Manifold Labs Plugzilla

It's one of those boxes that really caught the imagination when it was first announced. Effectively a way to run plug-ins in a dedicated rack unit it'll find friends among those who want to sideline their computer. GEORGE SHILLING squares up to Plugzilla.

PLUGZILLA IS A STANDALONE plug-in host, designed to run plug-ins that would normally run in a computer DAW. Designed by digital boffin Tony Agnello and built by Eventide, it presently loads and runs Steinberg Windows format VSTs and VSTis, compatibility mainly dependent on copy protection systems. It will also soon support Linux Audio Developer's Simple Plug-in API (LADPSA) format.

The box itself is a deep, heavy, wider than normal 2U rackmounter, containing much of the innards of a PC, running Linux on a Celeron processor, complete with whirring hard drive and fans. There is, as yet, no monitor support, but you can plug in a USB keyboard for entering text when saving settings.

The architecture has been designed with two 'machines', each of which can simultaneously load four plug-ins. An extremely flexible routing system allows for instrument plug-ins to merge their output with incoming audio, and each machine may be routed in series or parallel with the other machine, or sent to any desired outputs. Individual plug-in slots can also derive input and send output to any separate single analogue or digital connection. A large number of setup presets are available for different routing combinations including M-S and 4-channel settings using different clock rates.

On the rear are XLRs for four analogue inputs and outputs. XLRs are also provided for stereo AES-EBU I-O, along with a pair of Wordclock connectors for operation up to 96kHz plus SPDIF on phonos. There are two TRS footswitch sockets, MIDI 1 In, Out and Thru, plus a MIDI 2 In/Out on a single 5-pin DIN plug. There is a power rocker by the IEC socket, and computer connectivity in the shape of two USB A sockets, a USB B, and an Ethernet connector. The unit can directly access system updates from the Internet and PZView software for Windows provides file management using a networked PC. The USB sockets can be used to connect external drives, and there are a further two USB A connectors on the front.

Another Power button on the front panel boots the machine and it takes about 85 seconds before relays click to switch on the audio signal connections. The front panel has been neatly designed with rows of buttons and eight continuous clicking rotary encoders with surrounding LEDs for pointers or metering; these are officially known as the Knobs. Functions and values are displayed on a pair of two-row LED displays. The bottom row displays the function of the knob underneath, while the top row shows related information. Above each display is a row of four buttons, one for each plug-in slot, that

are used to access and bypass each plug-in. In the centre are overall machine bypass buttons, page scroll buttons and primitive meters.

Five illuminating buttons on the right select main modes. Snapshot is a quick way of saving and loading the entire setup of the unit into one of 8 locations. Load/Save takes you into menus for more specific file functions for individual plug-ins, machines, plug-in settings, system setups and more. In Knobs mode you can access the parameters for the plug-in, usually spread across multiple pages.

Each screen's page up/down buttons can be pressed simultaneously to enter Zoom mode where you can use all eight knobs for a single plug-in. Knobs can be pushed for coarse editing, and also, for example, to Load settings or display parameter values. By pressing Knobs again you enter a Hot Knobs page where you can assign the most useful functions for immediate access to essential settings, using the knobs and buttons above. It is also possible to set ranges, and control parameters via MIDI controllers and even USB joysticks.

Confusingly, this is referred to as Automation, although unless recorded as MIDI in a sequencer, nothing is automated about it. Meters mode handles many pages of possible points to monitor signal levels and these are displayed on-screen numerically; useful but not especially clear to read. Finally, Setup mode provides MIDI and audio connection configurations, CPU usage indicators, and all the other configuration setups, such as sample rate.

A huge number of plug-ins is included preloaded

with accompanying preset programs, although the quality of these effects and instruments is variable. A large proportion of available VSTs are compatible and can be installed; Challenge/Response authorisation can be activated from the front panel. Plug-ins are listed alphabetically by Name, Vendor or Type through the simple menu system, making finding and loading plug-ins very straightforward.

As a VSTi host Plugzilla works extremely efficiently — MIDI and audio latency is extremely low, probably considerably lower than would normally be achieved by the average DAW software instrument plug-in running on a normal computer. This is where Plugzilla excels, and would prove extremely useful for onstage use of software synths and sample-based instruments. With VST studio effects, the convertors sound excellent, and the knobs tweak very effectively, although in some instances missing GUI detail slightly mars the experience.

In theory Plugzilla should eliminate some of the stability problems normally associated with running any DAW on a PC or Mac. However, I overloaded the CPU and crashed it with (an admittedly ridiculous) six instantiations of PSP MasterQ at 96kHz, and I was unable to make any kind of Save function work. This caused an error message, and 'unloaded' the plug-in I was trying to save.

But Plugzilla is fairly straightforward to use, and for VSTi live use Plugzilla is undoubtedly preferable and more robust than a laptop, and the low latency is very welcome for musicians. The physical whirring noise of the unit is irritating in a studio situation, but for sheer flexibility of function Plugzilla is hard to beat. ■

Contact

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PROS	Great VSTi host for live keyboard performance; ultimate flexible effects unit.
CONS	Noisy HD and fans; problems saving settings.
EXTRAS	Manifold Labs consists of veterans of the pro audio and telecoms industries. (L-R) Marc Lindahl (went from dbx to co founding Sonorus and doing design work for Avid, Mackie, TC Works, Swissonic, Midiman, Event, and others before joining Eventide as VP of marketing & strategy and moving to Manifold Labs); Jim Sieniki (lead software engineer with AT&T Bell Labs, Ariel, and UTStarcomm); Don Elwell (started at Ariel Corp as a hardware engineer, eventually led the department as VP Engineering); Tony Agnello (while at Eventide invented the Harmonizer and SP2016 effects processor, has been involved in DSP since the 1970s, including cofounding Ariel Corp); Joe Waltz (veteran of Lexicon and Eventide, worked on JamMan, Lexicon 300, Eclipse and Orville among others); Todd Mizenko (musician and senior software engineer with Ariel, General Atronics, and Dot4).