

# SZIKLA TECHNICAL PRODIGAL Dual Analogue Channel Strip & Monitor Station

Is it a tracking device, a post production signal processor or a routing and monitoring hub for your studio? Greg Walker discovers that the home-grown Szikla Prodigal ticks a lot of boxes.

Review: Greg Walker



## PRICE

\$4995 + GST

## CONTACT

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## PROS

Transparent sound & high-performance super low noise circuits  
Extremely flexible unit with small footprint  
Comprehensive studio monitoring/routing section  
Smooth, musical compressor & de-esser  
Australian design & build with excellent after sales service

## CONS

EQ has limited controls  
Expensive

## SUMMARY

The Prodigal is the new 'Australian army knife' of the audio world. It provides a wealth of features in a super compact space while the quality preamps and signal processors are enhanced by a comprehensive studio monitor section.

Over the years AudioTechnology has shone the spotlight on a range of Australian audio pioneers, many of whom have contributed to the audio industry on a local and global scale with game changing designs, clever innovations and considerable business savvy. Having said that, it's an unfortunate fact that most of the outboard in our studio racks is designed and built overseas and we pay a premium for importing this gear in the never-ending quest for great tone.

With the honourable exceptions of people like Al Smart, Rob Squire at Proharmonic, Joe Malone at JLM, David Peach, and Sebastian from Sebatron, there hasn't been a lot of locally built outboard making it to market in the last 10 years, which is a shame. Helping to shift this imbalance for the better is Melbourne-based electronics designer, audio engineer and musician Andy Szikla with his well thought out and ambitiously feature-rich dual channel strip and monitor station offering, the Prodigal.

## BOLD AS BRASS

The Prodigal is a comprehensive dual channel strip featuring mic and line preamplifier, DI input, high and low pass filters, three-stage EQ, frequency adjustable de-esser and stereo linkable compressor/limiter. Not content with these features alone, the Prodigal adds comprehensive LED level, gain reduction and peak metering, three distinct stages of mono switching and can act as a studio HQ for a variety of audio sources with multiple monitor outputs, two stereo source inputs as well as mini-jack in and headphone out all handily subject to gain control. The design is discrete solid-state with FET circuits in the compressor and de-esser stages. There's no valves or input transformers to be found here and the audio design aims for transparency and flexibility rather than vintage mojo.

A look inside the top cover reveals an extremely tidy circuit design and clean build. Much thought has gone into the power supply and earthing layout and a clever sub-chassis design that supports the boards and protects the surface mounted pots from the potential shocks and joint damage usually associated with this approach. The front panel is nice and thick and though I'm not a huge fan of the look, you can't deny the Szikla has one! The thick brass rack 'ears' and silver faceplate proudly distance the device from the black faceplate and chicken-head knob fraternity.

## PROD ROCK

The Prodigal arrived at my studio on the eve of a drum overdub session so I gave it a baptism of fire on stereo overheads. I used a pair of ribbon mics for this application and bypassed all the signal processing options in favour of simple pre-amplification. The Prodigal pres had plenty of gain on tap and delivered a nice clean, detailed image of the drums with the thickness of the ribbon mic's lower midrange tone well represented.

The sound of these preamps is rock solid and pleasing to the ear while being fairly neutral. Each channel offers backlit switches for phantom power, pad and phase reverse and the metering is

very informative and clear (you can easily check input levels from across the room). I plugged some headphones into the monitor section and quickly checked the phase of my overhead mics by switching in the monitor 'mono' button and flipping the phase (a handy feature). The monitor section delivers zero latency monitoring of any source passing through the unit's inputs.

Next up were some fairly loud electric guitar overdubs on another project. The setup was a Telecaster into a Fender amp miked up close with a Shure SM57. For these parts I engaged the compressor/limiter and started exploring the Prodigal's signal processing abilities. Settling on a moderate ratio and a fairly quick attack with a slower release speed to quell some of the harsher transients I was really happy with the results. The melodic lines sang beautifully and there was a nice thickness to the tone. The compressor locked the dynamics down nicely and helped deliver a 'finished' sound. After this recording the Szikla went up a notch in my estimation. Like all the processors on the Prodigal, the compressor/limiter delivers a lot of flexibility with a small control footprint. Simple attack, release and ratio controls are complemented by an input knob that feeds the compression circuit. The FET circuit used here shares some design elements with the famous Urei 1176 compressor and the availability of super fast attack speeds is one of its great strengths.

Unlike the 1176 the Prodigal compressor will not spit out heavily distorted tones at extreme settings but maintains clarity and definition as the input level and compression ratio are increased. At moderate settings the compressor can really lock a sound in place without displaying much in the way of compression artefacts. There is a pleasing thickening of the tone and some subtle tonal saturation as extreme compression is applied but the Prodigal is indeed its own creature, which I consider a big plus.

