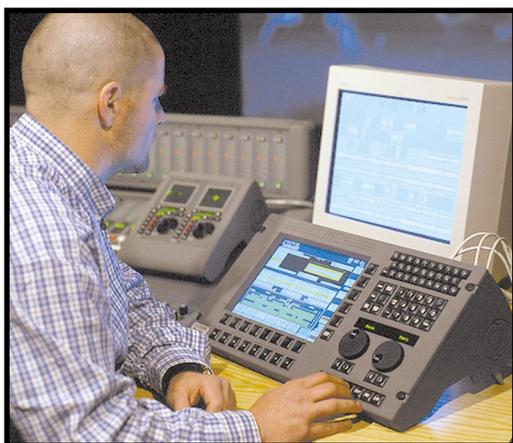


AMS Neve Audiofile SC Plug-ins

Longevity garners respect but carries with it the responsibility and difficulty of keeping up. So how do you modernise and develop a workstation standard? That'll be plug-ins then.

ROB JAMES



FOLLOWING THE PROGRESS of a vintage wine can be a rewarding pastime. Frisky and a little presumptuous when young, a really good wine develops with age. The sharp edges are rounded off and subtle complexities emerge. But there is always a risk the longer you keep it. Will the next bottle be a sublime maturation of all the qualities it had when young, with new depths and greater 'length', or will it be past its sell by date and only be fit to put on chips?

So it is with workstations. At 17 years of age AMS Neve's Audiofile certainly has vintage, but I approached this review with some trepidation. Development can sometimes spoil an elegantly simple design. All those extra features can clutter up the interface, or expose deficiencies in the hardware. AMS has always concentrated on keeping the Audiofile a lean, clean machine honed for specific tasks with a minimum of unnecessary feature bloat. Recent upgrades, especially the SC (Studio Controller), have reinforced these strengths but when plug-ins were first announced for Audiofile there was the suspicion that this might be a step too far.

Audiofile is now more 'open' than ever before with heavy duty networking capabilities, practical file and project interchange, retaining and enhancing the core virtues of speed and cost-effectiveness. OMF import is lightning fast and Pro Tools Session format 5.0 can be read directly. The 5.1 session format cannot, because Digidesign has chosen to use RSA encryption. So much for open formats!

All of this is good and useful stuff and has come along with a host of minor improvements mostly aimed at enhancing the Workflow concept and therefore real-world productivity.

The enabling hardware for much of this is the SAM card. This PCI card in the Studio Controller provides an intelligent 'fat pipe' to Audiofile by tapping into the link to the disk subsystem. The SAM card allows audio

The plug-ins

Included with the SC are a single band EQ (see below), Super TimeFlex and Pitch Change. This uses a new proprietary algorithm to produce very high quality time stretching and pitch shifting. Presets are provided for a variety of programme and individual parameters can be tweaked to fine tune out any remaining artefacts on difficult material.

There are also optional individual plug-ins.

Four-band parametric EQ would usually be unremarkable but this (and the single band) offer the choice of DFC (Digital Film Console) or Capricorn algorithms. If you've never heard these EQs you really don't know what you've been missing. They cover the spectrum from the surgical precision of a laser through to the brutality of an axe, taking in the most subtle and musical massage. 48dB of boost and cut and a maximum Q of 1000 (really, one thousand) is on offer, with low and high pass, low and high shelving, bell and notch options.

Dynamics follow a similar pattern. Here the algorithms used are the same ones that are found on the DFC. This means smooth invisibility with iron fist control over peaks and creamy compression. Each instance of the plug-in gives two dynamics processors each configurable as compressor, limiter, expander or gate.

OMF 1 and 2 import/export uses a 'wizard' interface to guide the user through the process. Import and export can use any storage medium including an Ethernet network. Is this finally the end of sneakernet?

Ring Modulator is triple-band and produces the familiar effects without fuss or requiring any real effort. Voice Code is also a ring-modulator but allows one voice to modulate another for synthetic voice effects.

Triple band distortion allows odd or even harmonic distortion to be applied in specific frequency bands. Filtering before and after the generators adds versatility. Results vary from subtle to extreme.

Exciter shouldn't be confused with others of the same name. Here Exciter is a multiharmonic generator that creates spiralling pitch change effects. Delay with modulation does the standard echo, flanging and phasing stuff. Multidelay is two pairs of delay modules with cross-channel feedback options.

Oxymoron is a delay effect but much more than that. Rhythmic delays with variable feedback, an oscillator for flanging effects, and EQ in the feedback loop give some idea but it really needs to be heard and played with to be appreciated.

Refitter has eight variable delays tuneable across the frequency spectrum and frequency dependent rhythmic repeats are its speciality. Quick Pitch enables two variable ratio shifts to be applied simultaneously.

