

SSL Pro-Convert V5

On the day that an intrepid manufacturer released the second example of a DAW onto the market something else also arrived — a nasty and persistent problem. As workstations have multiplied and grown in capability and complexity this perennial bugbear has become the stuff of nightmares. **ROB JAMES** refers, of course, to file and project interchange.



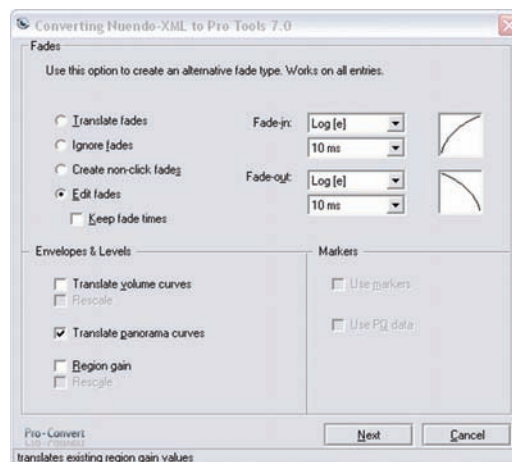
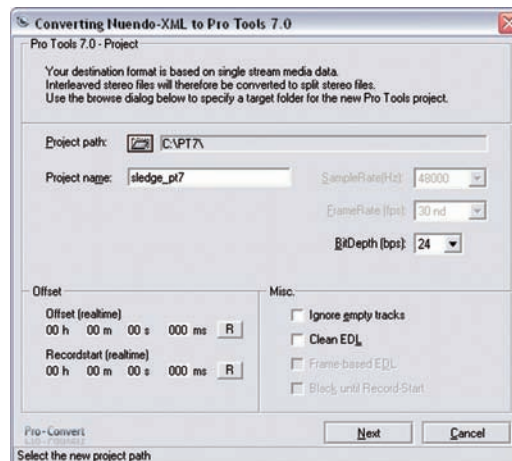
Conversion between most current audio file formats is now a trivial, if boring, exercise, although there is sometimes the attendant risk of degradation. Legacy Mac formats such as SD2 are best avoided simply because of the resource-fork problem. This can be dealt with but can also be a major pain especially across networks. However, this nuisance pales into insignificance when compared to the fun and games to be had when attempting to convert entire projects. In many ways this is directly analogous with converting video editing EDLs (Edit Decision Lists) and in fact video EDL formats, or at any rate modified video EDL formats, are often used to move simple projects between audio workstations.

In their most accessible form, EDLs are text lists of instructions that tell the hardware to play sections of given audio (or video) media files at specific times and for specified durations out of specified outputs. So straightforward are formats like the granddaddy of them all, CMX, that, with care, they can be edited in a simple text editor. At their most complex, EDLs can and do contain a wealth of other information about fade duration and shape, crossfades, panning, EQ and plug-ins, automation and metadata, etc. The more complex EDL formats often cannot be read by a human directly and are not amenable to modification in a simple text editor.

Most DAWs can, in theory at least, import and export in a number of formats for project interchange purposes. Some cannot and indeed, despite paying lip service to open formats and interchange, one or two manufacturers make life difficult for anyone wanting to try.

In reality, the whole business of interchange is fraught with problems. Even when a workflow is working nicely, a small change in either the source or destination software can cause major problems. By far the best answer is to stay with one 'standard' all the way through a project. Recognising that this is often just not practical in the real world, any tool that can help with the process has got to be welcome.

Written originally by German software house Cui Bono Soft, founded by Axel Gutzler and Wolfgang Packeiser, Pro-Convert has been around since 2000 as EDL Convert. The last version I can find details



for was 4.2 in 2004 with a price around the 250 to 350 dollar mark. SSL bought the software in 2007 and have now produced a new version, Pro-Convert V5, at UK£349 (+ VAT).

Pro-Convert approaches the interchange problem on several levels. At the top is full native compatibility. This means taking a project from one DAW or NLE in its native format and converting it into the native format of another with everything translated (apart from mixer snapshots, plug-ins and MIDI, which it doesn't deal with). The next level requires the source to export in an intermediate 'wrapper' format such as XML or OMF. At the lowest level Pro-Convert can use the EDL formats with the broadest compatibility such as CMX. It can also convert between audio media file formats when necessary.

The killer feature is its ability to read and write Pro Tools Session formats above version 5.0. I'll repeat that, Pro-Convert can read and write Pro Tools 5.1-7.x, *.ptf and *.pts format Session files (and V5.0 as well of course!)

The current list of native formats supported also includes Adobe Audition, Steinberg Wavelab montage and, naturally enough, SSLs SoundScape. Other applications, such as Samplitude/Sequoia, SADIe, Final Cut Pro, Logic and Nuendo, all require

projects to be saved in a suitable interchange format. Others, such as Pyramix, Avid, Sonar, Digital Performer and Audiofile, currently have to use OMF (or XML) as the intermediate and a number of templates are provided for this.

The default parameters work well enough in most cases, but when they don't there is a vast range of tweaks. When things don't work out quite as anticipated the problem often lies in the capabilities of either the source or target. This is one application where reading the manual really is likely to save a lot of time and head scratching. A detailed index would be helpful. Although 32-bit Windows only, Pro-Convert should also run on Intel Macs via Boot-Camp, Parallels, etc.

Installation is simple enough and there is a dongle for copy protection. Machine requirements are modest although if you are planning to do a lot of media file conversion, then the more grunt the better. It's worth noting that despite the fact that this is primarily an audio tool it will deal successfully with references to a single video file. Since it cannot handle plug-ins or mixer layouts (to avoid an exponential rise in complexity) where these are an issue you need to export projects with 'frozen' or consolidated tracks with the effects included. Also worth mentioning is that it is a good idea to stick to the most common audio file formats and avoid exotic multichannel interleaved types.

The interface is as simple as it can be with browser windows and dialog boxes as necessary. In operation I experienced some aberrations but, with careful attention to the settings these were relatively minor.

SSL assures me that development work is proceeding apace to include more native formats. Tom Schuh, Pro-Convert product manager had this to say: 'We are in discussion with ALL major DAW manufacturers and working hard to eliminate the missing names in the list of Pro-Convert supported applications. The list of supported DAWs will change over the course of the next 12 months, however in which order other DAWs will be supported heavily depends on the pace of contribution by other manufacturers.'

Pro-Convert V5 is an essential addition to any facility house toolkit. Conversion is an imperfect science and the quicksand is constantly shifting as the DAW manufacturers update their software. It will never be a substitute for a properly designed workflow but, when it works well, it does open up a lot of possibilities. For music it means an easier route for people who wish to use the DAW they are familiar with in the early stages of production and later move to a different studio for final mixing. Similarly, in sound for picture it will enable less fraught collaboration between people using different DAWs.

In the professional context, if it saves a day or so of reconstruction or sheer fiddling about, Pro-Convert only has to work once, on one project, to justify its asking price. ■

PROS Reads and writes Pro Tools 5.x – 7.x session formats; lots of tweaks; cheaper than a day messing about.

CONS Not a perfect process (but what is?); limited number of DAWs supported natively; operator intelligence required.

Contact

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