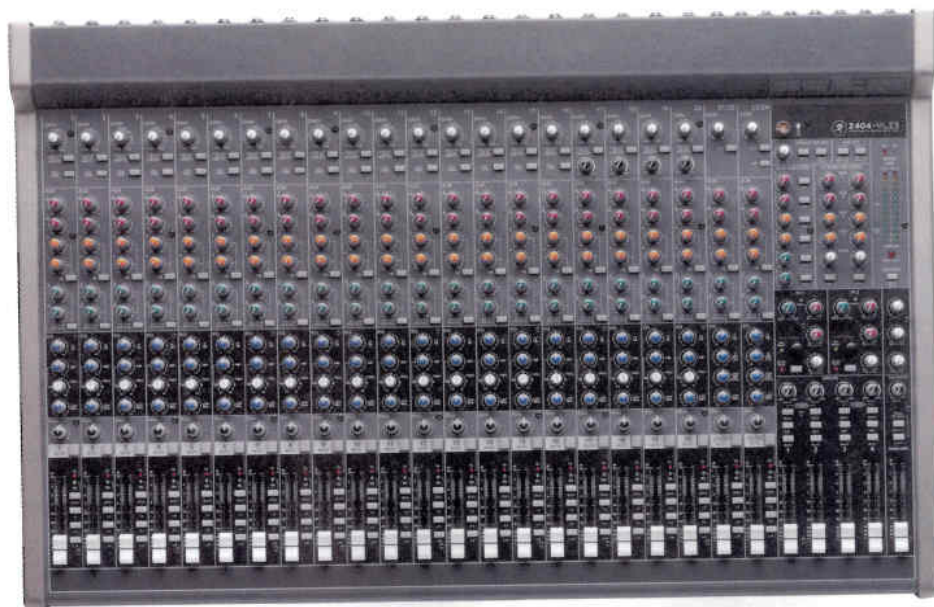


AUDIOREVIEW

MACKIE 2404-VLZ3 Compact Mixer



Reviewed by: *John McJunkin*

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create no coloration
whatsoever—
I love these.**

My church is a portable “church-in-a-box” that leases time in an elementary school gymnasium in Gilbert, Ariz., so the terms “compact” and “portable” and “lightweight” sound like music to my ears (particularly since I am usually one of the guys who haul our gear in and out of the gym). But at the same time, since I’m also responsible for the quality of the audio, I am skeptically optimistic at best when it comes to the fidelity of bantam-weight gear with a “small footprint.” On those extraordinary occasions when the smaller, lighter stuff actually sounds great too, I have a grin that must be surgically removed from my face.

Mackie has introduced the latest update to its VLZ series of mixers, with two models available, the 2404-VLZ3 and the 3204-VLZ3. These have 24 and 32 input channels, respectively, and the “04” designation refers to the fact that these are both four-bus mixers. There are six other, smaller mixers in the line, ranging from 4-16 inputs, but the 2404 and the 3204

bring three new tricks to the party that none of the others have—two onboard effects processors, USB connectivity with your computer, and onboard compressors. The inclusion of these items is gaining popularity with other manufacturers as well, and rightfully so. If the processors sound good, that’s two less rack-mounted units I have to lug into the gymnasium. If the compressors sound good, that’s a few less compressors to add pain to my lower back. And certainly having a built-in USB interface not only lightens my load, but also facilitates a really quick turn-around in terms of getting a sermon podcast online. Since the recording can be made directly to the computer, it can be uploaded very quickly, even if basic editing and processing are desired.

The 2404 that I evaluated isn’t actually a super lightweight device—it does have a bit of heft to it, since it’s largely composed of metal. That’s fine, because it’s not huge and isn’t that heavy, but it is solidly constructed and feels sturdy. Each

company: **Mackie**

product(s): **2404-VLZ3 Compact Mixer**

phone: **(425) 892-6500**

website: **www.mackie.com**

suggested retail price: **\$1,499.99**

The compressors are surprisingly transparent, considering their fixed 6:1 ratio.