## ESSING MARVELLOUS

After tracking a number of projects with the Prodigal that included bass guitars, vocals, percussion and strings, my conclusion was that the mic preamps and compressors were of an excellent quality and could be real workhorses in the studio. But I wasn't done yet, the Prodigal still had more features to explore. I switched the unit's channels to line input mode and began exploring post-production applications starting with some vocal grooming. Sending a very sibilant female lead vocal into the Prodigal gave me a chance to evaluate the unit's de-esser circuit. The two continuously variable controls here are very simple to use — 'ess' (contrary to my expectations) applies more de-essing as it is turned counterclockwise from 'max' towards 'min', presumably to give the effect of clamping down the threshold. The other pot determines the frequency above which the de-essing is applied (1-10kHz). In use I found this circuit to be extremely smooth and musical. The esses were tamed with very little impact on the overall top end of the vocal's tone (a quality sadly lacking in most software de-essers), and the 'limit'

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LED's activity gave helpful feedback as to how much high frequency limiting was being applied.

Szikla explained to me that his circuit shared some aspects of the DBX 902's design and it is certainly right up there alongside the 902 as one of the best de-esser circuits I have ever worked with. Next on the tinkering list was the EQ section. This is effectively a three band tone shaping circuit with two fixed frequencies — a cut centred around 300Hz ('de-mud') and a boost above 9kHz ('air'). The third band is a constant Q parametric EQ with  $\pm 10$ dB available from 100Hz to 10kHz. In practice this EQ is very musical and quite flexible. The 'de-mud' was the surprise package for me as there were many sources from vocals to kick drums to guitars that seemed to benefit from this gentle de-emphasis of the lower mid frequencies. I found the 'air' circuit to be a fairly subtle but pleasing addition while the parametric band was extremely useful for highlighting sweet spots in the tone of vocals, snare drums, acoustic guitars, etc. It was also equally adept at removing unwanted frequencies, though it's one to two-octave bandwidth (depending on how hard you push it) means it is not a surgical tool. Further tone shaping options are available via the high and low pass filters which operate in both line input modes (rear XLR and front TRS) as well as on the microphone preamps. These filters roll off at 12dB per octave and have a subtle 1dB boost at the roll-off point for a more musical effect.

## AUDIO CENTRAL

Last but not least is the built in Monitor Station section of the unit that occupies the far right side of the faceplate. Both the Prodigal source input and playback output sub-sections feature mute and mono buttons. Playback sources can be selected from one of three inputs (including the front panel mini-jack socket for your iGadget) and a fourth setting mutes all inputs. These I/O circuits share a peak meter to keep an eye on hot levels and the nearby headphone output with rotary fader handles discrete output monitoring of all sources. This is a well-endowed headphone amp so you need to watch your headphone output levels!

Speaking of outputs the larger 'Studio' control is designed to be your master fader for the two mutable monitor outputs (ideal for two sets of studio monitors) while the independent line outs on the back can be switched between +4dB and -10dB operating levels. Again the design here is compact, well implemented and very flexible. The audio quality is very transparent and there is a ton

## → GETTING TECHNICAL WITH SZIKLA

**Greg Walker:** How did you get into electronics and in particular the audio design side of things?

**Andy Szikla:** I've had a long association with the AV industry, and early on worked repairing faulty gear and designing odd bits of equipment. Eventually, that turned into proper contract design work and my own Szikla Technical product lines.

**GW:** What was your first breakthrough?

**AS:** I invented a system for big shows where a presenter could advance Powerpoint slides remotely via a wireless button, and it was the first of its kind in the world. It altered the way those shows were able to be conducted at the technical level, and I am still very proud of that fact. These days similar gadgets are everywhere, but the old Cue King is still a benchmark.

**GW:** Can you describe the initial development of the Prodigal and how the collaboration with Australian producer David Nicholas (INXS, Pulp, Elton John) affected the design?

**AS:** I had also been designing audio circuits since the very early days, and had a whole drawer full of ideas but hadn't gotten around to doing much with them. In 2008, after some years playing and singing in minor bands, I began recording my first solo album *Dark Valley* for Rubber Records. I rescued

all my 'prodigal sons' from the drawer and made a prototype to use on that recording. I showed David what I was doing and he was full of helpful suggestions, took a box home and fell in love with it. David has used the Prodigal on every recording he has made ever since, in every situation from pro sessions to his own home studio (which primarily consists of the Prodigal and an Apple laptop). His feedback has helped shape its sound, features, and user interface.

