

Crane Song Phoenix

It's one for all those Pro Tools users who have never even sniffed analogue tape — it's a tape emulation plug-in. **JON THORNTON** gets all cosmic with talk of Luminescent, Iridescent, Radiant, Dark Essence and Luster.



IT'S SOMETHING OF AN indicator of the way recording technology is heading when a company like Crane Song enters the DAW plug-in market. Led by analogue guru Dave Hill, the company enjoys a deserved reputation for manufacturing a variety of outboard devices with a no-compromise approach to quality, and above all musicality.

Not that this is Crane Song's first foray into the world of digital signal processing. Its HEDD (and latterly HEDD 192) units have provided digital modelling of valve/analogue characteristics in dedicated hardware for some time now. The Phoenix suite of plug-ins is much more than simply a down-scaled version of this processor though. Available only in TDM format for Pro Tools, Phoenix is a collection of five separate plug-ins — all of which are designed to emulate the characteristics of analogue tape recording.

At this point, you'll be thinking that this isn't exactly new territory for plug-ins. But where the Phoenix suite differs from previous efforts is in the care that has been taken to emulate the entire analogue signal chain, not only addressing the perceived effects of tape saturation, but of the entire record/reproduce electronics and associated equalisation curves. (*Hill's Aria electronics for ATR wide-track analogue tape recorders are well respected. Ed*)

You can purchase the Phoenix suite for UK£530 (inc. VAT) and authorisation is achieved using the increasingly familiar iLok system. A time-limited (20 days) demo version is also available for download from the Crane Song website. Slightly annoyingly, the demo version also requires you to go through an iLok authorisation process. While I can see the reasoning behind this from a copy protection point of view, it is a bit of a hassle, and may well discourage people from trying it out.

In use, the five plug-ins have an identical user interface and minimalist set of controls. A large graphical level control adjusts the amount of the Phoenix process that is introduced to the audio signal. For each plug-in, there are also three 'colour' settings that allow a degree of user modification of the processing applied. Broadly speaking, these settings

alter the overall tonality of the signal. The Gold setting is the most even and neutral, Sapphire introduces a noticeable high frequency lift, while Opal has more low and low-mid frequency emphasis.

The different plug-ins have equally evocative names. They are (deep breath): Luminescent, Iridescent, Radiant, Dark Essence and Luster. While they all sound different, all of the plug-ins seek to achieve the same goal — to emulate 'tape' effects to allow an increase in apparent loudness without an increase in gain.

Initial auditioning suggests that they are introducing elements of multiband compression/limiting, equalisation and the introduction of synthesised harmonic products. All of the processing is level dependent — the harder a signal is hitting the process, the more pronounced the effect. To aid this, the final parameter on the plug-in is an input-trim setting, which allows the level of signal addressing the processing to be attenuated.

Initial reaction to the effects of the plug-ins is that they are not at all 'in your face'. Even the most aggressive version (Dark Essence) has a subtlety to its sound that shames other plug-ins of this type. This isn't to say that the effect isn't obvious — it is very apparent. Rather, the processing doesn't intrude on the dynamic detail of the original source, working with it rather than against it. Switching the process in and out does result in quite a loudness step up — and this appears in some cases to be more than just a perceived effect. Making true A/B comparisons is therefore somewhat tricky, but the Phoenix process is clearly much more sophisticated than a simple bump in signal level and frequency balance.

Of the five processes, Luminescent is the most subtle, and worked well on vocals to give a solidity and sheen to the sound. Iridescent seems to introduce more HF compression, and fattens up the low mid range, and of all of the processes this is the one I found to most useful when strapped across a mix bus. Radiant and Dark Essence become increasingly more aggressive in approach (*A bit like me when your copy*

is late Jon. Ed) — with the onset of processing happening earlier, and both sounded good when applied to kick drums, bass guitars and snare drums on the Opal setting. The final process, Luster seems to morph from the subtlety of Luminescent to the extreme of Dark Essence depending on signal level. This gave a very pleasing effect on acoustic guitar, as the processing increasingly solidified the sound on loud strumming, but remained very natural sounding on quieter sections.

The separation of the different processes into five discrete plug-ins, rather than having one plug-in with different presets, is indicative of the attention to detail that has gone into their design. The algorithms employed have clearly been very carefully designed and tested. This has the added advantage of making each plug-in relatively frugal in the amount of DSP capacity it takes up on a Pro Tools rig, allowing multiple instances of each plug-in to run without causing undue overhead.

And this is a good thing, because after a while you find yourself applying them to almost everything. Now, I know that all things are usually best done in moderation, and applying some plug-ins I could mention to almost every track in a session would result in a wholly unpleasant mess, but this is simply not the case with Phoenix. Far from muddying the sound, careful application and fine-tuning of the processes can work wonders with a mix in nearly all genres.

We should remember that we live in an age where some engineers have simply never worked with analogue tape, and for them emulating its effects might seem a strange concept. Phoenix should really be viewed as an incredibly useable and flexible sonic paint-box — and more to the point, one that doesn't result in a murky brown colour when you mix all the colours together.

Perhaps the acid test for any reviewer is whether they are happy to relinquish the particular item once the review has been completed. In this case, I have a feeling that once the 20-day demo on my iLok has expired it will have to be replaced with the full version. Immediately. ■

Contact

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PROS

Eminently useable and musical sounding; perfect for combating 'digititus'; flexibility in sound despite the minimalist user interface.

CONS

TDM Only; iLok authorised demo a bit of a pain; you could get carried away...

EXTRAS

Crane Song's Avocet is designed to solve the problems of accurate monitoring and volume control for workstation users. It's a stereo controller with three digital inputs, three analogue inputs and a headphone system. All digital signals are up-sampled and jitter reduced and it features dim, mute and mono functions plus a speaker select switch that sends line level balanced audio to one of three outputs. Buffered meter outputs are included.

