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VOL. THIRTY-NINE NUMBER TEN

\$5.99US \$5.99CAN

07>



JULY 2023  
USA \$5.99  
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# REVIEW



## ART Pro VLA III Multi-voice Tube/Opto Compressor

*Two comps for the price of one*

### REVIEW BY BILL STUNT

For more than four decades, Applied Research and Technology (ART) has built studio gear that bridges the gap between boutique performance and everyday practicality. The latest addition to the lineup, the ART Pro VLA III Multi-voice Tube/Opto Compressor, continues that tradition with expanded features and refined performance.

### The VLA Legacy

The VLA III builds on the legacy of the VLA II compressor. It remains a two-channel optical compressor capable of dual mono or stereo-linked operation, but adds a new twist. The source of the "Multivoice" name is the ability to route audio through either a 12AT7 tube stage or a clean solid-state signal path. This dual-voice design greatly expands the range of gain-management tasks the unit can tackle, effectively delivering two distinct compressor flavors in a single box. Not a bad value proposition.

### The Third-Generation VLA

If a feature-rich yet operationally straightforward compressor was a design goal, ART hit that mark with flying colors. The clean layout and familiar set of controls make operation a breeze.

The two-rack-space unit is solidly and attractively built. Large backlit VU meters display output levels, while a central 8-segment LED meter monitors average and peak input levels. Individual LED

gain-reduction meters sit below each VU meter for precise visual feedback.

Each channel offers Threshold, Ratio, Attack, Release and Output controls. In Link (stereo) mode, however, the output controls take on a clever secondary function: the first knob becomes a master output for both channels, while the second acts as a Balance control, allowing precise weighting of compression between channels to fine-tune the stereo image. It is an unusually thoughtful feature for a hardware compressor.

Additional controls include Link/Dual mode selection, the Voice switch for choosing between tube and solid-state signal paths, and individual Bypass switches for each channel.

### Around the Back

The rear panel provides both XLR and 1/4" balanced input and output connections. The Pro VLA III can also be configured for either professional (+4dBu) or consumer (-10dBV) operating levels. With the I/O Level switch engaged, the

unit operates in professional mode, where "0" VU corresponds to +4dBu at the input or output. In -10 mode, "0" VU aligns with approximately -10dBV.

### Specs

The Pro VLA III delivers impressive specifications, especially at its price point. Input impedance is 10 k $\Omega$ . Maximum input level is +20 Bu in +4dBu mode and +10dBu in -10dBV mode. Maximum output gain is +20dB, while frequency response spans an impressive 10 Hz to 50 kHz (+0/-1dB). Total harmonic distortion is rated at less than 0.005% in solid-state mode, and equivalent input noise is a very respectable -99 dBu (+4 dBu mode, A-weighted).

### Smooth Operator

In use, the Pro VLA III soft-knee leveling amplifier and optical compression circuit deliver an exceptionally smooth, rounded and forgiving response that works well on a wide variety of sources. Vocals, bass and even mix buses are all natural fits. This is not a grabby or aggressive compressor; instead, it gently reins in peaks in a very musical and transparent way.

As expected, the tube stage adds harmonics that flatter the critical midrange. Engaging the Tube voice introduces a noticeable thickness and warmth that is immediately appealing without sounding overhyped or muddy. With gentle settings, it excels on bass guitar, smoothly controlling

transients while adding a pleasing harmonic bloom that complements many musical styles. It is equally effective for adding body and movement to synth pads, as well as subtle control and character to acoustic piano and guitar tracks.

## Pushing In

Heavy compression can be both useful and musically attractive, and with more aggressive settings the Pro VLA III comfortably enters “compression-as-effect” territory. I especially liked it on aggressive acoustic guitar tracks in the vein of Leo Kottke or Jimmy Page on early Led Zeppelin recordings like “Black Mountain Side.” Here the VLA III adds both weight and restraint, creating a sense of controlled excitement. I have only begun exploring its full range of possibilities, but it is already clear that the unit excels in this role.

Switching to the Solid State voice changes the character noticeably. While still unmistakably an opto compressor, the response becomes firmer and more articulate, with greater transient detail and a more open, modern presentation. It handles everyday dynamics control with an appealing

balance of transparency and musicality. I particularly liked this mode on vocals and electric guitars, where it adds control without dulling aggression or completely flattening the performance dynamics.

## Get on the Bus

One of the more useful design refinements is the expanded ratio range, now extending down to 1.25:1 for exceptionally subtle control in bus compression or mastering applications. Combined with generous headroom, lower background noise and improved channel matching in stereo-linked mode, the Pro VLA III feels well-suited for these more demanding tasks.

By design, the Pro VLA III is not trying to be an all-purpose compressor. It is squarely an opto design and not the tool I would reach for when seeking the explosive punch of an FET compressor or the ultra-fast precision of a VCA design.

That said, the Pro VLA III is still remarkably versatile, delivering smooth, musical compression with plenty of character. Better still, it does so at a price point not much higher than many premium plugins—or even some competing single-channel



budget opto compressors. That alone makes it compelling, especially for engineers who still appreciate the tactile experience of shaping dynamics with real knobs and meters instead of staring at waveforms on a screen, or who want a compressor that exists outside the usual budget-clone paradigm.

## Wrap Up

Well thought out, well built and affordable—that has long been the ART formula in a nutshell, and the Pro VLA III is a worthy addition to the lineup. For a project studio owner looking to add a first piece of hardware outboard gear, the Pro VLA III is an excellent choice. For more seasoned engineers, it offers enough personality and flexibility to stand apart from the usual crowd of budget compressors and makes a strong case for a spot in the rack. ➤

**Price:** \$599

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