Waves SSL 4000 Collection

Plug-in emulations of the automated console that typified an era and defined modern operational methods were inevitable given the drive to integrate everything into the DAW. GEORGE SHILLING dons flying goggles and helmet and revisits the resurrection of an old favourite.

THE MAJORITY OF my engineer flying hours were clocked up on SSL 4000 Series consoles. I have often fended off criticism of these desks from engineers who preferred rival manufacturers' products. This denigration invariably centres on the quality of the audio path. My defence is usually based on the superior operation and ergonomics of the SSL, the layout of the controls is wonderfully clear, and the integrated automation computer simple to use, its operation rarely interrupting the workflow. I can use a 4k with my eyes half-closed! Although many loved the onboard compression, the integrity of the mic preamps, EQ and signal path were, in fairness, open to question. I never chose an SSL 4k room because of the sound of the desk. But I rarely found this a problem –- the sound of the SSL was undeniably crunchier than that of contemporary Neves, but in reality, the studio was booked, and you just made the best of whatever equipment was at hand. Plenty of hit records seemed to survive and prosper despite or because of this character (and the skills of engineers!) And part of the myth of the SSL sound was more to do with the all-too-tempting ease of popping in the characterful channel dynamics. My eyebrows raised when I learned of this product from Waves. After years of listening to people moaning about the sound of older SSLs, here was a plug-in aiming to emulate that sound!

The package (Price US$1000 native; US$2000 TDM), which was developed under license from Solid State Logic, comprises three separate plug-ins. The centrepiece is the E Channel which has the EQ, Filters and Dynamics sections of the 'black-knob' EQ vintage desk (superior to the earlier 'brown knob' EQ), along with a useful channel fader. The graphic rendering and shading is truly impressive. But rather than representing them authentically in-line, the sections have been placed more conveniently alongside each other. Sonically, the EQ seems very authentically recreated, with t r e m e n d o u s power and poke. All the EQ bands and filters sound remarkably close to the SSL, albeit inconveniently

controlled by mouse. The green knobs operate the expander/gate and this also seems very closely emulated. The expander was mainly useful for reducing tape hiss; an application that is mainly redundant here.

The grey-knobbed compressor section is by contrast slightly disappointing. It seems to lack the dynamic punch of the original, and the auto-makeup gain doesn't entirely convince. I may be mistaken, but it really doesn't seem to add quite enough gain as the compression is increased, except with percussive signals. The Fast Attack mode's character is closer to the original, but some of the magic still seems to be missing, and it needs to be pushed hard to start pumping like the original. When pushed to extremes, the break-up doesn't really sound quite the same as I remember.

There is a separate plug-in for G Series EQ. Rather than high and low frequency bell-curve buttons, the extreme bands are fixed as shelving, while the middle two bands feature frequency shift buttons — divide by 3 on the low mid, and multiply by 3 on the high mid. I found this an irritation, the shift is an unmusical interval, and I missed the bell curves on high and low bands. The low-pass filter is inexplicably missing from the emulation. However, the tweakier curve character of the G EQ seems fairly well emulated.

Finally, the Mix Buss Compressor is recreated as a separate plug-in. This was much-loved by engineers as a convenient and easy way of beefing the mix up and making things gel. One obvious difference is that the Make-Up gain knob also 'Makes-Down' by up to 5dB. The compression seems to lack some of the body of the original, and the Auto release setting doesn't really seem quite the same. It's certainly an approximation but there are other mix bus compressor plug-ins available. Switching the In button out behaves the same as the real thing with very slow or Auto Release settings — it is not the same as bypassing, and a slow release ensues. Also included here is the Auto-Fade function although unlike the desk, the indicator doesn't extinguish when a fade-in is complete. It can, however be instantly defeated with Fade In, Out and Off states.

All three plug-ins include an 'Analog' On/Off switch — apart from the bus compressor, these are rendered as sliding switches and my natural inclination to click and drag initially frustrated my efforts when a simple click is all that is required. This changes the character of the plug-in in a fairly subtle manner. The manual states that turning this off removes the emulation

of the distortion of the analogue signal paths of the modelled circuits. I tested this mixing a rock band in-the-box with an E channel on almost every signal, a few G EQs elsewhere, and a G EQ following a Bus Compressor across the mix. Comparing mixes with all Analog switches on and all off the difference is easily audible — the high end is definitely sweeter, individual elements such as acoustic guitars have a little more air without the Analog switch engaged, there is perhaps less midrange power, but an undoubtedly warmer, deeper bass end. So, things seemed to sound better when much of that carefully modelled character is defeated! However, things improved with entirely different mix bus processing using a UAD Fairchild and Sony Oxford EQ.

If you need that authentic 80's sound, much of it is here, particularly in the E EQ. Despite the availability of better modern EQs, such as McDSP's FilterBank, this gives you the character and perhaps undesirable qualities that many of us spent years battling against! Waves hasn't quite nailed the personalities of the channel and bus compressors, but they are pretty close. ■

PROS	E EQ closely modelled; brings back (fond?) memories!
CONS	Compressors not so accurate; sounds arguably better when 'Analog' emulation is off; expensive; SSL 4000 was never the best sounding hardware!
EXTRAS	Z-Noise from Waves has an 'exclusive' Extract mode that can create a noise

profile from sources that contain signal, as well as a flexible Adaptive mode. Z-Noise claims to employ a new 'more musical' algorithm that delivers better low-frequency resolution and improved time sensitivity.

Described as a true broadband processor it uses a 5-band EQ interface and real-time operation means you can monitor the entire output or just the noise being removed.

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