

KEVIN BECKA
takes SPL's
Transient Designer
4 into the studio
and finds that this
dynamic processor
is, for lack of a
more appropriate
word, dynamic.

Out of the box the 1U Transient Designer from SPL looks deceptively simple. The front panel consists of separate attack and sustain knobs, a bypass button, and a signal present LED. This set-up is repeated four times, once for each channel. The only other additions to the front are two link buttons for stereo pair linking and an on/off rocker switch. On the back, apart from the XLR inputs and outputs and primary voltage selector, there is a ground switch, which when set to the off position isolates the circuit ground from the chassis ground. There are nice touches throughout including the lighted bypass buttons, and quality pots, switches, and XLR connectors.

How it works is quite clever. It uses four envelope followers, two assigned to the attack and two assigned to the sustain. Envelope One follows the shape of the original attack curve while Envelope Two maps a slower attack. The control voltage is derived from the difference between

kick and snare, I was able to breathe life back into sampled drums by adding a bit of attack. The unit shone when I used it on some pre-recorded loops. When added to a mix, loops have a tendency to eat up a lot of dynamic real estate since they're usually crushed to death and contain both transient and sustained ingredients. However, with the Transient Designer I could easily clean up a loop by lowering the sustain and either leaving the attack flat or adding just a bit to taste. In one particular case there was a loop that contained a bass line, shaker, machine kick and snare. I could completely change the personality of the loop, effectively lowering the bass line and shaker while bringing out some punch in the kick and snare at the same time.

I also tried the unit in a number of situations where it didn't work. A fast moving bass line was too much for the envelope followers to dissect, making any front-panel changes ineffectual. I also used it on a vocal and found it's called the Transient Designer for good reason



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TRANSIENT DESIGNER 4

DYNAMICS PROCESSOR

these two attacks. The sustain followers work in the same manner with the difference between the original sustain envelope and a slower version providing the control voltage. There are no attack, decay, or release settings, all this is done by the circuit. What the user can adjust is up to ± 15 dB of attack gain and up to ± 24 dB of release gain.

In The Studio

I was looking forward to evaluating this unit after reading some information on its promised performance. First I put it in line between a multitrack recorder and a console to try it on various pre-recorded tracks. The first and most obvious use was on separate kick and snare tracks. It was remarkable how well it worked in this situation. I was able to change the personality of the track and put much more of a 'point' on the drum by boosting the gain. These particular tracks were recorded in a small room, and I could remove the room by lowering the volume of the sustain. The result was a track that was much more in your face without being unmusical. What put the fun factor into the process was the ability to go radical in the opposite direction. In other words, adding an unnatural amount of sustain and removing all transients.

Next I moved onto a percussion track, which was a shaker with a lot of slosh after the attack. This tended to obliterate the attack and make it too large, but by lowering the sustain and adding some attack I was able to bring out the transients and lower the signal between the peaks. As a test I brought up a vocal track just underneath the unprocessed shaker, enough so the shaker was masking it. Then I switched the Transient Designer in and out and listened to the effect. It was just what the doctor ordered with the newly designed shaker effectively getting out of the way of the vocal. It was this test that opened my eyes to the possibilities afforded by the use of this unit.

I then patched it between the outputs of a drum machine and the console with some interesting results. As with the live

— the vocal didn't provide it enough transients to design. The manufacturer admits this unit is not meant as a mixdown tool, which makes perfect sense. There have to be some valleys between the peaks to make the unit work properly.

While I was using the Transient Designer I couldn't help but fantasise about what a next-generation unit would be like. I think adding MIDI capabilities would broaden the audience for this versatile tool. In addition, it would be great to be able to A/B instantly from one front-panel setting to another with a single button or even a footswitch — alternating between a track with exaggerated sustain and no transients to a version with no sustain and lots of punch, all at the push of a button, for instance.

Conclusion

The Transient Designer exceeded every one of my expectations. It is intuitive, sounds great, and can be both subtle or not (which isn't a bad thing at all). Once you use it you'll want it at every mix session. At a time when compression is overused for the sake of making a track louder, it's nice to have a device whose intention is to put dynamics back into the mix. Hats off to SPL designer Ruben Tilgner for inventing a truly innovative dynamics processor. □

INFORMATION

- £ SPL Transient Designer 4 £605 + VAT.
- A UK Distributor: Pure Distribution.
- T +44 (0)20 7328 0660.
- w www.pure-distribution.com

- A SPL Electronics GmbH, Sohlweg 55,
D-41372 Niederkrüchten, Germany.
- T +49 2163 9834 0.
- F +49 2163 9834 20.
- w www.soundperformancelab.com