# Bricasti M7

**If there's one area where hardware has lost out to software alternatives it is in effects processing. Thus it is encouraging and exciting to uncover a unit that doesn't just pay token lip service to the idea of a hardware reverb but aims to set the bar at a new level of performance and accessibility.**

JON THORNTON

**T**HERE'S GOT TO be a certain degree of bravery or recklessness involved in developing and launching a piece of outboard gear these days. Perhaps less so with the likes of preamplifiers and EQs, where analogue rules still apply and competition with in-the-box solutions is less of an issue. But in the realm of synthesised algorithmic reverb processing, there's no doubt that the marketplace is getting tougher for hardware.

Still, there's been quite a buzz about Bricasti's offering — especially given the fact that it was announced in 2005 and has only recently started shipping in its final production version. The M7 is the first product from a relatively new company, although delving a little deeper reveals a longer and richer pedigree in the world of artificial reverb than the relatively unfamiliar name might suggest. Bricasti was formed three years ago by Brian Zolner and Casey Dowdell — both ex-Lexicon employees with backgrounds in sales/marketing and software engineering respectively. The aim was to take all of that experience in building some of the most venerated reverbs of recent times and marry it to what is now achievable with 21st Century technology and with as little compromise as possible. Add in a

commitment to making the user interface as intuitive and musically relevant as possible, and you'd seem to have all the right ingredients to enter the fray with confidence.

First impressions of the unit are of nicely understated quality. The M7 is very solidly constructed with an all stainless-steel chassis, fronted with a very substantial machined aluminium face-plate. Buttons and knobs are very positive, and the unit's main display is a bright, clear red LED affair, that is easily readable at most working distances and lighting conditions. The rear panel has balanced analogue I-O on XLRs, with digital I-O also fitted as standard (AES single wire and all sampling frequencies up to 192kHz). A pair of 9-pin sockets will enable the use of a forthcoming hardware remote capable of controlling four M7s, and a pair of MIDI sockets implies some other future communication developments although they have no functionality in version 1.0 of the firmware.

There's no provision, though, for any external Word clock input or output and the unit has to work in either fully analogue or fully digital I-O mode — you can't, for example, take an analogue input and generate a digital output. So in digital mode, the unit simply synchronises to whatever embedded

clock it sees on its AES input; no AES input results in a muted output.

Returning to the front panel, and there's a tiny bit of *deja-vu* for long time PCM80/81 users, simply in the way in which the display and major controls are set out. Thankfully, that's where the similarity ends. Much as I love the PCM80 for its sound, it surely possesses one of the most tortuous editing interfaces known to mankind as anyone who's really moved beyond simply recalling presets will testify. The M7 is the complete opposite in this respect. Recalling and editing presets is very instinctive, and the designers have thought extremely carefully about the range and type of editable parameters available. The result is a list of only 16 parameters in total that can be used to tweak the one hundred plus presets on offer.

Navigating between presets is very straightforward, with a familiar grouping into halls, plates, rooms, chambers, ambience and spaces. In addition, there are four hot keys on the front panel and pressing and holding will assign the currently loaded preset for the instant recall of a favourite.

The algorithms employed are quite distinctive as Bricasti has elected to employ three distinct reverberators. The first deals with the early part of the

reverb — not early reflections as such, but rather the first 100ms or so of the reverb's development. The second deals with the later part of the reverberation, and the final one only deals with the very early reverb build up in the very low frequency range. This is restricted to energy below 80Hz, and doesn't develop into the later part of the reverb tail, allowing reverbs to suggest the weight or power of a room or hall, without any objectionable LF build-up.

Most first time users of the M7 will do exactly what I did, which was to run through the presets on offer using a variety of sources, from solo guitars, and single drum hits through to full orchestral sections and vocal tracks.

In an age where most modern reverbs are pretty damn good, whether hardware or software, synthesised or convolution based, you might think that it would be hard for something to just reach out and grab your attention in an 'oh my gawd' fashion. Yet that's the overwhelming initial impression the Bricasti gives. Halls, plates and rooms just seem to wrap around the source and become an integral part of it — it's actually quite difficult to get that effect where the reverb seems slightly disconnected from the programme material. 'Lush' is the best adjective to describe it.

In comparison to similar presets from a TC M2000 and a Lexicon 480L, the Bricasti generally sounds less bright and brittle than the TC, but not quite as dark sounding as the 480L. It's definitely closer to the 480L in character, particularly in the way that it wraps around the sound, but whereas the 480L can sound pleasant but a little washy on longer halls, the Bricasti retained the warmth but with a far greater amount of detail towards the end of the reverb tail. This is most noticeable when you audition the 100% wet reverb output in isolation. On some of the room presets it sounds exactly like a room microphone — the other units still sounded like digital reverbs.

With only 16 parameters to tweak, editing is remarkably straightforward, but this doesn't restrict the flexibility of the sonic palette on offer. Indeed, some generic parameters found on nearly all reverb processors — most notably diffusion and density — have a precision to their effect that I've never encountered before.

One of the most interesting parameters is one that allows you to alter the balance between the early and late reverberators mentioned earlier. Shifting this in favour of the early portion of the reverb is analogous to listening to the air around the instrument, and can be used to great effect when applied to some of the larger rooms and halls. The effect here is not the same as tweaking up the early reflection levels, as it suggests far more about the space than this. Sticking a large wooden room on a vocal track and pulling this parameter down to favour the early reverb gives you all of the character of the space around the voice within a very short reverb time, but completely lacking in the hollowness about the sound or unpleasant comb-filtering artefacts that this technique sometimes leads to. Going in the other direction with this parameter, in other words favouring the later portion of the reverb, is useful in being able to give more of the distant characteristics of the space in the reverb return, and for getting a reverb to sound just like a room mic on a drum kit it's brilliant.

All of the factory presets are eminently useable, although some favourites stick out, like Boston Hall A, Snare Plate B and CD Chamber (Casey Dowdell Chamber?). If there's a weak point to its palette, then it would be with some of the ambiences and spaces — certainly for outdoor spaces and short ambiences I'd be more inclined to go with the Non-Lin algorithms

on a System 6000.

But that's a whole different league in terms of price and while the M7 isn't exactly bargain basement territory (UK£1,996 + VAT), it's clear that all elements of the design, from the analogue stages through to the convertors, through to the algorithm design and the use of DSP (enough DSP to sink a battleship, in Brian Zolner's words), have been painstakingly considered and implemented.

At the end of the day, the same amount of cash could provide you with a very decent collection of reverb plugs, each capable of multiple instances in a mix. With the M7 it's strictly one instance at a time. But I'd hazard a guess that a single instance of pretty much any of the reverbs on offer here, carefully considered and fed from a variety of tracks in a mix would give a result that would sound a whole lot more compelling. Add to this a user interface that is not only easy and intuitive, but allows incredibly rapid editing in an entirely musical manner, and the M7 definitely finds itself in that rare category of gear — listen to one at your peril, you'll never want to give it back. ■

| **PROS** | Wonderful, lush reverbs; great user interface; early/late reverb balancing has to be heard to be believed. |
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| **CONS** | Can only operate in either analogue or digital I-O modes; strictly a one instance device. |

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