

iZotope Neutron 3 Advanced

£359 **PC** **MAC**

Does this third-generation channel strip plugin really take us one step closer to the dream of the fully-automated mix engineer?

> With versions 1 and 2 scoring 9/10 in **cm238** and **cm252** respectively, the pressure is on for the latest iteration of iZotope's amazing 'smart' channel strip plugin to meaningfully improve on its predecessor. We'll concentrate on the new features of v3 for the purposes of this review, but first, let's get up to speed with a general summary.

Neutron is a semi-modular channel strip boasting seven (previously six) superb processing modules - two multiband Compressors, EQ (with Dynamic mode and the excellent Masking Meter), Gate, Exciter, Transient Shaper and the new Sculptor - invoked in whatever combination and order you like (and also included as individual plugins), plus an output Limiter. What's always set it apart from other similar offerings, however, is the Track Assistant feature, which 'intelligently' analyses the incoming audio and creates a tailored preset for it.

Neutron is available in three versions: Elements, Standard and Advanced - see the iZotope website for the differences. We're looking at the flagship Advanced here.

Looking good

Neutron 3 sees a radical overhaul of the GUI, with the module control panels now overlaid

"It's positive and sexy stuff, but we wish we could switch back to the old display style in multiband mode"

over the metering displays within a single pane à la Nectar (9/10, **cm265**), enabling upscaling of the latter; much smoother spectrograms; and corner-drag resizing. For the most part, it's positive and sexy stuff, but we do wish there was the option to switch back to the old decked display style for modules running in multiband mode, as having to select bands individually to view and edit their controls is a step backwards from having them all visible at once.

Despite being nudged sideways by Neutron 3's headline addition, Mix Assistant - which we'll get to shortly - Track Assistant is still very much a marquee feature. It works just as it did in previous versions, but now also deploys the new Sculptor (see *The Sculptor module*) in its generated presets, and offers Instrument type sub-menus for more detailed targeting.

As ever, the presets Track Assistant serves up are only intended as starting points for tweaking, rather than being in any sense 'final',

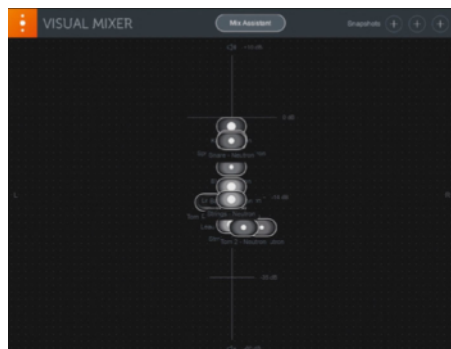
“Play your song, then marvel as levels and pans are automatically set up to create a mix”

so it's still obviously important to approach it with that in mind.

Balancing act

The new Mix Assistant uses 'intelligent' track analysis to set up the level, pan and width controls in the Visual Mixer introduced with Neutron 2. Via the magic of Inter-Plugin Communication, this unifies the level, pan and width controls of all running instances of Neutron (or the included Relay utility plugin), the idea being to load one onto every track, set all tracks to unity gain and centred panning, then adjust their levels and stereo positioning collectively in the Visual Mixer instead of the host DAW's mixer. The first step in the Mix Assistant's Balance dialogue is to select tracks for inclusion and set one or more of them to be the Focus for the algorithm to keep front and centre, as it were. With that done, simply play your song from start to finish, then marvel as the levels and pans of every plugin are automatically set up to create a mix. Immediately after analysis, you get the chance to tweak the relative levels of five arbitrary groups - Focus, Voice, Bass, Percussion and Musical - and reassign individual tracks between them if the algorithm has classified anything incorrectly. Within each group, the algorithm adjusts the gains of the component tracks to get as close to the level set by that group's fader as possible. Hitting the Accept button commits to the group levelling and dissolves the group faders - after that, you can only change individual track volumes, pan positions and stereo width using the Visual Mixer's control pucks.

With the right source material, the results can be very impressive. On a well recorded pop/rock song comprising around 20 tracks with vocal Focus, the suggested levels made for a remarkably solid foundation on which to build - we were pleasantly surprised at the cohesion achieved by the mixing algorithm. However, on a vocal-free house track, featuring a heavily modulated bassline, the nonsense it made of the



It might be 'Visual' but it sure ain't pretty - come on, iZotope, give us some colouring and icon options



Sculptor just 'knows' what a good EP should sound like

The Sculptor module

Neutron 3 introduces a new module to its virtual rack in the form of Sculptor, which applies up to 32 automatically adjusted bands of compression in order to push the input signal towards a target curve. Said curve is selected from the same menu of 25 instrumental options presented by Track Assistant, including four All-Purpose settings for source-agnostic usage; and Sculptor is also given pride of place by the Track Assistant engine, which places it first in every chain it generates.

Having selected your target curve manually or analysed your real-time input, the amount of spectral processing applied - ie, how hard the

frequency is pushed towards the target curve - is determined by the left-most control, while the Tone knob tilts the spectral shaping towards a darker or brighter sound. The remaining control, Speed, alters the attack/release times of the compression.

Sculptor can be a bona fide miracle worker in broadband mode, imbuing sonically lacking instruments and vocals with palpable presence, weight and air, but it's also fantastic for just smoothing out problematic frequency ranges, as zoned off using the left and right Range Selector handles. The Solo button helps here, letting you hear the processed range in isolation.

non-percussive signals weren't really worth the time spent loading all those Relay plugins. This didn't come as a huge surprise, though, electronic music being far less algorithmically quantifiable than acoustic/electric instrumentation, we assume. Another consideration is that the settings made by Mix Assistant are, of course, static, so you still have to manage any fader rides yourself.

We should also mention the great work iZotope have done on CPU/memory usage and loading times with Neutron 3, yielding a night and day improvement over v2 in both regards.

New-tron

Although Mix Assistant isn't as fundamentally useful as Track Assistant, it can certainly save some time at the start of the mixing process. It's about time the Visual Mixer got a bit of love, however: it still doesn't even offer mute and solo buttons, let alone the ability to colour individual track controls or customise their icons.

All that aside, the main selling point of Neutron is and always has been the outstanding quality of those signal processing modules. The Track and Mix Assistants, tasty though they may be, are really just the innovative icing on an already delicious cake. **cm**

Web izotope.com

Alternatively

Process.Audio Sugar cm270 » 8/10 » £119

This 'sweetening' effect puts a multiprocessor engine under the governance of a handful of controls

Waves CLA MixHub cm268 » 9/10 » \$199

Awesome SSL-style channel strip plugin with ingenious 'Buckets' grouping system

Verdict

For Mix Assistant is pretty cool

Sculptor is brilliant

The existing modules are still excellent

Stunning performance

Greatly improved GUI, apart from...

Against ...the unhelpful Multiband UI
Visual Mixer clearly needs an update

Sculptor, Mix Assistant and some serious optimisation make v3 another solid update to iZotope's all-in-one channel strip

9/10