



iZotope Ozone 9 from \$129

Ozone 9 introduces some novel processing to iZotope's long-running mastering software. **Bruce Aisher** digs out his mixes and takes it for a test drive

CONTACT WHO: iZotope **WEB:** izotope.com **KEY FEATURES** Standalone and plugin based mastering software. **SUPPORTED OPERATING SYSTEMS:** Mac: OS X 10.11 El Capitan–macOS 10.14 Mojave **PC:** Win 7 64-bit (Latest Service Packs) – Win 10 **PLUGIN FORMATS:** AAX (64-bit), AU, NKS, VST2, VST3 **PRICING:** Ozone Advanced: \$499 Ozone Standard: \$249 Ozone Elements: \$129

THE PROS & CONS



UI improvements make parameter adjustment clearer

A comprehensive set of tools for master, pre-master and problem-mix adjustment and reference

Numerous quality of life improvements



No subtractive listen/comparison tool in new Master Rebalance module

Some modules only available in Advanced version

It is perhaps hard to believe, but iZotope's Ozone mastering software has been around, in nine major versions, for 17 years. That's a long time in the audio software world, and a period which has seen massive changes take place. The original was released, in 2002, into the relatively immature world of DAW-based audio plugins – remember that virtual instruments were only introduced to the VST specification a few years before this, so the idea of making, mixing and completing music entirely

'in-the-box' was in its infancy. At the same time, audio streaming was still yet to be employed in any meaningful commercial way, with conventional music media, such as CD, still holding sway. A taste of the future could be found in the rise (and fall) of Napster, and its illegal music sharing system, but Apple were still to launch the iTunes Music Store and Spotify was but a twinkle in the eye. Also remember that mastering at that time was an essential technical process for managing the way in which music was transferred for playback on

VERSION EXCURSION

Before taking the plunge, it is worth knowing that Ozone 9 comes in three different versions, with some of the new headline enhancements only available in the top-dog Ozone Advanced. This means that if you have been wowed by the new Master Rebalance or Low End Focus modules, or want access to the Tonal Balance Control plugin, Codec preview feature or even use the modules as individual plugins, you will have to head to the full-fat version. That being said iZotope tend to offer good deals on their software bundles, with plenty of upgrade options alongside a 10-day free trial to lure you in.



physical media. CD and vinyl each required a number of technical hoops to be navigated to meet specific standards for duplication and playback. While aesthetic tweaks involving EQ, dynamics and image manipulation were always part of the mastering engineer's job, the idea that one piece of software (or hardware) could cover all these elements was relatively new. Now though, there is also competition from automated online mastering services and the demand for 'self-mastered' mixes. This brings us to Ozone 9, which iZotope have dubbed 'the future of mastering'.

Despite many changes over the years, there are a number of core elements in the Ozone world that were established from the start. The EQ, Maximizer (a form of digital limiting) and multi-band dynamics, imaging and exciter are all still in evidence – albeit in improved and much-tweaked versions. In fact, Ozone now comes in both standalone app and plugin versions. The app allows you to import audio, and even host third-party plugins, while the plugin version is intended for use within the familiar surroundings of your chosen DAW – and may often

find use as the last processor on a stereo mix bus. The signal flow in Ozone is based around a series of customisable modules dedicated to specific tasks. Apart from the aforementioned modules that have been around since the start, Ozone 9 now includes vintage-flavoured modules (Limiter, Compressor, EQ and Tape), a multiband Spectral Shaper, Dynamic EQ, Match EQ, and new Master Rebalance and Low End Focus modules. It is the latter two that are highlighted by iZotope, and that will probably be the thing grabbing the most interest.

Master Rebalance uses 'Source Separation' technology to allow you to change the relative volume of vocals, drums or bass in a stereo mix, the big sell here being that you don't need the original track elements. Controls are kept to a minimum, with a single slider covering 8+/- dB gain change for the selected element, but the results are surprisingly good. However, this will be highly dependent on the material involved, and involves a degree of compromise when it comes to unwanted side effects. Subtractive testing between processed and unprocessed versions – something that should be available

THE ALTERNATIVES



IK Multimedia T-Racks 5 €149

Another well-established mastering suite that includes nine processors, with the ability to add more via IK's online store.

ikmultimedia.com



Eventide Elevate Bundle €199

Relative newcomers to the mastering software field, Eventide/Newfangled Audio's Elevate plugin uses modelling of the human auditory system to help optimise mixes.

eventideaudio.com



FabFilter Mastering Bundle £379

Known for their highly visual, user-friendly and flexible audio processors, here FabFilter bundle four of their acclaimed plugins, suitable for mastering.

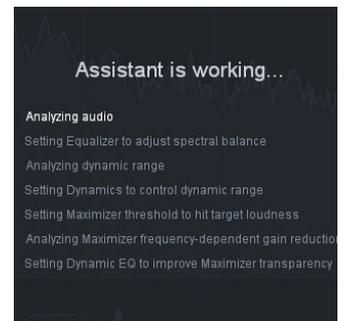
fabfilter.com



MASTER REBALANCE: This new tool uses 'source separation technology' to allow you to adjust the level and balance of vocal, drums and bass elements in a stereo file



LOW END FOCUS: A module dedicated to increasing low-end clarity. Controls let you adjust the tone and timbre at the lower end of your mix



MASTER ASSISTANT: This automated process analyses your mix and sets up Ozone with suggested mastering processes, and can now analyse external track references

within the module – inevitably reveals that it is currently impossible to completely isolate audio elements, but for last resort tweaking or subtle automated changes this is a useful addition to the Ozone armoury.

Low End Focus is another intriguing module, and one that claims to 'sharpen the edges of your bass sounds'. Again, controls are simple, with 'Punchy' and 'Smooth' modes and adjustments for 'Contrast' and 'Gain' of the chosen frequency range (a definable band between 20 and 300Hz). Usefully, this process can also be used in a Mid-Side configuration, and offers a 'Listen' button to hear what is being added or removed. Once again, this is a module that could easily be overused, but is potentially a great problem solver for difficult mixes.

Stepping back into more conventional territory, the EQ module

has been improved, with better metering and a resizable window. Both of these – perhaps inspired by FabFilter's EQ offering – make a lot of difference to usability. The Imager has added a new Stereoize II mode. Though this type of artificial stereo effect should really only be used in extreme cases, the new version is much easier on the ear when monophonic material needs some width added. Elsewhere there have been many other improvements to what is an already powerful set of tools. Small things like the removal of the six-module limit, a wider range of reference genres in the Tonal Balance Tool, NKS device support and tweaks to the Master Assistant all make for a better experience.

Overall, version 9 is a further step forward for Ozone. Although there is a danger that some of the more novel processing available here might be

considered somewhat heavy-handed, or just a 'quick and dirty' fix when a better quality mix is the answer, there is no denying that Ozone 9 has all bases covered and, in the right hands, is capable of great results – and even in inexperienced hands, it can do a very good job. **FM**

FM VERDICT

9.0

A powerful package of mastering processors, excellent metering and track referencing, vintage flavours and cutting-edge processing