Audio Ease Speakerphone

The clever Dutchmen who brought us Altiverb have been beavering away at Speakerphone proclaiming it to be the ultimate speaker simulator plug-in. GEORGE SHILLING listens in some pretty strange places…

Supporting VST, RTAS, MAS and AU formats, Speakerphone comes with a CD-ROM installer, plus the DVD of integrated Sample Packs and 5Gb of background environment samples. The Speakerphone plug-in comprises 12 different processor modules plus a 'Sample Bay'; each module can be individually bypassed. The central process is the Speaker convolution module. This contains settings obtained from dozens of speaker devices, from tiny children's toys to enormous PA systems, with plenty of gramophone horns, valve radios, TVs, laptops, mobile phones, guitar amplifiers, and megaphones along the way. These are detailed and pictured in colour in the excellent user guide. Opening the plug-in reveals a large window that takes up almost a third of my screen, but even so it could do with being larger, as there are so many tiny controls and small things to read.

Context Help is available, and near the top is an indication of CPU use — turning every module on sent the indicator over 50% on my late-model G4 Mac, but EQ and Compression together used just 4%. The graphics are rather stylised and somewhat reminiscent of early Ableton Live, with a green and grey colour scheme and oddly represented rotary controls. Presets use a proprietary system and are handled at the top of the window, but using the host system in Pro Tools for saving user presets seemed to work OK, and many controls can be automated as normal.

However, Speaker types cannot be selected using automation, so you must swap multiple instances for automatic changes to the basic settings, although Audio Ease suggests it might add a Snapshot function. There are more than 500 presets provided, but these

are sensibly categorised and quick to find. Input Gain has its own knob but defaults to Auto for a level that tracks the input to optimise the effect without overloading or under-driving. On the Output there is a simple Limiter available, and a function to optionally Mute When Stopped.

A large Wet/Dry slider is provided across the top, and this can even be 'kicked' from anywhere to either side for instant smooth morphing, with a transition speed variable between 0.1 to 30 seconds, although the slider can be automated conventionally.

Speaker simulations are divided into six categories, each with their own icon: Record Players and Horns, Small Speakers, Guitar Amplifiers, Radios, Megaphones and Walkie-Talkies, and Telephones. Clicking on any of these brings up a drop-down list where you can choose a particular model, and that model's photo appears as the mouse is hovered. The More Info button opens a separate window with a larger photo and information. Speaker simulation can be placed Pre or Post the other effects. Having selected a dodgy old speaker, the first thing you notice is that while a certain tone is added, the sound is often remarkably clean. This is deliberate as below are eleven effects modules to futz the sound up further. Each individual module even includes a number of presets and a system for saving your own settings.

The Distortion module provides 10 different types, with a Pre-EQ one-band parametric with variable resonance and frequency low-pass filter, and the Curve graph allows further tweaking. Crunch-o-rama!

After this there is a Room module that features plenty of reverb convolutions from Altiverb, along with some new spaces, such as resonant wooden,

metal and plastic boxes — all settings accompanied by a photo. The only controls here are Mix and Decay, but the presets are excellent, including small Post spaces, outdoors ambience, 480L and EMT 140 reverbs. The EQ module is remarkably comprehensive: Low and High shelving, two Parametric bands, plus Low and High variable resonance and frequency filters.

Below the last three modules are two rows of four modules. Crush lets you reduce sample rate and wordlength using a crosshair graph. The Gate has variable Threshold and Release and provides complete gating or 20dB ducking. A well-featured Compressor provides all usual controls, and Phono simulates gramophone degradation in the shape of Wow and Ticks.

The next row features Mod which includes Phasing, Flanging, Chorus, etc., this will either modulate using a variable LFO, or Sync to the host tempo whereby the knob changes into a pop-up note value selector. Codec simulates GSM and similar degradations, and you can even control one setting via MIDI for vocoder-style robot voices and suchlike, although the pitch doesn't follow a conventional scale. The stereo Delay module features separate Left and Right settings and a sync to host function, High or Low Filter, etc. Finally the Tuning module emulates the effect of tuning in a radio station with a large selection of different band types and variable inter-modulation side bands.

The large section at the bottom is the Sample Bay. The five different columns represent five MIDI octaves for control using a keyboard or host sequencer, each column selectable Pre or Post Speaker and effects. Clicking on the heading brings up the list of categories and sample packs, and there are all sorts of background noises, SFX, speaker-related noises and ambiences to choose from here, and even some royalty-free music. Clicking a name sets the loop playing; dragging its right edge adjusts the level. And you can even drag files from host tracks straight into the list, and vice versa — dragging sounds from the library out onto Pro Tools tracks or as audio files into the Finder. Furthermore, it is possible to place in the Bay any samples or folders on your system, or any installed iLife Sound Effects.

So what's not to love? Well, some might moan that there is only one pair of stereo outputs, and there are no plans for a 5.1 version. But for television and film postproduction this is an excellent tool for achieving quick results. Classical or rock band recordists might not think there is much for them in this plug-in, but anyone in the field of experimental music, remixing or sound design will find many useable settings here. Even in rock and pop production there are effects here that will occasionally bring something new and fun to the proceedings — who doesn't love the occasional robot voice or gramophone effect? Speakerphone (Euro 395 + VAT) is unusual, flexible, fun, and will inspire myriad applications for audio people in many different fields. I love it! ■

PROS	Unique and comprehensive collection of effects, intelligently implemented; a marvellous tool for TV and film postproduction.
CONS	Stereo output only; no Snapshot/Speaker-select automation (yet); can't drag split stereo files to Sample Bay.

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