

TC PowerCore X8 (with Tube-Tech CL-1B)

As one of the earliest purveyors of the 'box of DSP' approach, TC has seen the power of computers increase and has hiked the power of its PoCos accordingly. The X8 is its most powerful offering yet but **GEORGE SHILLING** can handle it...



TC's PowerCore system is now long established as an excellent method of increasing the capabilities of a native system, adding a broad range of included, optional and third party plug-ins to the host, with extra CPU horsepower to boot. It's been around since 2001, and since then, host computer power has increased immensely, so it is now possible to run more capable DAW systems without assistance from external processors. However, the inevitable progress of technology has led to more complex and demanding plug-ins whose quality has noticeably increased in the intervening years. Like the Universal Audio UAD-1 and SSL Duende, the PowerCore devices run dedicated high quality plug-ins

on custom hardware.

The latest addition to the PowerCore family is the X8, its most powerful unit to date. It includes 8 Motorola DSPs that equate to double the power of the PowerCore FireWire and four times the power of the PowerCore Compact. And there is, of course, plenty of included RAM. It ships with V3 software, although inevitably after the installation it transpired that there was a newer version online, and the process had to be repeated. The box itself is a simple 1U with a pair of FW400 connectors and a little in-line external PSU. The front panel has an enormous bright blue illuminated logo that shines brightly when all is well, and there is a rocker power switch.

The X8 comes with 14 included AU/VST plug-ins, plus a voucher to choose some optional extras from the TC-now website. Many extra demos are installed at the outset, which can be potentially frustrating, as these are fully functional but time limited, so checking the list of what you actually own in the control panel is advisable, and even then it's not always clear. Some standard plug-ins don't show up in the list, while others have different names. I started enjoying the excellent BrickWall Limiter, only to find that it is part of the time-limited demo MD3 Stereo Mastering suite. As well as enabling viewing and authorising of plug-ins, the installed Control Panel shows DSP usage, and allows setting of a few performance parameters.

Bundled plug-ins include the 1176 emulating 24/7C, unsurprisingly somewhat inferior to the UAD version, but it includes all the usual controls and the famous all-buttons-in mode. The gain structure is slightly odd and I found it difficult to apply subtle compression to an upright bass and still have enough gain on the output to match the bypassed signal. A more tweakable vanilla-flavoured dynamic processor is available in the PowerCoreCL compressor limiter, with two distinct sections; the compressor featuring a mix control, and the limiter including Soft Saturation. The multiband mastering Master X3 is also included, still a useful level maximising tool.

EQSat Custom is the main dedicated EQ plug-in, with five bands and a Soft Saturation setting available. Noveltech Character is an enhancer that analyses incoming signal and intelligently enhances aspects of the signal using only three parameters — it is equally useful on any signal for a bit of extra juice, and adds a nice glowing presence. Dynamic EQ includes four bands, which can be continuously varied between static and dynamic function. VoiceStrip includes basic EQ, compression, de-essing, etc and the excellent Chorus-Delay is modelled on the TC 1210 hardware unit, with BPM settings available. This covers crispy and rich chorus and flanging as well as delay with a high cut filter.

Classic Reverb provides good basic reverb, and Mega Reverb takes algorithms from the M5000 for some very nice settings. However, the trial versions of the System 6000-based DVR (based on the EMT 250) and NonLin2 really whet the appetite with their astonishing richness, showing what can be achieved with the power of the PowerCore processors. Filtroid emulates two analogue filters with various routing and modulation possibilities. The useful and effective DeNoise gives a flavour of the Restoration Suite.

Tubifex is a terrific guitar amp modelling plug-in with three modelled 12AX7 tube stages and speaker simulation — it's very convincing, with a very rich and variable overdrive sound. Finally the PowerCore01 is a virtual synth modelled on the classic Roland SH-101. This is a great sounding instrument, with all controls mapped to MIDI controllers. It comes with a huge categorised preset library, and there are loads of great settings.

Each plug comes with a number of presets with a proprietary file system included on each plug-in, and while (apart from the PowerCore 01) these are not bountiful they generally provide enough starting points.

The review model was additionally supplied with the Tube-Tech CL-1B plug-in, an emulation of the famous hardware unit. This has been modelled by Softube AB of Sweden, and is to all intents and purposes



a thoroughly authentic recreation, sounding every bit as characterful as the hardware unit. This was created with 'highly advanced component emulation technology' to great effect. There's nothing quite like the real thing, but this captures the character very well. I especially loved it on vocals and acoustic piano.

PowerCore plug-ins do not come as RTAS versions for Pro Tools as standard, but with FXPansion's VST to RTAS utility you can wrap all plug-ins to work, with no evident problems. Particularly useful on my HD system with ageing computer were the buffer multiplier settings found in the PowerCore control

panel. These provided virtually no RTAS CPU penalty in exchange for slightly longer latency settings, and those were dealt with seamlessly with the delay compensation.

Using some of the more complex plug-ins inevitably requires more processing power, for example the Tube-Tech uses 44% of the processing of one of the eight chips. In normal use there is plenty of power to create a complex mix setup, even without the help of onboard computer processing. Although some seem a little long in the tooth and possibly past their sell-by date, some of the standard bundled plug-ins are truly excellent. I had a better experience with latency and bandwidth issues using the X8 compared to Duende or UAD-1, but each of these solutions provides different plug-in selections — if you are a fan of vintage compression then the UAD is probably of more interest. However, once optional TC and third-party plug-ins are added to the PowerCore there are few weak areas. Some of the add-on reverbs really glow, and a unique bonus is the ability to run a number of different soft synths. ■

PROS

Plenty of processing power; great reverbs — especially with the optional add-on plug-ins; good support from third-party developers including Sonnox; good soft synth included.

CONS

FireWire connection; uninspiring compression without adding the Tube-Tech plug-in; fiddly graphics on some plug-ins; demo authorisations not always clear; some optional plug-ins expensive.

Contact

TC ELECTRONIC, DENMARK:
Website: www.tcelectronic.com