Steven Slate Audio VSX

> Monitors and headphones both have their place, but each has its own pros and cons. Monitors are generally far superior when set up correctly, but that individual correct setup generally requires an acoustically great space.

Headphones do tend to be more dependable, but they miss the crosstalk, reflections and stereo width perception of monitors.

A few systems have aimed to solve the conundrum over the years. By emulating the acoustic effects of monitors before a signal is sent out to your headphones, systems like Waves Nx and Focusrite's out-of-commission VRM box have attempted perfection. Now a new headphone/plugin setup from Steven Slate Audio is taking its shot…

Setting up >

With your Steven Slate Audio VSX headphones connected as your output device, you'll need to load the VSX plugin onto your master bus – as the last device in the chain, naturally – to affect the sound. If you had the headphones on before instantiating the plugin, you'll notice quite a drop in level. The VSX system warns you not to bypass the plugin from your DAW, instead using the onboard bypass feature. There's also a Level Match function to ensure this bypassing is calibrated properly.


< Loading up

We find ourselves (at least acoustically) in the room at NRG Recording Studios, staring at a mixing desk we'll never use, and a setup of three monitors. The sound is nicely balanced, and gives us a very nice stereo image that wouldn't be possible on headphones. Checking the bypass, it needs Level Matching to ensure things are consistent when we compare to the original headphones sound. There are more virtual rooms and other environments to get to soon.

More setup >

After level matching, there are more controls we can dial in to customise studio sound. There's a Depth control that helps you achieve a balance akin to changing your listening position. Rather than 'blending' the original and the processed sound, this lets you bring the room tone higher or lower. You can also select between monitoring through the studio's Near-Field, Mid-Field and Far-Field speakers, for a bassier depth that works impressively on the VSX cans. A lot to choose from just in this room.
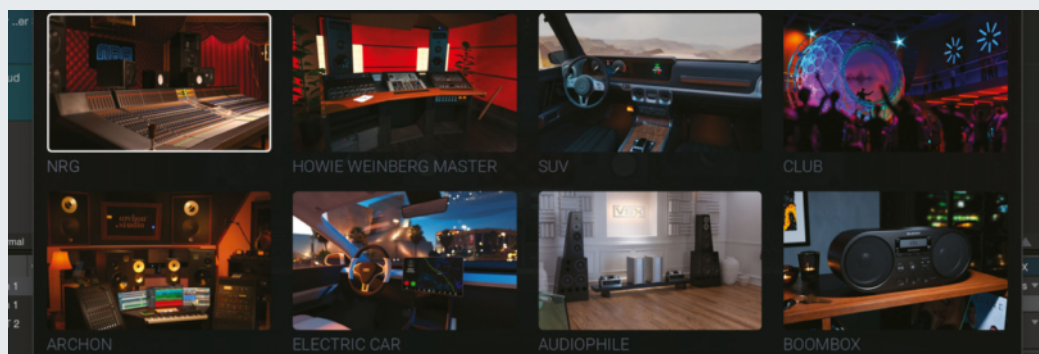
Exploring the sounds >

Immediately, the Club environment exposes some problems with the current mix's bass balance – there's not much energy carrying this particular track in the high end, although it was sounding solid in other environments. Sure, a club is bassier than anything else, but it's more the punchiness of our high end that should be worked on than overall level. Over to Howie Weinberg's Mastering Studio, where we can switch between Engineer and Client perspectives to get another gauge on things.
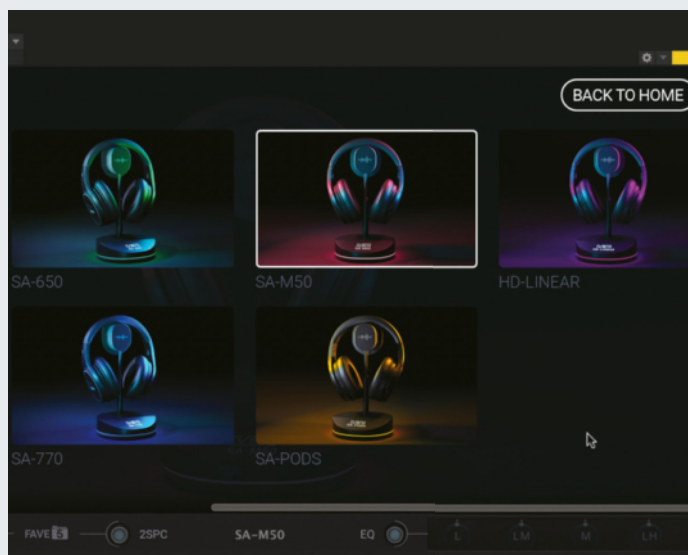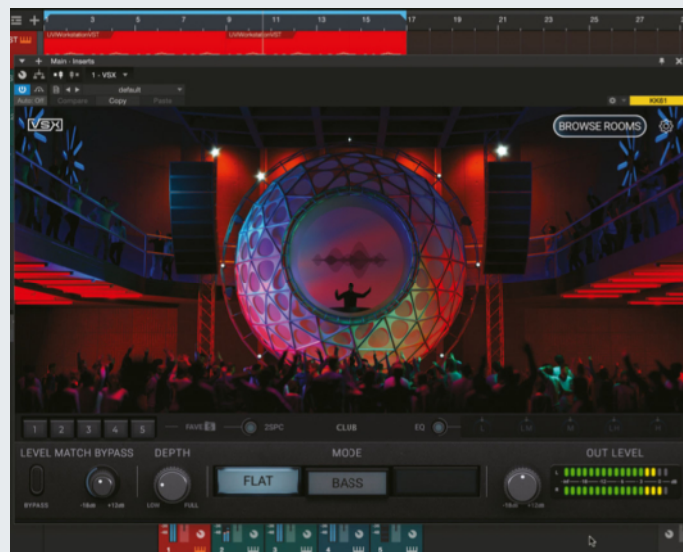
< More headphones

VSX's box of tricks doesn't stop at emulating environments, the headphone hardware can also emulate other headphones. The HD Linear model is a generic setting meant to tune the hardware with a flat frequency response. You get models of some well-known headphones: Sennheiser soundalikes; the closed-back Beyerdynamics, family favourite Audio-Technica cups and Apple-style earphones, likely a very frequent destination for a lot of music these days.

Moving more quickly >

There are five 'preset' slots to save your 'Fave-5' locations or headphone models, for quicker access if particular setups show up more problems in your mix than others. Your go-to choices remain across sessions, and particular settings are stored too. There's also a five-band EQ, helping you balance and re-balance the frequency response of the environment. With the bespoke headphones available, though, why mess with it at all?