Resonator is two resonant filters with a delay between the bands. Subtle radio distort effects to howling cacophony is the result. Multiband Resonator differs from the Resonator in that it has four bands laid out in the same way as a DFC EQ but lacks variable roll off.

Apart from these AMS Neve proprietary algorithms there are already third party plug-ins available with the same level of integration into the Audiofile environment. Cedar De-click will need little introduction, but here it has been given the same 'look and feel' as the AMS Neve plug-ins and is automatic – de-clicking an Event is as simple as selecting it and hitting the de-click key.

SynchroArts' famous Vocalign is another option. The Vocalign implementation will be immediately familiar to anyone who has used it on another platform but with the added bonus of one key import and export to Audiofile. More third-party plug-ins are on the way.

to be moved between the two at 25 – 33 times real-time (depending on which disk drives are fitted).

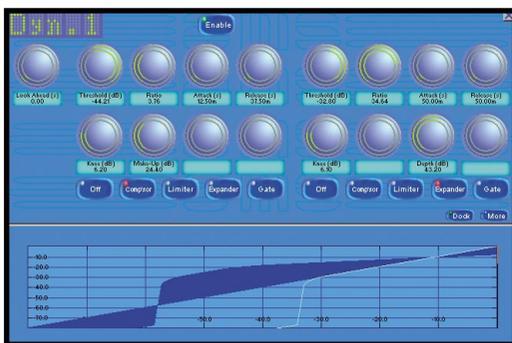
Plug-ins, in the form that we generally think of them, are a blessing and a curse. There are honourable exceptions but many are riddled with compromise. This is perhaps unsurprising since they have to work



with a variety of host software and in environments where processing power is at a premium.

A further problem arises when plug-ins are used in lengthy production chains, such as feature films and long-form TV. Elements of a project are worked on in small rooms before being combined into pre and final

review



mixes in a big room. Treatments that seemed like a good idea when the elements were prepared may be inappropriate or simply disliked when heard in context at the mix. In this environment there must be a quick and simple way of undoing editing decisions, including the effects of any plug-ins, to avoid major delays and costs. This means writing effects decisions as automation data and having workstations equipped with the same plug-ins present at the mixing stage.

For logistical reasons – noise, clutter and machine control – this is often undesirable and can be expensive. Alternatively, wherever plug-ins are used, the original audio must be copied to a new audio recording and retained as a means of undoing the effects. This latter approach is time-consuming and inconvenient, requiring manual copying and rigorous discipline on the part of the user to keep track of where everything is. Even when the playback machine does have the same plug-ins, problems frequently arise with unexpected results or processing power anomalies.

The Audiofile approach neatly side-steps all these hassles with a single keystroke. This copies the



underlying Cue (audio recording) for the duration of the Event (EDL entry) with the effect applied and replaces the original in the Event list. The original Event remains in the list but is 'Stated Out' i.e. muted. Thus allowing for quick comparisons and instant undo even on machines without any plug-ins.

Consider this. Most of the time involved in effects and equalisation is spent deciding what effect and which parameters to use, listening to the result and adjusting until satisfied. All the Audiofile plug-ins can be auditioned in real time so the time overhead involved in processing and copying at 25 – 33 times speed is negligible by comparison.

A single key press from the main Audiofile editing page invokes the plug-ins and parameters are controlled either from the Audiofile Spectra control surface or with mouse and keyboard on the Studio Controller; flexible and fast. Combinations of plug-ins are 'built' on a template page. Each plug-in can be individually switched in and out of circuit and the output of each monitored. Fader and Feedback Fader building blocks add to the creative possibilities.

Complex effects can be constructed and saved for future use. Obviously there are also libraries with factory and user presets for all the plug-ins.

A Time/Frequency Calculator aids pitch change and time-shift calculations.

My only reservations are that some of the graphics could be more legible and that none of this comes cheap. However, Audiofile has never been a 'back bedroom' machine. It is a serious, professional tool and, in serious, professional facilities, the cost pales into insignificance compared with the rest of the room and the operator.

AMS first made its name with the RMX16 reverb and DMX16 sampler, delay and pitch shifter. AMS Neve EQ and dynamics are legendary. These plug-ins continue the same tradition. Rather than being a step too far, they bring another dimension to an already massively capable tool.

As additions to any workstation these plug-ins would be highly desirable. In the context of real-world production facilities it is the slick implementation and complete integration with Audiofile that really sets them apart. ■

PROS Creative and productive; premium quality tools and effects

CONS With a price to match; some graphics could be clearer

Contact

AMS NEVE, UK:
Tel: +44 1282 457011