Universal Audio UAD Plug-ins

Universal Audio is widely respected not only for impressive hardware reissues and original designs, but also for the quality of the ever increasing plug-in range available for its UAD cards. GEORGE SHILLING tries a Bus Compressor, Transient Designer and Helios Type 69.

The UAD PCI card system has been expanded with two new alternatives to the original UAD-1 card: the UAD-1e PCIe version for compatibility with newer computers, and the UAD-Expander which uses the ExpressCard format for laptops. The latest update to the UAD software (for AU, VST and RTAS) is 4.9, and as usual, there are a few bug fixes, plus two new plug-ins on a 14-day trial. These comprise the Precision Buss Compressor and the SPL Transient Designer.

The former is a UA original, designed to emulate VCA-type 'master section console compressors', with the aim of 'gluing' mix elements, so I think we can all guess what the model for this was… As if that weren't enough of a clue, there is an auto-fade function also built in with a knob to set time from 1 to 60s. This one seems rather rapid at the start, and slows down too much at the end of the fade, compared to my memory

of the SSL. The final giveaway is that Ratio can be set to 2:1, 4:1 or 10:1.

Other controls feature more variation: Attack and Release are continuously variable, although the latter includes a familiar Auto setting. However, there are two really brilliant features that others never thought to include. These comprise a Mix control for blending uncompressed signal, and a switchable sidechain Filter variable from 20Hz to 5kHz. These are both terrific features that would always be on my wish list for a dream compressor, and they are implemented perfectly here. Knob settings and metering are displayed very clearly in the plug-in window, and this sounds absolutely as you might expect, although without the two 'new' features activated the Duende Stereo Bus Compressor seems to have slightly more 'glue' in a brief A/B test.

The SPL Transient Designer is one of the few

pieces of hardware outboard I use regularly in preference to the convenience of software plug-ins. None of its imitators has the simplicity of operation of the SPL — just two knobs, Attack and Sustain. The SPL is invaluable for rescuing poorly tuned and/or recorded bass and snare drums; turning up the Sustain often adds a richness and ambience that turns a pingy snare drum into something with a nice rich crunch. So a plug-in emulation is something for which I have waited a long time (although a version was available for the Creamware Pulsar/SCOPE platform).

The UAD version opens in a surprisingly large window that shows two panels. The design is based on the new RackPack hardware version of the Transient Designer rather than the original 1U versions. The left panel hosts knobs for Attack and Sustain, plus there is the useful Output Gain knob (new on the RackPack version) for trimming the signal following processing. The right panel seems somewhat superfluous, as it features just a Power button, which has the effect

of bypassing the effect in exactly the same way as the On button on the other panel! The Transient Designer cleverly senses the transients by measuring levels relative to the average signal level — the effect is therefore not dependent on the overall level. Increasing Attack sharpens the initial transients of drums, acoustic guitars, etc., while decreasing it softens the initial snap.

Increasing the Sustain knob brings up the decay of any sound in a rather pleasing fashion, while reducing it often has the effect of removing ambience. UA claims the Transient Designer can be thought of as a 'philosophical relative of the LA-2A' and I'd broadly go along with that. With simple controls, the effects of both these devices are generally pleasing, and very quick to set up. As usual, the UAD emulation is excellent, with the sound comparing favourably alongside the hardware. The only difference detected was at extremes of setting, with a few transient attacks sneaking through when Attack was set to minimum on the plug-in, where the hardware wasn't so easily fooled. But this generally has all the function and sound of the hardware, and I anticipate this will get a lot of use here.

The Helios Type 69 EQ was released a few versions back, but is one of the more interesting vintage emulations available for the UAD. In contrast to the SPL, the plug-in window for this seems perversely small. This is characterful, musical and satisfying to use, with some rather quirky controls. The unit modelled is the first Type 69 which was originally at Island's Basing Street Studios, which (handily for UA) is now in California. This sumptuous three-band EQ is the kind of circuit that is happy being pushed to extremes — 'full boost at all frequencies' can sound great!

The High band is a 10kHz shelf with a stepped range of -6dB, -3dB, then 2dB steps from zero up to an indicated +16dB. The Mid band has eight useful switched frequencies, and 15dB continuous boost or cut. The Q starts off wide at low gain, then narrows with increased gain for a nicely pokey sound. The Bass section is rather unconventional, with either a peak boost of up to 15dB at four selectable frequencies, or a shelving cut at a fixed 50Hz in 3dB steps down to -15dB. However, a boost is applied when one of the frequencies is selected, even with the gain at zero — one of the peculiarities of the original that UA has faithfully modelled! Even with EQ bypassed, some subtle signal enhancement is apparent — just a slight enrichment is detected.

This is a fantastic EQ, especially when used on drums and acoustic instruments, with a real 1970's spirit. The penalty for this wonderful sonic quality is a rather heavy DSP requirement. With one UAD card installed just six mono or four stereo instances of this plug-in are available at 44.1kHz, so unless a multi-card setup is used, or you 'print to tape', this will be a rare treat.

UA's plug-ins are superb, but the original card is quite long in the tooth, and increasing DSP requirements of plug-ins like the Helios and Neve emulations can only strengthen the case for something new. But even though their rather large latency preclude use in a recording situation, I would hate not to have these effects for the final mix. ∎

PROS Arguably the best plug-ins and emulations around.

CONS Latency too great for recording/ monitoring situations; uses some host CPU processing; DSP requirements of some plug-ins unreasonable for current cards!

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