UA SSL and Studer UAD plug-ins

Harking back to a time when studios were studios and the market liked it that way, GEORGE SHILLING **plugs up some SSL desk to some Studer multitrack and finds it all very familiar …**

*U*A cheekily introduced the 4K Channel Strip and 4K Buss Compressor plug-ins a while back, but has now introduced updated versions that are officially licensed by SSL. The old plug-ins continue to co-exist for backwards compatibility and to upgrade those to these new versions there are small upgrade fees. For your money, you get the most significant upgrade with what is now called the SSL E Channel Strip. The earlier UAD 4K strip was modelled on a 'black knob' EQ equipped console. The new version includes an updated version of that — apparently the modelled desk was custom calibrated differently from typical examples. So, the EQ has been tweaked in collaboration with SSL for a more authentic set of curves. And, more significantly, there is now a switch to select Brown Knob mode. This is a wholly different EQ with a much broader character. With real SSL desks, I was always a dyed-in-the-wool black knob fan, it's tweakier and more precise; but there are occasions when the smoother brown knob mode is useful, and this does the job authentically.

The colour scheme of the knob caps has been updated to more accurately reflect the real thing, and what is more, the LF knobs actually change to the appropriate colour when the mode is switched. The modelling seems very accurate, in line with UA's usually high standards. The Dynamics section has all the splurge of the compressor we know and love, and the EQ is as powerful as ever. The Fast Attack mode of the compressor is properly brutal, and the knob graphic even appears to pull up like the original console (unlike SSL's own X-Rack recreation). Another bonus over the reissued hardware is that this strip also includes the filters, which authentically vary in character depending on the EQ mode. The Gate includes the original Expander and Gate modes, plus a second gate mode based on later SSL designs that boast a 'no chatter' circuit — it works well. And all the familiar sidechain options are present and correct. Usefully, the stereo version of this plug-in can be set to operate as dual mono with regard to Dynamics by de-activating the Link button.

The G Series Bus Compressor has also been graphically tweaked from the original UAD incarnation. This was already very accurate modelling, and with all the same settings and similar calibrations to the original item it makes for a very useful tool. With fast or the Auto release setting, this glues the mix as beautifully as ever. The only addition here on the new version is the provision of the famous SSL Auto Fade — a button with a knob ranging from 1 to 60 seconds. This was fun on the console but will probably not be so frequently employed when you have DAW control of automation and graphical representation of fades. Anyone familiar with the original Quad Compressor or its later incarnations will feel at home using this, and I suspect the majority of instantiations will be across the stereo mix bus. It's odd to see these SSL plug-ins in the UAD list alongside so many of rival Neve's licensed emulations, but having the choice is a dream situation for users.

The Studer A800 plug-in is officially licensed by Studer and offers modelling of the machine electronics, plus a variety of tape formulations. The plug-in window graphics are a stunningly authentic representation of the tape machine, with animated rotating tape reels (although you can stop that when it gets too irritating!) A selector chooses the tape formulation (250, 456, 900 or GP9 — none officially licensed, but we know what they are, especially with the closely copied designs of the take-up spools!) Tape speed can be set to 7.5, 15 or 30ips, while preset calibration levels (to determine how hard you are hitting the tape) can be set to line-ups of +3, +6, +7.5 or +9dB. There are also Input and Output level knobs with plenty of range. You can even switch to a mode to model just the electronics of the machine (and not the tape), and select between

Repro and Sync head models (although I can't imagine you'd often want the latter!)

Using the different speeds, levels and formulations, the effect is pretty subtle but undoubtedly very closely resembling the real thing. Even just putting one instantiation across the mix bus lends the whole mix a beautiful glow — mixing a slow, unusual, atmospheric yet busy track I found that putting the Studer last in the chain and selecting GP9 at 15ips with a line-up at 7.5 really helped glue the mix and tighten the bottom end. It added an almost indescribable magic to the mix that just made it all sound somehow more like a proper record. Switching to 900 tape brought a little more clarity — just as I remember from a tape brand shoot-out a few years back.

The Studer A800 plug-in also has some other tricks. Click the 'Open' legending and a whole raft of extra controls appears, resembling line-up panels and pushbuttons of the original machine. These include familiar line-up EQ trims with HF and Bias on the HF Driver section, and HF and LF trims for (separately) Sync and Repro heads. At lower speeds you have the choice of NAB or CCIR EQ. Having fiddled with the settings, you can thankfully always return to an 'accurate' or recommended line-up by clicking Auto Cal On. There are also adjustments for Hiss and Hum levels (and Noise On/Off buttons).

This plug-in breaks new ground with a system to link multiple instantiations across the mixer by virtue of the Gang Controls function. Activating this on any instantiation links all plug-ins' controls together. There is a tiny flaw in the system, in that recalling a preset didn't cause other instantiations to adjust to the new settings; you must actually tweak each control for its brethren to follow suit. But this is akin to Avid's HEAT

master controls, where the whole tone of the mix can be changed, even with a separate processor on each channel.

The provided presets are a bit 'scattergun' in their naming and ordering in the list, but I mainly tweaked my own settings. UA suggests placing the Studer as the first plug-in on all channels, and for a really enriching sound this could work great. However, modelling that is this good requires quite some DSP, so I suspect many users — me included — will be thinking of adding another UAD2 card to their system. Each mono Studer added 10% to the DSP usage of my Solo card, whereas the SSL Channel only adds 7%, so there are few mixes I'd be able to do with all tracks covered, especially once I've used my usual cherry-pickings of UAD reverb, EQ and compression.

But I was able enough to explore the possibilities and be thoroughly impressed. My favourite tape emulation is undoubtedly the AnaMod ATS-1 but this comes fairly close, at considerably lower cost. The Studer sounds terrific, and I thoroughly recommend it. Now, how about an Ampex or MCI too…? ∎

PROS Thoroughly accurate emulations of great classic gear.

CONS Ever-higher DSP requirements for new plug-ins; fairly high latency for TDM users.