

# sonible smart:comp

A.I. rising — **NIGEL JOPSON** appreciates the ghost in his machine



This is a spectro-dynamic compressor that aims to find the parameters for well-balanced compression results in just a few seconds of 'learning', following in the footsteps of sonible's smart:EQ plug-ins (*Resolution V17.1*). The smart:comp is actually two compressors in one: a time domain compressor with conventional controls and a spectral compressor.

The time domain compressor has controls for Threshold, Ratio, Attack, Release and Knee, with a graphic representation of the incoming waveform and dynamic slopes (adjustable with graphic 'handles') in the upper portion of the plug-in window. By clicking a little arrow to the right of the Release rotary, additional parameters can be displayed. The Shape display opens up graphic controls for Attack and Release. Attack Hold and Release Hold can be adjusted in millisecond increments. The Shape can also be adjusted, and although the display implies an infinitely 'bulge-able' knee might be possible, in fact the Shape control adjust in an exponential/mirrored exponential curve. This fine-tuning section affords some extra-fast release settings which might not otherwise be possible.

The Focus tab on the left opens a sidechain filter window in place of the Shape display. High and Low frequency roll-off points can be selected by dragging the left and right extremes of a horizontal graph inwards. It's not possible to adjust the roll-off slopes, but it is possible to get some very precise turnover-frequency positioning, the little headphone symbol at the bottom of the display allows solo monitoring of the sidechain. The sidechain switch at the bottom of the plug-in window de-activates spectral compression, and (unfortunately) switches off the excellent auto make-up gain control.

Auto gain make-up is normally so bad on compressors I hardly use it, but the smart:comp 'auto' setting is so capable of maintaining unity gain through the plug-in I grew to depend on it, and I don't really understand why it's excluded by the sidechain. My only other niggle is that, if you were previously using Spectral, turning Sidechain off (if you decide against it) does not re-activate Spectral.



## A.I. — better than human?

The Spectral compression continuously analyses input signal across more than 2,000 bands, and when Spectral is active smart:comp "acts like an intelligent, ultra-high-resolution multiband compressor that dynamically smoothes out tonal imbalances". It's possible to solo what it is doing by clicking the headphone icon at top right of the plug-in window. For readers who may have less than high regard for multi-bands - rest assured — the sonible A.I. deploys some serious voodoo.

I used Spectral compression on all types of program material — many individual instruments as well as subgroups — and it almost never disappointed. There's not enough dynamic range in listener's reproduction chains, and SPL is not sufficient, to allow naturally recorded dynamics for every instrument in a mix. Spectral compression is 'Special' with a capital 'S' — I never wanted to turn it off — and it's easy to adjust with the 0-150% amount control.

Let's talk about dynamic control. With more audio being recorded by musicians and people with little on-the-job training, the equipment metaphors of my generation of engineer are totally inappropriate for modern in-the-box work. An audio process should react dynamically to the input signal and apply treatment which varies as the signal itself changes. The braggadocio insider-talk of previous generations of engineers has not helped. Let's face it, we did not really want to 'smash' or 'crush' our audio to death, these were just words we used to impress tape-ops. We knew what we were doing: we went to the fine line of electrical capability, and then backed it off a tad. But the reasoning and subtlety of a career spent watching and learning

from peers is missing now. The smart:comp is exactly the sort of tool a neophyte recordist requires.

## Spectral is special

The smart:comp combines automatic parameterisation of a time domain compressor with either sidechain control or spectral compression. It's a tool which will help mixing professionals immensely. The initial settings derived from clicking the Learn button always err on the 'cautious' side, it's the perfect tool to have instantiated on channels to just get the dynamics trimmed a little. The provided presets (standard, drums, kick, snare, bass, guitars, keys, vocals, male/female) all tune dynamics in the correct direction, and it takes 6 seconds for the plug-in to analyse audio when clicking the Learn button. sonible, please put on your to-do list: a global control plug-in to activate all Learn buttons on every instance of smart:comp instantiated on a session.

The smart:comp is not the compressor a pro would turn to for a special effect. It's not something I would put on a bass guitar to get that 'bursting at the seams' VCA-style bulge, while keeping finger snaps in trim with 20:1 limiting. I would put it on nearly everything else! It's the perfect plug-in to make that sustain from a Marshall amp come across without ruining dynamics; it can make a Fender Rhodes 'speak' a little more in a mix, it's great for homogenising backing vocals, very effective at giving a well-recorded drumkit a touch of polish, and I found the combination of spectral and gentle time-based compression great on the mix bus. It's an intelligent Inflator for the modern era. **i**

## resolution/VERDICT

**PROS** Taking just a few seconds to set, it learns audio and enhances the dynamics to within a few clicks of a final mix. Regular price €129.

**CONS** The auto gain make-up is so good I don't want it to switch off if I use the sidechain!

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