



Leapwing Audio CenterOne

BILL LACEY gets to the heart of spatial audio

I've always felt that boutique plugin developers are a bastion of risk taking and forward thinking ideas. In order to stand out in a field dominated by the established plugin powerhouses and ever improving built-in plug-ins by DAW developers themselves these small companies need to think outside the box to get attention. To that end Leapwing Audio is such a forward thinking developer, and their £179 CenterOne plug-in is just the kind of offering I like to see to get my creative juices flowing. Now at Version 2, on the surface CenterOne is a tool for manipulating the centre prominence of a stereo signal. How they do that, and what you can do with it, is what sets it apart from the competition.

To accomplish its magic CenterOne offers two separate algorithms: Center Prominence and LCR Extraction. Center Prominence is basically a pan law control, allowing you to increase or decrease the role of the centre content in your mix. It occupies the left side of the interface. Two simple controls are offered, the Center Prominence slider allowing up to +/- 9dB of control and a Level Trim that allows users to compensate for any overall level changes. Rather than rely on M/S processing techniques, CenterOne employs a spatial analysis algorithm that allows the Center Prominence control to manipulate the phantom centre without affecting the balance of the stereo image in the side signals.

On the right side of the interface is the LCR Extraction section, where you can separate the stereo signal into discrete Left, Center and Right signals. There are some really handy controls in this section that shout out for experimentation. You get three Level faders,

each with a Level Meter and a Mute control. You can also link the Left and Right channels, affecting both the Level fader and Mute button. Now things really get interesting. There is a Center Channel Width slider. This determines how wide the extracted centre channel will be, either deriving its signal from the exact middle of the stereo stream when set to -100 or progressively adding more content from the sides by moving the slider towards +100. Additionally, this section offers a powerful Center Bandpass EQ to affect how the algorithm reacts. This linear phase EQ directs frequencies between the two targets directly to the centre channel, and anything to the left and right of those to the Left and Right channels. Three filter slopes are offered (6dB, 12dB and 18dB) and can be set independently for each target.

CenterOne's spatial analysis algorithm in action

An obvious use for Center Prominence is to increase or decrease the level of a vocal in a song. Just as practical is to be able to control the level of the bass in the centre channel. Manipulating the Center prominence is not solely the domain of music mixing, either. There are uses in audio-post, too. When you've been handed a music heavy mix of a film or television program and no split mixes CenterOne can be used in a pinch to rebalance the dialogue to music, making it easier to understand what people are saying.

The real fun begins when you make use of the auxiliary plug-in outputs. When using Pro Tools, create three mono tracks and set their track inputs via Input ---> Plug-in --->



Auxiliary plug-in outputs

CenterOne ---> Left, Right or Center. The advantage of this is the ability to process each component individually. So, for instance, you could EQ the centre and L/R separately or add a delay to one component and not the other. CenterOne is just as useful on individual tracks, not just full mixes.

There are also Stereo to LCR and 5.0/5.1 versions of the plugins. These are pretty interesting the way they work. When used in a surround mix the Stereo to LCR routes a stereo track directly to the Left Center Right outputs, putting the centre signal directly in the Center speaker (no phantom here). When using the 5.0/5.1 variants, no signal is output in the LFR or surrounds, just LCR. You can however direct a mono sum or all three to any channel in a 5.1 configuration. As the majority of music tracks supplied for surround mixing are stereo, routing them via CenterOne is a useful way to upmix to LCR.

Some new utility functions have been introduced in Version 2. The plugin now has a dedicated Undo/Redo section, allowing you to step your way back through every click and drag within the plug-in. That's a feature I'd like to see implement more readily in all plug-ins. An A/B compare is now added as well as a small number of presets, which are good starting points and demonstrate proper usage.

CenterOne's user interface is very nicely designed, allowing for easy manipulation. That shouldn't be underestimated — easy to use translates into more experimentation and new discoveries. There's not much to quibble about, either. I wouldn't mind slightly fatter meters and sliders. I use a Slate Raven and these are a little challenging to grab on a multi-touch screen. Not all DAW's support auxiliary plug-in outputs, either. You can cobble together a workaround if needed, but that's the fault of the plugin. Other than that it's a win for me. 📌

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Sleek design and easy to use interface that inspires experimentation. Auxiliary outputs in Pro Tools.

CONS Slightly skinny sliders can be hard to grab on touchscreens.

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