

# Leapwing Audio Al Schmitt

£139 **PC** **MAC**

Bottling the sonic signature of the sadly departed producer, Leapwing Audio's latest plugin promises the sound of a legend..

> Ever since the impressive DynOne made us re-think everything we knew about parallel compression, the Belgium-based Leapwing Audio have kept us well fed with a slew of instant-buys. From the algorithmic, spatial manoeuvring of CenterOne, to the clever, harmonic sculpting of RootOne, Leapwing have cemented themselves as key plugin players.

With their latest sound tool, the company veer off from the 'One' series (to be honest, it was getting quite confusing) and deliver a series of carefully crafted sonic profiles under one roof, tailored to enhance specific instruments in a mix, as well as the entire mix bus. The source of these profiles, one Al Schmitt - legendary producer of Jefferson Airplane and Neil Young, and engineer for Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan and Madonna, who sadly passed away as we went to press. Needless to say, Al's studio processes helped shape some of humanity's most beloved music.

So, having this genius's twinkly aural magic sat on your hard drive, waiting to be applied to your own tracks, is an incredibly appealing prospect.

## Take flight

In making this plugin, Leapwing studied Al's workflow across the decades, carving the nuanced profiles from his favoured approaches,

"Having this genius' twinkly aural magic sat on your hard drive, applied to your tracks, is an appealing prospect"

ranging from mix-wide considerations, to subtler harmonics per instrument. The six district profiles are Vocal, Piano, Bass, Brass, Strings and Mix, each of which have unique parameters. There are a handful of presets within each profile, though not multitudes (just 14 in total) as the emphasis here is on getting to the 'instant Al' sound quickly.

Upon installing, and loading up the Vocal profile, we add an instance of Al on a dryly recorded vocal track. We're presented with the gorgeous (and scaleable - tick!) UI. At the centre of which, we see an image of a small, old school vintage microphone. As we quickly skim through the profiles, we see the main image change to reflect what's currently selected. Sticking with the Vocal profile in the first instance then, we try out the Edgy Vocal preset, which adds a heap of compression but lots of air to our track, immediately altering its attitude and tone. Flicking to the second of the three

“The shining light in our tests was the Strings profile, which exceptionally spotlighted the detail of a piece”

presets, 50s Vocal has a more restrictive quality, though the compression here is quite low. Dabbling with the parameters at the bottom of the UI, we can discern that the Body Level adds a low body boost or cut to our vocal, while switching between Air Level can increase our high-end sheen by 5, 8 or 16kHz. There's also some very nice reverb here, dubbed Echo Level. The mystery of just what the three, traditionally sculpted, reverb profiles are is maintained by their cryptic labelling as A, B and C. Though we can confirm that all three are instantly characterful and mood-enhancing, particularly B in this case.

As we route audio through the plugin, we see volume lines emanate from the central image, with yellow lines indicating volume level in real time, while the outer blue lines indicate any applied gain reduction, at half a dB per ring.

## Schmitt it

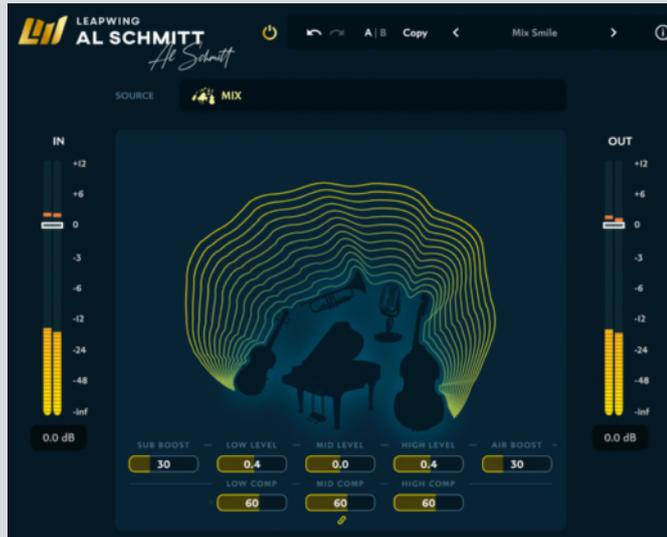
Moving through the rest of the main profiles now, and we examine the effect it has on our low end. We strip a DI'd electric bass of all mix tweaks and just apply AI's Bass profile. Straightaway, the bass part swells with oomph. The three scaleable parameters for Compression, Body Level and Air let us position it in our mix more comfortably. Switching to the 'Subtle and Thick Bass' preset however, just sorts out our bass tone with no fuss, sitting it well and adding a touch of weighty rumble. Nice.

Similarly, the Piano profile wrenches some subtle piano forward, enhancing the per-note clarity. There are only two presets here - Pop and Jazz - both of which aren't really genres we're working in, but slight tinkering, particularly with the Echo Type, Level and Compression limit coats our track with added class. Exactly the same could be said of the Brass profile, which we sample on the upbeat horn section of one of our funkier experiments.

The shining light in our tests though, was the Strings profile, which exceptionally spotlighted the detail of a piece composed using a



The profiles have been carefully tailored for each instrument, containing specific presets and parameters



Using AI on the mix bus can spruce up your sonics in preparation for mastering

## Call me AI

Leapwing spent many long painstaking months developing this plugin, forensically deconstructing AI's studio alchemy via classic tracks, gear simulation, and of course, by asking the man himself. The reverbs - or 'Echo' as it's dubbed here - in particular have been sculpted based on AI's favoured room types. They can be wildly different per-instrument with each Echo containing three different switchable modes. The Echo terminology harks back to AI's use of actual echo chambers back in the day,

well before the widespread uptake of electronic reverb. The reflections here then, are remarkably realistic.

Bearing in mind that a similar amount of instrument-specific tuning has been applied to the other parameters per profile - particularly EQ - it's pretty apparent that warm and vibrant sonic enhancement is rapidly achievable. Additionally, careful adjustment of the Input signal and Output signal provides an old-school way of providing some satisfying levels of gain.

combination of Spitfire's BBC Orchestra and Native Instruments' Session Strings. We'd previously overwrought an arrangement with additional layers of strings to emphasise a motif. Applying AI to our central violin track enhanced the tonal vibrance so much that we could mute the majority of the rest.

## Instant class

Finally, the Mix Bus profile lets you route the full mix through the plugin, with a helpful Sub Boost that ramps up the low frequencies, useful when prepping your mix for mastering. Upping the Air Boost can help to add breathing room to your higher end, while the three band compression is helpfully designed for taming transients.

Throughout all our tests, we were impressed at the speed at which perceptible enhancement was reached. Benefit will of course vary depending on your genre (this isn't really designed for electronic music) and, though there was some heavy taxing on our CPU at various points, the overall experience here was undeniably positive. If you're after a speedy, efficient route to polish your productions, and are up for delegating some decision making to a bona fide studio icon, it's a great buy. **cm**

## Alternatively

**Toontrack Decades SDX cm275 » 9/10 » €159/£140**

This collection of Schmitt-produced drum kits is a great AI fix, covering jazz and big band to funk and AOR

**Waves CLA Signature Series cm158 » 8/10 » £85**

Another sonic stamp by a renowned, albeit rockier producer, Chris Lord Alge

## Verdict

**For** Instant, bottled AI Schmitt - add sparkle to your tracks with ease  
Tailored profiles per instrument  
Intuitive, scaleable interface

**Against** Not a good fit for all genres  
Can take its toll on the CPU

Leapwing's first foray into the world of signature plugins is a triumph, and spreads some professional polish on our tracks

**8/10**

**Web** leapwingaudio.com