It was David's idea to expand the (zero latency) monitor section to serve as the hub of an entire system. He saw before I did that there are plenty of good engineers working in all sorts of varying locations, and a box like this could help them achieve uniform results across the board. So in the end, David helped to change it from a tool kit for making my own record, to a more universal device. Put your laptop on top, plug in your powered speakers... and that's your studio.

**GW:** Given that valves and transformers are all the rage at the moment in outboard equipment, can you explain why you chose the transformerless solid-state path with the Prodigal?

**AS:** The Prodigal was developed on the bench and in the studio, not merely in the mathematical

space, and I used my hands and ears for all of it. I love transistors. I play with them like a kid plays in a sandbox, and find them quite magical. I've never really got into valves so I guess that's mostly a personal thing. I do use transformers (which are essential in some cases) but they always sound like transformers to me, so I thought it would be fun to invent my way around them and see if there was a different way of getting something to sound special.

That led me to a number of satisfying innovations which frankly are the reason I bother to do it in the first place. I think the sound of the box has a kind of personality about it, which I don't believe would have crystallised if I just did what everyone else was doing. My design philosophy with the Prodigal was as follows: no matter what rubbish goes in the input, angels should appear at the output and beat you in the head with fluffy pillows. The central question of relevance to me was one I think should be asked of any piece of recording gear: does it help you to produce sounds which, once you hear them, you want to hear again? Transistors are my creative medium and I wanted to use them to design something beautiful. I believe with the Prodigal I have been successful, and I am very, very proud of it.

of headroom. For me this section's inclusion of multiple stage mono switches for checking phase and mono compatibility as well as the provision of a simple way of A/B-ing multiple input sources such as reference tracks and previous mixes once again reflects this box's concern with making itself useful while delivering high quality audio results.

### GIVING IT A PROD

As I got more familiar with the Prodigal I started using it for more creative tone-shaping work on individual tracks and stereo busses. I found pushing the parametric EQ quite hard into the compressor at higher thresholds and ratios gave me some great 'semi-treated' vocal tones while parallel compression on strummed acoustics with the de-esser engaged and the compressor set to fast attack speeds allowed me to boost the guitars' core tones while de-emphasising the transients and high frequency hash. On stereo drum bus the compressors really shine, delivering a lovely wallop to kick and snare while locking down the dynamic range seamlessly. It's worth noting that all stereo sources greatly benefit from the stereo linking feature activated by another backlit button. Manual matching of settings is still required but with the 'link' button in, the actions of the attack and release settings are precisely electronically aligned. Care has also been taken to match FET transistors in the compressor and de-esser sections as well as in the preamps for exactly balanced L/R operation and the results of this can be clearly heard on stereo programme material.

With some tasteful Prodigal compression applied, stereo mixes have a really satisfying 'glue' to them while activating the EQ section allows for some broad-brush tonal sculpting. The lack of centre detents or 'soft' stepping on the continuously variable controls is a minor gripe as this makes precise recalls difficult (Andy being the kind of guy he is would doubtless make you one with stepped controls if you asked). A few times I felt I was losing a tickle of top end during more intensive signal processing but this was easily remedied by some subtle EQ after I had printed the mixes back into my DAW. The compressor is one of the most addictive aspects of the Prodigal and you have to be careful not to apply too much compression as the effect is quite transparent. Switching the metering to the 'comp' setting gave plenty of useful feedback and though I'm not a huge fan of LED meters these ones performed admirably (they also meter input and output level and even de-essing gain reduction).

### PRODIGAL SUM

It's quite a feat of engineering that so many features have been included in one 3RU device and, while the front panel layout is understandably busy, the unit is quite easy and intuitive to work with. The legending is clear and the backlit switches, meters and LED indicators all give quick and ready feedback while all controls are easy to operate and have a pro feel to them. The unit ships with a very comprehensive and informative manual that provides lots of technical content and also tells its

own story about Szikla's attention to detail.

Having used the Prodigal for a month or so, I found Andy Szikla's claim that you could make a quality record using just his Prodigal unit totally justified. While at first glance the asking price appears quite steep, consider that you get two great mic preamps, two 3-band EQs with filters, two super-smooth de-essers, two great compressors and a fully specced studio monitoring and routing system. You can track with it and then process individual elements and mix busses back through it and you won't be disappointed with the results.

Not everyone will gravitate to the Prodigal's all-in-one solid-state format, but for the money you get an awful lot of features implemented with a very high quality design and build. Best of all it's an Australian product and it's got its own sonic thing going on. Before you go out and buy the latest greatest American or European import, take the Prodigal for a test drive and hear what quality Australian designed and built outboard sounds like. ■