

SPL Analog Code Plug-Ins

As analogue intelligentsia manufacturers go, SPL has held out longer than most from submitting to the call of the plug-in. **GEORGE SHILLING** says they have now finally succumbed and he's quite pleased they did.

SPL first came to my attention 20 years ago with its relatively cheap Vitalizer boxes, a rival audio enhancer to the popular audio exciters of the day. A few years later I became a fan of the (still cheap) much loved and unique Transient Designer, and bought one. The German company has latterly developed more seriously 'pro' hardware designs, introducing products like the extraordinary and rather more expensive 120V Mastering series. For rather a long time now SPL has resisted the temptation to venture into software products. However, it has now developed a partnership with Dirk Ulrich, the boss of Brainworx, to develop these plug-ins.

The Analog Code moniker comes from the desire to emphasise how accurately these plug-ins have been modelled on the SPL hardware. Based on the company's RackPack modules, component modelling was employed, but there was also collaboration with the designers of the hardware for complete accuracy.

The first three SPL plug-ins are emulations of the Ranger EQs, Transient Designer, and TwinTube, available for TDM, or Native, in RTAS, VST and AU flavours. TDM purchasers also receive the native formats. Each SPL plug-in window comprises two sections — the main plug-in controls in the left part and a four-memory instant recall section on the right. Labelled simply A, B, C and D, these are useful for quickly comparing settings without having to name and save them in the host, and they can be automated in the DAW for altering settings during the course of a mix. All plug-ins include yellow signal present 'LED's, and red Overload indication. There is also an On button on the left panel and a Power button on the right, clicking either of these bypasses the process.



TRANSIENT DESIGNER — Although it is not long since Universal Audio licensed and developed a version of this very same unit for its UAD cards, SPL has started from scratch and developed its own code for this. This new version is subtly different from the UAD version; it does seem to pack more low-end punch on a bass drum, for example, and sounds absolutely terrific. Although rival designers have offered similar processors, few come close to the fantastic flexibility and ease of operation of the Transient Designer. With just two knobs (and latterly a level compensation knob) things couldn't be simpler. Often a life-saver on poor drum recordings, or an invaluable enhancer

on good ones, its uses are not limited to percussion. Anything that seems a bit spiky can be smoothed over with a little reduction of Attack and an increase in Sustain. The latter can also often have the effect of bringing up any room elements on a recording, adding some tone and depth to a sound. Cranking up the Attack can often bring lacklustre signals back to life. The process cleverly works independently of input signal level, and this plug-in retains all the hardware's characteristics and sonics.

EQ RANGERS — Three eight-band mini graphic EQs comprise the Rangers plug-ins. The hardware is reminiscent of the API 560 and works on a similar 'proportional Q' principle. The Rangers are passive designs, lending them naturally pleasant sonics. Although the Rangers each have only eight bands,



this is made up for with the provision of three distinct models featuring different frequency selections. The Full Ranger covers bands from 40Hz to 16kHz, the Vox Ranger covers bands from 220Hz to 4kHz, and the Bass Ranger goes from 30Hz to 2kHz.

Maximum cut or boost of each band is just over 12dB, but higher frequencies have broader bandwidth than lower bands. The sliders have rather vague calibration marks — you can employ host automation if you must know the exact boost or cut.

The first thing that is apparent when using these plugs is that small and even moderate boosts are rather subtle. You often find that plug-in EQs require more cranking than their analogue equivalents, but such is the natural character of this EQ with its excellent phase coherence and lack of distortion, that you can struggle to hear any effect at all initially. But increasing boost really sounds very sweet indeed. Some crazy looking curves are sometimes necessary for sculpting some character, but there is no doubting the quality of this processing.

Large EQ changes can be compensated for with the bottom Output level slider. I thought I would have less use for the Bass Ranger, as you rarely want to fiddle intricately with bass frequencies unless it's a rescue job. However, for rescue jobs this is impressive, and I soon found that experimenting with each band led me to some fantastic sounding bass drums, sometimes courtesy of wild looking curves. The Vox Ranger covers the crucial midrange area comprehensively, although despite a wide bandwidth I sometimes

found the highest band (centred on 4kHz) a little low. However, you can always add a Full Ranger. I would have liked the possibility of click-dragging curves with the mouse, perhaps by holding a modifier, just to give more of the feel of pushing shapes with your fingers on a hardware unit.

TWIN TUBE — This module comprises two effects — tube Saturation and Harmonics processing — and the two sections are completely independent, with a separate knob and On button for each. The Saturation control drives the virtual tube circuit gradually into rich and/or horrid distortion. It noticeably rounds off transients of drums, acoustic guitars and similar signals, simultaneously introducing some roughness into the sound. I frequently found that as soon as I could hear it doing anything significant, I often disliked the 'broken' sounding characteristics. But small amounts of distortion enabled instruments to be perceivably louder in a complex mix without them poking out or getting in the way.



I duplicated and balanced tracks in order to compare processed and unprocessed signal, as there is the glaring omission of any kind of level trim to counter the boost that happens (up to 6dB) from turning up the Saturation. The Harmonics control enriches the high frequencies at one of four selectable frequencies from 2kHz to 10kHz. In the hardware version a

combined coil/condenser system works in conjunction with the valve to process overtones and affect phase structure. It is claimed that this is different from the principle of exciters which add distortion, and the process is indeed cleaner than most exciters, but it has a similar effect, adding rich top end or upper mid harmonics to a signal. It sounds not unlike a fairly powerful EQ boost, but reacts dynamically with the material. In 10k mode it does a great job of lifting the blankets from the tweeters! I encountered a bug on the TDM version which frighteningly sent the level up about 12dBs when both processes were bypassed. SPL quickly remedied the situation with an update.

A nice innovation is that all SPL plug-ins' rotary controls and even the Ranger sliders can be adjusted using a mouse wheel when the pointer is hovering above. Holding a modifier increases resolution. This is an excellent idea that all plug-in designers should incorporate henceforth! ■

PROS Uniquely useful and flexible Transient Designer; gorgeous 'Passive' EQs; sparkling Harmonic enhancement.

CONS No Output gain trim on TwinTube; saturation not always to my taste.

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