brand-new design.

Master model

As this version of the Phoenix has been designed with mastering in mind, we strapped it across a recently completed final mix. Linked for stereo operation, we set up the compressor so that the VU meters indicated that around 2–3dB

did it adversely affect the character of the source material. It had to be driven very hard before obvious compression effects were audible, making it almost impossible to ruin your sound.

The Phoenix Mastering Plus – like all Thermionic Culture gear we've heard – is a wonderful, professional tool. It might not be the first choice for those wanting to completely crush their audio signals, but it can give sounds a firm,







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