London Acoustics

Brighton compressor & Osaka Mix EQ — **NIGEL JOPSON** tests two Acustica nonlinear convolution plug-ins

These plug-ins take advantage of the Acustica Audio dynamic sampling and Volterra series nonlinear convolution engine. This software was explained in detail in *Resolution* V17.5 (the article is available to read from the Technology item on our website Content menu). Strictly speaking, these plug-ins are 'Acqua Libraries For N4'. The free Acustica Nebula N4 Player loads internal and 3rd party devices — think of it like Native Instruments' Kontakt player — but for audio processing.

In February 2019, an update to Acustica's Acquarius installer made it possible to automatically build VST2/3, AU and AAX versions of London Acoustics' plug-ins, to load directly from your DAW plug-in list without the N4 player. The London Acoustics Brighton compressor is the lowest-priced convolution compressor in the 'Acustica marketplace' at €85, Osaka Mix EQ is €70. Acustica plug-ins have an ardent following amongst a certain type of production pro — let's generalise, and say those who appreciate analogue — but have to work in-the-box either for budgetary or workflow reasons. As an 'industry veteran' from the '80s, I immediately heard the point of Acustica's technology as it helped me get what I missed from hardware.

Brighton compressor

I've never really enjoyed software compression — I felt plug-ins didn't capture the dynamically changing effect of analogue hardware. I'm the type of tape-era engineer who liked to apply generous amounts of low-ratio compression with a slow attack time: bringing up the subtleties of performances whilst letting the natural peaks through. Most compressor plug-ins do this rather badly. The Brighton compressor UI gives a visual nod to the black-face Teletronix LA-3A. The convolution samples for Brighton were from "both a classic Vactrol VTL5 optical photocell detector and a custom-built one, prototyped on a breadboard with a new-concept, custom-circuit tube preamp".

Brighton definitely has that 'Opto sound', luckily for my taste, the attack time goes to a generously slow 75ms. A good test is Mark Morrison's vocal on 'Return of the Mack' — can we bring up the lower level inflections of the verse — without completely squashing the loud "whoooah" the vocal enters with? I found I could pile on 10-15dB of compression, at 5:1, and still preserve the vibe. Gain structure is important when setting the Brighton: generous use of the saturation control — which adds a subtle bite to the sound — will require trimming gain back with a utility plug-in before the Brighton. The Transients control and Tube Hot/Normal switch are both useful modifiers, handy when compressing a 'round' sounding bass, to help keep a bit of grit and attack. The Hi-Pass Filter is useful to keep the obviously bountiful Opto-characteristics in check when working on a bass or chugging electric guitar.

The Brighton is usually too 'obvious' a compressor for use on the stereo buss, but the higher ratios are great for bulking up snare and tom hits, and for getting a bit of 'phat' into guitar riffs. Despite the Saturation control's name, it's not a 'fuzzy saturator' plug-in — Brighton worked best for me on acoustic rather than electronic instruments. If you want to beef up a Fender Rhodes, congas or damped guitar it's a great choice.

Osaka Mix EQ

London describe the four-band parametric Osaka as "somewhat Oxford-esque in inspiration", although when using the mid-bands on the highest Q setting on toms I found myself reminded of a Trident TSM console (only less noisy of course). Each of the four EQ sections are individually activated by clicked a little button to the left of the boost/cut knob. Despite a bit of latency in using them, it's convenient to be able to punch the sections in and out.

The Osaka is just the plug-in to turn to when you need a bit of extra character — adding EQ brings out the personality of the instrument — without massively increasing gain at the chosen frequency. I found it easy to hear the 'character points' while rotating the boost (it's always boost): the plug-in easily delivers that 'papery' character when boosting presence on a Wurlitzer — or Tablas, for example — which one never seems to be able to obtain from a software EQ.

The same effect is evident when boosting the 250Hz-435Hz regions; there's a sort of 'cone breakup' effect redolant of analogue hardware. In hardware, it's caused by components saturating, distorting a little, or by phase relationships generated by boosting one section of the circuitry. Whatever — this effect has become part of the language of modern music production — because it's a sound modification which suggests an 'impression' of power, without actually dominating a mix.

If you want an EQ to sound like an 'EQ module' (rather than a frequency boost), the Osaka is for you. I likened it to the Trident console because I often thought EQ-ed percussive tones sounded way too resonant when soloed on this desk, but 'in the mix' I found the result suggested power without loudness. The Osaka is also capable of sounding pretty sweet when used more moderately on vocal or guitar, especially the high frequency shelving section.

resolution/VERDICT

PROS The great sound of analogue in a plug-in, at an affordable price.

CONS Getting the best from convolution plug-ins requires some thought, and attention to gain structure.

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