



FOOTSWITCH

Kick in the crunch, or one of the on-board digital effects



FX SEND/RETURN

Set your FX on a proper look



ON-BOARD EFFECTS

The MG100DFX has digital chorus/delay, delay, flange, chorus and reverb effects built



Marshall MG100DFX Combo

LOOKING FOR SOME SERIOUS POWER on a budget? Marshall's effects-laden MG100DFX combo certainly delivers the oomph. Review by Huw Price

Mourn not Marshall's Valvestate amps, those behemoths among budget blasters, for now the company has replaced their successful old series with the AVT and MG models. The MG series is the new doorway into the Marshall-driven rock dream, promising classic looks, decent build quality and, hopefully, a worthy dollop of that trademark tone.

Unlike the Valvestates, though, the MG series does not include a real valve in the circuit: instead the designers have developed FDD, aka Frequency Dependent Damping, a form of speaker emulation that mimics the way valve amplifiers interact with loudspeakers. Marshall deserves due recognition for this: amp designers often concentrate their efforts on preamp distortion, neglecting the influence of the power stage on feel and playability. FDD creates a 'larger than life' illusion from the speakers – and, as a bonus, you get a speaker-simulated line output for low-volume home

recording and easy connection to a PA system.

If you like the way Marshalls look – textured vinyl covering, plastic corner protectors, that big white plastic logo – you'll like the MG100. It's a 100W, two-channel combo with a single 12" Celestion speaker, an effects loop, an emulated headphone/line output and a jam-along CD input on the front panel. There are four digital effects (reverb, delay, chorus and flanging) and a channel switching/effects activating footswitch. It weighs in at 23.6kg and is solidly constructed from 3/4" chipboard. Its vital statistics are a solid 590x556x275mm (24x22x11") and, after winning Miss Amplifier 2002, its ambitions are to travel the world and eat small children.

A master volume controls both channels but each has its own Gain control and EQ. The clean channel has Bass, Middle and Treble and a Clean/Crunch switch; the overdrive channel also has Bass, Middle and Treble plus a Contour control to radically sculpt the mid

RRP:

£299

frequency range to vary the tone from vintage and woody to scooped and aggressive. There's also an OD1/OD2 switch – the second option providing obscene levels of gain.

The Digital FX Preset/Adjust control is dual purpose, allowing you to select one of the four types of effect: chorus and delay together; delay; chorus; or flange. As you sweep the control, each effect become active in different regions of the knob's travel range. Within those regions you can adjust the parameters of the active effect. For instance, in the chorus/delay and delay section, the knob controls the delay time from a short rockabilly or surf-style slapback to long, atmospheric 'stadium' echoes (though the idea of anyone trying to play surf music with a Marshall seems pretty strange to me – a bit like playing Barney Kessel lines on a BC Rich). Anyway, the number of repeats sensibly decreases as the delay time shortens. This knob also controls chorus speed and flange speed.

The Digital FX Level control allows you to mix the effects with your dry sound – very sensible, because you'll never be stuck with an effect you like but with an excessive volume level. The reverb is also digital, not the traditional spring-loaded affair you might expect, which means you can't drop-kick the MG100DFX to produce radical 'exploding' effects. Tsk, tsk... the sacrifices we have to make to live in the digital world.

Most guitarists place their effects between their guitar and their amp, but the MG100's

FACTFILE



effects loop also allows you to place them between the preamp and the power amp. This can result in improved signal-to-noise ratio because, unlike the guitar signal, any noise generated by the effects unit does not pass through the whole amplifier. It also provides a wider palette of sounds, because a flanger or chorus in front of an amp only acts on a clean guitar signal; the distorted signal passing through the effects loop will contain more harmonics, so the effect is potentially more radical and extreme. Higher fidelity is another benefit, because a preamp will distort any effect that passes through it. Placed in an effects loop, the effect is applied to the distorted guitar but stays relatively clean as it passes through the power stage.

The MG100 has a -10 dB/+4 dB switch to match levels to pedals or rack-mount effects and an Effects Loop Mix control for blending in the required amount of the effect placed across the effect loop. In practice, though, it didn't work too well with standard stompboxes. As the effects loop signal was faded in, the overall volume coming out of the amplifier dropped, reaching its minimum when the dry/effect mix was 50/50 then rising again as it moves towards 100 per cent wet. It seemed that every effect I tried flipped the polarity of the signal passing through it, partially cancelling the dry signal. Though aware of the problem, Marshall insists that the polarity of the loop is consistent and recommends that, when using stompbox effects, the Effects Loop Mix control should always be set to 100 per cent wet. If your effects unit has a dry/wet balance parameter it should be set to 100 per cent wet internally. A 'polarity flip' button would be a sensible, cheap solution, but as matters stand, the functionality of the Effects Loop Mix control is somewhat compromised.

The FDD button, of course, switches on the Frequency Dependent Damping circuit. Marshall is obviously pleased with its FDD technology and surely the only reason that the switch is included is to demonstrate what the MG100 would sound like without it! However, I can't imagine that anybody would use this amp with the FDD switch disengaged.

