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Protected: SPL Passeq Plugin Review

One of the more interesting plugin releases of 2010's forth quarter came from the German based company SPL in the form of a digital recreation of their masterpiece passive equalizer unit named Passeq. Being a digital recreation and emulation of an actual hardware unit it shares the same name as it's real world brother and the GUI also looks just like the outboard unit. With exception for the A,B,C,D preset buttons and the M/S and Link buttons that aren't present on the outboard unit.

The equalizer has separate controls and switches for left and right channel (or mid/side channel if you engage that), the controls for each channel are laid out in a snowflake-like pattern. The somewhat unusual pattern compared to other EQ's can be a little confusing and hard to grasp at first, but after a few sessions with it you notice that it's mostly a matter of getting used to it. For mono tracks, mixing session and/or when you don't need separate controls for L/R or M/S there's also a version where you get single controls and half of the user interface.

The base for the control pattern is a big output attenuation knob, to the right of it sits three filters for boosting frequencies and to the left three filters for cutting frequencies. Above the center attenuation knob there's also a Q (bandwidth) control for the high frequency boost filter, the other filters are fixed bandwidth.

Usage

So what is it that makes this plugin stand out in the crowd? I've been using it for a month now and it often finds it's ways into my work. It's very nice both for sweeting and for gentle cutting tasks on single tracks while mixing as well as on the stereo bus. I'd say that, due to it's limitation of specific frequency selection and fixed bandwidth Q, it's quite different from most equalizers that people start with and get used to in the digital realm. It's not your use for everything EQ as you can't really rely on it for surgical task. For example I found that cutting out the room ringing on a kick drum track at around 55Hz is almost impossible, as the filters broad bandwidth also takes out a lot of the things around the 55 Hz that you want to keep for the kick.

So now you might ask, why would I buy an EQ that's limited to broad bandwidth that also has fixed points for frequency selection when I can buy one that does it all! Well, after using it extensively for a month I have to say that it's definitely worth getting this EQ as addition to your all-around EQ, as there's a lot of tasks that the Passeq outperforms basically all other software EQ's I've used and tried. It might not be your every day EQ or the EQ that you're gonna use the most and that's capable of everything, but in it's right place it sounds really great!

Some might find the user interface is too large and feel that it covers too much of the screen,

especially if you are used to working with plugins. I find it really inspiring that it's this large and it feels more like working with real gear and twisting real knobs instead of picking around with tiny sliders and knobs that most of plugins are built with.

Less is more

The interesting thing with software vs. hardware is that in software and the digital realm of sound all settings are basically possible, your go-to EQ plugin probably have 5-7 filters that can go from 10Hz to 20kHz all with an adjustable Q that ranges from 0.1 to 50 or even 100. Practical? Yes, but often it also makes simple EQ:ing harder due to that you have too many choices and if you spend too much time tweaking you'll soon end up going around in circles instead of moving forward. In other words, unlimited flexibility isn't always a good thing.

The thing that I really appreciate with the Passeq is that the frequency selection is stepped, meaning that there's fixed values for where the different bands can do boosting/cutting. What at first might feel limiting will, once you get used to it, make your work easier and faster. Also worth mentioning is that with bandwidths this broad, the specific frequency of the filter and isn't the most important part as long as you're in the ballpark, as it boost or cuts quite a lot around it as well. When using the Passeq with it's broad filters the numbers feels more like guidelines and it helps me to listen to how it sounds more-so than looking at numbers and curves on the screen, which is very easy and tempting to do when working in a DAW.

To sum up, often less is more and it's really nice to work with what the Passeq offers instead of having everything from zero to infinity at your hands. Talking about stepped frequency choices, it's also worth noting that measured in professional outboard gear measures the Passeq have 72 frequency choices per channel, which ranks it among the more flexible stepped units on the market.

Sound

Starting with the boosting bands of the Passeq it's built up around the follwing:

- HF (highs)
- LMF-MHF (low mid-mid high)
- LF (lows)

All around I found that the strengths of the Passeq is in it's high and low bands. It's high frequency boost is hands down the best and nicest sounding boost I've heard in a plugin so far. You can do up to 12.5dB of HF boost and the Passeq doesn't sound nasty like so many software eq's does when you go over 3dB of boosting. The HF filter has the following frequency choices: 5k, 6k, 7k, 8k6, 10k, 12k, 13k, 15k, 16k, 17k, 18k, 20k. Meaning that you can do everything from boosting a little presence to the vocals and bringing up a lifeless hihat to adding shimmer to cymbals and air to vocals or a mix.

