Waves API Collection

It was only a matter of time but an officially sanctioned set of API plugs has been on the cards for a while and that they should come from Waves is encouraging. GEORGE SHILLING plugs into some of his favourite outboard.

WITH THE PROLIFERATION of SSL and Neve emulations that have appeared over the last couple of years, it is perhaps inevitable that there would be an officially licensed set of plug-ins based on these well-loved API (Automated Processes Inc.) analogue processors. URS had an unofficial attempt at modelling some of the API hardware, but this from Waves is an officially sanctioned release. Waves now provides emulations of the three most respected players in the analogue console world, with the official SSL 4000 Collection and the unofficial Neve-based V-Series. API developed its 2520 op-amp in the late 1960s, and several original module designs are still available. This collection comprises three vintage EQ channels and the more recent 2500 bus compressor. Oddly, the simpler 525 compressor is absent.

Waves' tedious installation and authorisation process is more complex than most manufacturers' and I have yet to have this complete smoothly for any demos, and this was no exception. There is also the matter of WUP (Waves Update Plan) for purchasers, meaning that an already expensive purchase gradually becomes more so. Furthermore, the reselling procedure seems rather complex.
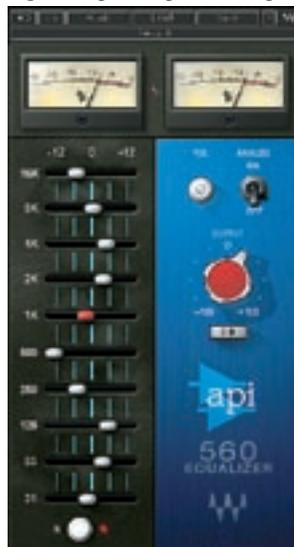
The plugs support TDM, RTAS, AudioSuite, MAS, VST, DirectX and AU formats, and in Pro Tools show up in all the expected places. Opening any of them, I was initially surprised by the enormity of the window size — this seems to be current policy with Waves as other recent releases boast similarly large graphics. This seems rather incongruous with the rather diminutive hardware API equivalents but it is welcome, things are easier to see and manipulate, and it makes sense as LCD screens get ever larger and cheaper.

Dialling up the EQ plug-ins you are confronted with a huge screen full of lovely authentic graphic recreations, with a few helpful modifications. The dual-concentric knobs are beautifully modelled, with clever implementation of controls using up/down and left/right mouse control for the different knobs, with helpful little arrow indicators appearing as you hover over them. All controls have a pop-up value display when adjusted. The three EQ plug-ins include vintage-style metering at the top, these have a range of 30dB up to 0dBFS, but have been designed to look like VUs, with a Clip 'LED'. There is an extra panel with +/-18dB gain on a knob, Peak level readout, Polarity switching, and an Analog On/Off switch, which theoretically defeats emulation of (one assumes) analogue distortion, and a small amount of hiss in the case of the EQs. With EQ applied, selecting Analog On can sometimes add a certain extra low-mid poke, but this is all rather subtle and no difference was detected with the EQ set flat.

The 550A three-band EQ is based on a 1960s design, the hardware version of which was reissued in 2004. I loved using originals on the c.1977 API console at RAK studios. The character of these is smooth, simple and musical — it's the kind of EQ that is difficult to get wrong with gentle peaks and shelves with 'proportional Q' at useful fixed frequencies. It is less 'butch' than vintage Neve and the Waves version

seems very similar. The shelving and filter buttons are augmented with extra indicators. The 550B is a similar unit that features an extra band and more frequency settings that overlap across the bands, although it lacks the A's band pass Filter. But half the fun of these is the limited operation — boost and cut are in 2dB steps (offering +/-12dB) and the A offers just 5 frequencies on each of its three bands, whose bandwidths are non-adjustable. The B offers seven on each of its four bands. Both 550 plug-ins sound as crisp and airy as the real thing, extreme boosts never sound nasty, although the plug-ins seem to introduce less noise than an analogue patching arrangement might!

The 560 is a graphic-type EQ, again a vintage design, and this also uses a 'Proportional Q', i.e. small boosts cover a wider range, and more extreme boosts (and cuts) narrow the bandwidth. This makes it just about the smoothest and most forgiving graphic EQ that you are likely to encounter, and this is surely one of the most 'analogue' sounding plug-ins in existence. The only slight daftness is the unnecessary vertical orientation — the URS version sensibly orientates this sideways.

The 2500 is modelled on the hardware rackmount stereo mix bus compressor that was launched in 2000.

This excellent unit boasts some unique features. The original's 1u front panel layout has been shunted into three rows with logical sections and the output gain and Analog switch on a panel similar to the EQ plugs, although here you also have the option of auto-gain makeup. To be honest, I was initially disappointed with this plug-in, it seemed to somehow lack the 'wow' factor of the hardware unit, and I thought this emulation was less successful than the EQs, particularly in Feed Back mode.

However, I initially judged this by transplanting it across an existing mix. When I started using it on subgroups and individual instruments, I started to fall in love with it almost as much as I had the hardware. The Thrust circuit works beautifully, filtering the sidechain and allowing great squashing of programme without big bass drum beats messing it all up. With the hardware I almost always prefer the Feed Back compression type, but somehow here the Feed Forward seems to sound even better in many instances. There is a knob to select variable percentages of stereo linking, plus three different filtering options for the link — perhaps these are of more interest to mastering engineers, but they are nevertheless useful in situations where stereo image is important.

As with all Waves plug-ins, their excellent proprietary filing system is included, and some useful starting points are provided with the extensive presets. They are fairly economical with resources, so it is perfectly possible to have a large quantity of these on multitrack channels, although the 560 was fussier, refusing to open without free Accel (rather than Process) chips.

The API Collection (TDM US$2000; native $1000) is obviously not quite the same as having the hardware, and the best API tool is surely the mic preamp, so that obviously fails to make an appearance here. But these are fine tools, bringing some character and life to the safe world of digital mixing. You don't need them, but you will want them! ■

PROS Thoroughly designed plug-ins with great attention to detail; it's fun to have a large number of API EQs on your ITB mix; excellent graphics.

CONS Expensive; WUP; you still need some API 512C mic preamps for the full effect! Emulations still lack some of the character of the hardware originals; No 525.

Contact
WAVES, ISRAEL:
Website: www.waves.com