channel strip from 1-20 features a 60-mm fader, signal routing and solo buttons, a mute button and pan knob. Above that is the mixer's three-band equalizer, with low shelving fixed at 80 Hz, high shelving at 12 kHz, and mids sweepable between 100 Hz and 8 kHz. Up to 15 dB of boost or cut is available on each. Above the EQs are knobs representing the mixer's six auxiliary sends. Sends one and two are intended for monitors, as they are fixed in pre-fader mode. Three and four can be switched between pre- and post-fader mode as a pair, and five and six are a bit unique. As a pair, they can be toggled between feeding the two internal effects processors or a pair of output jacks for external processing. This pair is fixed in post-fader mode, so they're not particularly useful for monitors. Another really cool and unique feature here enables the sending of auxiliaries five and six to your computer via USB for a "unique stereo recording" (as stated in the mixer's manual), but it's important to remember that since auxiliaries five and six are fixed in post-fader mode, fader adjustments will change this "unique" recording.

Lay of the Land

The top of the console is home to the inputs' gain knobs, and buttons toggling a 20 dB pad and 18 dB/octave low cut filter with its frequency at 100 Hz. Inputs 17-20 have their pad button replaced by the single knob to control the compressors on those channels—specifically, it's the threshold control. Inputs 21/22 and 23/24 are stereo pairs with buttons to toggle between physical inputs, internal effects returns, and on 23/24, the USB return. To the far right of the control surface are aux masters, stereo returns, metering, effects controls, and faders for the mixer's four subgroups. Each subgroup has its own single-knob compressor-like inputs 17-20,

very nice for creating drum spank buses and the like.

The rear panel features XLR mic inputs, ¼-inch balanced/unbalanced line inputs, with ¼-inch TRS inserts, along with ¼-inch TRS inputs for stereo channels 21/22, 23/24, and stereo returns. Group and auxiliary outputs are also represented by ¼-inch TRS balanced/unbalanced output jacks, along with TRS inserts for all 10 such channels. There are stereo and mono monitor outputs—also ¼-inch balanced jacks. Similarly, there are stereo and mono main outputs with balanced XLR and ¼-inch jacks and TRS inserts. A pair of stereo RCA jacks represent the mixer's tape in and out, and a USB connection resides close by. There is an XLR talkback mic input, an IEC power inlet, and main and phantom power switches. The one absurd item on the back panel is the headphone jack. A headphone jack on the rear panel? Really, Mackie? There's got to be someplace on the front panel for this, guys.

The badly placed headphone jack is among my very short list of cons, which is completely outweighed by a lengthy list of pros. The VLZ3 mic pres have tons of headroom, are dead quiet, and create no coloration whatsoever—I love these. The EQs sound fantastic as well, and failing the inclusion of fully parametric EQ, Mackie has fixed the frequencies of the shelves in useful, musical locations along the spectrum. The auxiliaries allow for really flexible routing, although it would be nice to have an option to switch auxes five and six to pre-fader mode, to allow a completely independent stereo recording via the USB interface. These same auxiliaries could be used as an effects send to plug-in processors on one's computer, and I've become a big fan of using comput-

ers as signal processors this way—I've become spoiled by the quality of convolution reverbs and the like. Unfortunately, inexpensive digital reverbs sound grainy and artificial to my ear, and while the 2404s processors are not great, they're not bad. The delays are just fine, and offer tap tempo right on the front panel—very handy. Only reverbs, delays, and choruses are available, but that's a deliberate decision on the part of Mackie. As they say in the manual, the effects units do not "include useless effects such as 'the warbler' or the 'insanity delay'" and I truly appreciate this; I think we've all scratched our heads wondering who would really use some of the insane "laser-splat vocal" effects we've all seen.

There are three major features that make this mixer stand out: its compressors, its effects, and its USB connectivity. The compressors are surprisingly transparent, considering their fixed 6:1 ratio, and they do a good job of keeping levels under control. It would be nice to have them on more than just four input channels, but the four subgroup compressors are very useful. The effects will not replace the \$500 units in your rack, but if you want to save space and weight, and if you don't mind keeping it simple, they do the trick. The USB interface facilitates the recording of four discrete channels and playback of two discrete channels to and from your computer, respectively. This is powerful—it makes for quick turnaround of podcast uploads, and can also enable quick editing, processing, and burning of CDs for churchgoers. These three extras make the Mackie 2404-VLZ3 very worthy of consideration.

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