Especially the latter examples of adding nice sounding shimmer and air seems to be very rare in the software world so I was really happy to finally hear a plugin that's good at this!

Note that the boosting high band is the most flexible band of the Passeq as it has variable bandwidth-Q so you can select how broad a boost you want.

When it comes to the low frequencies the Passeq sound wonderfully thick and warm and boosting a decibel or two in the lows of a well-recorded bass line or a kick drum easily puts a smile on your face and I also think it sounds great for thickening a thin-sounding mix. Due to the broad filters the Passeq isn't as easy to use and pleasing when dealing with a bad recorded kick drum or a rumbling sounding bass guitar. So in these cases I've found it's best to use a more surgical eq instead of, or in combination with the Passeq.

In the mid frequencies the Passeq sounds solid and good, but not perfect. To my ears it, to some extent, lacks some of the warmth that I'm looking for when I decide to boost the low mids and when trying to boost the vocals slightly in the higher mids to make them pop out in front of the mix it often gets too honky souding for my taste. Don't get me wrong, it doesn't sound bad and it's definitely on par with many other software EQ's and usable at times, but it just doesn't blow me away like the high end does.

When looking at the cutting filters of the Passeq it's built the same way as the boosting, around three bands:

- MHF-HF (mid high-high)
- MF-MHF (mid-mid high)
- LF-LMF (low-low mid)

I find the MHF-HF band very useful for taming a overly bright guitar and it has already, during the month I've been testing the Passeq, saved a bounced mix that was all too shrill sounding due to overly bright cymbals. It's very smooth and gentle and one of my favorite ways for taming over-bright sounding sources.

Even though the mid frequency boosting wasn't really to my taste I find the cutting nice, I've already used it twice for mixes that were too muddy in the mid region.

Looking at the LF-LMF cutting band it's one of the smoothest and most natural sounding ways to tame the low end. Setting it really low down at 10Hz it nicely cuts away unwanted rumble down below the kick in a full mix without having a too steep and ringy sounding dB/octave ratio.

Sound clips

Here are some test samples of different tasks done by the Passeq, and for comparison I've also included clips of Logic 8's Channel EQ plugin. It's not really possible to show how an equalizer works and behaves with sound clips but it might give you a hint.

Take my word on it, you really need to have a hands-on session with it to grasp it's potential and sound. It's an impressive plugin!

NOTE: Clips may sound a little exaggerated and maybe not something you'd do in a mixing session.

Drums: Radical +12 dB high boost

- Untreated clip: ▶ listen
- SPL Passeq: ▶ listen
- Logic Channel EQ: ▶ listen

Vocals: Radical +12 dB high boost for air

- Untreated clip: ▶ listen
- SPL Passeq: ▶ listen
- Logic Channel EQ: ▶ listen

Drums: Gentle low cut at around 30 Hz and slight boost at 120 Hz

- Untreated clip: ▶ listen
- SPL Passeq: ▶ listen
- Logic Channel EQ: ▶ listen

Conclusion

After a month of usage on real projects as well as test tracks I feel confident to say that the Passeq is one of the best sounding software EQ's I've tried. It's the perfect tool for gentle boosting and painting broad strokes over a single source as well as over a mix. It's not your swiss army knife of EQs, but in combination with a good quality more surgical and precise parametric EQ you got yourself a rock solid combo for equalization tasks.

Priced at 149€ + VAT, it's not overly expensive and since good sounding highs and "air" boost is hard to come by in the software world I'd say it's worth its price for the high frequency filters alone!

When talking about equalizers, the focus is often put on the boosting and it's easy to forget that it's just half the story. I'd like to really lift forward the usefulness of the Passeqs cutting bands as well, as they are very gentle and nice sounding and I find that I often reach for the Passeq for cutting tasks, as it sounds more natural compared to other software EQs.

The Passeq is a great plugin and I warmly recommend You to check it out if you are looking for a EQ for sweetening and tone shaping with broad gentle boosts and cuts. The SPL Passeq is all in all a superb EQ plugin for the money!
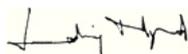
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