McDSP Plug-Ins

With an interesting assortment of dynamics, EQ and analogue channel emulations, this is one plug designer that is all about McChoice. GEORGE SHILLING goes for the veggie meal with an upgrade on the drink.

IF A CERTAIN HAMBURGER empire was to market a different kind of chip, McDSP might well be its chosen brand name. However, it has been snapped up instead by small Californian company McDowell Signal Processing, headed by one Colin McDowell, who used to be an engineer for Digidesign. His series of plug-ins aims to emulate just about every dynamics and EQ hardware unit ever built, and add extra features – no mean feat then.

The plug-ins are presently available only for Mac. They have a graphic theme of green panel backgrounds, black backgrounds for graphs and plots, with silver knobs and buttons. Make sure your printer has plenty of green ink if you want to print out the manuals – these are very good, bar a few typos, but come only in PDF form.

All these plugs use 'Double Precision Arithmetic' i.e. 48-bit processing, facilitating a very low noise floor. Fans of, ahem, knobs (and screen 'real estate') can choose knobs instead of sliders in FilterBank and CompressorBank, and in the case of the compressors, choose whether or not the compressor curve characteristics graph appears. These graphs, and the frequency graphs, can optionally display a calibrated background grid by Control-Clicking on them, which is useful for the technically minded. And all versions of all the following are selectable as stereo versions, with useful dual/stereo modes and relative linking available.

The Analogue Channel comes in two flavours. Analogue Channel 1 emulates electronic circuits, such as mixing consoles. Overload compression and 'pleasant' distortion are the main benefits of the AC1, whereas Analogue Channel 2 emulates tape, with settings emulating various manufacturers' real tape machines' measured responses, along with variable bias, frequency hump, roll-off and tape type.
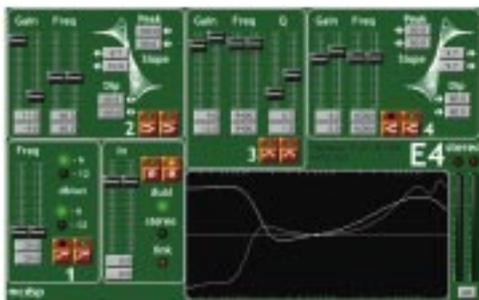
Tape compression is also modelled, with variable settings. It sounded very good when the Input was increased, but not quite as lovely as my EL Fatso. Although the distortion modelling is impressive, the lack of any hiss can make for a slightly 'dry' digital character. The effects of this plug are sometimes fairly subtle, but there are more than enough presets and settings to amuse you for months, especially with the AC2.

The CompressorBank plug-in has four different configurations. The CB1 includes all the usual settings for Ratio, Threshold, Attack and Release, as well as variable knee, and an unusual Bite control that lets differing degrees of transients pass through uncompressed, emulating different hardware models. The knee varies from soft to hard and beyond into a mode with a tail that gives an S-shaped characteristic, which tends to let the HF transients sparkle. The CB2 adds a very comprehensive 'pre-filter', useful for de-essing or taking some low-end out of a mix compressor, for example.

This includes all possible filter functions imaginable, with continuously variable slope characteristics and the option of inserting it in the signal path as well as the detector 'circuit'. The CB3 additionally includes one band of 'static/dynamic' EQ.

The CB4 is a much simpler affair, with specific settings for modelling particular hardware compressors, such as Urei 1176 and Fairchild 670, with a variable feature set to include only the controls found on those models. I wasn't entirely convinced that these settings sounded like the modelled hardware. However, the features of the CB3 are all useful in different situations. Overall, CompressorBank generally sounds best on vocals. On rhythmic signals it can be overly smooth and sometimes unexciting despite 'pumping'. The Release settings are often too long and the Thresholds too low in the presets.

FilterBank is the McDSP EQ plug-in, comprising 20 configurations of 2, 4 and 6-band EQ. These include various combinations of shelving, parametric and filter EQ, including band pass and band reject. The high and low pass filters can be set to 6, 12 or 24dB/octave, and sound smooth, clean, precise and powerful.

Large graph plots show the EQ curve set very clearly, except in the band pass version. The only criticisms I have is that the EQ types cannot be switched between shelving and peaking. I also occasionally found the +/-12dB range not quite enough, but similarly you can easily 'double up'. The shelf characteristics are infinitely variable with unique peak and dip controls that enable all kinds of different shapes at the corner frequencies for the emulation of just about any EQ character. FilterBank always sounds clean and smooth.

All these plug-ins are exceptionally economical with DSP resources, whether using TDM or RTAS, no doubt thanks to Mr McDowell's insider knowledge of how Pro Tools works. And all configurations are also present in AudioSuite form.

The graphics are good but I seem to remember the previous versions looking cleaner – the new knobs have small dots instead of line pointers. All the plug-ins are stable and well-behaved.

Unwanted distortion is difficult to achieve, thanks to the Analogue Saturation Modelling. I rarely found instant gratification with CompressorBank but Analogue Channel is great fun. FilterBank is indispensable – sonically powerful and clean, eminently usable, and always graphically clear. ∎

MC2000

This is a multiband version of Compressor Bank, and is priced higher than the other plugs here (McDSP prices start at UK£369 +VAT). There are 2, 3 and 4-band versions and just about all of the standard CompressorBank features are here, apart from the EQ. There are separate controls on each band for all features, including Bite and Knee, and any one band can become the master control.

When settings are changed on slave bands, these continue to move relatively when the master control is adjusted. This plug is excellent, it sounds terrific and is fairly easy to set up, with graphs showing the crossover points, separate meters on each band, and a graph showing the knee and ratio characteristics with colour coding for the bands.

PROS FilterBank is indispensable and Analogue Channel is very useful; low noise, analogue-style overloading; ongoing development.

CONS CompressorBank presets a little disappointing sonically; no printed manuals; modelled units not named in plugs (presumably for legal reasons).

Contact

MCDSP, US:
Website: www.mcdsp.com
UK, Unity Audio: +44 1440 785843