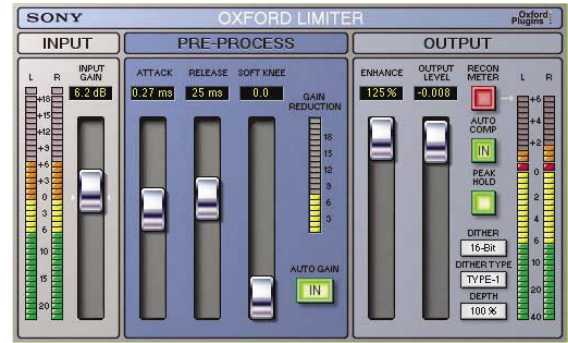


SONY OXFORD LIMITER PLUG-IN

Dynamics doesn't get much more 'core' than limiting, so what can the Sony Oxford do that we haven't heard before?

Text: Dave Foister



► If there can be such thing as a benchmark for ProTools plug-ins, then it's hard to go past the Sony Oxford range. Having started in a modest way by offering the EQ and dynamics sections from the Oxford digital desk ported across to the ProTools domain, the range has since taken on a life of its own, with a class-leading reverb and now a versatile limiter, both owing little to the console that gave them their name. The reverb is an obvious departure, since the desk has no reverb on board, but just in case anybody thinks the limiter is merely the relevant bits from the dynamics package, it's important to point out that it's a whole new plug-in device, with a range of features rarely seen anywhere else that are far more sophisticated than the limiter section of the Dynamics plug-in.

DOUBLE ENTENDRE

Obviously the apparently simple idea of signal limiting has come to have two related but distinct meanings. One is straightforward gain control, intended to guard against excessive levels, and protect loudspeakers, transmitters and other devices from overload, distortion and even damage. The other is the creative use of limiting to maximise the apparent level of a mix in order to make it sound 'louder' than the competition. There are many devices that will do one or the other, and some, like TC Electronic's Finalizer, set out to do both, and more. The Oxford Limiter also does both, but does the second job without the use of EQ or other adjuncts, and with a remarkably simple set of software controls.

As this is a Sony Oxford plug-in, it's no surprise that the manual goes to great lengths to discuss the whys and wherefores of every control on the screen, and while this is commendable, and helpful in understanding exactly what's going on, the result is a little daunting and makes the plug-in look more complicated than it perhaps is. In fact, there aren't many controls, the function of each and the interaction between them are both pretty clear, and in case you get lost there are a heap of helpfully named presets (Slammer is a good one) to use as starting points.

The processing, and therefore the screen, is divided into four distinct sections, although they interact so much that they can't be considered completely in isolation. First up is the input gain control, which determines how hard the signal hits the fixed threshold of the limiter stage. With 18dB of gain on offer, any signal that comes close to proper peaks can be driven hard into limiting;

alternatively there's enough control to make peaks tickle the limiter without introducing any appreciable gain reduction. The basic limiter stage is ostensibly quite straightforward, with Attack and Release controls and a variable Soft Knee that can introduce gain reduction smoothly from as low as 10dB below threshold. But of course, as this limiter is working entirely in the digital domain, it 'looks ahead' and knows the peaks are coming before you hear them and adjusts itself accordingly. This means that the attack time is not about making sure it catches the peaks, but about how quickly its gain changes, making it much more of a creative tool and allowing far more transparent processing of sensitive material. The same goes for the release time, which can introduce outrageous pumping if required or leave the processing almost undetectable. The plug-in has huge internal headroom too, so that 'overshoots' can be allowed without clipping and be dealt with in the next section.

The clever stuff comes with the Enhance control, which in true enhancement style is just slightly mysterious. Technically it provides 'sample value limiting and overall programme loudness improvement' but it does this using neither EQ nor deliberate distortion. It has two modes of operation: in Normal mode it gradually brings in the enhance effect as the fader is raised from 0 to 100 percent, but it's a real rock 'n' roll control as it goes on to 125 percent with even greater increase in loudness at the expense of possible distortion. Safe mode completely eliminates the chance of overshoot and allows the Enhance control to directly affect perceived loudness. Combining the two stages results in a staggering range of dynamic control, from inaudible safety limiting to astonishing loudness boost with complete control over how 'processed' the sound becomes. There's something very satisfying about the nature of the enhanced signal; it sounds like your original mix with greatly added impact, rather than a tweaked version of it.

OXFORD GRADUATE

This is a highly desirable plug-in, offering an intriguing blend of boring-but-necessary techy processing and definitely-not-boring signal enhancement which can knock your socks off. It's hard to think of a session where this wouldn't come in handy, either as a safety net or as a 'Make It Better' knob. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price

TDM: \$699; RTAS: \$479

Contact

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Pros

Versatile and wide ranging limiting options. Enhance tool takes the boredom out of limiting.

Cons

Manual a little daunting.

Summary

A classy and versatile limiter that offers flavour and spice in an otherwise relatively bland corner of the audio landscape.

Platforms Supported

ProTools HD/HD Accel
ProTools MIX
Pro Tools LE