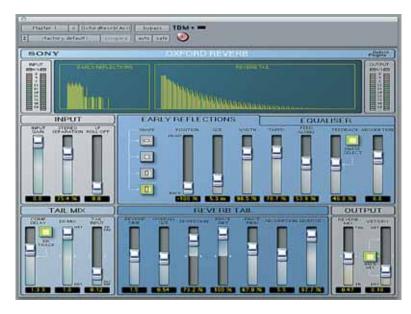# Sony Oxford Reverb

Better known for its range of EQ and dynamics plug-ins, Sony Oxford has finally applied its undoubted skills to the matter of reverb. JON THORNTON creates his own space and likes what he hears.

THE LATEST PLUG-IN from those terribly clever people at Sony Oxford is something of a refreshing change. At a time when most plug-in designers are falling over themselves to deliver reverbs based on convolving impulse responses, the Oxford Reverb eschews that approach and goes back to the traditional approach of reverb simulation, albeit with a few twists. Available as a TDM, RTAS and Audiosuite plug-in for Pro Tools HD systems, or as RTAS or Audiosuite for Pro Tools LE systems, installation is very straightforward, and authorisation is by i-Lok. (Price for Pro Tools LE is UK£295 + VAT)

First impressions are of a classy, easy on the eye, and well laid out user interface, although the number of parameters available might be slightly overwhelming to users accustomed to a less flexible reverb plug. A closer inspection of these parameters gives the first clue to the slightly different approach taken by Sony Oxford when compared to other reverb simulations. Rather than design individual simulation algorithms for particular acoustic spaces or reverberant sources — for example, hall, room, chamber or plate — Sony Oxford has concentrated on separating out the early reflection and reverberant tail sections of a typical reverb. These each have their own set of parameters, together with parameters that allow control over how they are linked together. A graphical display above the parameter controls shows early reflections and reverb tail portrayed as reflection amplitude over time. This really helps to see the effect that changing values and settings has.

Starting with the early reflection section, four basic space shapes are provided to cater for different geometries and proportions. These can then be tailored by parameters that adjust the overall size of the space, the relative front to back placement of the listening position within the space, and the relative stereo separation of the room reflections, which allows an artificially wide sense of separation.

Other parameters here allow users to determine whether long reflection paths lose amplitude naturally when compared to short paths or not, high frequency absorption and the ability to feedback early reflections into the room simulation with or without phase modification. A 'feed-along' parameter controls the degree to which the reflections are permitted to regenerate in the simulated space — which sounds similar to feedback but is subtly different, as it effects the complexity and density of the early reflections, whereas feedback has more effect on reflection duration and the amount of comb filtering that occurs. Admittedly, this sounds terribly involved, but in practice it's very easy and quick to create very natural (or indeed unnatural) sound environments. These can sound very diffuse or very modal depending largely on the feedback and feed-along values selected; and tight or spacious depending on the size and width parameters.

At this point, the user has the choice of how the reverb tail is generated. Principally, the choice is between the output of the early reflection stage being used as the input source, or the initial signal, which if necessary can be delayed to compensate for the early reflection build up period. In fact, the user can choose any mix of the two sources. If this sounds a little counter-intuitive, it amounts to Sony Oxford saying that the dense reverb tail plays very little part in giving dimensional information other than its absolute length. Using some of the early reflection output to generate the tail is sometimes necessary to give character to the sound, but if those early reflections are very sparse or modal, this can lead to an overly boomy sound.

Whatever source is used to create the tail section, there are again a number of parameters that give control over its texture, diffusion, size, time and shape. An interesting parameter is diversity, which at its minimum setting anchors the tail to the centre of the stereo image by giving a greater statistical weighting to reflections in this position. Increasing this parameter widens the spatial spread of the tail reflections. Used in conjunction with the equally intriguing phase difference parameter, which permits the build up of increasing phase differences between left and right components of the reverb tail over time, allows the user to create some very immersive wraparound effects — at the expense of mono compatibility.

Whatever the complexity of the simulation, there will always be tonal characteristics of real spaces that are just too complex to achieve by reflection simulation. Traditionally, this has been addressed by

the use of EQ on the simulated reverb — whether this is to more accurately recreate a real environment, or simply to tailor the overall frequency response of the reverb to suit modern pop production styles. The Oxford reverb doesn't disappoint in this respect, as hitting the equaliser tab reveals a four band parametric EQ section, with the high and low bands switchable between peaking EQs, shelving EQs or 12db /octave filters. Given the pedigree here, it's not surprising that the EQ sounds very smooth and natural but with a precision that allows for some very subtle fine-tuning.

The plug-in is provided with close to 100 presets, sensibly arranged in groups of halls, plates, rooms and ambiences. While some users might be content to simply trawl through these in search of something appropriate, that would really defeat the whole point of this plug-in. It's unique selling point is the way in which it encourages you to really think about spaces, and allows you to create something that is absolutely perfect rather than just acceptable. Other advantages include the ability to just use the early reflection or reverb tail stages on their own — for example, a stereo recording that has a distinct room sound to it could be fed directly to the reverb tail section, allowing the original environmental space to be lengthened in reverb time, while preserving its character.

I really liked this plug-in. In my view it now sets a new standard for simulation-based reverb plugs. In the past I've always found myself switching back to a trusty Lexicon 480 in pursuit of that perfection through careful tweaking. But now given the choice between using that idiosyncratic Lexicon remote, or the clean elegant GUI of the Oxford Reverb, that might become a thing of the past. ■

PROS	Ultimate control; encourages you to really think about creating and working with sonic spaces; not limited by predefined algorithms; elegant and effective GUI.
CONS	Not the cheapest reverb plug-in around — certainly not in TDM form; abundance of parameters initially a little daunting.
EXTRAS	Sony Oxford has bundles of its software on all supported platforms (Pro Tools TDM, Pro Tools LE, and TC PowerCore). The bundle features the Oxford EQ, Dynamics and Inflator, and the Transient Modulator and is compatible with Mac and Windows operating systems.

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