

sonible smart:reverb

Analyse this! **NIGEL JOPSON** tries a source-adaptive reverb



Having experienced sonible smart:comp's 2000-band magic spectral compression (*Resolution V18.6*), I was eager to try smart:reverb, which delivers custom-tailored reverb by adjusting processing to the characteristics of input audio. A drop-down menu lets users select from Drums, Snare, Guitars, Keys, Vocal, Speech and Universal... while a Learn button further tailors spectral and temporal settings to the recorded track. Reverb time is set manually.

Software reverb development over the past decade has been focused on two approaches: re-creating environments (cathedrals, train stations) with realism — or emulating classic hardware reverbs of the past. Real-life IR environments, whilst great for post-production, tend to generate ambience which 'takes too much space' in a music mix. And while I certainly enjoyed using Lexicons and EMTs in my analogue youth, there's an important point: in the tape era, engineers like myself had access to great recording rooms, and we spent ages adjusting mic positions for the correct acoustic vibe. The digital reverbs of this period have an undeniable artificial character, but combined with our careful acoustic recordings added the right amount of sheen or 'fairy-dust'.

In contrast, recording today tends to be either DI, VI, Sim or mics in less-than-optimal environments. A natural, rather than artificial, presence needs adding. For these kind of recordings, the smart:reverb is fantastic. It has the knack of adding just the desired amount of 'room' — and a very tuneable room it is as well. For example, I rather like the T-Racks Sunset Sound Reverb on electric guitar. It's easy to dial-in one of the famous recording spaces for a bit of room-tone and heft. I not only found it easy to match the exact 'Sunset room' with the smart:reverb, I was able to continue adjusting until I actually had a tone which better matched the guitar I was using.

Enter the Matrix

The XY pad Reverb Matrix is a masterful idea, as it's incredibly quick to adjust several parameters at once. The effect of the XY is easy to hear, with the Artificial (lower) scale having a brighter, phasey tone at the Intimate (left) end, and more of a slap-back effect at the Rich (right) end. Pushing the virtual joystick all the way to Natural (upper) scale brings the vibe more towards 'rehearsal room' rather than 'sound check' in contrast.

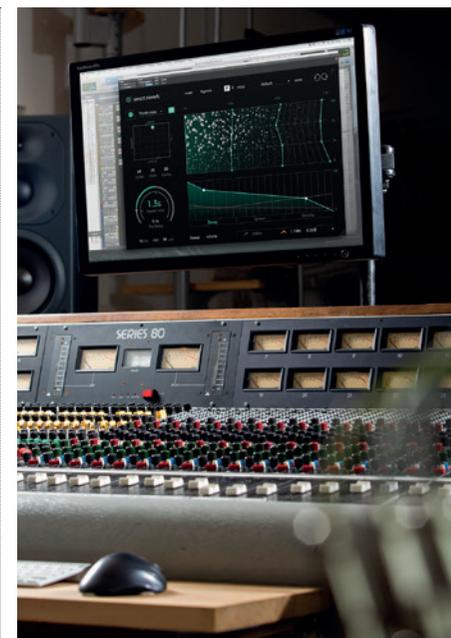
The pre-filter, with two EQ points and five filter types (bell, high and low pass, high and low shelf) is a quick and easy way of dramatically tuning the reverb tone. Clicking the coloured EQ curve icon at the bottom of the Filter section switches boost/cut on or off.

I found the main usefulness of the 'Learn' function to be the adjustment of the Spectral Shaper (to the right of the XY pad). Moving a thumb to the left or right decreases or increases the decay time within its respective time (horizontal scale) or frequency (vertical scale) band. An experienced producer will probably want to tweak the Decay, Spread and Density controls themselves in the Temporal Shaper (below the Spectral). It was noticeable that, while the Temporal shaper was basically set to a preset value for Guitar/Keys/Vocals and so on, the Spectral Particle Display modified according to the frequency content of the signal. A bass guitar would (usefully) have AI-set decay rates much shorter than a 6-string, after pressing the Learn button.

At the bottom of the plug-in window are two special effect buttons — Freeze and Infinite — like other parameters, they can be automated via the DAW. There are several nice touches to the UI design: unlike some plug-ins, a conscious effort does not have to be made to save settings. There are A and B memories, and whichever letter is illuminated automatically stores current control positions. Additionally, there's welcome multi-layered Undo/Redo buttons to the right of the Save Preset control.

A reverb of many colours

The thing with reverb plug-ins is that, like their hardware counterparts, mix engineers often end up using them with limited settings: I use plug-in 'A' for this type of snare and 'B' for this other type. It could be that it's so time-consuming adjusting controls that a favoured setting becomes the norm. A studio owner once asked me why the \$20,000 EMT 250 always had its R2D2 controls in the 'minimum' position when he saw me mixing. "Because that's the sound I want and that's why you bought it!" an arrogant younger-me shouted. The slight problem with this 'one tool for each job' approach is that it encourages a formulaic style of mixing, which risks



/ Modern-sounding (the plug-in, not mixer!)

leaving the final sound behind-the-curve as listener tastes evolve.

With smart:reverb, unlike some other reverbs, one does not suddenly hear Nirvana with some particular preset or aural circumstance. It is a tool, and a very flexible one at that: using smart:reverb, I found myself setting up less additional delays, less double tracking, less transient generators. The problem with instantiating a web of processing is that one becomes committed to it, whereas smart:reverb is flexible enough to do the job of bringing an instrument to the fore on its own, and easily tweaked later, without totally re-vamping the whole chain.

sonible have created a reverb well-suited to treating stacked vocals, and contemporary productions featuring odd snippets of percussive 'found sounds' will benefit from its tailored short rooms. The smart:reverb is a really modern-sounding ambience generator, with the facility to create tight and up-front rooms to bring individual instruments to the fore in a mix. **F**

resolution/VERDICT

PROS The AI controls do a great job creating suitable start-settings. The X-Y pad aids fast adjustment. Rooms are suited to modern productions.

CONS I thought AI meant all the controls would be set for me! I guess we'll have to wait for the sonible DAW-of-the-future...

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