SOUNDS

The clean channel sounds pretty good. I fired it up against an old Fender Deluxe 85 tranny amp I had lying around and found the MG100's playing response distinctly more valve-like, with a softer, rounded-off quality to the front of the notes – like the sag associated with valve rectification. The tone is reasonably warm and bluesy and a wide range of sounds is available via the tone controls. With a Strat I was able to get funky and also nail that SRV-meets-Hendrix clean-but-fat tone. Driving the clean channel with the humbucker-loaded Schindler produced less happy results, though. The sound was uncontrollably boomy and far less tactile.

I was all set to be fully impressed with the clean channel until I activated its Crunch



MARSHALL MG100DFX

Description: Twin channel, footswitchable 100W solid-state combo amp with closed-back 1x12" chipboard cabinet and four digital effects

RRP: £299

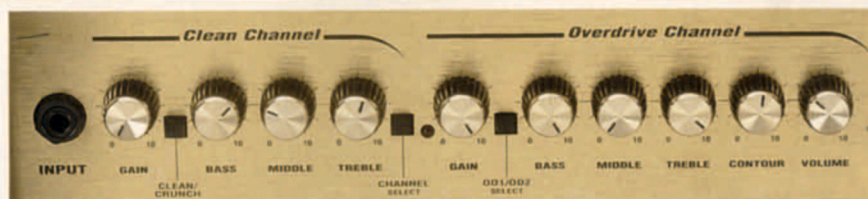
Controls: independent boost switches, gain, volume and tone controls for each channel plus overall master, reverb, digital effects and effects loop controls

Features: Footswitchable channels and effects on/off (footswitch included), digital reverb, delay, chorus and flange, effects loop with level control

Options: Similarly specified 85W Sherwood Signature in standard rexine-covered livery at £309. Also, twin-channel 15"-plus-horn Sherwood Classic (£379) now updated to 120W

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switch. Instead of the classic overdriven Marshall tone I was expecting, I was almost blown through the back wall by one of the nastiest, grainiest, cheapest fuzz tones I have heard in years. The upper harmonics were so saturated that every note I played sounded out of tune with itself – especially above the 12th fret. The onset of distortion was instantaneous, creating a series of beating harmonics so extreme as to virtually qualify as a tremolo. So, given that there's an overdrive channel, this bit of circuitry seems unnecessary and unpleasant. It certainly spoils an otherwise reasonably pretty picture.

Moving hastily onto the overdrive channel using the footswitch, things improved somewhat. Problems with transistor amplifiers are always more evident at low volume than high levels... and the MG100 is no exception. With the preamp gain turned right down, the ghost of a fuzz tone accompanied everything I played, together with a noticeable fizzing rattle that seemed to originate inside the cabinet and a slightly unhealthy quality rather reminiscent of a blown speaker. This, along with the extremely noisy cooling fan and the occasional electrical 'pop', renders this MG100 unuseable for recording. It's amazing how even the most humble Shure SM57 can capture these problems precisely.

However, a little extra volume worked wonders, burying these annoying gremlins beneath a wall of unmistakable Marshall tone. Balancing the Gain and Volume controls offers a wide range of sounds and I found the Contour control particularly powerful and effective. Old Marshalls and new Marshalls sound different, but the MG100 makes a genuine attempt to provide the best of both worlds – and all points in between.

There is a Boost switch on the overdrive channel labelled OD1 and OD2. If OD1 stands for 'Over Drive' then OD2 must stand for 'Over Done' – a flat-out, balls-to-the-wall rock assault on the senses. It ain't subtle, but turn the Contour control up and the unmistakable sound of contemporary rock is right there at your fingertips. Single-coils sound too metallic and brash, but things are a lot better with humbuckers. Like a traditional valve amp, the degree of distortion is easily controlled using the guitar's volume pot.

The reverb is smooth and warm but sounds oddly separate from the guitar, while the decay time is too long to be generally useful. As for the digital effects, they sound just about okay but nowhere near as good as a dedicated stompbox, and parameter adjustment is limited. You might find the delay useful for solos, but the others are sadly a bit gimmicky.

VERDICT

In the past there was definitely a stigma attached to transistor amplifiers, but with so many of the high-gain American metal guys going solid-state, things are changing. We have often advocated low-powered amps in this magazine but there's something special about the way a full-on 100W Marshall fills your entire body with sound – it does your soul good, even if it does trash your hearing.

This amp is a step up in quality from most transistor amps – though Marshall should maybe

pay more attention to the circuitry and the cabinet rattles, and a little less to digital toys. It's no valve-voiced tone monster, but at this price you wouldn't expect it to be. Instead it is loud, punchy and provides the trademark Marshall sound in an affordable package: seven-string players will be happy, as it's voiced with an almost unnatural degree of bottom end. The tonal range makes the MG100 viable as a practice amp and a gigging tool, so it should provide a lot of fun for hobbyists and novice guitarists alike.