TC Electronic PowerCore Compact

Look at it as your external processing in a box, a companion for your laptop or as a rather large dongle, TC is bringing the PoCo to more ordinary folk. ROB JAMES is eating sensibly and for the second time in this issue goes Lite.

THE WORLD OF OUTBOARD effects is changing. On the face of it an obvious observation but bear with me. On the one hand, the classic 'one trick pony' analogue box is experiencing a real resurgence in popularity. This is because its core virtues are being discovered by a new generation of engineers and rediscovered by the 'older' generation. On the other hand, the plug-in continues to proliferate. However, despite all the 'jam tomorrow' promises of the native processing advocates, workstations continue to use as much of the available computing horsepower as they can get their digits on.

There are two commercially available routes around this problem. The workstation manufacturer can include hardware DSP horsepower and software hooks for plug-ins in its products. This tends to be an expensive solution. Alternatively an independent manufacturer can build a DSP card or box running bespoke plug-ins. These can be presented to the user in such a way that they operate just like any other plug-in with the particular application, for example VST, Audio Units or Direct X. The advantage is that the processing overhead to the workstation is minimised and that the DSP card/box manufacturer can maintain a much greater degree of control than is possible with Native plug-ins. If the DSP is in a box, connected via FireWire then it is likely to have a much longer useful life than any PCI card, especially since this 'standard' is effectively already obsoleted by PCI Express.

TC Electronic's earlier PowerCore FireWire has already proved the point. TC's undoubted expertise in producing standalone effects boxes has been put to excellent use to provide plug-in effects with quality and reliability approaching that of a 'dedicated' hardware box.
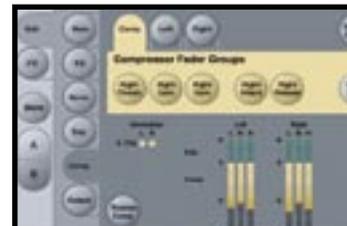
The new PowerCore compact is a 'light version' of the PowerCore FireWire at an asking price of UK£515 + VAT. This time the box is the size of a hardback novel and the styling softer, making the unit more suitable for use with a laptop. Internally and functionally it is, in effect, half a PowerCore FireWire — it has two Motorola 56367 DSPs each with 512k Word SRAM instead of four. The plug-in bundle lacks the Dynamic EQ and DeNoise included with PowerCore FireWire, but otherwise you get the same processors. TC has kept its promise, not only has the library of optional TC and third-party plug-ins grown in size but there are new bundled plug-ins too.

Installation is trivial. Launch the set-up application, reboot the machine and connect the hardware. Follow the on-screen prompts and that's it. The Compact is also the security dongle, so there is no copy protection to worry about. Turn it on and a row of blue LEDs on the front scan quizzically from side to side. Once recognised by the PC it shows a solid blue line.

TC includes a decent range of processors of its own devising and some good third-party examples.

If you like TC-style reverb and dynamics, these will not disappoint. A couple of unusual ones add interest (see panel). All are characterised by the same kind of easygoing tolerance you get from 'hardware' outboard. With native plug-ins I often have the uneasy feeling I'm close to the edge. In PC applications, processors are presented as VST plug-ins or, if you are feeling brave, you could try a third party Direct X wrapper. If it works for you, great, if not... For the Mac there is the choice of VST or Apple's Audio Units. The PowerCore Control Panel enables you to check resources, change parameters and check version information.

The range of optional processors is equally impressive. TC has updated its already useful Restoration Suite and introduced the MD3 Stereo Mastering package, which provides the same kind of multiband dynamics and brickwall limiting found in the TC 6000, and very good it is too. At a list price of UK£699 it needs to be. TC 30 is TC's answer to Vox AC-30 nostalgia. TC Helicon offers its VoiceModeler and Intonator. Sony has ported its excellent processors to the PowerCore. I have always particularly admired the EQ. Waldorf supply the D-Coder, a modernised Vocoder/synth, and DSound's VL2 8-channel virtual valve interface is available.

Strangely, the Surround reverb seems to have been dropped. Synths come courtesy of the included PowerCore 1 and the optional Access' Virus and Novation V-Station.

Compact extends the PowerCore range in a useful and sensible way. Not only does it lower the entry price for those with an eye on the future but it also opens up the PowerCore experience to Laptop users on the move. Given its considerable experience in producing standalone processors TC is in an excellent position to capitalise on PowerCore and appears intent on covering all the bases. The degree of serious third-party support helps consolidate this and increases confidence. This entire shooting match, hardware and generous processor bundle, costs less than some single plug-ins. Its success should be a foregone conclusion. ■

Highlights

Megareverb uses the Core 1 and 2 algorithms taken from the M5000 with enhanced tail design and diffusion improvements culled from more recent products. Classic Verb is much less natural but arguably a more creatively interesting proposition. EQSat Custom is a mastering equaliser. The algorithm is borrowed from the Finalizer. Master X3 is also based on the Finalizer algorithms. Multi-band expansion, compression and limiting plus 'Soft Clip' and dither.

Chorusdelay follows the functionality of the TC 1210 Spatial Expander providing chorus, flange and slap-echo. PowerCore CL is a general-purpose compressor. Voicestrip, as the name implies, has the tools commonly used for voice processing. Compression, De-Essing, EQ, Lo Cut Filter and Gate. 24/7C Limiting Amplifier is a software homage to one of 'those' compressors, including the '4-button mode'. The Compensator Native plug-in provides manual delay compensation for applications that do not include automatic plug-in delay compensation.

Filtroid is a simulacrum of an analogue filter bank with LFO, etc. that is capable of some very tasty extreme effects. Character is a new and somewhat enigmatic inclusion from fellow Danes, Noveltech. Using Intelligent Adaptive Filtering technology it claims to enhance favourable characteristics in a signal without requiring much expertise from the operator. Whatever the implications of this, it certainly produces some very interesting results for little effort.

Tubifex imitates three valve/tube stages and a speaker simulator to model amplifiers. Each of the three stages is based on a classic ECC83/12AX7 design. Vintage CL is a 'DBX' style vintage compressor/limiter.

PROS	Much 'bang for the buck'; excellent bundled reverb and dynamics plug-ins; good looking design; ideal for use with a laptop set-up.
CONS	No surround effects; VST and Audio Units only; issues with some FireWire chipsets (not its fault).

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