

# Roger Nichols Digital plug-ins

It's a brave step to launch a suite of native plug-ins in today's market and Roger Nichols Digital recently did just that with its **Detailer (multi-band limiter)**, **Dynami-zer (compressor)**, **Finis (limiter)**, **Frequal-izer (linear-phase EQ)**, **Uniquel-izer (EQ)** and **Inspector XL (metering)**. The plugs are available for PC and Mac in VST, AU and RTAS. **NIGEL JOPSON** plugs in and freaks out.



**R**ND IS FRONTED BY seven-time Grammy-winning engineer and producer Roger Nichols whose name still has resonance in the US owing to his work with Steely Dan. Four of the plugs were formerly available from Maryland outfit Elemental Audio, which now has an exclusive agreement with RND and continues to develop software for the Nichols brand. I purchased Dynami-zer and Uniquel-izer when they went by the even more preposterous names of Neodymium and Equium. Sadly I seem to have been in the minority and it's a salutary tale for developers: the Elemental lads adopted a hype-free profile with musician-friendly serial number authorisation. Predictably, the whole shebang was soon available on BitTorrent networks, despite reasonable pricing. RND has now iLoked all the plugs, and is putting considerable effort into explaining some of their unique qualities, providing training, support and downloadable presets from Roger.

The Dynam-izer was the plug-in that first got my attention — and it's still unique — a fine testament to lateral thinking on the part of the programmers. RND starts its explanation: 'Don't get confused — this is not multiband compression.' Wise words, as it has the look of a multiband and many a freshman-engineer probably produced crazy results trying to get it to function. If your analogue roots go back as far as mine: think Eventide Omnipressor. When Roger announces: 'This is a revolutionary, whole new way of looking at compression/expansion' — against all music-industry odds he's right!

The centre of the plug-in has a rectangular four-zone window; these are dB zones, rather than crossover points. Any input zone on the left can be dragged up or down to map to the output zones on the right. It's not immediately obvious, but the tiny beige button labelled 'Advanced' needs to be clicked for the output zones to be similarly slid up or down. With this device, you can take a very ordinary drum loop and drag all the low level ambience right up so

it's massively exaggerated, without squashing peaks. Also not immediately apparent is the fact that a no-change area can be established right at the top of the dynamic range. The whole red zone can be lowered (on each side) by 3dB or so, in order to let all the most dynamic peaks remain untouched: the Dynam-izer can be configured as a particularly good bootstrap compressor.

But for the fact that a predone fade-out plays havoc, the Dynam-izer would be a splendid native mastering plug-in. It does function very well as a final stereo-bus compressor playing the loudness game, although it's wise to leave set-up until the mix is completed. Clicking on tiny dots (resembling squashed sideways semiquavers) unlinks attack and release times of each band, and ratios are independently variable for each zone. There's a handy sidechain with a very wide-range key filter EQ. A key listen button makes it easy to set up, and the Dynam-izer excels as a de-esser.

I approached the newest plug-in, Detailer, in a detached manner, as it resembles a reworked version of the Finis limiter, my least favourite member of the clan. The Detailer is a 3-band Finalizer-type processor, with four pre-limiter sliders intriguingly labelled Mid and Hi Detail, with a cute blue and red spiky display. I'm all for anything that can lift a bit of detail in a mix, but when I listened to the effect on its own (at unity gain, with a scrupulously clean signal) it seemed to muddy the signal — a de-detailer — if you like. However, as I started to adjust the limiter, I realised the Detail section is actually a useful foil for high-end brushiness once you've got it pumping.

We all know the havoc a TC Finalizer can wreak in the enthusiastic mitts of a muso, and the more I used Detailer the more I appreciated how tweakable it is, a far more malleable tool than others at its price point, like the ear-rending iZotope Ozone, and with many more tricks than Sony's Inflator. The tonality of audio varies noticeably with input gain setting and although it seems perverse to trim gain back with a

'helper' plug-in before the Detailer only to crank it up again in the RND unit, it seems to pay some dividends aurally. The limiter controls are rather basic, I missed solo/mute buttons for the three frequency bands and stereo-linking for the Detail controls, but overall this is one of the best of its ilk at the price.

The Uniquel-izer is a very competent multiband EQ although I used it mainly for subtractive work because my analogue brain yearns for something a bit more coloured. There's now an Uniquel-izer LE, a very serviceable 5-band with HP/LP filters, a great improvement over most bundled DAW EQs and keenly priced at US\$69. The newer Linear Phase Frequal-izer is the flagship Nichols EQ. In the past I've tried to use my Waves Linear Phase ... but I'm generally frustrated. PSP's Neon is quite nice but can bring a Mac G4 to its knees. The issues of time on session and impatience/ear fatigue do get in the way with these rather fiddly EQs, and the Nichols programmers have some good solutions. The EQ points can be moved independently by clicking above or below, or the neighbouring points can be moved as well by dragging. Holding the option key enables horizontal dragging. But my favourite feature is the Smooth slider, which can progressively turn an anal-retentive multiband zigzag into a curvy-shape that would please Peter Baxandall. The overall curve can easily be slid up and down, and a slider called History rapidly rewinds changes step by step — a vast improvement on 'control z'. For the ITB mastering guys, there are 50 snapshot EQ States that may be automated in the host DAW.

The Inspector XL package provides a wealth of professional metering, including FFT, Phase, Spectrum Analyzers, K-System and PPM meters. I especially like the Statistics module, which is unique in offering 'hidden clip detection' (see Thomas Lund's article *Distortion To The People, Resolution V3.2*). I always have the statistics module open when bouncing or rendering a mix, as it displays a handy tally of 'over incidents' that the eye might have missed. The threshold to define a clip is tweakable in sample increments, so you can push the over samples beyond 6 if you're having a 'Vlado Meller' day.

The true test of a native plug-in for a production professional today has to be: is this really delivering something useful that I haven't already got in the screen-spanning list that pops up when I click my insert? In the case of Inspector and Dynam-izer the answer is a resounding yes, and the Uniquel-izer is a worthy contender if you like Linear Phase EQ. ■

## PROS

Dynam-izer offers unique creative features; Inspector supplies much-needed professional native metering; Detailer is better than most 'all in one' finalisers; comprehensive EQ from Uniquel-izer LE at a budget price.

## CONS

Detailer would benefit from 3-band isolate buttons and Detailer in/out buttons; Finis peak limiter should offer more adjustments for price; uninspiring boost sound from Uniquel-izer.

## EXTRAS

Detailer US\$289, Dynam-izer, Finis, Frequal-izer, Inspector, Uniquel-izer \$249 each, Uniquel-izer LE \$69. The full bundle costs \$745.

Inspector Free is a wonderful peak/RMS stereo meter with a headroom indicator.

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